

Article

The Questions Young Adults Want to Be Asked: A New Perspective on Interpersonal Curiosity in Relationships

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Abstract

Though an emerging body of theory and research suggests that individuals who feel and express greater interpersonal curiosity experience improved social functioning and relationships, researchers have yet to examine interpersonal curiosity from the perspective of those receiving questions from others. The present study employs a mixed-methods approach to explore the questions young adults wish to be asked by four relational partners (i.e., closest friend, mother figure, father figure, and romantic partner), along with their reasons why. Among our sample of college students ($N = 641$; $M_{\text{age}} = 19.82$), eight distinct types of questions (e.g., about one's well-being), along with six themes in their reasons for wishing to receive this curiosity (e.g., to improve relational dynamics), were identified. Findings not only suggest that young adults have questions they wish to be asked but also offer insight into six potential mechanisms by which they believe interpersonal curiosity could enhance their relationships.

Keywords: interpersonal curiosity; relationships; relational functioning; young adulthood

1. Introduction

Emerging theory and research underscore the likely relevance of *interpersonal curiosity* (i.e., curiosity about the thoughts, feelings, experiences, and desires of others) to social connection, human relationships, and social-emotional well-being (Han et al., 2023, 2026; Hartung & Renner, 2011; Kashdan et al., 2020; Letendre Jauniaux & Lawford, 2024; Litman & Pezzo, 2007; Ronfard et al., 2018; Way, 2025, in press; Way & Taffe, 2024). Indeed, prior research suggests that trait interpersonal curiosity is associated with social functioning and skills (Hartung & Renner, 2011; Renner, 2006), that those who ask questions during conversations tend to be better liked (Huang et al., 2017), and that the content of the questions adolescents report wishing to ask others relates to their friendship quality and social-emotional skills (Han et al., 2023, 2026).

Yet, despite recent scholarly interest in interpersonal curiosity, studies of interpersonal curiosity remain altogether few in number and leave one key area—the perspective of the person receiving interpersonal curiosity from others—entirely unexplored. To clarify *how* and *why* interpersonal curiosity may be associated with improved social functioning and relationships, however, we must examine how interpersonal curiosity is desired and understood by those being asked the questions. In this paper, we present findings from a mixed-methods study of the types of questions young adults wish to receive from four people with whom they may share relationships (i.e., closest friend, mother figure, father figure, and romantic partner), including their reasons why. Through the participants'



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reported reasons, our findings offer insight into six distinct mechanisms by which young adults believe interpersonal curiosity could improve their relationships.

1.1. Interpersonal Curiosity and Social Relationships

Although humans feel and express curiosity about others from an early age (e.g., Engel, 2015; Lieberman, 2013), only a small body of research has examined the role of interpersonal curiosity in our lives and relationships (i.e., Chouinard, 2007; Engel, 2015; Han et al., 2023; Hartung & Renner, 2013; Kashdan et al., 2020; Renner, 2006; Ronfard et al., 2018; Way, 2025, in press; Way & Taffe, 2024). This research, rooted exclusively in examinations of trait-based interpersonal curiosity and the questions people wish to ask others, suggests that our natural curiosity about one another may offer a key mechanism through which we may meaningfully connect to another person. Interpersonal curiosity, in other words, may prove critical for building and maintaining healthy social relationships, with researchers finding associations between interpersonal curiosity and social-emotional skills and markers of social connectedness among adolescents and adults (Han et al., 2023, 2026; Hartung & Renner, 2011; Renner, 2006). Survey research conducted with both young adult and older adult populations suggests a correlation between interpersonal curiosity and social competence, finding significant associations across all three included measures of social competence (Renner, 2006). Three experimental studies, each of which examined interactions between two adult strangers, further support this relation, finding that those who are more interpersonally curious glean more accurate perceptions of their conversational partners (Hartung & Renner, 2011), those who are more curious generally feel closer to their partners following both small talk and intimate conversations (Kashdan et al., 2011), and those who ask more questions are better liked by their partners (Huang et al., 2017). Taken together, these results underscore the potential role of interpersonal curiosity in relationship-building.

Prior research offers insight into two potential mechanisms by which interpersonal curiosity might serve to improve existing relationships. First, by expressing curiosity about one another, relational partners may foster intimacy and feelings of connectedness within the relationship. One person's questions may communicate their genuine interest in and care for their relational partner, helping that partner feel valued and secure in the shared relationship (Letendre Jauniaux & Lawford, 2024). Moreover, curiosity-driven questions functionally create opportunities to learn more about, and thus better understand and appreciate, one's relational partner. The information gleaned through this process may enable the question-asker to see their relational partner as they see themselves, perhaps violating assumptions they may have held about this person (Han et al., 2026; Way, 2025; Way & Nelson, 2018). Indeed, inviting others to share their perspectives appears to be an effective method for fostering mutual understanding, even in the face of prejudice (Eyal et al., 2018; Kalla & Broockman, 2023). By curiously exploring their relational partner's thoughts, feelings, and experiences, the question-asker may thus help their partner to feel truly "known" and understood by the other—feelings that have been shown to promote connection and relationship satisfaction (Reis et al., 2017; Schroeder & Fishbach, 2024).

Second, and relatedly, some prior research suggests that interpersonal curiosity may enhance relational functioning. In a pragmatic sense, because asking questions may enable a person to better understand the other person's point of view (Eyal et al., 2018), interpersonal curiosity might reduce the likelihood of a misunderstanding or unnecessary conflict. Studies examining the accuracy with which relational partners (e.g., romantic partners) grasp what one another are thinking and feeling during social interactions consistently find that these levels of accuracy are low, generally around 30–35% (Vorauer et al., 2025). It stands to reason that many common misunderstandings, which could create conflict

within a relationship, might be avoided if one person were to ask the other curiosity-driven questions rather than being forced to rely on their own assumptions about the other person (Wetzler, 2024).

However, critically, while it is tenable that each of these mechanisms might independently or jointly explain an association between interpersonal curiosity and improved social relationships, researchers have yet to examine the perspective of the person *receiving* interpersonal curiosity from their relational partners. Through our experience implementing *The Listening with Curiosity Project*, a school-based intervention designed to promote adolescents' connection and well-being by fostering interpersonal curiosity and listening skills among students (Han et al., 2023, 2026; Way, 2025, *in press*; Way & Nelson, 2018), we discovered that young people not only have questions that they wish ask but also have questions that they wish to *be asked*. Understanding the ways in which young people wish to receive interpersonal curiosity from others may be central to discovering how and why interpersonal curiosity unfolds within and may serve to improve relationships. In addition, as it is possible that interpersonal curiosity might manifest differently across the various relationships in a person's life, examining these patterns within several different relationship types is important for capturing nuance in these processes.

In the present study, we explore how and why young adults wish to receive interpersonal curiosity from their relational partners, thus extending the growing body of research on this construct and contributing to the study of human relationships more broadly. We focus on young adults—and specifically college attendees—for this investigation in light of marked developmental changes this group undergoes with regard to their relationships with parents, friends, and romantic partners (e.g., Galambos et al., 2018; Markiewicz et al., 2006; Tanner, 2006). As young adults adapt to their new contexts and changing relational landscapes, understanding how interpersonal curiosity might serve to improve their relationships with different figures in their lives (i.e., friends, parents, and romantic partners) could be particularly important.

1.2. The Present Study

The present study had three specific aims, each of which was exploratory in nature. First, we sought to identify patterns within the questions that young adults reported wishing to be asked by up to four specific others in their lives (i.e., closest friend, mother figure, father figure, and romantic partner), as well as within their reasons for wishing to be asked these questions. Second, we aimed to describe and qualitatively analyze the reported reasons to better understand how young adults understand and make meaning of interpersonal curiosity's role within their relationships. Third, we aimed to explore how question types and reasons may differ among the four relationship types (i.e., friend-friend, mother-child, father-child, and partner-partner) to better understand how individuals' meaning making about interpersonal curiosity may vary across relationships during this developmental period. Through our investigation into these three exploratory research questions, we sought to enrich our understanding of how and why interpersonal curiosity may function to strengthen young adults' relationships.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Sample and Procedure

The data presented in this study were drawn from an exploratory, mixed methods study using a convenience sample of college students in New York City, recruited via a research database housed at the authors' institution. Of the total of 687 individuals who completed the study, 40 (5.8%) were removed because they did not provide any qualitative data (i.e., all responses were blank), and an additional six were removed as age outliers,

leaving a final sample of 641 participants for the present study. Participants ranged in age from 17 to 23 ($M_{\text{age}} = 19.81$; $SD_{\text{age}} = 1.23$). Participants were majority women (59.3% women; 32.6% male; 3.1% gender non-binary, genderfluid, or genderqueer; 5.0% Prefer not to say), and diverse in terms of their racial/ethnic backgrounds (43.2% Asian; 14.7% White; 10.0% Latino/a/é; 8.1% Black/African American; 3.1% Indian; 3.0% Middle Eastern; 11.4% Multiple; 0.6% Not listed; 5.9% Prefer not to say). The only exclusion criterion was that participants be proficient in reading and writing English. The study, which took approximately 30–40 min to complete in its entirety, was administered online using the Qualtrics Survey Platform (Provo, UT; 2023, April & November) and included both free response and scale questions. This research was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the authors' institution (IRB-FY2023-7443; IRB-FY2024-8171), voluntary consent was obtained from all participants, and all participants received course credit for their participation. All data collection occurred during the Spring and Fall of 2023.

2.2. Measures

The questions participants most wished to be asked by friends, parents, and romantic partners, along with their reasons for wishing to ask those questions, were assessed via free response prompts. First, all participants were presented with the prompt, "Which question do you most wish to be asked by your closest friend?", followed by the prompt, "Why?", the responses to which were classified as participants' *questions* and *reasons*, respectively. These two prompts were then posed again to participants in reference to up to three additional specific types of relationships (i.e., mother figure, father figure, and romantic partner) such that participants provided up to four responses depending on whether they reported having a mother figure, father figure, and/or romantic partner in their lives. These relationship types were standardized to allow for comparison across participants and were limited in number to reduce participant burden. Of the 641 participants in the sample, 635 participants (99.1%) answered for the closest friend, 602 (93.9%) participants answered for a mother figure, 555 (86.6%) for a father figure, and 245 (38.2%) for a romantic partner, resulting in a total of 2,037 question-reason pairs across the 641 participants.

2.2.1. Questions

The questions participants provided across the four relationship types (i.e., closest friend, mother figure, father figure, and/or romantic partner) were coded using thematic analysis, following an inductive and semantic protocol (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Terry & Hayfield, 2021). The first author and a team of research assistants first engaged in data familiarization by reading participants' open-ended responses and making notes about the patterns observed. Using these notes, lists of initial codes were generated for the questions data and were then tested against a random sample of 50 participants' responses. The coding scheme was then refined to better distinguish between the codes and to capture responses that did not clearly fit into any of the prototypical codes yet which we interpreted as being reflective of a pattern in the data (i.e., not falling into an "other" category). Eight final types of questions were then defined and named (see Table 1). Responses which indicated that the participants did not know or did not have a question they wished to be asked were coded as "No Question/Unsure". Questions that could not be classified into the identified themes were given a code of "Other". These "Other" responses included those which were nonspecific (e.g., "Why?") and those which otherwise could not be classified into the identified categories (e.g., "How much was the jacket I just bought?"). Responses from a random sample of 131 participants (~20% of the dataset) were coded by two independent coders to assess inter-rater reliability, which was substantial (Cohen's

$\kappa = 0.79$; Landis & Koch, 1977), before all remaining question responses were divided equally between the two coders.

Table 1. Identified types of questions participants reported wishing to be asked.

Question Type	Description	Representative Examples
Who I Am & What I Think	Questions that seek to understand one's motivations, thought processes, opinions, and/or formative experiences, oftentimes probing who one is and why	"Why do you act the way that you do?" "How does your mind work?" "How has your past shaped you?"
My Goals & Desires	Questions that seek to understand one's goals, dreams, desires, and/or life plans	"What is your biggest goal in life?" "Are you sure you want to go to medical school?" "Why [do] you want a boyfriend?"
My Well-being	Questions that seek to understand one's emotions and mental states, how one feels about their own life, and/or the extent to which one's basic needs are being met	"How are you, really?" "Are you socially fulfilled?" "How's your mental health?"
My Life Updates	Questions about one's day-to-day experiences and/or about what is happening in one's life	"What's new?" "How is your life, romantically?" "Have you graduated yet?"
My Relationships	Questions about a third party and/or about the relationship one shares with a third party	"How is your brother?" "What do you think of Dad?" "How did your dad die?"
What I Think About You	Questions that seek to understand one's perspective on the question-asker and/or on the relationship they share	"Why are you friends with me?" "What do you think about me?" "Do you feel that I appreciate you?"
What I Need From You	Questions that seek to understand how the question-asker may offer support, change their behavior, or otherwise improve the shared relationship	"What is one thing I could do to improve our relationship?" "What could I do to make up for the past?" "What kind of support do you need?"
Making Plans Together	Questions about upcoming shared plans or invitations to spend time together	"What are we doing for your birthday coming up?" "Do you want to hang out soon? Play frisbee?" "When are we going to the beach?"

2.2.2. Reasons

Participants' reported reasons for wishing to be asked their questions across the four relationship types (i.e., closest friend, mother figure, father figure, and/or romantic partner) were coded using the same thematic analysis procedures as the questions data. These procedures yielded six final themes for the reasons (see Table 2). Reasons responses classified as "Other" included those in which participants stated that they simply were not asked this question (e.g., "He never asks"), were non-specific in their response (e.g., "[This question] is generally just a good question to ask"), seemingly misunderstood the prompt such that they gave a reason why the other person would wish to ask that question ("[My father figure] really likes to ask me to check his email"), or shared a reason which otherwise did not fit into the any of the identified categories (e.g., "Because I am hungry"). Inter-rater reliability was established using a random sample of 131 participants (~20% of the dataset) coded by the third author and an independent coder. Agreement was found to be "almost perfect" according to conventional benchmarks (Cohen's $\kappa = 0.82$; Landis & Koch, 1977), after which the third author coded all remaining responses.

Table 2. Identified themes in the participants' reported reasons.

Reason	Description	Representative Examples
To Feel Seen & Understood	Responses reflecting a desire to feel deeply seen and/or understood by others	"[My father figure] tends to think that I am lonely or should spend time looking for a partner, but I wish he would understand that that wouldn't make me happy." "I express myself so differently on the surface, which can sometimes cloud the way people in my life see me."
To Feel Cared for & Affirmed	Responses reflecting a desire to feel supported, cared for, loved, and/or cherished by others	"It feels nice that my mom wants to know what's going on at school and if I'm doing okay. I feel that she is there for me." "Because [this question] shows [my closest friend] cares about me and is interested in being around me."
To Grow & Learn	Responses reflecting a desire to grow, learn, and/or improve oneself through engaging with others	"I feel that talking this out with other people would help me reshape my thoughts." "I would want my dad's input on relationships, with hopes of a relationship like my parents."
To Improve Relational Dynamics	Responses reflecting a desire to open a conversation about the shared relationship in order to improve relational functioning, communicate one's own needs, and/or foster transparency in the relationship	"I always wish I had the opportunity to tell [my mother figure] about how the past still affects how I view her and feel around her." "I really want to ask [my father figure] to face some of his personal/internal fights and take those stresses off of my shoulders. Seeing him ask this would tell me he genuinely wants to change, if not for the betterment of his self, then at least for the sake of his family."
To Improve the Quality or Quantity of Time Spent Together	Responses reflecting a desire to engage with the other person, either more frequently/regularly or in different terms	"I want to bring back the little adventures that [my romantic partner and I] used to go on but I don't know how to bring it up." "I like spending quality time with my partner and I like experiencing new things together, especially when the thought comes from him."
To Express My Love & Appreciation	Responses reflecting a desire to express one's care, love, or appreciation for the other person and/or for the relationship they share	"I want [my closest friend] to know that I'll always be there to support and he's like a brother, and that while our humor is based around jokes, it very much is important at a deeper level." "I would want my mom to ask me this because I feel as though I really need to emphasize to my mom just how much of an amazing mother/role model she has been in my life."

2.3. Data Analytic Plan

First, we conducted descriptive analyses using R (version 2024.12.0) to explore the frequencies of the question types and reason themes, separately by the person to whom they were directed (i.e., friend, mother figure, father figure, and romantic partner), as well as by the total number of participants among whose responses each theme was identified at least once. Chi-square tests were performed to assess sex differences, and the phi

coefficients were calculated for statistically significant results as a measure of effect size. Next, we employed a qualitative analysis of the identified reason themes to more deeply explore how participants understood interpersonal curiosity's role within the context of their relationships.

To address our third research question about how reported questions and reasons themes may vary across the four relationship types, we conducted chi-square tests of independence using R to assess overall associations between question types/reason themes and relationship types, respectively. This approach was selected, despite the fact that it treats participants' responses across the four persons as independent, to preserve all available data across the unbalanced groups (e.g., including responses from participants without a romantic partner), and for its suitability for exploratory research aimed at identifying descriptive patterns. For both the questions and reasons, we organized the data into contingency tables, with the questions/reasons as rows and the relationship type as the columns. To identify specific patterns in differences in the distribution of questions/reasons across the relationship types, we calculated the standardized residuals and applied a Bonferroni correction to account for multiple comparisons. For the questions, as there were 40 total comparisons (10 question type codes $\times$ 4 relationship types), the significance threshold was set to $p < 0.000125$, corresponding to a critical value of $|3.23|$ for the standardized residuals. For the reasons, as there were 32 total comparisons (8 reason theme codes $\times$ 4 relationship types), the significance threshold was set to $p < 0.001563$, corresponding to a critical value of $|3.16|$ for the standardized residuals. Standardized residuals for the questions and reasons with absolute values exceeding their respective Bonferroni-corrected critical values were interpreted as indicators of a significant difference. By identifying cells that were significantly under- or over-represented, these residuals provide a measure of the relative importance of each particular question type/reason theme within the context of specific relationship types.

3. Results

3.1. Aim 1: Distribution of Question Types and Reason Themes

3.1.1. Distribution of Question Types

Descriptive analyses of the question types revealed that most young adults in our sample (625; 97.5%) reported at least one question they wished to be asked (i.e., a response that was not "None/Don't Know") across the four relationship types, and most of these participants also provided at least one reason (621; 99.4% of those reporting a question; 96.9% of the total sample). The most common question types were *My Well-being* (reported at least once by 48.4% of participants), *What I Think About You* (36.0% of participants), and *Who I Am & What I Think* (27.0% of participants). Statistically significant sex differences emerged for two of the question types. A greater proportion of men (19.1%) reported at least one question about *My Goals & Desires* compared to women, though the effect size was very small (12.4%), $\chi^2(1, N = 589) = 4.39, p = 0.036, \phi = 0.08$. A proportion of women (31.1%) reported at least one *What I Need From You* question compared to men (15.3%), with a small effect size, $\chi^2(1, N = 589) = 16.78, p < 0.001, \phi = 0.17$. In addition, a greater proportion of men (21.1%) reported either not having a question or not knowing their question at least once compared to women (13.2%), though the effect size was very small $\chi^2(1, N = 589) = 5.69, p = 0.017, \phi = 0.09$. The frequencies of each question type, both in total and separate by the person to whom they were directed, are reported in Table 3.

Table 3. Raw and relative frequencies of reported question types, presented in descending order of frequency across all relationship types.

Question Type	Friend (N = 635)	Mother Figure (N = 602)	Father Figure (N = 555)	Romantic Partner (N = 245)	Any ¹ (N = 641)
My Well-being	157 (24.7%)	177 (29.4%)	134 (24.1%)	33 (13.5%)	310 (48.4%)
What I Think About You	144 (22.7%)	80 (13.3%)	75 (13.5%)	71 (29.0%)	231 (36.0%)
Who I Am & What I Think	82 (12.9%)	69 (11.5%)	56 (10.1%)	16 (6.5%)	173 (27.0%)
What I Need From You	37 (5.8%)	78 (13.0%)	79 (14.2%)	44 (18.0%)	164 (25.6%)
My Life Updates	45 (7.1%)	64 (10.6%)	59 (10.6%)	13 (5.3%)	137 (21.4%)
Making Plans Together	66 (10.4%)	21 (3.5%)	27 (4.9%)	35 (14.3%)	110 (17.2%)
My Goals & Desires	25 (3.9%)	37 (6.1%)	38 (6.8%)	5 (2.0%)	94 (14.7%)
My Relationships	24 (3.8%)	14 (2.3%)	12 (2.2%)	3 (1.2%)	48 (7.5%)
Other Question	18 (2.8%)	15 (2.5%)	18 (3.2%)	7 (2.9%)	45 (7.0%)
No Question/Don't Know	37 (5.8%)	47 (7.8%)	57 (10.3%)	18 (7.9%)	99 (15.4%)

¹ Includes participants who provided each question type at least once.

3.1.2. Distribution of Reason Themes

Within participants' reasons, the most common types were *To Improve Relational Dynamics* (reported by 39.0% of the total sample; 40.0% of participants who reported at least one question), *To Improve the Quality or Quantity of Time Spent Together* (28.5% of the total sample; 29.3% of participants who reported at least one question), and *To Feel Seen & Understood* (24.5% of the total sample; 26.1% of participants who reported at least one question). A significant difference between men and women emerged for one of the reason themes such that a greater proportion of women (45.2%) gave the reason of *To Improve Relational Dynamics* at least once compared to men (30.2%), with a small effect size, $\chi^2(1, N = 571) = 11.56, p < 0.001, \phi = 0.14$. The frequencies of each reason, both in total and separate by the person to whom they were directed, are reported in Table 4.

Table 4. Raw and relative frequencies of reported reason themes, presented in descending order of frequency across all relationship types.

Reason Theme	Friend (N = 598)	Mother Figure (N = 555)	Father Figure (N = 498)	Romantic Partner (N = 227)	Any ¹ (N = 625) ²
To Improve Relational Dynamics	96 (16.1%)	87 (15.7%)	91 (18.3%)	71 (31.3%)	250 (40.0%)
To Improve the Quality or Quantity of Time Spent Together	101 (16.9%)	63 (11.4%)	67 (13.5%)	27 (11.9%)	183 (29.3%)
To Feel Seen & Understood	81 (13.5%)	73 (13.2%)	45 (9.0%)	9 (4.0%)	163 (26.1%)
To Feel Cared For & Affirmed	77 (12.9%)	87 (15.7%)	60 (12.0%)	18 (7.9%)	159 (25.4%)
To Express My Love & Appreciation	52 (8.7%)	35 (6.3%)	34 (6.8%)	23 (9.4%)	98 (15.7%)
To Grow & Learn	37 (6.2%)	32 (5.8%)	38 (7.6%)	4 (1.8%)	86 (13.8%)
Other Reason	146 (24.4%)	163 (29.4%)	145 (29.1%)	64 (28.2%)	303 (48.5%)
No Reason/Don't Know	5 (0.8%)	12 (2.2%)	14 (2.8%)	9 (4.0%)	29 (4.6%)
Missing ³	3 (0.5%)	3 (0.5%)	4 (0.8%)	2 (0.9%)	-

¹ Includes participants among whom each reason theme was reflected at least once. ² Total number of participants who provided at least one question, and thus for whom it was possible to report a reason. ³ Includes participants who provided a question for the specified relationship type but left their reason blank.

3.2. Aim 2: Qualitative Analysis of Reason Themes

Our thematic analysis identified the following six themes, in order of their frequency across the four relationship types, among participants' reasons for wishing to be asked their questions: (1) *To Improve Relational Dynamics*, (2) *To Improve the Quality or Quantity of Time Spent Together*, (3) *To Feel Seen & Understood*, (4) *To Feel Cared For & Affirmed*, (5) *To Express My Love & Appreciation* (6) *To Grow & Learn*.

3.2.1. To Improve Relational Dynamics

The most frequent theme among the reported reasons was the desire to be asked questions that could promote better relational dynamics, improve relational functioning, or foster transparency within the shared relationship (250 participants; 39.0% of the total sample; 40.0% of participants who reported at least one question). Participants described wanting to “get closer”, “bond”, or have a “more positive relationship”—outcomes for which their questions could be the impetus (e.g., “[This question] would help me work with my mother so we can both be more supportive.”). Some such questions would make participants feel comfortable asserting their own needs within the relationship (e.g., “[This question] would allow me to communicate what I want from my father.”), which they worried would “sound selfish”, cause them to “feel annoying”, or require more “courage” than they would have if it were not for the question. Resulting conversations could enhance relational functioning by helping the participant communicate their concerns about the relationship (e.g., “Maybe vocalizing issues will help [my friend and I] work past these problems”), guiding the other person to modify specific behaviors (e.g., “Because [my father figure] always likes to give solutions, but a lot of times I just need to feel his love and support rather than him telling me ‘I told you so.’”), or leading the other person toward broader behavioral change (e.g., “So that [my father figure] will change and stop emotionally hurting me.”). For some participants, the questions’ value laid in what it would reveal about their relationship: that the other person valued their perspective on the relationship they shared (e.g., “I want to know that [my closest friend] is curious about how I feel about our relationship”), was open to change (e.g., “I would like [my mother figure] to ask me [this question] because it would show a willingness to change and then I could be honest with her”), and wanted to improve the relationship (e.g., “Because it would mean that [my mother figure] would admit that she hurt me, takes responsibility, and wants to make it better between us.”). Other participants whose reasons reflected a desire to improve relational dynamics described strictly seeking transparency, either without reference to broader changes in the relationship (e.g., “I want [my father figure] to know that he puts pressure on me to succeed.”) or in what they believed to be the explicit absence of this possibility (e.g., “. . .to be able to recognize the holes in [my mother figure’s and my] relationship, even if it won’t fix anything.”). Participants spoke of wanting to “air grievances” and “get stuff off of [their] chest[s]”, wishing to tell others how they felt about the relationship or how they were impacted by the other person’s actions (e.g., “I’ve always wanted to tell him how he could’ve been a better dad. I wish he was around more often and didn’t make all the mistakes that he did.”).

3.2.2. To Improve the Quality or Quantity of Time Spent Together

The second theme in participants’ reasons (183 participants; 28.1% of the total sample; 29.3% of those who reported at least one question) was a desire to spend quality time together, either more frequently or in new, specific ways. Participants described wanting to simply be with (e.g., “I would like to see [my mother figure] more”) or make plans with (e.g., “So that [my closest friend] will schedule something to do together with me”) the other person, sometimes as a means of reconnecting with them (e.g., “I miss my dad because I haven’t seen him in a long time and would love to hang out with him.”). Other responses reflected a desire to engage their relational partner in conversations about specific topics that would be enjoyable or meaningful to them. Some of these participants described wanting to share their interests (e.g., “My father and I have some great political discussions, so I love when we talk about it”), sometimes in regard to topics in which they know the other person is disinterested (e.g., “Because I know [my closest friend] is not interested in movies, but I wish to talk to him about movies”). Others described wanting to engage

their partner in conversations about their other relationships (e.g., “It would be nice for my partner to show interest in my family”), or what matters to them (“I can’t remember the last time someone asked me about my dad or talked about him. I feel like I’m killing myself trying to keep his memory alive. . . I just want someone to care enough to want to know about him.”). Lastly, some young adults in our sample reported wishing to be asked their questions as a way of organizing meaningful activities to do with their relational partners (e.g., “I want to bring back the little adventures that [my romantic partner and I] used to go on but I don’t know how to bring it up”).

3.2.3. To Feel Seen & Understood

Third, when asked why they wished to be asked certain questions by their relational partners, a group of participants (163; 25.4% of the total sample; 26.1% of those who reported at least one question) gave reasons reflecting a desire to feel deeply seen and understood. Some described wanting to have “deep” and “honest” conversations wherein they could “share feelings”, “vent”, “open up”, and “be vulnerable”, often evoking an image of something that needs to be released (e.g., “This [question] would force me to open up and let my burdens out instead of them being held inside all the time”). Questions could provide an opportunity to share their painful secrets (e.g., “Something bad happened and I haven’t been able to bring myself to tell [my mother], but I really want her to know”), or another side to themselves and their experiences (e.g., “Not everything is happy all the time. I want a space to talk about the bad”). For others, the questions offered a chance to explain themselves; as one participant articulated, “I feel like I have to explain my actions and behaviors, so [this question] will give me an opportunity to”. Revealing or explaining parts of themselves not previously voiced would help the other better understand why they are who they are, what they “want in life”, and “what goes on in [their] head[s]”—an understanding that they believed could make them feel less “disconnected”.

Central to these responses were participants’ feelings of being *misperceived* and *misunderstood*, with participants reporting that their relational partners “don’t understand” and “don’t really know [them] at all”. Oftentimes, they described others’ false assumptions about who they are (e.g., “Because [my closest friend] see[s] me as this happy extroverted person that can do no wrong sometimes and I just want to let them know that I am not all sunshine and perfect as they think I am”) and their own well-being (e.g., “My parents always assume that I’m doing pretty well here, but in fact I am not”). Some participants blamed themselves for others’ misconceptions, attributing these to their own behavior (e.g., “I express myself so differently on the outside, which can cloud the way people in my life see me”), secrecy (e.g., “I haven’t opened up to anyone about what I am going through emotionally. I’ve been very closed off with everyone”), or dishonesty (“Because I often lie and say I am okay when in reality I am not”). However, sharing with others may have felt impossible, with participants reporting that they “feel unable to talk about it” or “don’t really feel comfortable”, oftentimes because they believed that sharing would make them a “burden”, a “bother”, or “a little selfish”. Being asked their questions may make it possible for them to share what has been trapped inside (e.g., “I often keep things bottled up because I don’t want to trouble people, so despite how scary a question like that would be, I think that is what I need to hear so that I can share”), thereby helping others understand and fully appreciate, trust, and value them as they are (e.g., “I want [my mother] to know my dreams. I want her to know I’ll achieve the things I desire. I want her to believe in me and be proud”).

3.2.4. To Feel Cared for & Affirmed

Another group of participants (159; 24.8% of the total sample; 25.4% of participants who reported at least one question) expressed the reason of wanting to feel cared for and affirmed by one or more relational partners, voicing their desires to be “supported”, “checked in on”, “nurtured”, “loved”, and “cherished”. Some described their questions as a means by which others could ease their stress (e.g., “I feel stressed and my mom making sure I’m okay gives me comfort”) or help to dispel unwanted feelings (e.g., “I want to feel [my friend’s] warmth and let go of everything I’m feeling”). Others wanted reassurance that their relational partners were thinking about them (e.g., “[This question] lets me remember I’m on [my mother’s] mind and that they care”) and care about their well-being (e.g., “I feel a lot of pressure from [my father] sometimes and it would be great to hear that he cares about how I’m doing mentally and physically”). Moreover, participants sought affirmation that others’ care and consideration was unconditional (e.g., “I want the reassurance that it’s okay, and that I’ll still be loved if I don’t do this thing that I promised myself I would do) and would be provided free of judgment (e.g., “[This question] leaves room for my mother figure to show support in my life without judgment”). For these participants, being asked their questions by others could lend “a sense of security”.

3.2.5. To Express My Love & Appreciation

The fifth reason we identified among participants’ responses was a desire to express their love and appreciation for the other person (99 participants; 15.2% of the total sample; 15.7% of those who reported at least one question). These responses reflected participants’ desires to uplift the other person (e.g., “I want to tell [my romantic partner] how much I love them and brighten their day”), fulfill that person’s needs (e.g., “[My father figure] is someone who needs a lot of reassuring and I want to give him that”), or simply to express how they feel (e.g., “Because he is the best father ever and I want to express my appreciation and love as well”). Others described wanting to affirm those they love (e.g., “My mom is really selfless and has a hard time prioritizing herself. I want to remind her that her hard work doesn’t go unnoticed”), ease the other person’s possible insecurity about the shared relationship (e.g., “I want [my mother figure] to know that even though my childhood experience did not go as planned, I will always be grateful for the sacrifices she made for me”), or make the other person feel “safe” (e.g., “Because I really want to express that I truly appreciate [my closest friend] and make them feel completely safe around me.”). Participants saw their questions as an opening to share these feelings, reasoning that their questions would “open the opportunity” or provide a “reason” to share (e.g., “I sometimes need to be prompted into a sentimental conversation but regardless my best friend deserves more kind words from me.”).

3.2.6. To Grow & Learn

The sixth and final theme identified among participants’ reasons for wishing to be asked a question by others in their lives was the desire to grow and learn (86 participants; 13.4% of the total sample; 13.8% of participants who reported at least one question). For some, this manifested as a wish to receive “advice”, “guidance”, “feedback”, or “input” from others (e.g., “I want to figure out this question with my mom because she is an intelligent woman. I want to know her advice about life”). Others described wanting to use their relational partner as a kind of sounding board (“Because I want to know the answer [to my question] myself and I want to be hit with the understanding that comes when your thoughts are externalized and reflected”). Hearing their thoughts reflected back to them in this way could bring perspective (“So I could be broken out of the trace in my mind and try to analyze [why I am mean to myself] instead of just listening to it”) and

clarity (“[My mother figure] helps me flesh out most of my doubts and insecurities. She helps me, mostly by listening, figure out what I really want for myself, not what I think I should want”). Additionally, some reasoned that hearing their questions from others would prompt deep self-reflection, which could be a motivating (e.g., “[This question] could motivate me to self-reflect and work harder”) or grounding (e.g., “Life is chaotic as it is. I value the importance of slowing down time a bit and reflecting on what makes [my friend and I] happy and what we can do to be happier”) experience for them.

3.3. Aim 3: Descriptive Analyses of Differences in the Distribution of Question Types and Reason Themes Across Relationship Types

3.3.1. Differences in the Distribution of Question Types

Results from a chi-square test for independence indicated that the distribution of the types of questions young adults reported wanting to be asked differed significantly across the four relationship types, χ^2 (27, N = 2037) = 168.86, $p < 0.001$. Given the size of our contingency table, the effect size (Cramér’s $V = 0.17$) is considered medium (Cohen, 1988). Given the exploratory nature of this study, we focused on interpreting the standardized residuals to identify specific associations across the relationship types for participants’ reported questions (see Table 5), using the Bonferroni-corrected critical value of $|3.23|$.

Table 5. Standardized residuals for relationship type and identified question types ¹.

Question Type	Friend	Mother Figure	Father Figure	Romantic Partner
Who I Am & What I Think	1.91	0.48	−0.76	−2.36
My Goals & Desires	−1.67	1.31	2.11	−2.35
My Well-being	0.09	3.26	−0.29	−4.31
My Life Updates	−1.92	1.79	1.69	−2.10
My Relationships	2.25	−0.51	−0.76	−1.44
What I Think About You	3.56	−3.70	−3.33	4.68
What I Need From You	−5.54	1.16	2.19	3.26
Making Plans Together	3.59	−4.30	−2.60	4.47
Other Question	−0.02	−0.63	0.66	0.01
No Question/Don’t Know	−2.24	0.00	2.54	−0.29

¹ Residuals that exceed the Bonferroni-corrected critical value of $|3.23|$ are bolded.

Questions with type *What I Think About You* were more likely than expected for friends ($z = 3.56$) and romantic partners ($z = 4.68$) and less likely than expected for mother figures ($z = -3.70$) and father figures ($z = -3.33$). Questions with the type *Making Plans* were also more likely than expected for friends ($z = 3.59$) and romantic partners ($z = 4.47$) and less likely than expected for mother figures ($z = -4.30$). Questions about *My Well-being* were more likely than expected for mother figures ($z = 3.26$) and less likely than expected for romantic partners ($z = -4.31$). Lastly, questions reflecting the type *What I Need From You* were less likely than expected for friends ($z = -5.54$).

3.3.2. Differences in the Distribution of Reason Themes

As with the question types, results from a chi-square test for independence suggested that the distribution of reported reason themes differed significantly across the four relationship types, χ^2 (21, N = 1866) = 83.74, $p < 0.001$, with a small effect size (Cramér’s $V = 0.12$). We again focused on examining standardized residuals to examine specific associations across the relationship types, using the Bonferroni-corrected critical value of $|3.16|$ for the reason themes (see Table 6). For participants’ reported reasons, examining the standardized residuals suggested that participants were more likely to report the theme *To Improve Relational Dynamics* ($z = 5.38$), as well as less likely to report the theme of *To Feel*

Seen and Understood ($z = -3.63$), for their romantic partner than would be expected. No standardized residuals surpassed the $|3.16|$ threshold for participants’ reasons relating to their questions for their friends, mother figures, or father figures.

Table 6. Standardized residuals for relationship type and identified reason themes ¹.

Reason Theme	Friend	Mother Figure	Father Figure	Romantic Partner
To Feel Seen & Understood	2.31	1.84	−1.68	−3.63
To Feel Cared For & Affirmed	−0.02	2.33	−0.64	−2.37
To Grow & Learn	0.34	−0.18	1.91	−2.82
To Improve Relational Dynamics	−1.79	−1.97	−0.05	5.38
To Improve the Quality or Quantity of Time Spent Together	2.70	−1.96	−0.20	−0.85
To Express my Love & Appreciation	1.13	−1.44	−0.81	1.50
Other Reason	−2.12	1.11	0.92	0.24
No Reason/Don’t Know	−2.66	0.06	1.24	2.05

¹ Residuals that exceed the Bonferroni-corrected critical value of $|3.16|$ are bolded.

4. Discussion

The present study advances our understanding of interpersonal curiosity to include what young adults may wish to *be asked* by those with whom they share relationships (i.e., friends, mother figures, father figures, and romantic partners), why they wish to be asked these questions, and how the questions and reasons differ by relationship type. Only a small minority of the participants in our study (2.5%) reported not having or not knowing a question they wished to be asked by at least one of the four relational partners, suggesting that young adults overwhelmingly *do* have questions that they wish to be asked by the people in their lives. Eight distinct question types were identified, revealing a wide variety of questions that young adults may wish to be asked.

The identified question types and their relative frequencies offer insight into the types of interpersonal curiosity that young adults may wish to receive from their friends, mother figures, father figures, and romantic partners. Questions about one’s own well-being (i.e., *My Well-being*; e.g., “How are you, really?”) were the most frequent, reported at least once by 48.4% of the participants. This pattern is consistent with the high rates of mental health struggles among young people in the U.S. (e.g., [Xiang et al., 2024](#)), and evidence suggesting that sharing one’s emotions with others may provide temporary relief (e.g., [Pauw et al., 2025](#)). The second most common question type in our sample included questions eliciting the participants’ perspective on their relational partners (i.e., *What I Think About You*; e.g., “What do you think about me?”; 36% of participants), which aligns with prior research suggesting that people prefer relational partners who understand how they are perceived by them (e.g., [Carlson, 2016](#)). Other prominent question types included questions about the participants’ own thoughts, motivations, opinions, or formative experiences (i.e., *Who I Am & What I Think*; e.g., “Why do you act the way you do?”; 27% of participants), questions about what the participant needs from their relational partner (i.e., *What I Need From You*; e.g., “What kind of support do you need?”; 25.6% of participants), and questions about the participants’ daily experiences (i.e., *My Daily Life*; e.g., “What have you been up to?”; 21.4% of participants). The specific content of these questions, however, is perhaps less informative than the reasons why participants wished others would ask them, which clarify the meaning participants ascribe to their own questions in the context of their relationships.

The themes we identified in the young adults’ reported reasons offer insight into six distinct mechanisms by which young adults may imagine interpersonal curiosity to

improve their relationships in desired ways. First, and most prominently in our data, participants described the reason of wanting to improve how their relationship functions, including by communicating their own needs or by fostering transparency (i.e., *To Improve Relational Dynamics*; 40% of participants who reported at least one question). These responses align with prior theory and research suggesting that interpersonal curiosity might improve relationships by enhancing relational functioning, such as by helping people to more accurately glean others' perspectives (Eyal et al., 2018).

Second, participants reported wishing to be asked their questions as a way of ensuring that they spent time with their relational partners in desired ways or simply more often (i.e., *To Improve the Quality or Quantity of Time Spent Together*; 29.3% of participants who reported at least one question). This desire to spend more quality time together, or to change the ways in which this time is spent, is consistent with theory and research about young adults' evolving relationships with parents, peers, and romantic partners (e.g., Galambos et al., 2018; Markiewicz et al., 2006; Tanner, 2006). This reason suggests that young adults may see questions as tools to help them find the kinds of social interactions they want from their changing relationships.

Third, participants described wanting to receive questions to feel more deeply seen and understood by their relational partners (i.e., *To Feel Seen & Understood*; 26.1% of participants who reported at least one question). This reason reflects findings from the broader field of human relationships, which suggest that asking questions can help one feel truly understood by their relational partner, likely enhancing the relationship between them (Reis et al., 2017; Schroeder & Fishbach, 2024). A subset of responses reflecting participants' perceptions of being *misunderstood* by their relational partners aligns with research suggesting that people are often inaccurate in their perceptions of their partners' thoughts and feelings (e.g., Vorauer et al., 2025). Being asked certain questions may provide young adults with the opportunity to share who they really are or how they really think or feel, thereby facilitating conversations conducive to building mutual understanding and connection (Way, 2025, in press; Way & Nelson, 2018).

Fourth, the young adults in our study described wishing to be asking their questions in order to feel cared for, supported, and cherished by their relational partners (i.e., *To Feel Cared For & Affirmed*; 25.4% of participants who reported at least one question). These responses support prior theory on the value of interpersonal curiosity in creating safe relational spaces, wherein people may feel supported and secure (Letendre Jauniaux & Lawford, 2024). The presence of this theme suggests that some young adults believe receiving interpersonal curiosity from others would make them feel this way, helping them to find the kind of support and affirmation they need from their friends, parental figures, and/or romantic partners to thrive (e.g., Wesley & Booker, 2021).

Fifth, some participants reported wanting to receive questions because they wanted opportunities to express their love, care, and/or appreciation for their relational partner (i.e., *To Express My Love & Appreciation*; 15.2% of participants who reported at least one question). These young adults appeared to see interpersonal curiosity as a means by which they could voice intimate sentiments. It is possible that the participants who gave this reason would have felt uncomfortable sharing their reflections with others without an invitation, as prior research suggests that people often overestimate how awkward it will feel to express appreciation (e.g., Kumar & Epley, 2018). These participants' responses suggest that receiving interpersonal curiosity could improve relationships by giving them an opportunity to communicate how much they value their relational partner.

Sixth, and finally, the participants suggested that others' questions could offer them a means of engaging with their relational partners in ways that could promote self-improvement, either through receiving others' perspectives or advice or through exploring

one's own thoughts and feelings aloud (i.e., *To Grow & Learn*; 13.8% of participants who reported a question). These responses may reflect participants' support-seeking in the identity exploration processes characteristic of emerging adulthood (e.g., Arnett, 2000). This theme, though the least frequent, suggests that some participants were seeking to learn from and with their relational partner, perhaps enabling them to get the kind of support they need from others during this transitional stage of life.

Importantly, we identified variation in the questions young adults reported wishing to be asked, as well as in their reasons, across the four relationships examined (i.e., those with their friend, mother figure, father figure, and romantic partner). Participants were more likely to report wanting to be asked questions about their own perspective on the question-asker or shared relationship when the question-asker was a friend or romantic partner and less likely to report these questions for a mother figure or father figure. These differences might be explained by the greater novelty and perhaps fluidity of friendships and romantic relationships or by sociocultural norms about what information young people feel is and is not appropriate to freely express to their parents. Questions about making social plans were also more common for friends and romantic partners and less common for mother figures, consistent with prior work suggesting that friendships and romantic relationships become more central to individuals' daily lives than parental relationships during young adulthood (e.g., Tanner, 2006). The young adults in our sample were also more likely to want to be asked about their own well-being by their mother figures, likely reflecting norms of maternal care, and less likely to want to be asked about their well-being by their romantic partners, possibly because they assume their partners already know this information or because their desire to be asked other questions simply outweighed their desire to be asked about their well-being. Lastly, participants were less likely to want to be asked questions about what they needed from the question-asker when the question-asker was a friend, perhaps due to differential expectations of what a friendship ought to provide compared to parental or romantic relationships.

In terms of differences in young adults' reasons for wishing to be asked certain questions across the four relationship types, significant differences emerged only for romantic partners. Specifically, young adults were more likely to wish to be asked questions for the purpose of improving relational dynamics within their romantic relationship and less likely to describe the reason of wanting to feel seen and understood by their romantic partner. These findings, while exploratory in nature, suggest that young adults may see the purpose of interpersonal curiosity in their romantic relationships as more about enhancing relational functioning and less about creating opportunities to share details about who they are. Other possible explanations for the latter include the possibility that young adults already tend to feel seen and understood by their romantic partners or that they feel greater freedom to express themselves in this way without their partner providing a question to open the conversation. Interestingly, no reasons for friends, mother figures, or father figures were significantly more or less common than would be expected, suggesting that young adults may see the function of interpersonal curiosity as relatively similar across these relationship types. Additionally, confirmatory research is necessary to clarify in what ways and why young adults conceptualize and wish to receive interpersonal curiosity from various others in their lives.

Limitations and Future Directions

The present study has several limitations and offers future directions to consider. First, since the study was exploratory in nature, findings should be considered preliminary, and further confirmatory research is necessary. Second, because the prompts posed to participants were specific to certain relationship types (i.e., that of a close friend, mother

figure, father figure, and romantic partner), we cannot be certain that these are, in fact, close or important relationships for all of the participants, and other types of relationships would not have been captured by our study. Future research should expand the breadth of relationships included (e.g., to include siblings or grandparents), as well as examine variation by the quality of these relationships or, particularly in the case of friendships and romantic partnerships, the relationships' duration. Third, we may have lost nuance in participants' reported questions and reasons by categorizing responses into distinct themes and, although our coding approach was inductive in nature, it cannot be considered objective given the researchers' active role in identifying and selecting the themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Fourth, while chi-square tests assume independence of observations, our study included multiple observations per participant (i.e., for the four relationship types), violating this assumption and possibly inflating the chi-square statistics related to the variation of question types/reason themes reported across relationship types. Fifth, although relationship-specific patterns were identified through these chi-square analyses, descriptive similarities in the observed frequencies of question types/reason themes across the four relationship types suggest that broad underlying patterns may be contributing to participants' responses for each of these relationship types. Future research should examine potential similarities and differences across relationship types more deeply. Sixth, though our sample was relatively diverse in terms of racial/ethnic identity, women were overrepresented, and all participants were college students at the same university in New York City, such that our findings may not generalize to young adults more broadly. Future research should examine the questions that other young adults, as well as individuals from other age groups and sociocultural contexts, may wish to be asked by others in their lives.

5. Conclusions

Though seemingly absent from the growing body of research on interpersonal curiosity and the study of human relationships more broadly, the questions that young adults wish to *be asked* by others in their lives may deepen our understanding of each of these topics. Evidence from the present study suggests that, among young adults, not only do such questions vary widely but that they are selected for a range of personally meaningful reasons. Examining the questions young adults wish to receive from people with whom they share relationships, along with the meaning they ascribe to these questions, offers a new perspective on how interpersonal curiosity functions within and across types of relationships—perhaps offering critical insight into how interpersonal curiosity may be *leveraged* to strengthen young adults' relationships and promote human connection more widely.

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