The Influence of Peer Pressure on Self-Esteem among Private University Students

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ABSTRACT

In the digital age, peer pressure has played an essential role in influencing individual attitudes and self-perception, particularly in young adults who are building their self-worth. Previous studies have discovered that decreased self-esteem is associated with susceptibility to peer pressure. Young adults are particularly susceptible to peer influence as they strive to establish their sense of self. Hence, this study aims to examine the relationship between peer pressure and self-esteem among university students. Regarding the methodology, this study applied a quantitative approach. The data were collected by using questionnaires through Google Forms and distributed to 100 students from a private university in Selangor. The study assessed self-esteem and peer influence using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale and Peer Pressure Questionnaire. The findings of this study discovered a significant correlation between peer pressure and self-esteem among students. This finding has contributed to practical responses and open discussion regarding how it enhances students' self-esteem and confidence. It assists students in embracing their uniqueness by loving themselves and not being influenced by their peers. In addition, this study can assist parents in monitoring or guiding their child's self-esteem.

INTRODUCTION

Background of the study

In the field of psychology, peer pressure has emerged as a crucial aspect of understanding human behaviour. Peer pressure has been shown to have a substantial impact on young adults over the lifespan. Furthermore, both theoretical and empirical studies have revealed that the most intense phases of peer pressure may occur throughout childhood and adolescence; in fact, most of the published research on peer pressure focuses on young people (Giletta et al.,2021). Veenstra and Laninga-Wijnen (2022) mentioned that peer pressure is a direct form of peer influence, referring to peers' active attempts to change an individual's behaviours, attitudes, or other characteristics. Furthermore, responding to peer pressure is inherent in human nature, and some people are more likely to resist and stand firm in the face of all forms of peer pressure (Sahu, 2022). As a result, there are various ways in which every individual confronts peer pressure, which can be beneficial or detrimental.

The younger generation seems particularly vulnerable to peer pressure because they seek comfort in their peers and keep striving to emulate them without considering whether this will benefit or harm them (Sarkar, Das, & Banik, 2022). When making decisions and adhering to moral values, youngsters rely more on their friends than their relatives as they grow older because they tend to talk more with their peers. In universities, peer pressure

among students is associated with the idea that peer pressure at the university level is complex and multilayered. Peers are a persistent and crucial component of university environments, significantly impacting students' overall development (Sahu, 2022). Their effects on academic accomplishment would likewise be significant and diverse, with distinct motivational outcomes resulting from different peer interactions (Filade et al., 2019). Hence, this is obvious among university students, who have a greater demand for social acceptance (Dar et al.,2020).

Problem statement

Peer pressure plays a pivotal role in the academic journey of university students, encompassing both supportive relations and the influence of peer pressure. It can also influence students' psychological balance and self-esteem (Deng et al.,2022). Peer pressure can have a positive impact by encouraging people to engage in healthy behaviour. However, it can cause anxiety, stress, and other unpleasant outcomes. Many factors contribute to peer pressure at university, including academic achievement and finances; if peer pressure is excessive, it can have negative implications, including low self-esteem (Chen & Deng, 2022; Gebresilase & Zhao, 2023). The students can't keep pace with the group and meet the social desirability, leading to them experiencing a series of lousy consequences, especially in social.

One of the primary ways in which peer pressure can negatively impact self-esteem is through the promotion of competitive comparisons. Previous research has shown that lower levels of self-esteem were related to higher susceptibility to peer pressure (Bukowski et al., 2008; Zawadzka et al., 2022) and associated with increased risk for deviant behaviour (Bibi et al., 2021; Gauthier-Duchesne et al., 2022) and academic disengagement (Steenberghs et al., 2021). Furthermore, a prior study also discovered that low self-esteem would be related to lower levels of resistance to peer influence (Chen, Shi & Wang, 2016).

Research objective

For these reasons, exploring the relationship between peer pressure and self-esteem is essential. As Baumeister and Leary (1995) mentioned, self-esteem is crucial to identity development. It is an internal representation of social acceptance and rejection and a psychological gauge that monitors the degree to which a person is included versus excluded by others (Leary et al., 1995). Therefore, this study aims to provide a deep understanding of the relationship between peer pressure and self-esteem among university students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A Theoretical Perspective of Social Comparison

This study applied social comparison theory to explain the relationship between peer pressure and self-esteem. Psychologist Leon Festinger proposed this theory in 1954. Social comparisons are essentially comparisons of oneself to others, which are a key mechanism impacting people's judgments, experiences, and behavior (Crusius et al., 2022). The social comparison process involves people's gaining knowledge of their effectiveness, capacity, and self-esteem by evaluating their attitudes, abilities, and beliefs through comparison with others. It focuses on the comparison process to build a standard by which we can accurately judge ourselves and learn how to define ourselves; this definition of self can either increase or decrease self-esteem (Festinger, 1954).

Referring to this theory, people often rely on comparisons with others to accurately assess their abilities, traits, and attitudes. In the educational context, this theory argues that students' identification and contrast with groups or peers shape not only their perceptions and concerns regarding how others will view them but also their perceptions of themselves in terms of academic competence, self-concept, and future potential, which consequently affect their achievement outcomes (Djikstra et al., 2008; Sheffler & Cheung, 2023). Students at university tend to get exposed to this kind of social comparison, which is driven by possible factors, including peer pressure, that might affect their self-esteem. Therefore, this study suggests that peer pressure plays a crucial role in influencing students' self-esteem, referring to the main idea of social comparison theory..

Peer Pressure and Self-Esteem

The influence of peer pressure on an individual's self-esteem is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that has been the subject of considerable scholarly attention (Adeyemi, 2019; Laursen & Veenstra, 2021). The positive impact of peer pressure can encourage students to drive themselves and put in a lot of effort because pressure from good peers can promote a healthy competitive spirit to achieve good grades or achievement. Meanwhile, if the peer pressure is too much that students cannot meet it, it will lead to a series of bad consequences; for example, they will become anxious and gradually lose their self-esteem (Zhang, 2023). In addition, the pervasive use of social media has also induced peer pressure and subsequently affected young adults' self-esteem (Fauzi et al., 2021; Kasim et al., 2022).

In university, young adults spend most of their time with their peers due to peers' popularity and conformity, influence, and ability to communicate better with their peers than in other stages of development (Tegegne, 2022). Students become more competitive at university as the pressure of competition becomes increasingly intense. This phenomenon leads to peer pressure that produces both positive, negative, or mixed effects, which may lead to good or risky behaviours among college students (Boruah, 2016; Chen & Deng, 2022). When this pressure is exerted negatively, it can lead to a range of negative effects, including disregard for parental authority, depression, academic disengagement, high stress levels, and poor academic performance. In addition, excessive peer pressure can also negatively influence individuals' behaviours, which has a significant impact on their self-esteem, as they may begin to doubt their abilities, which leads to feeling a sense of inadequacy and less worthy than others (Jhangiani & Tarry, 2022; Laursen & Veenstra, 2021).

In the context of this study, excessive peer pressure can lead to low self-esteem (Chen & Deng, 2022; Gebresilase & Zhao, 2023). This is supported by several previous research discovered that lower levels of self-esteem were influenced by peer pressure (Bukowski et al., 2008; Zawadzka et al., 2022) and associated with increased risk for deviant behaviour (Bibi et al., 2021; Gauthier-Duchesne et al., 2022) and academic disengagement (Ravendran et al., 2021; Steenberghs et al., 2021). The students can't keep pace with the group and meet their social desirability, leading to them experiencing a series of lousy consequences, especially in social relationships, and gradually affecting their self-esteem (Arshad et al., 2015; Harris & Orth, 2020). Hence, it can be stated that the self-esteem of young adults, particularly university students, may change or differ because of their relationships with peers. The hypothesis is depicted as follows:

H$_1$: There is a negative relationship between peer pressure and a student's self-esteem.

Therefore, a conceptual framework was proposed, and one hypothesis was constructed in Figure 1.0 below. The framework shows the relationship between peer pressure and self-esteem.
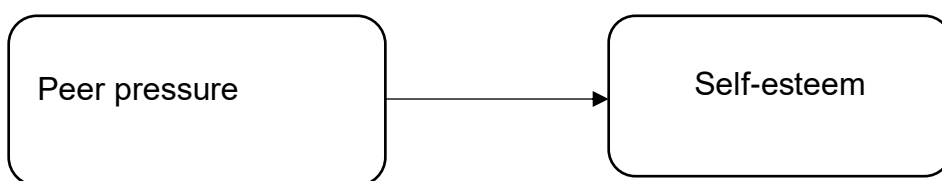

Figure 1: A proposed framework

METHOD

This study adopts a quantitative approach by using a cross-sectional study, which involves collecting numerical data from a sample population simultaneously. The target population of this study is students from a private university in Selangor, Malaysia, and the targeted respondents are from various departments of the faculty of education and social sciences. The sampling technique of this study is convenience sampling, in which respondents were collected from an easily accessible and available group of people in the faculty.

This study has adapted the items from existing and previously validated scales to measure all the constructs. The items in the research instrument were based on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree

(1) to strongly agree (5). The measurement for peer pressure was adapted from Saini and Sunil (2016), and the 10 items of self-esteem were adapted from Rosenberg (1965). The questionnaire via a Google form was distributed to targeted respondents, and only 100 of 215 students responded to the survey.

Data Analysis

Descriptive Analysis

The demographic information of the 100 respondents is presented in Table 1. In gender distribution, the proportion of female responses is considerably higher than that of males, comprising 72 per cent (72), whereas male students constitute 28 per cent (28). For age distribution, 21 per cent of the students are 18-20 years old, while 62 per cent are 21-23 years old, 10 per cent are 24-26 years old, and 7 per cent are older than 26.

Table 1 Demographic Information

Categories	Type	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	28	28
	Female	72	72
Age	18-20	21	21
	21-23	62	62
	24-26	10	10
	26 and above	7	7

Inferential Analysis

To answer the research hypothesis, this study utilized statistical software, SPSS, for data analysis. The study applied Pearson's rank correlation analysis to investigate the association between peer pressure and self-esteem among university students. Besides, reverse scoring was used for items, particularly in the Rosenberg Self-Esteem scale. The finding discovered a significant correlation between the two variables (p-value = 0.01 < α = 0.05), with a correlation coefficient of R = -0.277. Hence, this negative correlation indicates that higher levels of peer pressure, as measured by the reverse-scored items in the Rosenberg Self-Esteem scale, are associated with lower levels of self-esteem among university students. Indeed, peer pressure has decreased students' self-esteem and is significantly correlated. Table 2 displays the results of the correlation between peer pressure and self-esteem..

DISCUSSION

This study adapted the social comparison theory to understand the relationship between peer pressure and self-esteem. As shown in Table 2, the result showed that the hypothesis was accepted. Moreover, this hypothesis was supported by previous studies that students who experienced high pressure were associated with low levels of self-esteem (Adiputra, 2018; Chen et al., 2016; Tian et al., 2018; Zawadzka et al., 2022). As mentioned by Deng et al. (2022), peer pressure plays a pivotal role in the academic journey of university students, encompassing both supportive relations and the influence of peer pressure; it can also influence students' psychological balance and self-esteem. Hence, excessive peer pressure leads to low self-esteem (Chen & Deng, 2022; Gebresilase & Zhao, 2023).

In the context of this study, the findings discovered that peer pressure aligns with the Social Comparison theory's notion that individuals gauge their self-worth through comparisons, especially peers or classmates (Sheffler, 2023). University students, in particular, often face intense competitive peer pressure, where the achievements of their peers can lead to feelings of inadequacy, changes in attitudes and even personal values, and, subsequently, a diminished sense of self-worth (Mofatteh, 2021). This kind of pressure can drive individuals to engage in unhealthy behaviours, such as excessive academic or extracurricular overcommitment, to conform to the expectations of their peers or exceed the accomplishments of their peers (Fujiyama, Kamo, & Schafer, 2021).

Fundamentally, peer acceptance and approval have positively shaped students' self-concept, fostering a positive self-image and higher self-esteem (Deng et al., 2022). However, several factors contribute to peer pressure at university, including academic achievement and finances; it can have negative implications, including low self-esteem (Chen & Deng, 2022; Gebresilase & Zhao, 2023). The students cannot keep pace with the group and meet their social desirability, leading to them experiencing a series of lousy consequences, especially in social relationships, and gradually affecting their self-esteem (Arshad et al., 2015; Harris & Orth, 2020). When this pressure is exerted in a negative way, it can lead to a range of detrimental outcomes, including disregard for parental authority, depression, high-stress levels, and poor academic performance. Therefore, high peer pressure has negatively impacted students' self-esteem at university.

In Asian countries, the collectivist culture is a common practice, and Malaysia also significantly practices the collectivist values (Sumari et al., 2020). Collectivist cultures, which prioritize group harmony and interdependence, tend to see stronger peer influence, as conforming to group expectations is highly valued (Liu et al., 2017). In this study, the students experienced high peer pressure, as they needed to comply with social norms, expectations, and behaviors within a group, which subsequently affected their self-esteem. In addition, the emphasis on education within the collectivistic Malaysian culture has exposed Malaysian university students to high levels of academic stressors (Chua et al., 2018). Therefore, the value of collectivism can be considered as one of the precedents that significantly influence peer pressure and self-esteem among university students, especially in how individuals perceive and respond to social norms and expectations.

LIMITATION AND RECOMMENDATION

Although this study offers valuable insights, future studies should also acknowledge and address certain limitations. The data were obtained from a single source response since this study employed a cross-sectional design. The future researcher may adopt a mixed-methods approach in data collection by integrating various instruments such as surveys, interviews, and observation to obtain comprehensive data regarding peer pressure and self-esteem. Besides, this study is a fundamental finding that solely focuses on peer pressure and self-esteem, hence, it can be expanded to a longitudinal study by discovering its consequences over time. In addition, it will be interesting to explore how cultural or contextual factors can influence the association between peer pressure and self-esteem. Thus, future research can acknowledge cultural variables by adopting Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory to understand and compare different cultures that influence students' behavior and interaction.

Implications

This study contributes to the theoretical understanding of the student performance area by addressing the role of peer pressure and self-esteem. Furthermore, this study provides a foundation for future research by providing a comprehensive theoretical explanation of the social comparison theory toward academic performance by emphasizing the role of peer pressure. In addition, the findings of this study add to the existing body of knowledge on student behavior by understanding the interplay between peer pressure and self-esteem in a multicultural university setting.

In addition, this study will help students improve their self-esteem and find initiatives to be more confident. It allows students to change their lives through self-improvement and self-acceptance by offering practical initiatives and solutions. This can enhance students' knowledge of creating confidence that goes beyond cultural norms, enabling them to embrace their unique qualities while handling self-perception challenges. It is a valuable resource for students striving to be more comfortable and assured in themselves, fostering a positive self-image that contributes to overall well-being.

Furthermore, this study will help parents better understand their children and create a dependable environment where their children can trust and feel supported. Consequently, their children's self-esteem and self-confidence will increase. Parents can significantly impact their children's self-perception by encouraging open communication and a sense of security. Lastly, for researchers, this study may provide a valuable resource for future studies, serving as a guide for those who wish to conduct similar research and offering a source of

knowledge, particularly in psychology. It can be used as a reference point, providing abundant informational evidence for individuals studying the complexities of self-esteem and confidence-building initiatives.

CONCLUSION

Peer pressure has been demonstrated to affect young adults significantly throughout their lifespan, and it has emerged as a fundamental part of understanding human behavior, cognition, and emotions. Prior studies have recognized that peer pressure negatively impacts an individual's self-esteem. This aligns with this study's finding, as students who experienced high peer pressure were associated with low self-esteem. Hence, the findings of this study provide an essential extension of prior knowledge for the conceptual relationships between peer pressure and self-esteem in the university setting. Moreover, the outcome of this study will provide insightful ideas for stakeholders to understand the impact of peer pressure on student's self-esteem.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Consent to Participate: Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their involvement in the study.

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