

**Developing Recommendations for Young Adult  
Engagement in ECHS Clubhouses**

Doctoral Capstone Project

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## **Literature Review**

In the United States, it is estimated that 1 in 3 young adults ages 18-25 experience one or more mental illness, with approximately 75% of mental illness across the lifespan beginning by an individual's mid-twenties, indicating that young adulthood is a critical time for mental health support (Cadigan et al., 2019; Gmitroski et al., 2018; McKay et al., 2012; National Alliance on Mental Illness, 2023). As a life stage, young adulthood is characterized by identity exploration, instability, and various life changes related to social relationships, higher education, employment, and newfound independence (Arnett, 2000; Hallström & Beckman, 2021; Hotez et al., 2023; Thomas et al., 2020). Experiences during young adulthood have far-reaching impacts, as young adults experiencing mental illness are more likely to experience social and/or community isolation, discrimination, lower socioeconomic statuses, lower levels of educational attainment, and lower rates of employment (Gibb et al., 2018; Gmitroski et al., 2018; Hotez et al., 2023; Thomas et al., 2020). While young adulthood comprises the highest incidence rates of mental illness across all age groups, young adults tend to underutilize mental health services across the globe (Gmitroski et al., 2018; Hallström & Beckman, 2021; Thomas et al., 2020; Salaheddin & Mason, 2016). According to young adults, barriers that contribute to their lack of mental health service use include perceived stigma, feeling like they can or should solve their challenges on their own, mistrust in healthcare professionals, and inadequate knowledge about mental health treatment and resources (Hallström & Beckman, 2021; Salaheddin & Mason, 2016). Further complicating this progression into adulthood is the lack of transitional support between child and adolescent services and the adult healthcare system (McKay et al., 2012). As young adults experiencing mental illness age out of these programs and services, there are often limited referrals or resources to continue to support them as they enter a new life stage and navigate their newfound independence (McKay et al., 2012).

Researchers have identified various areas of interest and motivation for young adults including socializing, art and nature-based opportunities, community participation and exploration, social media use and trends, and other virtual activities (Thomas et al., 2020; Gowen et al., 2012). Hallström and Beckman (2021) identified that service components promoting life skill training and development such as problem-solving skills, decision-making, communication and social skills, coping skills, and critical thinking skills are key to supporting young adult self-efficacy as they navigate their mental health challenges during this unique period of life. Similarly, Thomas and colleagues (2020) identified a focus on life skills and goals as being a facilitator in young adult engagement in mental health service delivery. As a population, young adults typically report a desire to be employed, and services that address this goal can be used as a mechanism to support this population (Gmitroski et al., 2018). Young adults experiencing mental illness require unique support during this stage of life, and services and programs that support mental health need to make clear initiatives to implement programming that can support this population (McKay et al., 2012).

## **Generational Considerations**

*When thinking about how to best support young adults, it is important to consider the generational cohort's life experiences. Gen Z and Gen Alpha are the current and soon-to-be generations of young adults, and they have experienced unique life events and technological advances that influence their interests, behaviors, and values. There is currently limited peer-reviewed research and literature about the lived experiences of these generations. The following information was collected from a variety of research, news articles, and blog posts.*

### **Gen-Z**

Gen Z has experienced a variety of historical events during their most transformative developmental years, ranging from natural disasters, economic crises, international wars and conflicts, and the global Covid-19 pandemic (Harari et al., 2022; Martinez, 2024). These experiences are further magnified by the rampant increase in technology and digital communication. As a result, this generation has an increased prevalence of mental health challenges compared to previous generations (Martinez, 2024). The Covid-19 pandemic in particular has greatly influenced the mental wellbeing of current young adults as their college experiences and/or early work experiences were impacted significantly by social distancing (Harari et al., 2022). Current findings suggest that Gen Z is a particularly vulnerable population when it comes to employment skills and opportunities (Harari et al., 2022). While their mental health has been significantly impacted by current events, Gen Z tends to underutilize mental health supports, consistent with the literature of young adults (Martinez, 2024). Barriers identified specific to this generation include the increased cost of mental health support, the nation-wide shortage of mental healthcare professionals, and the inequitable distribution of mental health services in high-need areas (Martinez, 2024). Additionally, research suggests Gen Z wants to see themselves in those they receive support from, and there is a significant lack of diversity within the mental health field that can act as a barrier to this (Martinez, 2024).

Several values that have been identified as important to this generation, including flexibility related to employment and education (i.e. the importance of work-life balance, hybrid/remote work and learning, etc.), an openness to change, and a desire for novelty and stimulation (Harari et al., 2022). Notably, Gen Z heavily consumes and is influenced by online content, using social media platforms more than any other generation, which likely influences these values and needs (Paljug, 2025).

### **Gen-Alpha**

Gen Alpha is currently growing up and experiencing childhood milestones in the digital age of technology and various social media platforms (Steiner, 2024). As a generation, they are described as “intuitive” technology users (Steiner, 2024). There is not yet significant research on this generation related to their specific interests or the impacts of current and historical events

that they have grown up around, but it is noted that this generation is “hyper-flexible” and “hyper-digital” due to rapid advancements in technology (Steiner, 2024). For example, Gen Alpha individuals are more likely to seek out non-conventional routes of employment and education, such as social media marketing and content creation (Walsh, n.d.). These younger generations have access to a variety of social media and technology platforms allowing them to find support or connection in niche communities that are relevant to their individualized needs and interests.

### **Interview Summary and Themes**

**Sarah Brown;** Clubhouse International

**Tom Coppinger;** Massachusetts Clubhouse Coalition

**Ruth Osterman, Leo Seidman, and Genesis member;** Genesis Clubhouse, Worcester, MA

**Harry Balbirnie;** Mosaic Clubhouse, London, England

**Dimitra Garbis;** Progress Place Clubhouse, Toronto, Canada

*Interviews were conducted via Zoom with Clubhouse International and MA Clubhouse Coalition personnel, and with clubhouse directors and/or staff members of accredited clubhouses that were identified as having strong young adult initiatives and membership. Interviewees are listed above. Interviews utilized a set of semi-structured questions to identify supports and barriers to young adult engagement in clubhouses, young adult interests, and current practices used in various clubhouses to best support and engage young adults within the clubhouse model.*

### **Community Outreach and Partnerships**

One of the most recurrent themes across interviews was the importance of developing relationships and partnerships within the local community through outreach efforts. Interviewees emphasized that the Clubhouse Model continues to be underutilized and unfamiliar to healthcare and human service professionals. Each of the clubhouses identified as having strong young adult initiatives and membership highlighted their focus on building partnerships with local youth organizations, hospitals, universities, and/or other spaces serving youth and young adults. These partnerships allow the clubhouses to gain more referral sources to reach new young adult members, and promote the clubhouse model. Outreach efforts at each clubhouse look different, but all engage current clubhouse members in the process by implementing marketing development and outreach activities into the work-ordered day. Partnership efforts mentioned included delivering presentations and flyers to local youth and healthcare programs, inviting young adults from programs or shelters to visit clubhouse and join lunch or socials, visiting inpatient and partial hospitalization programs, offering tours to local university healthcare programs and medical school residents, and outreach to young adult foster homes and group homes. Clubhouses mentioned incorporating outreach activities and tasks into the work-ordered

day by encouraging members to create, plan, and deliver presentations, create flyers and other marketing materials, and visit potential referral sources alongside staff. These local community partnerships require consistent and ongoing efforts to build and sustain referral sources for potential new members, and appear to be a key contributor to young adult membership at these clubhouses.

## **Understanding Young Adulthood**

The importance of understanding the experiences and needs of young adults was another recurring theme across interviews. Interviewees highlighted the importance of recognizing young adulthood as a unique stage of life and development that benefits from additional support. It was consistently noted that young adults' interests, experiences, goals, personalities, and needs vary greatly, and that flexibility can support young adult engagement within the clubhouse model. For example, several interviewees noted that young adults were more likely to explore various different units and tasks, and that allowing young adults to follow their interests supported their participation in the work-ordered day. Some clubhouses felt that young adults were more drawn to activities that included technology or art, while others felt young adults thrived in leadership and planning tasks related to clubhouse-wide projects. Some clubhouses felt young adults were most interested in education and employment, while others felt it was more challenging to engage young adults in these opportunities. The key takeaway is that young adults are individuals, and that it is important to get to know the individual members and tailor opportunities to *their* interests to best support them. Interviewees also consistently spoke about the need for immediate reward that they see with their young adult members, noting that young adults often prefer tasks where they can create or develop a finished product such as cooking a recipe, creating a poster, or planning an event. Similarly, many interviewees felt young adults seeking employment, education, or housing tend to feel more urgency in reaching these goals, and felt it was important to have strong resources in place to support young adults in these areas. It was also noted that young adults tend to finish tasks quicker and want to stay busier, making it important to have a variety of tasks and activities offered during the work-ordered day. Overall, an ongoing theme across interviews was that young adulthood is unique, and requires unique and ongoing, focused support.

## **Young Adult Centered Initiatives**

All three clubhouse interviewees recognized the need for young adult initiatives within their clubhouses, and spoke about the opportunities and efforts they have put in place to better support and engage young adults. Examples of young adult specific programming that were mentioned include young adult committees and meetings, weekly young adult lunches, young adult socials, and evening/weekend activities. Important to these efforts are dedicated staff members - often young adults themselves - with youthful energy who are there to support and

engage members. It was frequently noted that one of the biggest perceived barriers to gaining new young adult members occurs when young adults tour clubhouse spaces and do not see other young adults. To combat this barrier, each club noted that they are intentional about how and when they give tours to young adult potential members. All of the clubhouses aim to schedule tours when a young adult member and/or staff member is present to lead the tour, with some clubs opting for a scheduled open weekly time-slot for young adult prospective members to tour, and other clubs scheduling individual tours on an as-needed basis. Similarly, clubhouses report scheduling tours and/or first days for prospective young adult members on days when young adult engagement is highest, such as when weekly young adult meetings or lunches are held. Overall, developing opportunities for young adults - both current and prospective members - to connect with one another appears to be a critical component of these clubhouses' success in young adult membership and engagement.

### **Utilizing Creativity and Technology**

Clubhouses that are successful in engaging young adult members tend to utilize a variety of technology and creative opportunities. As mentioned previously, young adults tend to enjoy tasks and activities where they can develop an end-product or event, with technology often being used as part of the process. Examples of technology being explored and/or used across the clubhouses interviewed include social media (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter/X, TikTok), recording technology (to create podcasts, newscasts, videos, etc.), creative editing and graphic design apps, websites, and software (Canva, Powerpoint, etc.), and various means of communication (individual and group texts, email blasts, digital flyers, Discord servers). These means of technology allow young adults and other members to incorporate art and creativity into work-ordered day tasks related to marketing, outreach, education and employment research, and other clubhouse projects. Multiple clubhouses noted that young adults are drawn to units and tasks that use some form of technology, and that they are especially drawn to tasks and activities where they can experiment with and develop different skills and ideas. Overall, staying up to date with the latest technology appears to be important in engaging young adults within the clubhouse model, and can be an effective part of the work-ordered day.

### **Environmental Factors**

Several clubhouses also emphasized the importance of the environment in appealing to young adult members. A common theme was to have members have a hand in the design of the clubhouse by contributing artwork to decorate the walls or creating a community art piece together, encouraging creativity and fostering a sense of community. For some clubhouses, having high-quality technology (computers, televisions, recording equipment, etc.) was another factor that they felt appealed to young adults. Additionally, many clubhouses use modern business decor and floor plans and bright colors to make their spaces aesthetically pleasing and

comparable to modern organizations. Some of the clubhouses have semi-separate spaces designated for young adult activities or gatherings, while other clubhouses found their young adults did not want their own space. When thinking about creating young adult spaces, all clubhouses noted the importance of including *all* clubhouse members in the decision making process. While some clubhouses took a more focused approach to designing their spaces, the commonality between clubhouses was to include members in the design and decor of the clubhouse when possible.

### **Additional Considerations**

Several additional factors were mentioned during the interviews that are important to consider when thinking about young adult engagement within the clubhouse model. It was noted that oftentimes young adults may be in the earlier stages of recovery of mental illness, and may still be discovering how their mental illness impacts and affects them and their experiences. For many, participating in a clubhouse may be their first experience in a non-clinical, community-based support program. Additionally, many young adults are experiencing an increase in independence, choice, and autonomy, where decisions and responsibilities were previously made and completed for them. It was consistently noted that it is important to practice flexibility with young adults as they navigate these newer experiences. Another important point that was highlighted was that the goal of the clubhouse model does not aim for young adult members to be present at the clubhouse at all times. The clubhouse model is meant to support members with the goal of reintegrating them into the community through employment, education, and community connection. It is important to keep in mind that a decrease in young adult engagement could be a positive and a success, as they meet their goals outside of the clubhouse through the support that they had and have in the clubhouse.

### **Recommendations**

*The following recommendations were developed by Julia Fragasso OT/s for the purpose of developing suggestions for ECHS' Renaissance and Elm Brook Place clubhouses to better support and engage young adult membership within their Clubhouse Models. Tailored recommendations were developed through the use of clinical reasoning informed by data collected from the above literature review and interviews, in conjunction with on-site clubhouse observations and communication with Renaissance and Elm Brook Place directors, staff, and clubhouse members.*

*These recommendations are interconnected with one another, and can be used and implemented together to best support the ECHS clubhouses. Recommendations were developed with both Renaissance Club and Elm Brook Place in mind, so some recommendations may not be relevant to both clubhouse's resources and/or needs. Clubhouse directors, staff, and members should work together to review recommendations and implement those that are feasible and of interest to each specific clubhouse.*



## **Community Outreach and Partnerships**

### **Connecting with Potential Young Adult Cohorts**

One of the most cited barriers to increasing *new* young adult membership at clubhouses is having a lack of *current* young adult members for prospective members to see. Many young adults may be in the earlier stages of navigating their mental health and exploring their support needs, and entering into a new and unfamiliar space can feel daunting to do alone. It may be beneficial to focus on getting groups of young adults through clubhouse doors to make the process less daunting and more appealing. To do so, it is important to connect with local programs or spaces that have groups of young adults who are already connected. For example, connecting and building relationships with local foster homes for transition-aged youth, young adult group homes, and local youth shelters may help expose a larger group of young adults to clubhouse together. These relationships could be built using marketing strategies that can be developed by members during the work-ordered day (see Marketing Materials below), and/or by creating opportunities to connect in an informal way during social events outside of the work-ordered day. For example, the clubhouse could invite a young adult group home to join lunch or dinner at the clubhouse, or coordinate a weekend get together at a park with a local youth shelter, in hopes of organically developing a mutually-beneficial relationship between programs.

### **Community Outreach**

Another key component of increasing young adult clubhouse membership is increasing referral sources within the local community. It was consistently noted that the Clubhouse Model is underutilized and largely unknown, even within the medical and mental healthcare systems. It is recommended the ECHS clubhouses develop relationships with local hospitals, colleges, and young adult programs to increase potential referral sources. To do so, clubhouses can host presentations at local highschools or invite college and graduate students studying relevant fields (ex. psychology, occupational therapy, public health, social work, medical students, etc.) to visit and/or volunteer/intern at clubhouses. Additionally, clubhouses can connect with other mental health programs serving young adults such as inpatient hospitalization programs, partial or out-patient hospitalization programs, youth access centers, and day programs. Current clubhouse members can work to identify local community programs to connect with by researching local programs during the work-ordered day, and/or by using their own knowledge of and experiences within local community programs. By building relationships within the community, clubhouses can increase awareness of the Clubhouse Model and increase their referral sources to gain more young adult membership.

### **Marketing Materials**

Connecting with young adult cohorts and community programs will require clubhouses to develop marketing materials, which can be incorporated into the work-ordered day.

Clubhouses may want to create a young-adult specific “marketing committee” within one of their units, or they may offer marketing tasks to the entire clubhouse. Examples of marketing materials that could be created during the work ordered day and aid in outreach and developing relationships in the local community may include creating posters, flyers, and presentations on Canva, emailing programs to schedule visits, and mailing and/or distributing materials to public spaces and programs. Additionally, members can support community outreach by joining staff to visit programs on-site to deliver marketing materials. Incorporating these tasks into the work-ordered day will aid the clubhouse in their community outreach and support members in building employment skills related to marketing.

## **Young Adult Initiatives**

### **Weekly Young Adult Meetings and/or Events**

Creating a young adult committee and/or weekly meeting is recommended if not already established to ensure that young adult members feel supported and connected. These meetings can be used as opportunities to increase social connection, identify goals and needs of young adult members, and develop plans for ongoing young adult programming and initiatives. Meetings could include education, discussion, goal-planning, and/or planned activities. It is also recommended that a staff member - ideally a young adult themselves - be dedicated to supporting these meetings and initiatives. In addition to meetings, young adult socials and events can be offered weekly or monthly to encourage social connection and clubhouse involvement. Socials and events could be coordinated between clubhouses to foster connection within the Eliot organization, and to provide more opportunity for building social networks between members. Various tasks associated with planning these events and socials could be a focus of the work-ordered day. Examples of tasks include creating and sending digital flyers for events, budgeting for activities, creating sign-up sheets, etc. Incorporating these tasks into the work-ordered day would allow members to gain and practice relevant employment skills while also allowing them to take leadership of their clubhouse experience.

### **Young Adult Group Chat**

Incorporating a young adult group chat (via text, Discord, Slack, etc.) as a form of communication between members may be helpful in supporting young adult members. New and existing young adult clubhouse members could be offered the opportunity to join the group chat - and have the ability to opt-in or opt-out at any point - to stay connected to one another. Many young adults prefer to communicate through text rather than phone calls, and having a log of communication and discussion can help keep people connected to the clubhouse and other members. Group chats could be used to update young adults about meetings, socials, and events, and could be used to check-in on one another. There can be power in the “fear of missing out” phenomenon, and utilizing a group chat to encourage

clubhouse involvement may increase participation and engagement from young adult members.

## **Utilizing Creativity and Technology**

### **Social Media**

Social media can be used as an outlet for social connection, marketing, learning, and entertainment. Young adults are typically interested in social media and familiar with various different forms of social media, such as Instagram, TikTok, Podcast platforms, YouTube, and Facebook. Creating content for these social media platforms can be used as free marketing for clubhouses, help develop skills that can be used in future employment, and feel engaging and relevant to young adult members. Such skills can be beneficial for employment opportunities in content creation, marketing, and administrative positions. Posting on social media platforms can be incorporated into the work-ordered day in a variety of creative ways. Examples include recording and editing virtual clubhouse tours, sharing daily recipes from the cafe units, sharing tips from the business units, and planning ideas and writing scripts for ways to market clubhouse to potential viewers. Utilizing social media platforms offers free marketing and publicity to the Clubhouse model and clubhouse itself and supports development of employment skills by incorporating young adult interests and current trends into the work-ordered day. Clubhouses should consider member rights to privacy when creating public content for social media, and ensure that all ECHS practices and protocols are being adhered to (i.e. photo/video release forms, password protection, etc.).

### **Technology and Digitalization**

Another commonality among clubhouses that were interviewed was their focus on using current technology that aligns with the wants and needs of young adults. For example, some clubs primarily use text messaging instead of phone calls for member outreach, because they have heard from young adult members that text messages are preferred. Additionally, clubhouses are using Canva to create marketing materials (posters, flyers, newsletters, etc.), which is a graphic design platform that many young adults are familiar with from school or work projects. Incorporating technology that is familiar and appealing to young adults can encourage participation in work-ordered day tasks. For example, Canva allows users more opportunity for creativity than Microsoft Publisher, and young adults may be more interested in work-ordered day tasks where they can harness their creativity and create something for the clubhouse (clubhouse newsletters, flyers, etc.) when it is more familiar to them. Digital copies of these materials can then be shared through email or text, reaching members who are not currently active in the clubhouse. It is important to note that some clubhouse staff and members may be unfamiliar with certain programs or websites such as Canva. This can be used as an opportunity for young adults to provide insight and share their knowledge to

support the clubhouse as a whole. It is recommended that clubhouse directors and staff talk to their young adult members to identify their technology preferences and to incorporate those into the work-ordered day when feasible.

## **Environmental Considerations**

### **Designated Young Adult Tours**

All interviewees agreed that the clubhouse tour is a critical component to gaining new young adult members. To ensure that a young adult member is available to give a tour to potential new young adult members, it is recommended that a time-slot or day be designated as a time for young adult tours. For example, it may be helpful to host young adult tours on days when young adult meetings and/or socials are taking place to ensure other young adults are in the clubhouse. Additionally, it may be beneficial to offer tours of the clubhouse to groups of young adults to encourage cohorts of members and make potential members feel more comfortable and connected.

### **Collaboration in Clubhouse Design**

Encouraging members to participate in the design, decor, and organization of clubhouse spaces can encourage creativity and collaboration within the clubhouse. Young adults tend to gravitate towards activities that result in an end-product. Creating spaces and decor for the clubhouse can be incorporated into the work-ordered day and/or into social activities and events. For example, if clubhouses choose to incorporate social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram Reels, Youtube, or podcasts into their marketing strategies, a space could be designed by members that is designated as a mini “studio” space. Members could create vision boards for what they want the space to look like, practice budgeting if materials need to be purchased, and create backdrops with paper and art materials. Additionally, members can be involved in decorating the clubhouse space with artwork in a way that supports the Clubhouse Model’s focus on community. For example, a clubhouse-wide project may include painting a wall or large canvas mural with artwork and designs that pertain to clubhouse values. This project could foster creativity and collaboration among members, and once completed, the opportunity to add to the wall or canvas could become part of the intake process for new members to represent their addition to the clubhouse community.

## **Additional Learning Opportunities**

### **Transitional Age Youth (TAY) Zoom Discussion**

Massachusetts Clubhouse Coalition is hosting a Zoom event, facilitated by Christine Regan of Tradewinds Clubhouse, on April 7th, 2025 for MA Clubhouses to come together and discuss young adult engagement and clubhouse programming.

**Clubhouse International World Seminar 2025**

This international training and networking event will be held in St. Pete Beach, Florida, May 9th-14th. Dimitra Garbis of Progress Place Clubhouse will be hosting a seminar focused on young adult clubhouse programming.

**Young Adult Training at Genesis Clubhouse**

Genesis Clubhouse in Worcester, MA hosts an annual week-long training event titled “Engaging Young Adults in the Clubhouse”. The 2025 training will take place September 8th-12th. For more information contact [Training@genesiscub.org](mailto:Training@genesiscub.org)

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