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# Links between Best Friendship, Romantic Relationship, and Psychological Well-Being in Emerging Adulthood

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## ABSTRACT

Best friendships and romantic relationships are linked to psychological well-being in emerging adulthood, but few studies have assessed their contribution simultaneously. This research ( $n=190$ ; 64.4% women) examined the links between intimacy and conflict with the best friend and the romantic partner on psychological well-being (self-esteem, depression, loneliness). Results showed that both relationships were independently linked to well-being, while also interacting with one another. Among participants reporting a less intimate or conflictual romantic relationship, an intimate best friendship was linked to higher self-esteem. Moreover, a conflictual best friendship was related to higher depressive symptoms only among those having a conflictual romantic relationship. Thus, best friendships and romantic relationships show distinct and combined contributions to well-being in emerging adulthood.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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best friendship;  
romantic relationship;  
intimacy;  
conflict;  
psychological well-being

The contribution of best friendships and romantic relationships to psychological well-being in emerging adulthood is well established (Arnett, 2015; Sherman et al., 2000). However, few studies have examined the links between these two types of relationships and well-being simultaneously, in order to bring out their distinct associations and interactions (Furman & Rose, 2015). Moreover, best friendships and romantic relationships share many similarities and fulfill similar social functions (Furman & Buhrmester, 1992). Thus, it is reasonable to assume that the contributions of these two relational contexts may interact with one another. The present study aimed to simultaneously examine the effects of intimacy and conflict in best friendship and romantic relationship on self-esteem, depressive symptoms and loneliness in emerging adulthood, to assess whether their contributions express themselves in cumulative, compensatory, and/or independent ways.

## *Best friendships and romantic relationships in emerging adulthood*

During emerging adulthood, best friendships and romantic relationships play a central role in individuals' social lives and significantly contributes to psychological well-being, notably by being preeminent sources of social provisions, (Carbery & Buhrmester, 1998; Furman & Rose, 2015). Moreover, emerging adults consider these two relationships as the most important in their social network (Collins & Madsen, 2006).

Best friendships and romantic relationships share many similarities. In contemporary western cultures, they are both usually characterized as voluntary, committed, and horizontal (Collins & Madsen, 2006; Laursen & Bukowski, 1997), in addition to fulfilling similar social functions (Furman & Buhrmester, 1992; Furman & Rose, 2015). Although they are similar in many ways,

they also present several distinctions: romantic relationships fulfill a need for sexual satisfaction and they are distinguished by expressions of affection more intense than in friendships (Collins, 2003; Furman & Wehner, 1997). Moreover, romantic partners may share responsibilities and life plans that best friends would not (ex: cohabitation, marriage, parental role; Arnett, 2015) and emerging adults report expecting more from their partner in terms of emotional closeness, social companionship, and relationship positivity, than from their best friend (Fuhrman et al., 2009). This could be partly explained by the fact that romantic exploration and the establishment of committed romantic relationships are considered salient developmental tasks of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2015). In that regard, authors suggest that romantic relationships and best friendships are part of a continuity: romantic partners gradually replacing best friends as the primary social figure (Chow et al., 2012). Nonetheless, best friendships remain an important source of intimacy and continue to contribute to psychological well-being during emerging adulthood (Carbery & Buhrmester, 1998; Sherman et al., 2000).

### ***Psychological well-being in emerging adulthood***

Emerging adulthood covers the period between ages 18 and 29 and is characterized by transitions in the social, academic, and professional spheres (Arnett, 2015; Nelson, Nelson, 2021). Although these numerous life changes appear to be beneficial for the psychological well-being in some respects, they are also related to increased psychological distress (Arnett, 2015). On the one hand, self-esteem, which is defined as one's general sense of worthiness (Rosenberg, 1979), is shown to increase between adolescence and emerging adulthood (Galambos et al., 2006; Wagner et al., 2013). This could be linked to a greater sense of freedom as individuals gain autonomy in their life (Arnett, 2015). On the other hand, the prevalence of clinical depressive symptoms, especially depressed mood, is particularly salient in the beginning of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2015; Galambos et al., 2006). According to Arnett (2015), the instability that characterizes emerging adulthood would contribute to the higher rates observed early in this period. Moreover, the prevalence of loneliness, the subjective experience of having too few satisfying social relationships, is higher in emerging adulthood than during adolescence and subsequent adulthood (Nicolaisen & Thorsen, 2017; Qualter et al., 2015). This could be explained notably by the many changes that occur in their social network in this period (Stroebe et al., 2002).

In short, emerging adulthood is a period of paradoxes, as individuals go through several life experiences and transitions that can increase their psychological well-being, while also making them more vulnerable to psychological distress.

### ***Intimacy and conflict in best friendships and romantic relationships, and psychological well-being***

A salient social provision found in both best friendship and romantic relationship is intimacy (Laurenceau & Kleinman, 2006), which can be defined as a need for closeness, mutual trust, and loyalty, which may involve the sharing of private or secret information and feelings (Furman & Buhrmester, 1985; Shulman et al., 1997). Intimacy in one's relationship is identified in the literature as a strong predictor of psychological well-being (Reis et al., 2000).

Intimacy in close friendships has been shown to be positively linked to self-esteem in adolescence (Buhrmester, 1990). Although research has shown that overall high-quality friendships are linked to high self-esteem in emerging adulthood (Bagwell et al., 2005; Sherman et al., 2000), few studies have examined the specific link between intimacy and self-esteem during this period. Similarly, intimate romantic relationships are associated with better self-esteem (Johnson et al., 2012), fewer depressive symptoms (Simon & Barrett, 2010) and less loneliness (Lee & Goldstein, 2016).

While intimacy contributes to foster well-being, some relationship features may contribute to impair it. A prominent negative feature of relationship is conflict, which refers to the level of antagonism or quarrels in a relationship and can be conceptualized as a structural qualitative feature (Furman & Buhrmester, 1985). In studying close relationships and their contribution to psychological well-being, several authors stretch the relevance to consider both positive and negative qualitative features of a relationship, to bring out the nuances that may coexist with one's best friendship or romantic relationship (Bagwell et al., 2005; Bowker & Ramsay, 2018). For example, a lack of intimacy in a relationship doesn't imply the presence of conflicts, just as a high level of conflict can be present in an intimate relationship (Hinde, 1997).

Conflictual friendships have been associated with higher levels of depressive symptoms (Bagwell et al., 2005) and loneliness (Heinrich & Gullone, 2006) in emerging adulthood. Conflictual romantic relationships are also linked to more depressive symptoms (Mackinnon et al., 2012) and lower self-esteem (Luciano & Orth, 2017).

### ***Why examine best friendships and romantic relationships simultaneously?***

Although studies have found links between intimacy, conflict, and well-being for both best friendship and romantic relationship in emerging adulthood, very few studies have examined the contributions of these two types of relationships simultaneously (Furman & Rose, 2015). Yet, as demonstrated by the work of Furman and Buhrmester (1992), such studies are essential to adequately examine the distinct contribution of these two relational contexts and their possible interactions. Considering the similarities and distinctions observed between best friendships and romantic relationships in terms of their social functions, it can be expected that, when examined simultaneously, both relationships may show combined and distinct associations to psychological well-being. Specifically, their contributions on psychological well-being could manifest themselves in cumulative, compensatory and/or independent ways.

### ***Interactions and independent effects of best friendships and romantic relationships***

First, intimacy and conflict in these two relationships could have cumulative effects on psychological well-being. Specifically, the higher the level on intimacy of an individual's relationship with both their best friend and their romantic partner, the better psychological well-being they tend to show. An inverse association tends to be observed among individuals who have a conflictual relationship with both their best friend and romantic partner. In support of the existence of a cumulative effect, Ratelle et al. (2013) showed that emerging adults who reported receiving support from all members of their social network (including friends and their romantic partner) showed better subjective well-being than those who reported receiving support from only part of their network.

Second, it is also possible that having an intimate relationship with one (best friend or romantic partner) may compensate for a lack of intimacy with the other, thus exerting a protective effect. This compensatory model, initially proposed by Stocker (1994) in studying the interaction between different relational contexts in childhood, has been supported by various findings relating to emerging adulthood. For example, emerging adults who reported having a quality relationship with their best friend, but a more conflictual relationship with their siblings, reported a high level of psychological well-being (Sherman et al., 2006). In contrast, having a quality relationship with their siblings, but a more conflictual relationship with their best friend, was linked to lower psychological well-being. Similarly, among female college students, having a low supportive romantic relationship appeared to have no effect on loneliness when they also reported receiving a high level of support from their close friend (Eshbaugh, 2010). However, having a low supportive relationship with their close friend was linked to a higher level of loneliness, even when having a highly supportive romantic relationship. These results suggest that best friendship intimacy may compensate for the effect on psychological well-being of a

conflictual romantic relationship. They also nuance the theoretical proposition that romantic partners replace close friends as the primary social figure in emerging adulthood (Chow et al., 2012).

Finally, considering the role that best friendships and romantic relationships play in social development during emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2015; Sherman et al., 2000), it is reasonable to expect that intimacy and conflict in these two relationships would contribute independently to psychological well-being, even when examined simultaneously. Moreover, considering the more prominent role of romantic relationships in emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2015), the contribution of romantic relationship to well-being may be greater than that of best friendship.

### ***Moderating effects of relationship duration and gender***

Emerging adults tend to maintain a smaller social network than adolescents, prioritizing more engaged and intimate relationships (Reis et al., 1993). Furthermore, friendships and romantic relationships that persist over time tend to be more engaged and of better quality (Hall, 2019; Lantagne & Furman, 2017). As a result, the links between intimacy, conflict (in best friendship and romantic relationship) and psychological well-being may be greater among individuals whose relationships are more longstanding. As for gender, the distinctions between women and men regarding the qualitative features of their relationships remain unclear. Some studies show that women report higher-quality friendships and more intimate romantic relationships than men (Barry et al., 2013; Johnson et al., 2012), while other studies show that women and men report similar levels of intimacy and conflict with both their best friend and romantic partner (Almquist et al., 2014; Mehta et al., 2016). It would be thus relevant to clarify if gender moderates the link between intimacy and conflict in these relationships and' psychological well-being.

### ***The current study***

The current study aimed observe the links between intimacy and conflict with one's best friend, intimacy and conflict with one's romantic partner, and three dimensions of psychological well-being, as well as the interactions between these factors. Specifically, by examining whether these links were expressed in cumulative, compensatory and/or independent ways. This study aimed to fill a gap in the literature by jointly examining the contribution of best friendship and romantic relationship on psychological well-being, while also considering both positive and negative features of one's relationship. The moderating effects of relationship duration (for best friendship and romantic relationship) and gender were considered. Three dimensions of psychological well-being that are particularly salient in emerging adulthood were investigated: self-esteem, depressive symptoms, and loneliness (Arnett, 2015; Qualter et al., 2015; Wagner et al., 2013).

In view of the cumulative effects of best friendships and romantic relationships on psychological well-being observed in the literature, it was expected that (H1) the higher the participants' level of intimacy with both their best friend and their romantic partner, the higher their level of self-esteem would be and the the lower their level of depressive symptoms and loneliness would be (e.g., higher psychological well-being). Conversely, (H2) the higher the level of conflict with their best friend and with their romantic partner, the lower their level of well-being would be.

As for compensatory effects, it was expected that, (H3) among participants reporting a low level of intimacy or a high level of conflict with their romantic partner, the higher the level of intimacy with their best friend, the higher the level of psychological well-being they would show. In contrast, (H4) the higher the level of conflict they reported experiencing with their best friend, the lower the level of well-being they would show, even when they reported a high level of intimacy or a low level of conflict with their romantic partner.

Finally, it was expected that intimacy and conflict in both best friendship and romantic relationship would have distinct (independent) associations with psychological well-being when observed simultaneously. Specifically, (H5) the higher the level of intimacy in each of these relationships, the higher the level of psychological well-being would be. Conversely, (H6) the higher the level of conflict in each of these relationships, the lower the level of well-being would be.

With respect to the moderating effect of relationship duration, it was expected that (H7) the links between intimacy, conflict (for best friendship and romantic relationship) and psychological well-being would be stronger among individuals whose relationship was more longstanding, compared to those whose relationship was more recent. As for the moderating effect of gender, discrepancies in the literature made it difficult to formulate hypotheses. This aspect therefore remained exploratory.

## Method

### Participants

These questions were examined in the context of a longitudinal study initiated with 390 students (58% girls; mean age at T1 = 12.38;  $SD = 0.42$ ) enrolled in eight schools in Quebec (Canada). These participants were predominantly Caucasian (90%). Only a minority were Black (3%) or of Hispanic (3%), Arabic (3%) or Asian (1%) descent. Participants took part in a follow-up assessment at age of 22 where the current study data was collected. At age 22, 303 participants were still actively involved in the project and 62.7% of them were in a couple relationship. They constituted the sample selected for this study ( $n = 190$ ). Compared with the rest of the initial sample ( $n = 200$ ), this subsample included a larger proportion of women (64.4% vs. 58%; chi-square test = 6.40  $p < .01$ ) but did not differ on other demographic variables (ethnicity and family structure) collected at the beginning of the study<sup>1</sup>.

### Research design and procedure

All participants from the original sample (excluding those who voluntarily withdrew from the study) were invited to participate in an annual wave of data collection at age 22. The data were collected using questionnaires completed at home. To ensure confidentiality, a research assistant was tasked to distribute and collect the questionnaires in a sealed envelope, and to make sure participants would answer the questionnaires alone and without being disturbed. A minority of participants (less than 5%) received and returned the questionnaire by mail. Participants received financial compensation (gift certificate worth \$25) to thank them for their participation. The project received the approval of the Ethics Committee of (*blind for review*).

## Measures

### Relationship features

**Intimacy and conflict with the best friend.** Intimacy and conflict with the best friend were measured using the *Network of Relationships Inventory* (NRI, Furman & Buhrmester, 1985). The NRI measures positive and negative qualitative aspects of relationship and has shown good reliability and validity indices (Furman, 1996). Participants were asked to identify their best friend (first name and surname), who had to be someone other than their romantic partner. The vast majority of them named a same-gender best friend (89.5%). They were then asked to indicate how well each item corresponded to their relationship with that person, using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1, *Very little or none of the time*, to 5, *Most of the time*. Intimacy was measured using 3 items (Cronbach alpha = .81; e.g., "How often do you share secrets and private

feelings with this person?") and conflict was measured using 3 items ( $\alpha = .77$ , e.g., "How often do you and this person argue with each other?"). The scores for each dimension corresponded to the mean of their items.

***Intimacy and conflict with the romantic partner.*** Participants were asked whether they currently had a romantic partner (yes/no). Those who answered in the affirmative were then asked to identify this person (first name and surname) and answer the same items from the NRI used to measure intimacy and conflict with their best friend, focusing this time on their relationship with their romantic partner. The internal coherence of these two scales was high ( $\alpha = .87$  for intimacy and .88 for conflict).

### ***Psychological well-being***

***Self-esteem.*** Self-esteem was measured using the *Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale* (Rosenberg, 1965). Participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed with statements regarding their self-esteem (10 items, e.g., "I have a positive attitude toward myself"), using a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1, *Strongly disagree* to 4, *Strongly agree*. The total score corresponded to the mean of the items, with a higher score indicating higher self-esteem. This instrument has shown good reliability and validity indices (Rosenberg, 1965). Internal consistency for this sample was high ( $\alpha = .87$ ).

***Depressive symptoms.*** Depressive symptoms were measured using the *Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale* (Radloff, 1977). This instrument assesses the severity of clinical depressive symptomatology, including affective components (e.g., depressed mood, feeling of hopelessness) and functioning markers (e.g., level of appetite, psychomotor activity). Participants were asked to indicate how often they had experienced depressive symptoms in the previous week (20 items, e.g., "I felt depressed"), using a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1, *Rarely or none of the time (0-1 day)* to 4, *Most or all of the time (5-7 days)*. The total score corresponded to the sum of the items, with a higher score indicating greater severity of depressive symptoms. Internal consistency for this sample was high ( $\alpha = .89$ ).

***Loneliness.*** Loneliness was measured using 10 items from the *UCLA Loneliness Scale* (Version 3; Russell, 1996). This instrument measures how often participants display loneliness markers (e.g., "I feel left out"), using a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1, *Never* to 4, *Always*. The total score corresponded to the mean of the items, with a higher score indicating a greater feeling of loneliness. Internal consistency for this sample was high ( $\alpha = .86$ ).

### ***Moderators***

***Relationships duration from ages 15 to 22.*** Every year between the ages of 15 and 22, participants were asked to write down the name of their best friend and their current romantic partner (if applicable). The friendship duration score corresponded to the number of times the best friend identified at age 22 was also named at previous measurement times (age 22 included; range of 1 to 8). The same calculation was used to measure romantic relationship duration. This calculation, based on longitudinal data, provided an objective measure of relationship duration, making it possible to overcome the limits of the instruments currently used in the literature, which call upon the memory of the participants in measuring the duration of relationships and are therefore subject to bias (Gibb et al., 2011; Lantagne & Furman, 2017).

### ***Data analysis plan***

The research questions were examined using a series of multiple regression analyses (PROC GLM, SAS). Regressions analyses were performed on the subsample of participants who had

romantic partners ( $n=190$ ), to examine the links between best friendship intimacy and conflict, romantic relationship intimacy and conflict, and psychological well-being. This analysis brought out the distinct associations between the features of each type of relationship, and well-being (independent simple effects), as well as their interaction effects (cumulative and/or compensatory effects). The moderating effects of relationship duration (of best friendship and romantic relationship) and gender were observed. The model was tested separately for each dependent variable. When a significant interaction between the independent variables was observed, the simple main effects for each sub-group were examined. In the case of an interaction between best friendship features and romantic relationship features, the variables relating to the romantic relationship (intimacy, conflict) were codified as moderating variables (*e.g.*, three values,  $-1 SD$ ,  $M$ ,  $+1 SD$ ). The same method was applied for interactions involving relationship duration.

First, best friendship features, romantic relationship features and moderating variables were introduced into the model to examine their main effects. Second, the interactions between best friendship features and romantic relationship features were added to the model. Third, the interaction effects of the moderating variables were tested with best friendship features, romantic relationship features, and best friendship features and romantic relationship features. Fit indices (SBC, Schwarz, 1978) were used to assess the level of fit of the tested models. In the absence of interpretable results, non-significant interactions were removed. The final model presented in the Result section showed the best fit with the data.

## Results

### *Preliminary and descriptive analyses*

The level of asymmetry in the data for each variable was assessed, to ensure that it did not exceed twice its standard deviation. In these instances, which was the case for intimacy and conflict for both best friendship and romantic relationship, the variables were normalized using an appropriate log transformation (Field, 2013). All variables under study were standardized (mean centered) to test interactions effects. The unstandardized means and standard deviations for the variables under study, as well as their standardized correlations, are presented in Table 1.

### *Links between intimacy and conflict in best friendship and romantic relationship, and psychological well-being among emerging adults in a romantic relationship*

The results for each regression model are presented in Table 2. The next section describes the results separately for each dependent variable. The main effects of each independent variable are described first, followed by the interaction effects.

#### *Self-esteem*

An effect of gender showed that men reported higher self-esteem than women. Moreover, an effect of best friendship duration revealed that more longstanding friendships were linked to higher self-esteem. In terms of interactions, an interaction was found between intimacy with one's best friend and intimacy with one's romantic partner. Specifically, among participants who reported a medium or low level of intimacy with their romantic partner, a higher level of intimacy with their best friend was associated with higher self-esteem,  $\beta=0.15$ ,  $t(171) = 2.18$ ,  $p<0.05$  and  $\beta=0.30$ ,  $t(171) = 3.24$ ,  $p<0.01$  respectively (Figure 1). An interaction was also observed between intimacy with one's best friend and conflict with one's romantic partner. Among participants who reported a medium or high level of conflict with their partner, a higher level of intimacy with their best friend was linked to higher self-esteem,  $\beta=0.15$ ,  $t(171) = 2.18$ ,  $p<0.05$  and  $\beta=0.34$ ,  $t(171) = 3.57$ ,  $p<0.001$  respectively (Figure 2). Finally, an interaction was observed between romantic relationship duration and intimacy with one's romantic partner. Specifically,

**Table 1.** Bivariate correlations between the variables under study (standardized).

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Gender (1 = F, 2 = M)										
2. Depression	-.12									
3. Self-esteem	.10	-.59***								
4. Loneliness	-.04	.57***	-.50***							
5. Best friend. duration	-.06	-.14	.17*	-.04						
6. Rom. rel. duration	.01	-.05	.01	-.05	.05					
7. Intimacy best friend	-.24**	-.08	.15*	-.28***	.02	-.10				
8. Conflict best friend	.09	.23**	-.21**	.20**	-.04	-.09	-.13			
9. Intimacy rom part.	-.06	-.25**	.27***	-.24**	.10	.11	.22**	-.09		
10. Conflict rom. part.	.04	.27***	-.31***	.10	-.02	.19**	.00	.18*	-.05	
M		26.69	2.70	1.42	4.69	2.99	4.15	1.49	4.48	1.63
SD		6.52	0.39	0.44	2.55	1.81	0.89	0.55	0.75	0.58

Note:  $n = 190$ . The means and standard deviations presented are non-standardized

\*\*\* $p < 0.001$ ,

\*\* $p < 0.01$ ,

\* $p < 0.05$ .

**Table 2.** Multiple regressions predicting subjective well-being by best friendship quality aspects and romantic relationship quality aspects among emerging adults with a romantic partner (standardized).

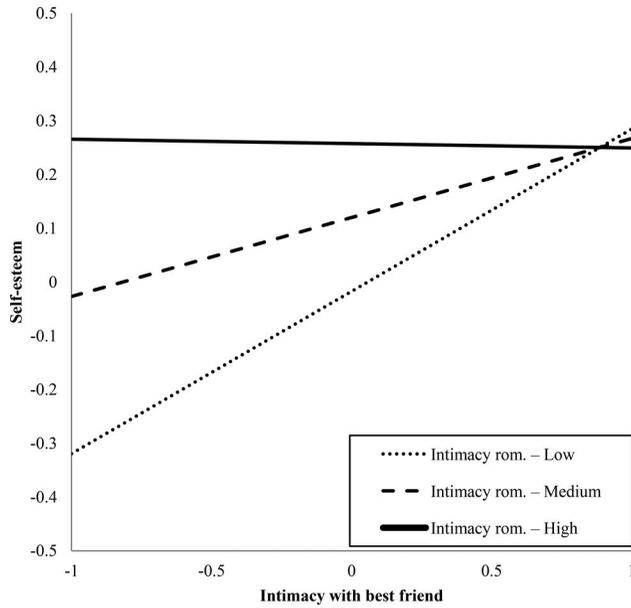
	Self-Esteem			Depression			Loneliness		
	$\beta$	S.E.	$R^2$	$\beta$	S.E.	$R^2$	$\beta$	S.E.	$R^2$
Gender	.20*	.07	0.33***	-.16*	.07	0.24***	-.14	.07	0.20***
Best friendship duration	.18**	.06		-.14*	.07		-.04	.07	
Intimacy with best friend	.15*	.07		-.04	.07		-.28***	.07	
Conflict with best friend	-.09	.06		.14*	.07		.11	.07	
Romantic relationship duration	.03	.07		-.03	.07		-.06	.07	
Intimacy with romantic partner	.14*	.07		-.16*	.07		-.13	.07	
Conflict with romantic partner	-.26***	.07		.24***	.07		.09	.07	
Int. friend* Int. rom.	-.16*	.06		.04	.07		.09	.07	
Int. friend*Conf. rom.	.20**	.06		-.04	.07		-.10	.07	
Conf. friend* Int. rom.	.01	.07		.02	.07		.01	.07	
Conf. friend* Conf. rom.	-.04	.06		.15*	.07		.08	.07	
Friend. dur* Int. friend	.10	.06		-.05	.06		.01	.06	
Friend. dur.* Conf. friend	.01	.06		.08	.07		-.06	.07	
Rom. dur.* Int. rom.	-.15*	.06		.08	.07		.11	.07	
Rom. dur.* Conf. rom.	.12	.07		.03	.07		-.04	.08	

Note:  $n = 190$ .

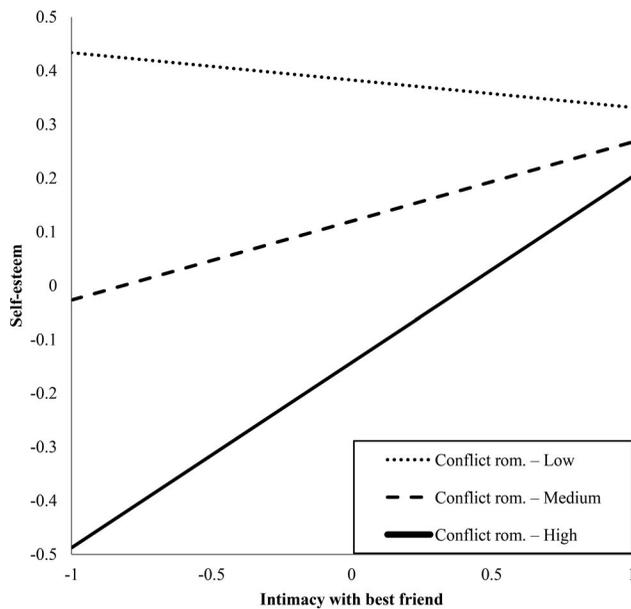
\*\*\* $p < 0.001$ ,

\*\* $p < 0.01$ ,

\* $p < 0.05$ .

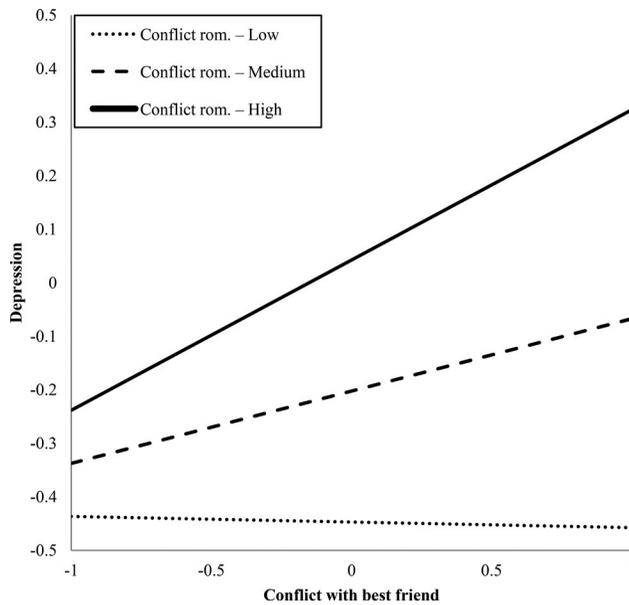


**Figure 1.** Self-esteem predicted by the interactions between Best Friendship Intimacy and Romantic Relationship Intimacy. Each line represents the association between Best Friendship Intimacy and Self-Esteem when Romantic Relationship intimacy is Low (-1 SD), Medium (M) and High (+1 SD).



**Figure 2.** Self-esteem predicted by the interactions between Best Friendship Intimacy and Romantic Relationship Conflict. Each line represents the association between Best Friendship Intimacy and Self-Esteem when Romantic Relationship Conflict is Low (-1 SD), Medium (M) and High (+1 SD).

among participants whose romantic relationship was of short or medium duration, a higher level of intimacy with their partner was linked to higher self-esteem,  $\beta=0.29$ ,  $t(171) = 3.23$ ,  $p < 0.01$  and  $\beta=0.14$ ,  $t(171) = 2.08$ ,  $p < 0.05$  respectively. No significant interactions involving gender or best friendship duration were observed.



**Figure 3.** Depression predicted by the interactions between Best Friendship Conflict and Romantic Relationship Conflict. Each line represents the association between Best Friendship Conflict and Depression when Romantic Relationship Conflict is Low (-1 SD), Medium (M) and High (+1 SD).

### Depressive symptoms

An effect of gender showed that women reported more depressive symptoms than men. An effect of best friendship duration revealed that more longstanding friendships were linked to fewer depressive symptoms. Finally, an effect of intimacy with one's romantic partner indicated that higher levels of intimacy were linked to fewer depressive symptoms. Regarding the interactions, the results showed a significant interaction between conflict with one's best friend and conflict with one's romantic partner. Specifically, among participants who reported a medium or high level of conflict with their romantic partner, a higher level of conflict with their best friend was linked to more depressive symptoms,  $\beta = 0.14$ ,  $t(171) = 1.99$ ,  $p < 0.05$  and  $\beta = 0.28$ ,  $t(171) = 3.04$ ,  $p < 0.01$  respectively (Figure 3). No significant interactions involving gender, best friendship duration, or romantic relationship duration were observed.

### Loneliness

An effect of intimacy with one's best friend revealed that higher levels of intimacy were linked to lower levels of loneliness. No other main effects or significant interactions were found.

### Discussion

Intimacy and conflict in best friendship and romantic relationship both contribute to psychological well-being in emerging adulthood. However, few studies have examined the contributions of these two types of relationships simultaneously, to bring out their distinct associations and possible interactions (Furman & Rose, 2015). The purpose of this study was to clarify these links. The results partially confirmed our hypotheses. On the one hand, intimacy and conflict in best friendship and romantic relationship both displayed cumulative, compensatory, and independent effects on psychological well-being. On the other hand, these associations were expressed in a distinct way depending on the different dimensions of well-being examined.

### ***Interactions and independent effects***

As expected, compensatory effects on self-esteem were found. First, among individuals who reported a medium or low level of intimacy with their romantic partner, a higher level of intimacy with their best friend was linked to a higher level of self-esteem. Second, among individuals who reported a medium or high level of conflict with their romantic partner, a higher level of intimacy with their best friend was also linked to a higher level of self-esteem. Thus, an intimate relationship with one's best friend appears to play a protective role for self-esteem among emerging adults whose romantic relationship is conflictual. These results are in line with our hypotheses and with observations from previous studies (Eshbaugh, 2010; Sherman et al., 2006). Considering that romantic exploration and engagement are considered developmental tasks in emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2015; Furman & Rose, 2015), emerging adults who have a conflictual relationship with their romantic partner may feel disconnected from their peers, which in turn may affect their self-esteem. However, the fact of having an intimate relationship at the same time with their best friend, another privileged relationship in their social universe (Arnett, 2015), could reassure them regarding their ability to experience quality personal relationships, which may thus protect their self-esteem. Furthermore, it can also be considered that individuals with high self-esteem in emerging adulthood have the capacity to maintain an intimate relationship with their best friend, even when they have a conflictual relationship with their romantic partner.

No compensatory effects were observed for conflict with the best friend. While unexpected, research showed that advances in conflict resolution skills in emerging adulthood are associated with a greater capacity to accept and process the presence of conflict in close friendships (Laursen et al., 2001). Thus, the links between best friendship conflict and self-esteem might not outweigh the effects of romantic relationship features.

A cumulative effect was observed for depressive symptoms. Among individuals who reported a medium or high level of conflict with their romantic partner, experiencing a higher level of conflict with their best friend was linked to more depressive symptoms. This result was in line with the findings reported in the literature, showing that having a conflictual relationship with several members of one's social network is linked to a lower level of psychological well-being in emerging adulthood (Ratelle et al., 2013). According to Baumeister and Leary (1995), the need to have close interpersonal relationships is closely linked to psychosocial adjustment throughout one's development, and difficulties initiating or maintaining such relationships appear to have negative effects on psychological well-being, including higher levels of depression. It thus appears coherent that experiencing conflict in the context of these two close relationships is linked to more depressive symptoms in emerging adults. It is also possible that experiencing depressive symptoms has an impact on the qualitative features of personal relationships (Coyne, 1976) such that individuals with the highest level of depressive symptoms might also report more negative repercussions in their social network.

The lack of cumulative effects involving intimacy is notable. However, previous studies have shown that emerging adults who show depressive symptoms can report both an intimate friendship and more depressive symptoms when they engage in co-rumination with their friend (Calmes & Roberts, 2008). This phenomenon could thus help explain the absence of effects involving intimacy with one's best friend on depressive symptoms, including in interaction with one's romantic relationship.

Finally, beyond the interactions observed, intimacy and conflict in both best friendship and romantic relationship showed independent associations with psychological well-being. With respect to best friendship, a higher level of intimacy was linked to less loneliness, in line with the literature (Heinrich & Gullone, 2006; Nicolaisen & Thorsen, 2017). It is notable that only intimacy with one's best friend was linked to loneliness while no link was found for the level of intimacy in one's romantic relationship. It is possible that a joint examination of the effects of these two types of relationships helped to bring out the relative importance of best friendship on this dimension of psychological well-being, compared to romantic relationships. It can also be argued that an intimate relationship with one's best friend is an indicator of adapted social

functioning in a larger group of peers (Laird et al., 1999), which would also contribute to reducing loneliness, while the dyadic and exclusive context of a romantic relationship would have less associations with this dimension of psychological well-being. However, these mechanisms remain to be clarified. As for romantic relationships, a higher level of intimacy was associated with fewer depressive symptoms. These results are consistent with the literature (Simon & Barrett, 2010), but contrast with the lack of results for intimacy with one's best friend. However, it has been shown that among youth who tend to co-ruminate with their loved ones, only co-rumination with their best friend is linked to an increase in depressive symptoms, while co-rumination with their romantic partner shows no association (Calmes & Roberts, 2008). Thus, it is not surprising that a high level of intimacy with one's romantic partner is linked to fewer depressive symptoms. It is also possible that emerging adults with few depressive symptoms tend to form more intimate romantic relationships.

Taken together, these findings open the door to a reflection on the role of best friendship in emerging adulthood. Indeed, while the literature emphasizes the developmental importance of romantic relationships during this period (Arnett, 2015), the present results show that the relationship with the best friend, often less studied, continue to play an important role in the social functioning and well-being of emerging adults. As the establishment and maintenance of romantic relationships is considered a developmental task in emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2015), it is possible that individuals are more sensitive to difficulties in their romantic functioning (e.g., less intimate or more conflictual relationship) during this period. At the same time, the relationship with the best friend could represent for emerging adults a constant and reliable intimate relational context, providing a protective effect on well-being.

### ***Moderating effects of relationship duration and gender***

A moderating effect of relationship duration was observed, whereby a higher level of intimacy with one's romantic partner was linked to a higher level of self-esteem, but only among individuals whose relationship was more recent. Although these results are surprising, an explanation can be proposed: considering that the beginning of a romantic relationship tends to be marked by more intense romantic feelings (Sheets, 2014), having a more intimate relationship with one's partner when the relationship is in a more passionate phase could have a positive effect on self-esteem, before dissipating as the relationship continues. Furthermore, the links between best friendship features and psychological well-being were observed regardless of whether the relationship was recent or more longstanding. It is thus possible that the effects of best friendship on well-being are marked by greater stability than the effects of romantic relationships.

Finally, no moderating effect of gender was found, which is consistent with the results of previous studies focusing on both best friendships (Miething et al., 2016) and romantic relationships (Bernardon et al., 2011). However, this finding is not unanimous in the literature (Lee & Goldstein, 2016; Simon & Barrett, 2010). In view of this lack of consensus, a possible explanation could be put forward: the moderating effect of gender on the links between features of a relationship and psychological well-being could be influenced by the notion of gender role orientation. Indeed, studies have shown that individuals' more or less rigid adherence to gender role is linked to the quality of their friendships and romantic relationships (Bowman, 2008; Perrin et al., 2011). Therefore, the inconsistencies in the literature regarding gender effects might reflect intragroup divergences in gender role orientation. Future studies might benefit from considering gender role variables, instead of gender alone, to examine the differences usually expected between men and women.

### ***Limitations, strengths, and future directions***

This study has some limitations that should be considered. First, all the variables under study were measured using self-reported questionnaires, which implies that some of the links observed may

reflect a problem of shared-method variance. Thus, it would be useful to also consider the perceptions of each participant's best friend and romantic partner in evaluating relationship intimacy and conflict. Second, the sample used was relatively socio-economically homogeneous and came from only one geographic region, which limits the generalizability of the results. Third, due to changes in the instruments used at different measurement times in the longitudinal study, we could only conduct cross-sectional analyses in this report, which does not help clarify the direction of the links between the variables. Finally, the cross-sectional design of this study limits the interpretation of our results to correlational links and does not allow to rule out that these associations may operate in the opposite direction. Despite these limitations, several strengths are worth highlighting. First, this study sheds light on the distinct contribution made by intimacy and conflict in best friendship and romantic relationship on psychological well-being in emerging adulthood, which has not been highly explored in the literature. Furthermore, our results highlight the role of best friendship as a protective factor for psychological well-being during this developmental period.

The results presented in this study pave the way for future research. First, future studies could simultaneously examine the contributions of intimacy and conflict in best friendship and romantic relationship on other salient dimensions of psychosocial adaptation in emerging adulthood, such as alcohol and marijuana use (Arnett, 2015), to account for their distinct associations. Second, it would be relevant to examine how the contributions of best friendship and romantic relationship features on psychological well-being evolve as individuals advance into adulthood and experience new transitions (*e.g.*, cohabiting, getting married, having children, etc.). Third, as intimacy and conflict can coexist in one's relationship, future studies might benefit from examining the contribution of conflict resolution processes on psychological well-being. Fourth, future studies with a larger sample would benefit from examining the contributions of the relationship with the best friend and the romantic partner on well-being when both of them are of the same gender. Finally, it might be advantageous for studies on the links between intimacy and conflict in one's relationship and well-being to consider the broader social context in which emerging adults live, including their peer group.

## Conclusion

This study showed that, when observed simultaneously, intimacy and conflict in best friendship and romantic relationship contribute in different ways to psychological well-being in emerging adulthood. On the one hand, it is possible that emerging adults with depressive symptoms are particularly sensitive to the presence of conflict in their close relationships, or that the presence of depressive symptoms affects the quality of these relationships. On the other hand, this study highlights the protective role of intimacy with one's best friend on self-esteem and loneliness in emerging adulthood. It is noteworthy that during a period in which romantic relationships play an increasingly prominent role, best friendships also continue to play a significant role in the social life of emerging adults. This study therefore underlines the importance of considering the role of best friendship in psychosocial development in emerging adulthood.

## Author's note

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## Note

1. Preliminary analyses involving the entire sample ( $n = 303$ ) were carried out to verify whether the links between intimacy and conflict with the best friend and well-being (self-esteem, depressive symptoms, lone-

liness) varied according to relationship status (having or not having a partner). The model was tested separately for each dependent variable. The effects of relationship duration and gender were controlled for. No interaction effect between relationship status and the level of best friendship intimacy or conflict were observed. However, the results showed that single emerging adults tended to feel more depressed,  $\beta = -0.19$ ,  $t(288) = -3.25$ ,  $p < 0.01$  and more lonely,  $\beta = -0.24$ ,  $t(288) = -4.07$ ,  $p < 0.001$  than those in a romantic relationship.

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## Data availability statement

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

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## Annex