

EXPLORATION OF SELF-REGULATION IN DEALING WITH PEER PRESSURE AMONG STUDENTS AT MA MADINATUSSALAM

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ABSTRACT

This study provides an in-depth exploration of students' experiences in dealing with peer pressure within the school environment. Such pressures, including tendencies toward consumerist lifestyles, cheating behavior, and mild bullying, represent significant challenges to students' integrity and personal identity. The purpose of this research is to describe how students experience peer pressure and to identify self-regulation strategies that enable them to maintain psychological and social balance. Using an interpretive phenomenological approach, this qualitative study examines the subjective meanings underlying students' experiences. The findings reveal that students often face a dilemma between the desire to gain peer acceptance and the need to uphold their personal values and principles. The process of achieving autonomy involves the integration of several self-regulation strategies, including reinforcement of personal values and moral principles, motivation driven by future goals, assertive communication in social interactions, and the application of time and stress management to maintain focus and emotional stability. The study highlights that the effectiveness of self-regulation strategies is not solely determined by students' motivation or aspirations but also by the consistency in applying personal values as a foundation for decision-making. The integration of motivation and value-based principles plays a crucial role in helping students navigate social pressures adaptively. These findings contribute theoretically to the understanding of self-regulation in the context of peer group dynamics at school and offer practical implications for educators and counselors in designing interventions to strengthen students' psychological resilience against peer pressure.

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INTRODUCTIONS

Education serves as a fundamental pillar in shaping human resources who are knowledgeable, of strong character, and adaptive to social change (OECD, 2020; Darling-Hammond, 2017). Schools function not only as institutions for transferring knowledge but also as arenas for identity formation and the development of social-emotional competencies. However, the dynamics of globalization and rapid technological advancement have created new and complex challenges for education, particularly for adolescents who are highly influenced by their social environment and digital media (Steinberg & Morris, 2020).

One of the most prominent challenges faced by students in school settings is peer pressure. Peer pressure refers to social influence that encourages individuals to conform to group norms, values, and behaviors in order to gain acceptance (Brown & Larson, 2009). During adolescence, the desire to be accepted by peers becomes a powerful psychological drive that affects students' decision-making, thought patterns, and social as well as academic behavior (Laursen & Collins, 2017; Santrock, 2019).

The phenomenon of peer pressure is also evident at MA Madinatussalam. Preliminary observations indicate that several students experience strong peer influence manifested through consumerist behavior, plagiarism, and participation in unproductive social activities. Such behavior is often motivated by the desire for social approval and reinforced by the influence of social media (Vogel et al., 2018; Hoffman et al., 2021). These conditions foster conformity that may undermine students' academic integrity and psychological well-being.

Peer pressure also affects students' academic and identity-related choices. Some students tend to adjust their academic tracks or study behaviors to align with prevailing group expectations, seeking social acceptance rather than personal fulfillment (Putri, 2024). This situation increases the risk of stress, social anxiety, and identity conflicts that hinder psychosocial development (Prinstein & Dodge, 2018).

In this context, self-regulation emerges as a crucial skill that enables individuals to control thoughts, emotions, and behaviors in alignment with personal goals and values despite external pressures (Baumeister & Vohs, 2016; Duckworth, 2021). According to Bandura (1997), self-regulation involves processes of self-monitoring, evaluation, and feedback that maintain behavioral consistency and integrity. Empirical studies have shown that adequate self-regulation acts as a protective mechanism against negative peer influence while promoting academic achievement and emotional well-being (Zimmerman, 2020; Mischel & Ayduk, 2022).

However, interviews with guidance and counseling teachers at MA Madinatussalam revealed that many students have not yet developed optimal self-regulation skills. This limitation makes them vulnerable to peer-driven conformity and unreflective behavior, leading to increased stress, decreased learning motivation, and disruptions in healthy social relationships.

Therefore, this study aims to explore how students at MA Madinatussalam manage peer pressure through self-regulation strategies. The research, titled "An Exploration of Students' Self-Regulation in Dealing with Peer Pressure at MA Madinatussalam," seeks to: Explore students' experiences of various forms of peer pressure encountered in the school environment. Identify and describe the self-regulation strategies employed by students to manage peer pressure effectively. The results of this study are expected to provide both empirical and practical contributions to educational development and school counseling programs aimed at strengthening students' psychological resilience and fostering independent character formation.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach with an interpretative phenomenological design (Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis / IPA) to gain an in-depth understanding of students' subjective experiences in self-regulation when facing peer pressure. This approach was chosen because it allows the exploration of the personal and social meanings of participants' lived experiences, which cannot be measured quantitatively.

The research was conducted at *MA Madinatussalam*, Deli Serdang, with participants selected through purposive sampling based on specific criteria: (1) having experienced peer pressure within the school context, (2) being able to reflect on their experiences openly and communicatively, and (3) being willing to participate voluntarily.

The number of participants was determined to be five students, referring to the principle of data saturation in interpretative phenomenological research. According to Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) and Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014), IPA studies focus on the depth of individual experience analysis rather than the generalization of findings. Therefore, a relatively small number of participants—usually between four and ten—is considered ideal to enable in-depth and idiographic analysis of each case. In this study, the involvement of five participants was deemed sufficient to achieve conceptual saturation, meaning that no new significant themes emerged from additional data and each experience had been comprehensively interpreted.

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews, observations of the five participants, and field notes to obtain a comprehensive understanding of students' social conformity dynamics and self-regulation strategies. Data analysis was carried out using thematic analysis based on the principles of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, which includes stages of data familiarization, initial coding, theme identification, and contextual interpretation of meaning.

The validity of the data was ensured through source and technique triangulation, member checking, and an audit trail to maintain consistency and credibility of interpretation. Ethical considerations were guaranteed through the implementation of informed consent, participant anonymity, privacy protection, and the acquisition of official permissions from the school and relevant institutions prior to conducting the research.

RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

Students' Experiences in Dealing with Peer Pressure

The Complexity and Types of Peer Pressure Faced by Students In general, the experiences shared by the five respondents (R1 to ZA) indicate that peer pressure within the school environment is far more complex than mere invitations to engage in antisocial behavior. Such pressure targets two fundamental aspects of adolescent development: moral/personal integrity and the basic need for social affiliation. The respondents' experiences can be classified into two main categories: academic identity-based pressure and social/consumerist norm-based pressure.

In the first category, as experienced by ZI, the pressure stemmed from academic labeling ("Social Studies students are not cool"). This label threatened ZI's self-image and forced her to choose between the study program she truly believed in (Social Studies) and social acceptance. Meanwhile, other respondents such as CK and ZA faced pressures that challenged their ethical values and moral principles. CK struggled against collective demands to cheat and adopt a consumerist lifestyle that contradicted her habit of saving. On the other hand, ZA faced pressure to violate ethical communication norms through a gossip culture that encouraged her to spread false information. Essentially, all forms of pressure compelled the students to choose between maintaining personal authenticity or conforming to group expectations to preserve their social standing.

Initial Reactions, Inner Conflict, and the Weapon of Isolation Internal struggle was a defining feature across all respondents' experiences. Although some students initially tried to resist the pressure, most realized that the threat of social isolation was the group's most frightening and effective weapon. The greatest fear that drove students to surrender (as in RK) or to feign indifference (as in CK and ZA) was the threat of being excluded or becoming the target of retaliatory rumors. Respondent RK explicitly admitted that he gave in because he was afraid of being completely alone after being mocked as a "mama's boy" and a "coward."

This fear of losing social belonging is highly relevant to the *Need to Belong* theory in adolescent psychology. Research on *Social Ostracism* by Williams (2022) shows that the psychological pain of being ignored or excluded is comparable to physical pain. Therefore, when ZA's friends threatened, "We'll spread rumors about you," it became an unavoidable form of pressure, forcing ZA and other principled students to endure intense psychological distress and inner conflict. Some students (such as CK and ZA) responded through *self-sacrifice* suppressing their emotions

and pretending to be calm or silent to avoid conflict whereas RK suffered more severe consequences, including a loss of self-identity and the feeling of being a “puppet” for nearly two years.

Field findings on these students’ experiences are reinforced by recent developmental psychology literature. Pressures targeting students’ principles and self-identity, as experienced by ZI and RK, align with the concept of *Group Influence on Self-Identity*. Pressures that attack one’s identity such as academic labeling can lead to self-disintegration and psychological stress. Krosch and Mitchell (2023) explain that when a person’s personal identity (e.g., being honest, diligent, or choosing a certain academic track) conflicts with group norms, adolescents exhibit defensive reactions that cause behavioral change or even withdrawal from their authentic identity to conform to group expectations. RK’s experience of describing himself as a puppet after yielding to peer pressure vividly illustrates how prolonged social influence can erode personal autonomy and identity integrity. Ultimately, the experiences of all respondents suggest that the core of this struggle lies in the conflict between personal ethics and the fundamental human need for social acceptance.

Students’ Self-Regulation Strategies in Facing Peer Pressure

The complexity of peer pressure requires students to activate effective self-regulation mechanisms. Based on the findings from Respondents 1 to 5, the self-regulation strategies successfully used by students can generally be categorized into four main types: Principles and Personal Values Strategy, Motivational Strategy, Assertive Communication Strategy, and Time and Stress Management Strategy. These strategies function as both internal and external defense systems that enable students to maintain their personal integrity and autonomy amid social demands. The students’ success in applying these strategies demonstrates their adaptive ability to manage inner impulses (emotions/fear) and environmental challenges (invitations/threats).

1. Principles and Personal Values Strategy

This strategy serves as a moral filter that determines the quality of students’ social interactions. All respondents consistently used personal values as benchmarks for evaluating friendships. Respondents such as R1 and ZI grounded their principles on prioritizing academic achievement, while RK explicitly stated that healthy friendships must be based on mutual respect and should never come at the expense of self-worth. For ZA, the commitment to honesty acted as a moral shield protecting her from participating in gossip culture (the boomerang effect). Collectively, this strategy shows that students who successfully regulate themselves can set clear boundaries and categorize peers into “same frequency” and “keep a distance” groups (CK). This affirmation of self-values provides strong justification for resisting pressure while maintaining personal integrity.

2. Motivational Strategy

The motivational strategy focuses on using future goals as a positive driving force to divert attention from negative group influences. For most respondents, professional aspirations functioned as a proactive defense. CK, for example, viewed her ambition to become a civil servant and maintain her academic ranking as rational grounds for rejecting meaningless invitations, even when labeled negatively (“too ambitious about worldly success”). Similarly, ZA’s aspiration to become an investigative journalist served as an internal compass that guided her toward truth-seeking behavior, effectively neutralizing gossip invitations. This strategy is crucial because it not only motivates students to reject negative influences but also encourages them to redefine their identities (e.g., RK’s transformation from feeling like a “puppet” to becoming a purposeful individual).

3. Assertive Communication Strategy

This strategy reflects students’ maturity in rejecting peer pressure without triggering social conflict. Respondents demonstrated varied assertive techniques, ranging from direct to subtle approaches. R1 used honest, reason-based refusals (such as a tutoring schedule), while ZA and CK displayed more sophisticated, non-confrontational assertiveness. CK skillfully declined invitations by pretending not to hear during exams or through empathetic refusals (“I really want to join, but the situation doesn’t allow it”) to preserve her friends’ feelings. Meanwhile, ZA applied firm yet polite refusals based on personal needs (teaching private lessons to earn money). Collectively, these strategies demonstrate that self-regulated students can manage their emotional responses and maintain personal boundaries effectively while minimizing the risk of social exclusion.

4. Time and Stress Management Strategy

Time and stress management strategies act as proactive defense mechanisms by structuring leisure time into meaningful and productive activities. Most respondents, such as R1 and ZA, transformed their unplanned free time into structured commitments that generated income or enhanced knowledge (teaching private or tutoring classes). For ZA, teaching was not only a source of income but also a powerful “logical shield” for refusing peer invitations. This strategy serves a dual function: first, providing an undeniable reason for refusal, and second, helping to manage stress by redirecting focus and energy from social conflicts to personal achievements. Consequently, students regain control over their time and limit opportunities for negative interactions.

The success of all respondents in applying these four strategies aligns with the concept of Self-Regulation in developmental psychology. According to Zimmerman (2013), self-regulation is a process in which learners actively control their thoughts, behaviors, and emotions to achieve their goals. The strategies used by the respondents reflect the three main phases of self-regulation:

Forethought Phase (Planning): Demonstrated through the Principles and Personal Values Strategy and the Motivational Strategy, where students set goals (e.g., becoming a civil servant/journalist) and analyze task contexts (maintaining grades/honesty) before acting.

Performance Phase: Evident in the Assertive Communication Strategy, where students actively control their responses (polite refusal, pretending not to hear) to achieve their goals (rejecting invitations without conflict).

Self-Reflection Phase: Reflected in the Time and Stress Management Strategy, where students evaluate past failures (wasting time with peers) and adjust their future behavior/environment (regular tutoring) to sustain effective self-regulation.

Thus, these strategies illustrate that students do not merely react to pressure but proactively design their environment and behavior to ensure that their personal goals remain intact.

CONCLUSION

1. Students' Experiences in Facing Peer Pressure

Students' experiences reveal that peer pressure within the school environment is complex and carries deep psychological impacts, extending beyond mere invitations to engage in deviant behavior. Nature of the Pressure: The main source of pressure centers on threats to personal identity integrity and social status rather than physical behavior. The pressure manifests in various forms, including academic labeling (ZI), demands for a consumptive lifestyle (CK), and moral-ethical violations (cheating and gossiping). Primary Tools of the Group: Social ostracism and retaliatory rumor-spreading (ZA and RK) serve as the most effective weapons used by peer groups to enforce conformity. The fear of being excluded becomes the main reason students give in (RK) or feel a loss of personal autonomy. Internal Impact: Students with strong integrity experience intense internal conflict. They are often forced to sacrifice emotional comfort (pretending to be calm or smiling) in order to maintain social relationships and avoid confrontation, indicating that peer pressure imposes a significant psychological burden.

2. Students' Self-Regulation Strategies in Coping with Peer Pressure

Students who successfully maintain their integrity employ four self-regulation strategies synergistically as an internal and external defense system. Principles and Personal Values Strategy: This strategy acts as a moral filter to evaluate friendships. Principles such as honesty (ZA) and prioritizing academic goals (R1, ZI) serve as strong internal defenses for resisting invitations and filtering social circles. Motivational Strategy: Professional aspirations (becoming a civil servant or journalist) function as anchors of value and rational fortresses. These future goals give students social courage to reject meaningless invitations, as negative actions are seen as damaging the foundational capital toward their career ambitions. Assertive Communication Strategy: Students use polite refusal techniques based on factual reasons (for example, private tutoring schedules to earn money). This strategy effectively establishes personal boundaries and priorities while minimizing the risk of conflict that could trigger social isolation. Time and Stress Management Strategy: Students proactively structure their free time with productive activities (private tutoring,

teaching, or helping their mothers). This structured routine serves a dual function: as a “logical shield” to refuse invitations and as a mechanism to redirect focus for managing social stress.

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