Factors Influencing Social Isolation Among Urban Empty-nest Youth in East China: A Qualitative Study

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Research Article

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Abstract

Background: Empty-nest youth are among the most vulnerable populations in society and they are prone to social isolation. Social isolation has a significant impact on empty-nest youth themselves and the society. Through an in-depth understanding of the main factors of social isolation among empty-nest youth in East China, this study aim to address their social isolation, ensure their psychological health and quality of life, and promote social integration.

Method: This study used descriptive qualitative research to conduct semi-structured interviews with 15 empty-nest youth between August and October 2021. We used directed content analysis on the resulting data.

Result: By combining, generalizing, and refining, we finally derive two main themes and eleven sub-themes. According to attribution theory, we divide results into internal factors (personality traits, internet dependence, upwards comparison mindset, social cognitive bias, lack of social adaptation ability, inadequate social skill) and external factors (social network relationship disconnection, insufficient urban concern, indifferent interpersonal relationship, heavy economic burden, work factor).

Conclusion: Factors contributing to social isolation among empty-nest youth are multifaceted. The study recommends that managers take appropriate measures to reduce the level of social isolation among empty-nest youth, safeguard their psychological health and quality of life, and promote social integration.

Background

Social isolation refers to the "insufficient quality and quantity of social contact" [1]. According to American social psychologist Biordi [2], social isolation refers to a negative emotional experience of leaving one's organization, a feeling of involuntary "loneliness", and a decrease in the quality and quantity of social networks of the isolated. According to Carpenito Moyet, social isolation is a state in which groups or individuals are unable to fulfill their social desires, and is accompanied by negative emotions such as despondency, loneliness, or feelings of worthlessness [3]. It is frequently found in vulnerable groups such as the elderly and disabled [4, 5].

Social detachment may increase the incidence of health-related problems [6]. There is a growing body of research demonstrating that prolonged social isolation not only increases the incidence of mental health problems [7] but may also lead to an increased risk of non-fatal diseases such as cardiovascular disease or stroke [8]. In addition, social isolation may also reduce social connections, impede social integration, and diminish an individual's sense of meaning and purpose in life [9].

As an essential part of the urban mobile population, empty-nest youth are mainly young people living in the country's central cities, provincial capitals, or core cities, aged between 20 and 35. They tend to have stable jobs, higher levels of education, a stronger sense of independence, are away from parents and relatives, are unmarried, and live alone [10]. The spatial isolation of young people living alone creates a
psychological and physical detachment from the family members of their origin. Due to their dual characteristics of living alone and being mobile, they may face additional challenges in the process of social adjustment. Current research suggests that empty-nest youth have low overall level of social integration [11] and suffer from a lack of social engagement. Long-term social disassociation can lead to psychological problems[12] and may lead to socially harmful events.

The Medium- and Long-term Youth Development Plan (2016-2025), issued by the State Council, also emphasizes the need to promote the integration and participation of youth groups in society [13]. However, there have been few reports of social isolation among empty-nest youth, both domestic and foreign. Due to the rapid economic development in East China, centered on Jiangsu, Zhejiang, and Shanghai, the social integration of residents may have been neglected, which in turn has contributed to the growth of the empty-nest youth group. Therefore, exploring the causes of social isolation among empty-nest youth has a long-term contribution to improving the quality of life of empty-nest youth in developed regions.

Attribution is the process by which people analyze the actions of others or themselves, pointing out their nature or inferring their causes, that is, explaining and inferring the causes of the actions of others or themselves. Attribution theory is a theory of social psychology that deduces and explains the reasons for the behaviors of others and oneself. The attribution theory was first proposed by Heider in 1958 from a naive psychology perspective. He believes that a person's behavior must be a reason [14]. When researchers seek the cause of individual behavior, they either attribute it to internal causes (emotion, attitude, ability, etc.) or external causes (external pressure, weather, situation, etc.). Only by first understanding whether the root cause of the behavior is internal or external can they effectively control individual behavior [15]. With the further development of the research, the system of attribution theory has been improved and become the theoretical basis for understanding human social behavior [16]. The core of attribution theory is how people understand the reasons for their behaviors and those of others [17]. In real life, causal attribution is essential for constructing complex events, providing explanations for events, and facilitating prediction [18]. At present, however, there is no corresponding study on the attribution of factors that influence social isolation in empty-nest youth.

Therefore, this study uses Heider's attribution theory as a framework to attribute the social isolation behavior of empty-nest youth in East China, to fill the gap in the study of the social isolation of empty-nest youth foreign and domestic. It is expected to provide theoretical support for relevant authorities to explore intervention strategies to address the social isolation of empty-nest youth to reduce the level of isolation and improve the quality of life of empty-nest youth.

**Methods**

**Study design**

This is a qualitative study using semi-structured interviews and as the primary data collection method. Throughout the study, We have followed the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research
Participants and setting

From August to October 2021, this study selected participants by purposive sampling and snowball sampling techniques. Researchers selected the empty-nest youth around them who met the inclusion criteria as the study objects at first. During the second stage, participants were asked to invite acquaintances who also met the criteria to participate, i.e., a nonrandom method of sample selection ("snowball sampling technique"). The inclusion criteria were: (1) aged between 20 and 35 years old; (2) with education at high school or above; (3) living alone in a first- or second-tier city distant from their parents; (4) self-reported existence or previous isolation from society, relatives and friends; (5) voluntary participation in this study. The exclusion criteria were serious psychological illness or other major diseases such as cardiovascular disease. The sample size followed the criteria of "subject saturation". This study included a total of 15 empty-nest youth. To ensure privacy, the results of the interviews were presented anonymously, and the names of the participants were replaced with "N + number". Table 1 showed the general information of the participants.

Table 1 General information of the participants
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Sex</th>
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<th>Current Residence</th>
<th>Career</th>
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**Ethical consideration**

The research was approved by the “REDACTED” Ethical Committee. Before the interview, the interviewer contacted the participant to establish a trusting relationship, and informed participants in detail about the procedure, purpose, and meaning of the interview. The researcher informed participants in advance that this interview would be recorded in its entirety and that they could withdraw from the study at any time, and signed an informed consent form. All information was kept anonymous to protect the privacy of the participants.
Data collection

The researchers collected data from August to October 2021. Based on the purpose of the study, the researchers constructed preliminary interview profiles through a literature review and thematic group discussions. The outline of the interview was adjusted after pre-interviews with two urban empty-nest youth in East China and based on the content of the interviews and expert suggestions. The final interview outline was as follows: (1) Please talk about your perceptions of behavior away from social groups (including your friends, colleagues, etc.). (2) What do you think are the intrinsic factors that would motivate you to stay away from social groups? (3) What are the external factors that motivate you to stay away from social groups? (4) What help do you think would increase your happiness by providing?

To avoid the risk of COVID-19 transmission, interviews were conducted by using WeChat video calls. To assure privacy, a quiet, independent room was selected as the interview location via WeChat video, and the interview time was also determined. Each participant was interviewed for 35 to 45 minutes. The researchers flexibly adjusted the content of the interview based on the participant's mood and the information provided during the interview. During the interview, the researcher listened intently, felt the changes in the participants' tone of voices, and paid close attention to and recorded nonverbal behaviors such as facial expressions and body movements, until data collection reached saturation. While following the principle of not eliciting or criticizing the participants’ opinions, the researcher also used techniques such as rhetorical questions, follow-up questions, repetitions, and summaries to ensure the authenticity of the interview data.

Trustworthiness of data

The rigor of this study is reflected in three ways. The researchers engaged in self-reflection throughout the interviews and data analysis and analyzed whether their personal experiences and values had influenced their findings. However, the researcher's knowledge of the research questions was sketchy at the time and only deepened as this study was conducted gradually. Reflection notes were also written after each interview. In addition, all transcribed text and coded results in this study were returned to the respondents promptly for validation, ensuring the accuracy of the findings.

Data analysis

The main data analysis methods of qualitative research are content analysis methods, current applications of content analysis show three distinct approaches: conventional, directed, or summative. Directed content analysis is used to validate or extend a conceptual framework or theory, also known as deductive category application, and it has a more structured process than traditional content analysis [19]. As this study used the attribution theory as the theoretical framework, we conducted the data analysis using directed content analysis. The steps followed are as follows. First, the key concepts are extracted from existing theory or literature as initial coding categories, and operational definitions are provided for each category. Second, the data is read word by word to highlight what is closely related to the research topic and these are coded using the initial codes, any text that cannot be coded is given a
new code. The codes are grouped into categories and sub-categories, and the categories are collated to form themes according to their relevance. The two researchers conducted the data analysis independently. When disagreements arise, we seek advice from teachers within the team.

Results

Theme 1: Intrinsic factors

Personality traits

Some of the empty-nest youth are introverted and usually in a passive state in terms of interpersonal communication, and are less willing to socialize with others and more inclined to be alone.

“Perhaps it has something to do with my personality. I don’t like places with a lot of people, and I don’t want to be in a group, I prefer to be alone.” (Participant 4)

One of the respondents also mentioned that social isolation gave him more of a positive experience, helping him to reduce the pressure of social interaction.

“I enjoy being alone, no one is bothering me, and I am relaxed. So I don’t have to care about others, unlike the previous university group dormitory life where I always had to move to others.” (Participant 2)

Internet dependency

Numerous empty-nest youth mentioned that Internet entertainment programs enrich their leisure time outside of work. Online communication with family and friends through SNS can meet their daily emotional needs.

“I am very dependent on the Internet, spending a lot of time every day playing games or catching up on dramas, and so on.” (Participants 4)

“I do not communicate with other people a lot. Now the Internet is more developed. In our words, communication with the outside world is not only through games, a phone call can directly go to meet some of my emotional needs.” (Participant 7)

Although some respondents claimed that connecting with others through the Internet can satisfy emotional needs, excessive use of the Internet can also exacerbate social isolation among some empty-nest youth.

“I am relaxed sending messages online, but once I deal with others in real life, I feel awkward and can not say a word.” (Participant 8)

Upward comparison mindset
Empty-nest youth are part of the urban migrant population. Some of the participants lacked an identity for themselves due to their education level, residence, and work.

“In this society, it is rare for an average student who has not graduated from a top school to receive adequate attention! (sigh)” (Participant 9)

“I feel the gap between me and the natives is huge. My job is not stable and there is no house here. Periodically, I envy the natives in our unit.” (Participant 12)

Social cognitive bias

Due to the large gap in economic and social status and other factors, empty-nest youth may reject locals to protect their self-esteem regardless of whether they are discriminated against.

“I don't want to get in touch with them (locals), I have always felt that the natives here more or less despise outsiders.” (Participant 15)

“Am I from Zhejiang or Shanxi? I sometimes can't figure it out.” (Participant 6)

Lack of social adaptability

Some empty-nest youth have just entered society from school, and their ability to adapt to society has not yet developed, which results in their behavior tendency to alienation from society.

“I sometimes play electronic games day and night. I was afraid of finding a job at that time. I wanted to stay in the house I rented and escape the outside world.” (Participant 8)

Lack of social ability

Some participants claimed that although they intend to build relationships with the people around them, they will face some obstacles in the interaction process due to their lack of interpersonal communication skills.

“I wasn't much of a talker before. When chatting privately with colleagues, I always don't know how to continue. So I felt like I had some communication problems...”(Participant 1)

“I never liked to talk much before. When communicating with colleagues in private now, I often don't know how to continue the conversation, so I think I may be having some communication problems.”(Participant 5)

Theme 2: External factors

Breakdown of social network relationship
After empty-nest youth move to new cities, their connections to their original social group gradually diminish, and relationships are not entirely established in the new environment.

“After graduating from school and starting to work, I have less contact with my previous classmates and friends. I don't have any friends here (pause), so I am all alone.” (Participant 14)

Other participants mentioned the lack of social resources and their limitations.

“I had few people to interact with, and no one else would ask me out (sigh).” (Participant 10)

**Insufficient social attention**

Due to the lack of attention and support of empty-nest youth from society, some young people lack a sense of social belonging and have a negative attitude towards social help, thus reducing their contact with the outside world.

“Personally, I'm used to this kind of life. To be honest, I don't expect other people to help me anymore (community sector).” (Participant 5)

“The community didn't pay too much attention to me. The only communication with them I can recall was when I had close contact with COVID-19 patients.” (Participant 13)

**Indifference to relationships**

Urbanization accelerates the pace of social life, leading to a strong sense of isolation between people.

“I feel that in larger and more developed cities, the more distant people are from each other. That is, each person is living his or her own life according to his or her trajectory, and they do not have any interaction with others.” (Participant 3)

“Everyone had to get busy with their work. The pressure is intense and there is not as much time and energy to deal with relationships.” (Participant 14)

**Heavy economic burden**

Housing prices are usually higher in East China. Some empty-nest youth claim they are under great financial pressure. They prefer to stay in their rental homes and cut down on daily expenses by socializing less.

“It's quite expensive to buy a house for me now, so I go out less. After all, every time you go out to eat and play is another huge expense.” (Participant 2)

“Friends sometimes need money to maintain. After my salary has been paid the rent, there is very little left. I work in a big city but cannot save much money to go home for the Spring Festival. I shall be laughed at, shall I not?” (Participant 12)
Work factors

The nature of work also effects on the social activities of empty-nest youth. Most of the participants claimed that their work situation is different from that of their friends and that as a result, they had less time to get together.

“Unlike in school, it’s hard to have a break together with my friends now because of work.” (Participant 6)

Prolonged working hours or extreme intensity may cause empty-nest youth to feel physically and mentally exhausted, which depletes their motivation to engage in social activities.

“Work took up too much of my energy, and even when I took a break I felt particularly weak. So even when I was free I did not want to go out.” (Participant 5)

“Because my company usually has to work overtime, sometimes until 8 or 9 p.m., which is equivalent to a day when there are nearly (pause) 11 hours. So when I get home, I just want to grab a bite and lie down in bed with nothing to do.” (Participant 10)

Discussion

Analysis and countermeasures of the intrinsic factors

Based on the attribution theory of Heider, this study divided the intrinsic factors of social isolation in urban empty-nest youth in East China into four factors. They are personality factors (personality traits), attitudinal factors (Internet dependency, upward comparison mindset), ability factors (lack of social adaptability and social ability), and cognitive factors (social cognitive bias).

Individuals’ personality traits influence their attitudes toward social interactions. Empty-nest youth who are introverted are less willing to interact with others, tend to be passive in social interactions, and are more satisfied living alone [10]. Krinenberg argues that living alone does not necessarily lead to loneliness. On the contrary, living alone may promote self-concern and self-reflection in youth [20]. Therefore, it is recommended to follow the principle of individualization without excessive interventions for this group.

This study shows that over-reliance on the Internet is a major factor in social isolation among empty-nest youth, which is largely consistent with the findings of a previous study [21]. The use of the Internet can satisfy young people’s needs for emotional catharsis, social interaction, entertainment, professional identity, and individual-specific psychological needs [22]. However, long-term indulgence in the Internet may have the opposite effect. Not only can it lead to physical and psychological health symptoms (anxiety, depression, and poor sleep) [23], but it can also weaken young people’s interpersonal relationships and prevent them from assuming the social roles they used to play and from participating in social life [24], increasing their level of social isolation. Therefore, it is recommended to use software to
limit the length of Internet access for self-restraint and to encourage empty-nest youth to increase the frequency of offline social interaction.

Participants of this study are all from the East China region, centered on Jiangsu, Zhejiang, and Shanghai. The area is the main area where highly intellectual and diverse people gather. Some young people may have low self-esteem due to upward comparison thinking and social cognitive bias, which may also be one of the essential factors for social isolation in empty-nest youth. Upward comparison is the process by which individuals compare themselves to others they perceive to be better than themselves [25], and the process may harm on the individual's psychological health [26]. Because of this, cities and social sectors should actively help empty-nest youth eliminate comparison thinking, strengthen their psychological construction, eliminate the negative effects of deviance effects, and shape their sense of urban ownership. In addition, related departments can also give them more platforms to express their needs in various aspects such as urban construction, political activities, and livelihood protection.

Social adaptability is the ability of empty-nest youth to compromise, relate, confront and cooperate with their environment and others in order to adapt to their psychological and behavior [27]. Social competence is the key engine for their participation in social activities. Low levels of social adaptability may lead to reduced social competence in individuals, which in turn may lead to social anxiety [28]. Disengagement from socialization sometimes leads to lower levels of social anxiety in youth. As a result, they are more likely to adopt disengaged coping responses when confronted with social anxiety [29]. Therefore, this study suggests that low levels of social adjustment and social competence may contribute to the isolation of empty-nest youth from the urban fringe. Social isolation may not only interfere with the daily activities of empty-nest youth but may also predict the onset of disorders such as depression and hinder their social integration. Therefore, the education sector needs to pay attention to the development of social adaptation skills in the young population. For example, by adding relevant courses and strengthening social practices during holidays, can help empty-nest youth to successfully socialize after graduation. This study also suggests that urban units could actively organize lectures on interpersonal relationship management. Community and corporate managers can make use of complementary personalities to arrange suitable peers for empty-nest youth to enhance their social interaction.

**Analysis and countermeasures of external factors**

According to the attribution theory of Heider, the external factors that influence the social isolation of urban empty-nest youth in East China can be classified into four factors. Including other's influence factors (insufficient social attention), social factors (the breakdown of social network relationships, indifference to relationships), economic pressure factors (heavy economic burden), and work factors.

Some scholars have previously argued that highly educated empty-nest youth have a higher sense of independence, self-esteem, and self-confidence [30]. However, studies have also shown that education may also influence the degree of social isolation. Young people with higher levels of education are more likely to relocate for work than those with lower levels of education, which may lead to less direct contact
with family members and thus increase social isolation [30]. A new generation of empty-nest youth has moved to unfamiliar environments due to work, reducing opportunities for human interaction and causing social network relationships to break down. In addition, society pays insufficient attention to empty-nest youth and has led some of them to lack awareness of active participation in social activities. It may lead to their negative attitudes towards social support when empty-nest youth live along a perceived low level of social support, it is also more likely to exacerbate physical and psychological health symptoms [31]. For young people living alone, therefore, excellent neighborhood relationships and the availability of social support are essential. This study suggests that when there is a chronic lack of social attention to empty-nest youth, local municipal departments can use mainstream media to increase the attention paid to them. Community managers also need to develop appropriate support policies to increase empty-nest youth's sense of belonging to the city. Second, to speed up the building of social platforms, they can join forces with communities and enterprises to organize various types of cultural and sports activities, parties, sodalities, etc. to increase their chances of making friends.

In addition, some of the empty-nest youth are not aware of the lack of public activities due to their lack of attention to the city. Some scholars have previously argued that educated empty-nest youth have a stronger sense of independence and more self-esteem and self-confidence [32]. However, studies have also shown that the level of education may also influence the level of social isolation. Young people with higher levels of education are more likely to move for work than those with higher levels of education, which may lead to the less direct personal contact with family members and thus increase social isolation [30]. Therefore, for young people living alone, good neighborhood relations and the availability of social support are important. When they perceived social quality of the neighborhood is low, living alone is more likely to exacerbate depressive symptoms [33]. Therefore, when society lacks attention to empty-nest youth for a long time, it may lead to negative attitudes toward urban support. It may also exacerbate their "transient mentality" [31] and lead to the development of physical and mental health symptoms. Local city departments can use mainstream media to increase the attention of all people to empty-nest youth; community managers need to develop appropriate support policies to increase their sense of belonging to the city. Secondly, to speed up the building of social platforms, they can join with communities and enterprises to organize various types of cultural and sports activities, dating parties, sororities, etc. to increase their chances of making friends.

Rapid changes and economic development in developed regions have accelerated the pace of individual life and threatened relationships, creating strangeness. Due to their experience of apathy in urban relationships, the empty-nest youth in this study formed a negative assessment of urban social contact and thus maintained a greater social distance from others. Moreover, implicit social discrimination may have an impact on the psychological health of empty-nest youth [34], which further affects the establishment of their trusting relationships with others. Given this, relevant departments should make efforts to eliminate hidden social discrimination and accelerate the construction of an atmosphere of trust and mutual support in the city.
Economic status may be one of the main factors influencing social isolation, consistent with previous findings [35]. Socially isolated populations are normally concentrated in areas with elevated levels of low-income populations. These results consider that socioeconomic support can be applied to these areas in a targeted manner. It was also suggested that local governments should continuously improve the social security system and take measures such as increasing financial subsidies and rationalizing taxes or special surtax deductions to reduce the financial burden on empty-nest.

The increasingly fierce competition in society has contributed to the "involution" among enterprises (when social resources cannot meet the needs of all people, people get more resources through competition). As a result, some employees have had to increase their competitiveness by increasing their hours or workloads. Government and social departments should exercise their regulatory functions, require enterprises to closely implement relevant laws, and advocate flexible scheduling.

**Limitations**

Through qualitative interviews, this study explores the influencing factors of social isolation of urban empty-nest youth in East China, but there are still some limitations. First, the study participants were all from cities in East China, and there was a lack of sampling in less developed regions such as central and northwestern China. Therefore, the results of this study should be applied with caution to other regions. Second, the sources participants in this study are mainly acquaintances (snowball sampling method). It may not be representative of the entire urban empty-nest youth population due to the social circular and the group property of the introducer. Third, our investigation was lack of dynamic analysis of factors affecting social isolation in empty-nest youth at different epochs and at different time nodes. Furthermore, the results of this study can only relate social isolation to the influence factors of internal and external attributions, but cannot draw causal inferences between them. Therefore, future studies can also explore additional factors that affect the social isolation of empty-nest youth in urban areas and address these issues.

**Conclusion**

The results of this study show that the factors contributing to the social isolation among empty-nest youth in East China are multifaceted. Intrinsic factors mainly include personality traits, Internet dependency, an upward comparison mindset, etc. While the extrinsic factors mainly include the breakdown of social network relationships, insufficient social attention, indifference to relationships, etc. This study serves as a reference for urban management to cope with the social isolation of empty-nest youth by focusing on their internal and external needs, enhancing their psychological nursing and care, and improving their social participation and social integration. In this way, the level of isolation of empty-nest youth can be reduced and their quality of life improved. In the future, we need to continue to explore intervention strategies to address the social isolation of empty-nest youth.

**Abbreviations**

Declarations

Acknowledgements

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Authors’ contributions

Anling Yao and Ling Li were involved in the design of the study, data collection, analysis, drafting and revising the manuscript. MingLing Zhu provided help with the data collection and data analysis. All authors have read and approved the final manuscript.

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Availability of data and materials

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Ethics approval and consent to participate

This study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee, School of Nursing, Zhejiang Shuren University, ZheJiang, China. This study and all relevant methods, were carried out in accordance with the guidelines and regulations of the Declaration of Helsinki. Before beginning the interviews, each participant received the necessary information from the principal investigator about the study and interview began after obtaining written informed consent. In the interviews, the consent form was provided to the participants a few days before the interview, and after completing the form, the researchers received the form in person.

Consent for publication
Not applicable.

**Competing interests**

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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