

RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PEER PRESSURE AND SELF-ESTEEM IN ADOLESCENTS

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ABSTRACT

Adolescence is a period of significant transition marked by rapid changes in the body, emotions, and social life. During this time, adolescents face many challenges such as academic stress, peer pressure, family conflicts, and social demands, all of which can affect their mental health and overall well-being (Stecz et al., 2020; Kaur et al., 2022). Peer pressure is a major factor that can lead to risky behavior, social isolation, and low self-esteem (Helfert & Warschburger, 2013; Blakemore, 2019; Chung et al., 2021). Self-esteem plays an important role in helping adolescents cope with social and emotional pressures. Adolescents with high self-esteem typically have a positive view of themselves and life, while those with low self-esteem are more likely to feel anxious, depressed, and helpless (Marsh et al., 2004; Das et al., 2016; Peng et al., 2021; Preston & Rew, 2022). Therefore, understanding the relationship between peer pressure and self-esteem is important for comprehensively supporting adolescents' mental health.

Keywords: (adolescence, peer pressure, self-esteem, mental health, well-being)

INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is a developmental stage marked by significant physical, emotional, and social transitions. During this period, peers become one of the most influential social groups in shaping an adolescent's identity and behavior (Santrock, 2023). Peer pressure, often defined as the influence exerted by individuals within a peer group to conform to shared norms, can affect various aspects of adolescents' psychological functioning—including their self-esteem and emotional well-being (Kaur et al., 2023).

Peer relationships are central to adolescent life. At this age, belonging to a group provides a sense of safety, acceptance, and identity. However, the desire to belong can also cause young people to suppress their individuality to gain approval (Zhou

& Li, 2023). Studies show that both positive and negative peer pressures play a crucial role in shaping adolescents' self-perceptions. Positive peer influence can encourage self-improvement, while negative pressure can undermine confidence and increase feelings of inadequacy (Stecz et al., 2023).

Self-esteem refers to an individual's overall evaluation of self-worth (Harter, 2024). It is a fundamental psychological resource that helps adolescents face challenges and maintain emotional stability. Low self-esteem has been linked with anxiety, depression, and increased susceptibility to peer influence, while high self-esteem tends to buffer the negative effects of social pressure (Peng et al., 2021; Blakemore, 2019).

Although many quantitative studies have examined how peer pressure statistically correlates with self-esteem, few have explored how adolescents personally experience and interpret these pressures in their daily lives. A qualitative approach allows a more nuanced understanding of how adolescents construct meaning from social interactions that shape their self-image. Therefore, this research aims to explore:

- How do adolescents experience peer pressure in their daily social environments?
- How does peer pressure influence their self-esteem from their own perspectives?

By focusing on adolescents' subjective experiences, this study seeks to provide insights into the psychological processes behind conformity, self-worth, and identity development.

METHOD

Research Design

This study used a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore adolescents' lived experiences with peer pressure and self-esteem. The phenomenological design focuses on understanding meaning as perceived by participants, rather than testing predefined hypotheses (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach is suitable for capturing the emotional and cognitive depth of adolescents' experiences.

Participants

Participants were six adolescents aged 15–18 years, enrolled in senior high schools in Surabaya, Indonesia. The selection used purposive sampling, emphasizing students who had experienced some form of peer pressure and were willing to share their experiences. The participants consisted of three males and three females. To maintain anonymity, pseudonyms were used in all transcripts.

The researcher acted as an instrument of data collection, maintaining reflexivity by recording thoughts and emotions in a reflective journal throughout the study. Peer discussions were held to

minimize bias and ensure that interpretations reflected the data rather than personal assumptions.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted over two weeks. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes. Questions focused on participants' experiences with peer pressure and its impact on their sense of self. Examples of questions included:

- "Can you describe a time when your friends influenced your decision?"
- "How did you feel when you followed or resisted your peers' expectations?"
- "What do you think it says about you when you choose differently from your friends?"

All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim. Field notes were taken to capture nonverbal cues, such as hesitation, tone, and emotional expressions, which helped enrich the interpretation process.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step process:

- Familiarization with data through repeated reading of transcripts.
- Generating initial codes to identify significant statements.
- Searching for recurring patterns and forming preliminary themes.
- Reviewing and refining themes to ensure consistency.
- Defining and naming final themes.
- Producing a detailed narrative linking themes with existing literature.

To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, member checking was conducted by sharing interpreted results with participants. Peer debriefing with academic supervisors helped refine theme accuracy, and an audit trail was maintained for transparency.

RESULT

Thematic analysis revealed three main themes that described adolescents' experiences of peer pressure and its connection to their self-esteem.

Theme 1: The Need for Social Belonging

Most participants reported feeling pressured to conform to group expectations in order to maintain friendships and avoid rejection. One participant stated:

"If I don't go along with them, I feel like they'll think I'm weird or boring. I don't want to be left out." (P3)

This theme reflects adolescents' strong desire to be accepted, even at the cost of personal discomfort. Conforming to group norms helped them feel secure but also created dependence on external approval. As Kaur et al. (2023) suggested, the need for social belonging can enhance connectedness but may weaken individuality.

Theme 2: The Conflict Between Self and Group

Participants often described internal tension between personal values and peer expectations. They expressed feelings of frustration when their desire for self-expression clashed with the group's opinions.

"Sometimes I do things I don't really agree with, just to make them happy. Later, I feel guilty or fake." (P5)

This theme illustrates the identity conflict common in adolescence, where individuals oscillate between autonomy and conformity. According to Harter (2024), this developmental struggle is a normal part of self-construction, but excessive conformity can erode self-confidence and personal authenticity.

Theme 3: Developing Resistance and Self-Awareness

Several participants reported learning to manage peer pressure more effectively over time. They developed stronger boundaries and recognized their own values.

"I used to follow my friends easily, but now I think before I do something. I've learned that saying no doesn't mean losing friends." (P2)

This theme suggests that peer pressure experiences can foster emotional growth. Adolescents who reflected on their experiences often reported increased self-awareness and improved self-esteem. This finding supports the idea that overcoming peer pressure can serve as a source of empowerment (Zhou & Li, 2023).

DISCUSSION

The findings highlight that peer pressure is a complex and multifaceted experience that shapes adolescents' self-esteem in both positive and negative ways.

The first theme, the need for social belonging, aligns with developmental theories stating that adolescents prioritize peer acceptance as part of identity formation (Santrock, 2023). Belonging to a group satisfies emotional needs but may create vulnerability when individuals rely too heavily on external validation. This dependence on approval can temporarily raise confidence but lead to long-term self-esteem instability.

The second theme, conflict between self and group, echoes previous findings that peer pressure can generate psychological distress when adolescents suppress personal values to avoid social isolation (Research on Peer Pressure, 2023). Persistent conformity without internal agreement can cause feelings of guilt and self-doubt, ultimately lowering self-esteem. This tension mirrors Erikson's (1968) concept of "identity versus role confusion," where adolescents struggle to balance individuality and social integration.

The third theme, developing resistance and self-awareness, provides an encouraging perspective. As adolescents mature, they often learn to assert boundaries, think critically, and evaluate peer influence. These behaviors are linked to self-regulation and autonomy—key components of healthy self-esteem (Harter, 2024). Similarly, Zhou and Li (2023) found that adolescents with higher self-esteem are more likely to resist negative peer pressure and maintain psychological well-being.

Overall, the results suggest that peer pressure is not inherently destructive; its effects depend on

adolescents' coping strategies and internal self-concept. Supportive relationships with parents, teachers, and peers can buffer negative effects, helping teens navigate peer influence without losing their sense of self.

From a psychological education standpoint, schools should promote programs that encourage open discussions about peer pressure and self-acceptance. Training in communication and assertiveness skills could help adolescents handle social influence constructively (Kaur et al., 2023). Furthermore, counselors should assist students in reflecting on their values and building intrinsic confidence that does not rely solely on peer validation.

CONCLUSION

This qualitative study explored how adolescents experience peer pressure and how it influences their self-esteem. The findings revealed three main dynamics: the need for belonging, inner conflict, and eventual self-awareness. Peer pressure can both challenge and strengthen self-esteem depending on how adolescents interpret and respond to social expectations.

Adolescents who rely heavily on external approval often experience lower self-worth, while those who learn to set personal boundaries and reflect on their experiences develop greater resilience and confidence. Thus, rather than viewing peer pressure as purely harmful, it should be recognized as a developmental experience that can foster self-understanding and growth when managed appropriately.

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DECLARATION OF POTENTIAL CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest related to this study. They did not receive funding or have affiliations that could influence the design or reporting of this research.

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