

Investigating the Relationship Between Academic Motivation, Peer Conformity and Socio-Emotional Competence Among Students

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Abstract

In its purest form, education extends beyond textbooks and classrooms while capturing holistic student development, including academic achievement with socio-emotional development and the intricate dynamics of peer relationships. This study investigates the relationship between students' academic motivation, socio-emotional competence, and peer conformity. The primary objective is to determine how peer conformity mediates the effects of socio-emotional competence on academic motivation. The three constructs were measured with standardised instruments on a sample of 350 students. Correlation and mediation analyses were conducted to investigate the relationships between these variables. The results show a significant negative correlation between peer conformity and socio-emotional competence and a positive relationship between academic motivation and socio-emotional competence. The mediation analysis confirms a partial mediating effect of peer conformity on academic motivation and socio-emotional competence. It emphasises the significance of Socio-Emotional Learning programs for improving academic performance and decreasing the negative effect of peer influences.

Keywords: Academic Motivation, Peer Conformity, Socio-Emotional Competence, Mediation, School Psychology

INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is characterised by heightened susceptibility to peer influence, which can impact socio-emotional development and academic outcomes. It is important to consider the relationship between peer conformity, socio-emotional competence, and academic motivation to understand the holistic development of adolescents and encourage positive development and academic engagement among students. Education extends beyond textbooks and classrooms while capturing holistic student development, including academic achievement with socio-emotional development and the intricate dynamics of peer relationships. This study explores the relationship between academic motivation, socio-emotional competence, and peer conformity of students to understand the complex nature of student development and its implications for educational practices.

Academic Motivation

Academic motivation, a pivotal component of student development, propels students beyond the mere pursuit of grades. It motivates students to engage, persist, and succeed in their education. By distinguishing

between intrinsic and extrinsic motivators, Wentzel (2009) and Eccles & Wigfield (2002) have influenced our understanding of the complex nature of academic motivation. Apart from traditional academic paradigms, a balance is achieved when socio-emotional aspects are incorporated with an intrinsic drive motivated by personal interest and satisfaction.

Peer conformity

Conformity has been defined as, “the act of changing one’s behavior to match the responses of others” (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004).

Peer conformity, a dimension in this intricate triad, adds a layer of complexity to student dynamics while also playing a crucial role during adolescence, influencing their attitudes, behaviours, and academic outcomes. Children are more likely to perform behaviors that are positively reinforced by the peer group and are less likely to perform behaviors that are punished by that group (Brown et al., 1986, as cited in Masland & Lease, 2013).

Socio-Emotional Competence

CASEL (2021) characterizes socially and emotionally competent students as being able to understand and manage their emotions, set and achieve goals, solve problems successfully, establish and maintain healthy relationships, and process and retain information within settings that intentionally nurture these skills (Eriksen & Bru, 2022). Socio-emotional competence is the ability to effectively recognise and manage emotions while also forming positive relationships and making responsible decisions. It encompasses a diverse set of competencies, including self-awareness, self-regulation, interpersonal skills, and decision-making abilities, and noted their importance in predicting academic performance (Brackett & Rivers, 2014; Denham, 2006). However, integrated studies are essential because children do not develop in an empty environment. At the same time, they negotiate the complex framework of peer relationships and academic challenges.

Relationship between Academic Motivation, Peer Conformity and Socio-Emotional Competence

Several studies, including Masland and Lease (2013) and Zook (1995), emphasise the pivotal role of peer groups in shaping academic behaviours and attitudes. They highlight the significance of intrinsic motivation and peer group dynamics in influencing academic conformity. Masland (2011) states that the complex interplay between individual characteristics, social identity, and peer group norms determines academic behaviours. Adolescents conform to the views of their peers, which impacts their academic and socioemotional factors (Jiang et al., 2015). Behavioral dynamics, such as exclusion and ostracism, may also accompany peer rejection and thereby reduce children's participation in instructional or collaborative activities with classmates (Ladd, G. W et al., 1999). A study by Chakraborty (2023) reveals that a student who struggles academically may improve their performance when they belong to a group that fosters effective learning. The peer group can either promote or impede the learning process of a student. As revealed by the findings, teachers can effectively use the peer group to enhance classroom interaction and participation, and peers can also serve as a source of motivation for academic achievement.

Ferri revealed that academic procrastination is influenced by internal and external factors such as the environment and peers when students have high conformity to their friends and groups (Ferrari et al., 1995, as cited in Arfah et al., 2022). The existence of high peer conformity will certainly affect academic procrastination (Arfah et al., 2022). Changes in students’ perceptions of social competence were positively predicted by friends’ fall scores of social competences, whereas changes in students’ perceptions of cognitive competence were negatively predicted by friends’ fall scores of cognitive competences (Ryan, A. M., 2000).

According to Denham (2006), the role of socio-emotional competence in promoting school readiness is critical for understanding its relationship with peer conformity and academic motivation among adolescents. He defines socio-emotional competence as an individual's ability to manage emotions and engage in social interactions effectively. Moradi and Chemelnezhad's (2021) study discusses the importance of fostering self-efficacy beliefs to promote socio-emotional development and academic motivation, as well as the perception of school climate as a predictor of socio-emotional competence, emphasising the importance of supportive and inclusive school environments for students' socio-emotional well-being.

Several studies investigated the relationship between socioemotional competence and academic achievement; Bhat (2023) emphasised the importance of creating supportive environments for socioemotional development in broader environmental systems and the positive relationship between emotional intelligence and academic achievement. Anwuzia (2023) emphasises the importance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in developing socioemotional competencies required for successful career navigation and academic achievement by focusing on the Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL).

A systematic process for promoting students' social and emotional development is the common element among schools that report an increase in academic success, improved quality of relationships between teachers and students, and a decrease in problem behavior (Durlak et al., 2011). SEL programming results in significant shifts in social, emotional, and academic competencies as well as improvements in the quality of learning environments (Brackett & Rivers, 2014). Students who master these competencies are more likely to engage confidently in learning activities and remain resilient in the face of difficulties (Wang & Eccles, 2012, as cited in Eriksen & Bru, 2022).

Izard and colleagues report consistent longitudinal associations between early emotion knowledge and later academic competence in young children even after controlling for other important child factors such as age, verbal ability, and temperament (Izard et al., 2001; Trentacosta & Izard, 2007, as cited in Eriksen & Bru, 2022). The relationship between self-regulatory abilities and academic performance has been extensively studied, school self-regulation being one of the strongest predictors of school performance (Eriksen & Bru, 2022).

Durlak et al. (2011) found that promoting SEL through universal interventions boosts academic outcomes, increases motivation to learn and cooperative behavior in the classroom, decreases disruptive behavior and non-compliance, and decreases emotional distress. A study by Oberle et al (2014) reveals that SEL promotion benefits not only the well-being and positive development, but also their academic achievement.

A study by Brechwald and Prinstein (2011) emphasises the importance of considering environmental variables and individual characteristics when researching peer influence processes and offers significant perspectives on peer influence processes, highlighting an understanding of how peers influence adolescents' attitudes and behaviours. They conclude that socio-emotional competence impacts peer influence and suggest that adolescents with higher levels of socio-emotional competence may be less vulnerable to negative peer influences.

In order to understand the relationship between peer conformity, socio-emotional competence, and academic motivation among adolescents, Bukowski and Rose (2021) provide insights into the future directions of research on peer relations while highlighting the significance of peer relationships in shaping adolescent development across domains, like academic engagement and socio-emotional functioning. Peer

conformity affects their procrastination in class, emphasising the detrimental effects of peer pressure on academic conduct (Arfah & Tamar, 2022). Peer interactions determine academic achievements, motivation, and social conduct. A thorough analysis of the impact of peer interactions on academic motivation by examining peer groups as a setting for the interaction of their motivation, engagement, and academic achievement was conducted in several studies (Wentzel & Muenks, 2016; Ryan, 2000).

Despite abundant research on these topics, there is a notable lack of investigation into the interactions between peer influence, academic motivation, and socio-emotional development. While research on socio-emotional competence and academic motivation is abundant, few studies specifically investigate how these factors interact with peer conformity in educational settings. Thus, there is a pressing need for empirical research that delves into the interconnectedness of these constructs to inform more holistic approaches to promoting positive academic outcomes and social-emotional development among students. Research suggests that peer relationships significantly impact socio-emotional well-being and academic outcomes of adolescents (Rubin et al., 2011). This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the mechanisms underlying adolescent behaviour and achievement by examining how peer conformity influences socio-emotional competence and academic motivation. Integrating findings from these studies offers a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted factors influencing adolescent academic behaviours, attitudes, and achievements, providing valuable insights for educational practitioners, policymakers, and researchers alike.

Objectives & Hypothesis

Objectives

1. To examine the relationships between academic motivation, socio-emotional competence, and peer conformity among adolescents.
2. To examine the influence of socio-emotional competence and peer conformity on academic motivation.
3. To investigate whether peer conformity mediates the relationship between socio-emotional competence and academic motivation.

Hypothesis

H01: There is no significant correlation between academic motivation, socio-emotional competence, and peer conformity among adolescents.

H02: Socio-emotional Competence has no significant influence on Peer Conformity and Academic Motivation

H03: Peer Conformity has no significant influence on Academic Motivation

H04: Peer conformity will not mediate the relationship between Socio-emotional competence and Academic motivation.

Methods

Sample

The study includes a sample of adolescents aged 13-18 from South India. A total of 350 participants had been recruited using purposive sampling. The inclusion criteria are adolescents in English medium schools with formal education who live in urban settings. Adolescents with diagnosed learning disabilities or behavioural disorders were excluded from the sample population.

Tools/Measures

Academic Motivation Scale (AMS) was used to assess students' academic motivation and engagement. Robert J. Vallerand developed the Academic Motivation Scale (AMS). It was initially published in 1992. The scale measures various factors related to academic motivation, including intrinsic, extrinsic, and amotivation. It consists of Likert scale items that respondents rate based on their agreement with statements related to academic motivation.

The Peer Pressure Questionnaire is used to measure the level of peer conformity among students. The Peer pressure questionnaire is a psychometric instrument designed to assess individuals' propensity to conform to the attitudes, behaviours, or opinions of their peers. The scale measures the extent to which individuals are influenced by peer pressure or social norms in various contexts. Authors Santor, D. A., Messervey, D., & Kusumakar, V. developed and validated the tool in 2000.

Delaware Social and Emotional Competency Scale (DSECS-R2) is used to assess the socio- emotional competence of the students. Maurice J. Elias developed the Delaware Social and Emotional Competency Scale (DSECS-R2), and the revised version (DSECS-R2) was released in 2015. This scale assesses various aspects of social and emotional competence in children and adolescents, including self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making.

Ethical considerations

The study will adhere to ethical guidelines outlined by the American Psychological Association (APA) and local institutional review boards. Informed consent will be obtained from participants or their guardians, ensuring voluntary participation and confidentiality of responses. Participants will be informed about the purpose, risks, and benefits of the study, as well as their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Data will be anonymised and securely stored to protect participants' privacy.

Procedure

The study was conducted in secondary schools in the southern part of India.

Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and consent was obtained from parents/school management for adolescents under 18. A detailed consent form was given, outlining the purpose of the study, procedures involved, confidentiality measures, and the right to withdraw. The consent forms were submitted to school management for review and approval. Once approved, consent forms were provided to participating students to ensure information sessions would accompany their understanding, and voluntary participation to address any concerns.

Upon obtaining consent, data collection sessions were scheduled during school hours in appropriate settings. The questionnaires were administered to students, providing clear instructions and ensuring confidentiality. Participants were given ample time to complete the questionnaires independently, with the researcher available to address any queries. Data collected is anonymous to ensure confidentiality.

Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. If participants choose to withdraw, they were instructed to inform the research assistant immediately. Their data will be excluded from further analysis, and any completed questionnaires will be securely discarded. After data collection, the researcher performed data entry and cleaning to ensure accuracy. Statistical analysis will be conducted using appropriate software, including descriptive statistics, regression, and mediation analysis.

Results

Correlation Analysis

Table 1 shows the Correlation Matrix of Academic motivation and Socio-emotional competence.

	Peer Conformity	Academic Motivation		Socio-Emotional Competency	
Peer Conformity	—				
Academic Motivation	-0.413	***	—		
Socio-Emotional Competency	-0.288	***	0.282	***	—
Mean	80.7		147.1		90.9
SD	16.8		26.4		12.7
Skewness	0.0513		-0.0871		-0.5965
Cronbach's α	0.820		0.899		0.846

Note: *** indicating significance at 0.001 level With reference to Table 1,

The results indicate a statistically significant positive moderate correlation (Pearson's $r = 0.282$, $p < .001$) between academic motivation and socio-emotional competence. This result rejects H01a and shows that academic motivation increases as their socio-emotional competence increases. It showed that peer conformity and academic motivation had a negative moderate correlation (Pearson's $r = -0.413$, $p < .001$). It proceeds in opposition to H01b and implies that the academic motivation of students is inversely correlated with increased peer conformity. The significant nature of this inverse relationship indicates that peer influence can hinder academic engagement.

Peer conformity and socio-emotional competence have been reported to have a significantly low negative correlation (Pearson's $r = -0.288$, $p < .001$). This implies that socioemotional competence declines with increased peer conformity. Although the correlation is low, the statistical significance supports the idea that peer conformity may have a negative impact on socio-emotional development in adolescents.

Multiple regression Analysis

Table 2 shows the Linear Regression Analysis of the variables Socio-Emotional Competence (SEC), Peer Conformity (PC) and Academic Motivation (AM)

Model	Predictors	Dependent Variable	R ²	β	t
1	SEC	PC	0.0829	-0.380	-5.61

2	SEC	AM	0.0794	0.584	5.48
3	PC	AM	0.170	-0.648	-8.45

With reference to Table 2,

Regressing SEC on PC produced an R² of 0.0829, indicating a significant negative relationship between higher SEC and lower peer conformity (Estimate = -0.380, $p < 0.001$).

Regressing SEC on AM resulted in an R² of 0.0794, indicating a significant and positive correlation between academic motivation and socio-emotional competence (Estimate = 0.584, $p < 0.001$).

When AM is regressed on PC, an R² of 0.170 indicates that there is a significant negative correlation between higher peer conformity and lower academic motivation (Estimate = -0.648, $p < 0.001$).

Mediation analysis

Figure 1 shows the Path of the Variables

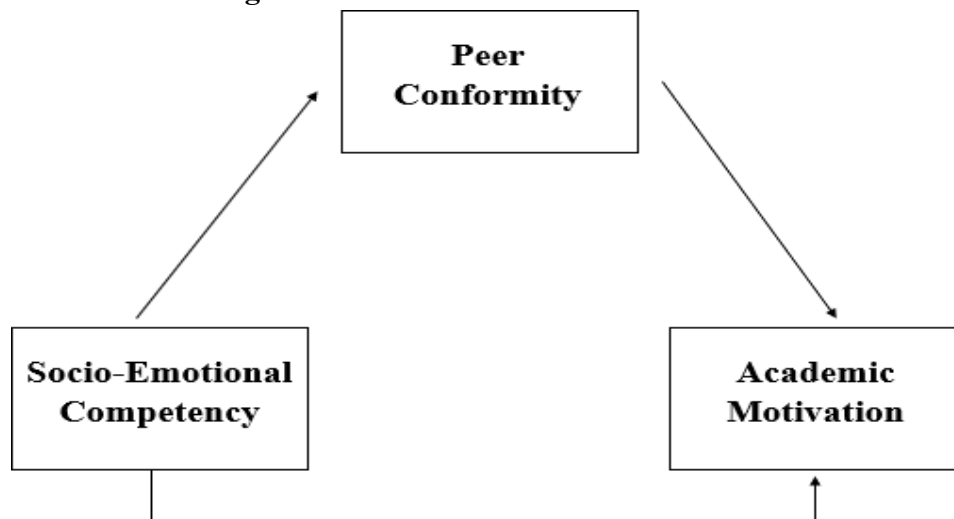


Table 3 shows the mediation estimates where Academic Motivation is the Dependent Variable, Peer Conformity is the Mediating Variable, and Socio-Emotional Competency is the Predictor.

Path			β	Direct	Indirect	Total	Mediation
SEC	→	PC	-0.380	0.368	0.216	0.584	Partial
PC	→	AM	-0.567				
SEC	→	AM	0.368				

According to the mediation analysis results, peer conformity partially mediates the relationship between academic motivation and socio-emotional competence. Peer conformity indirectly affects academic motivation through socio-emotional competence, accounting for 36.9% of the total effect and was statistically significant (Estimate = 0.216, SE = 0.0485, Z = 4.44, $p < 0.001$). This implies that the

relationship between academic motivation and socio-emotional competence is influenced by peer conformity.

It suggests that socio-emotional competence positively influences academic motivation and that peer conformity strengthens this relationship. The present study extends the understanding of the role that socio-emotional learning provides in promoting academic performance (Taylor et al., 2017) by investigating the mediating roles that peer conformity plays in the link between academic motivation and socio-emotional competence. The emphasis on South Indian students adds to the literature collection an enhanced cultural perspective while highlighting how essential it is to comprehend these dynamics across various educational contexts.

Discussions

The results of this study align with key theoretical frameworks, presenting insights into the relationship between academic motivation, peer conformity, and socio-emotional competence. According to Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (1977), peer influence plays a significant role in shaping adolescent behaviour. The results support the theory by indicating a significant negative correlation between peer conformity and socio-emotional competence. Students who conform more to peer norms have lower socio-emotional competence, according to Masland and Lease (2013), who highlight how peer conformity can shift academic focus.

Self-determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2017) illustrates the positive relationship between socio-emotional competence and academic motivation. According to this theory, meeting psychological needs like autonomy, competence, and relatedness boosts intrinsic motivation. A study by Reindl (2021) stated that connectedness and competence drive academic engagement, which supports the results of this study that identified that students with higher socio-emotional competence are more academically motivated.

The Ecological Systems Theory (Ladd et al., 2009) suggests that various social environments influence adolescent development. According to the research findings, navigating these environments requires socio-emotional competence. Adolescents with stronger socio-emotional skills are less influenced by peer conformity and have higher academic motivation. This supports Brechwald and Prinstein's (2011) hypothesis that socio-emotionally competent adolescents are more resistant to peer pressure.

The study emphasises that socio-emotional competence increases academic motivation and protects against the adverse effects of peer conformity. Students with higher socio-emotional competence are less susceptible to peer pressure, resulting in better academic outcomes (Oberle et al., 2016).

The results have important implications for research and practice in adolescent development and education. The findings can help educators, policymakers, and practitioners understand the factors that influence adolescents' social, emotional, and academic well-being, allowing them to shape targeted programs aimed at developing socio-emotional skills and intrinsic motivation in adolescents, thereby supporting their academic achievement and long-term well-being. Understanding how peer relationships influence socio-emotional competence and academic motivation enables interventions to be tailored to promote positive peer dynamics and improve students' overall development.

The current findings would provide insights for related parties such as educational institutions, teachers, parents, relatives, and practitioners to focus more on peer acceptance and prosocial behaviour as an effort to develop adolescents' social-emotional competence, which is proven to be beneficial for various aspects in life (Denham et al., 2012; Wentzel et al., 2021, as cited in Purna et al., 2024).

Conclusion

This study provides a growing body of research that highlights the complex relationships between academic motivation, emotional competence, and social dynamics. The null hypotheses are rejected because the data show a significant negative correlation between peer conformity and socio-emotional competence and a positive relationship between academic motivation and socio-emotional competence. The linear regression analysis further supports these relationships, revealing that academic motivation positively correlates with socio-emotional competence and negatively correlates with peer conformity. Furthermore, the mediation analysis revealed that peer conformity accounts for 36.9% of the effect in mediating the relationship between academic motivation and socio-emotional competence. This suggests that peer conformity has a negative impact on academic motivation; however, socio-emotional competence remains an essential factor in improving academic performance. Peer conformity mediates the relationship between academic motivation and socio-emotional competence, contributing independently. Wentzel (2017) emphasised that peer influence can have a beneficial or negative impact on the academic performance of students, as well as how these factors influence a student's motivation and behaviour in the classroom. Similarly, students with higher socio-emotional competence performed better academically and were more resilient to peer pressure (Oberle et al., 2016).

Implication and limitations of the study

The findings provide opportunities for future research into how socioemotional competencies and peer pressure affect academic performance. Improving socio-emotional competence can reduce the negative effects of peer conformity on academic motivation, as evidenced by partial mediation of the interaction of the variables. Given the growing emphasis on social and emotional learning (SEL) in education, this study validates the importance of SEL programs in improving academic performance. Studies have consistently shown that SEL programs improve the well-being and performance of students (Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017).

There are various challenges with exploring the variables of the study. The use of self-report measures presents a concern since it may produce bias. Future research may triangulate the results by combining observational data, or teacher reports to lessen this effect. Sociocultural factors influence peer conformity and socioemotional competence, but these factors must be thoroughly investigated. Future research should consider cultural differences in peer dynamics and emotional development to provide a more nuanced understanding of the variables.

The difficulty of addressing peer conformity in educational settings is another issue raised by the results above. This makes it challenging to maintain an adequate balance between supporting constructive peer relationships and promoting individuality.

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