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Exploring Cognitive Impairments Linked to Toxic Positivity and Emotional Suppression

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Abstract

Positive thinking is usually treated as good for mental health, but when positivity turns into an unspoken rule when people feel they are not allowed to be anything less than upbeat it can end up working against the well-being it promises to protect. This paper examines toxic positivity, the tendency to dismiss, invalidate, or override negative emotion in the name of staying positive, and asks what this pattern does to emotional regulation and everyday cognition. Drawing on research from education, workplace psychology, and clinical settings, we trace how the pressure to "stay positive" pushes people toward suppressing what they actually feel, and how that suppression carries measurable cognitive costs. We then report a cross-sectional study of 104 young adults (18–30 years) that tested these relationships directly. Toxic positivity was positively correlated with both emotional suppression ($r = .236$, $p = .016$) and self-reported cognitive impairment ($r = .277$, $p = .004$); the association between suppression and cognitive impairment approached but did not reach significance ($r = .181$, $p = .065$). Together, the findings suggest that sustained pressure to appear positive can quietly interfere with concentration and other everyday cognitive functions, and they support a more balanced view of positivity one that leaves room for negative emotion instead of treating it as something to hide.

Keywords: toxic positivity, emotional suppression, cognitive functioning, emotion regulation, young adults

1. Introduction

Happiness sells. Self-help books promise it, workplaces build entire wellness programmes around it, and social media quietly rewards whoever looks the most upbeat. Optimism has become something close to a moral expectation rather than simply a mood. Yet a growing body of psychological research points to an uncomfortable pattern: when positivity stops being a choice and becomes an obligation, it can work against the very well-being it is supposed to protect. Psychologists have started using the term toxic positivity for this a cultural and interpersonal habit of insisting on optimism so completely that negative emotion gets brushed aside, dismissed, or treated as unacceptable.

This is different from ordinary positive thinking, which usually leaves room for things to be difficult. Toxic positivity does not. It asks people to override what they are actually feeling and present contentment instead, and it is this covering-up this suppression that sits at the centre of the present paper.

Making sense of toxic positivity means drawing on two lines of research that have not always spoken to each other. One is well established: the study of emotion regulation, which since the early 1990s has

produced solid evidence that suppressing emotion carries costs for memory, for physiological arousal, and for relationships. The other is newer and still taking shape a small but growing literature that treats toxic positivity itself as a measurable construct, building on the older suppression work but asking what happens when positivity becomes a social demand rather than a private coping strategy.

The stakes here are not abstract. Adolescents whose executive functions are still maturing, employees whose effectiveness depends on emotional honesty, and more or less anyone exposed to constant messaging that negative feelings are unacceptable are all plausibly affected by whatever cognitive price toxic positivity extracts. Bringing these two research traditions together is therefore not just an academic exercise; it is an attempt to take seriously a risk that is easy to miss precisely because it is so widely encouraged.

1.1 Defining Key Terms

A few terms are worth pinning down before going further.

Emotional expression is the outward signalling of what someone feels through facial expression, posture, tone of voice, gesture, or what they say. It is shaped by culture, but it is also how people coordinate with one another socially.

Emotion regulation is the broader umbrella term for everything people do, consciously or not, to manage their emotional responses. Some of these strategies reappraisal, mindfulness and problem-solving are considered adaptive because they let people respond flexibly to difficulty while staying psychologically steady.

Emotional suppression is narrower: it means deliberately hiding an emotion's outward signs masking sadness, anger or fear behind a composed exterior. It can be useful briefly, for instance holding it together during a work presentation, but sustained suppression is where research consistently finds trouble. Crucially, suppressing an emotion does not make it disappear; it simply stops it from showing, while the internal experience continues underneath.

Toxic positivity, as used here, is what happens when positivity is treated as a rule rather than a resource when negative emotion is framed as unacceptable, embarrassing, or a personal failing. It shows up in throwaway lines such as "just stay positive" "look on the bright side" or "everything happens for a reason" phrases that sound encouraging but effectively tell the listener that their distress is unwelcome and needs replacing.

What separates ordinary optimism from toxic positivity is flexibility. Healthy positivity can sit alongside an honest acknowledgement that something is hard. Toxic positivity cannot: it demands rapid suppression or replacement of negative emotion regardless of what is actually going on for the person.

1.2 The Present Study

This paper has two aims. The first is to review what the literature spanning clinical psychology, education, and organisational research currently says about how toxic positivity, emotional suppression and cognition relate to one another, tracing that story from the earliest experimental work on suppression through to the more recent studies that name toxic positivity directly. The second is to report an original study of young adults testing these relationships empirically: whether higher toxic positivity is associated with greater suppression and greater perceived cognitive difficulty and whether suppression helps explain the link between the two. Taken together, this combination of theory and data is intended to make the case that a culture of forced positivity costs more than it appears to.

2. Literature Review

The following sections trace the major theoretical and empirical contributions relevant to the relationship between emotional suppression, toxic positivity and cognitive functioning, moving roughly from the foundational experimental work of the 1990s to the most recent studies that address toxic positivity as a construct in its own right.

2.1 Suppression as Cognitively Demanding Work: Gross and Levenson (1997)

Much of the contemporary research on suppression traces back to an experiment by James Gross and Robert Levenson (1997), which showed that suppressing emotion is not just a matter of behavioural restraint it is effortful, and it has measurable cognitive and physiological costs. Participants watched emotionally charged film clips either while responding naturally or while deliberately masking their reactions. Those who suppressed showed heightened physiological arousal, including increased cardiovascular activity, alongside disruptions in how well they encoded and processed what they had just watched.

The finding that came out of this, and that later research kept confirming, is that suppression does not switch emotion off it just redirects it. The person keeps feeling what they feel; they simply spend cognitive effort concealing it, which often means the internal experience stays just as strong, or even intensifies, while the outward presentation looks calm.

Two things have to happen at once for suppression to work. The person has to keep monitoring their own emotional state noticing what is rising, gauging how strong it is, deciding whether showing it is acceptable while simultaneously exerting the inhibitory control needed to stop their face, voice, or words from giving anything away. Both of these draw on the same executive-control systems responsible for working memory and attention, which is exactly why suppression is so costly: it competes directly with whatever else the person is trying to think about, remember, or decide.

This matters for toxic positivity because, in the lab, suppression is usually a short, one-off demand. In everyday environments shaped by toxic positivity, however, positivity becomes an ongoing expectation, and suppression turns from an occasional coping tool into a near-constant regulatory task one whose costs, on this model, should accumulate rather than reset.

2.2 The Memory Cost of Keeping Composed: Richards and Gross (2000)

Jane Richards and James Gross (2000) took this further and asked what suppression does to memory, in a study whose title "the cognitive costs of keeping one's cool" has since become something of a catchphrase in the field. Building on Gross and Levenson's resource-competition idea, they found that people who suppressed their emotional reactions while taking in information later remembered that information worse than people who had reacted naturally.

Across several experimental conditions, the pattern held: suppression during encoding meant weaker recall afterward, and the effect was strongest for details tied to emotionally loaded material suggesting suppression interferes not just with the emotion itself but with everything else being processed at the same time.

The mechanism, as they described it, is attentional division. Suppressing an emotion means constantly monitoring facial expression, posture, tone, and behaviour while also attending to whatever triggered the emotion in the first place. That monitoring eats into the same working-memory and attentional resources needed to encode new information, so the two tasks regulating the face, absorbing the content end up competing, and the content usually loses.

In classrooms shaped by toxic positivity, this has an obvious application. A student who suppresses frustration or confusion because the culture of the room rewards visible confidence is spending attention on emotional self-management exactly when that attention is needed for learning. And because the quality of initial encoding predicts how well material is retrieved later, that diversion is not a minor cost.

Richards and Gross also distinguished suppression from reappraisal reinterpreting a situation rather than hiding one's reaction to it. Because reappraisal happens earlier, before much regulatory effort has gone into inhibition, it changes the meaning of the event rather than fighting it after the fact. Later work by Gross and John (2003) confirmed that reappraisal, unlike suppression, does not produce the same memory costs, and often leaves cognitive performance intact or even improved. This distinction turns out to be central to understanding toxic positivity: it does not simply ask people to think positively it asks them to hide negative emotion after it has already been triggered, which means it carries the full executive cost of suppression rather than the comparatively cheap cost of reappraisal.

2.3 When Suppression Becomes a Habit: Gross and John (2003)

Gross and John (2003) extended this line of work in two directions: looking at suppression as a stable personality trait rather than a one-off lab task, and showing that its costs are not just internal but interpersonal. Using the Emotion Regulation Questionnaire, they compared people who habitually suppressed with people who leaned more on reappraisal.

Habitual suppressors reported less positive effect, more negative effect, and lower overall well-being a less adaptive emotional profile all round, in which positive experience was blunted and negative experience never quite got processed.

The social costs were just as striking. Because suppression means constantly hiding what one actually feels, habitual suppressors disclosed less to others came across as less emotionally available and reported their relationships as feeling less genuine. Emotional disclosure is one of the main ways trust and closeness get built, so when it is chronically restricted, those relational processes suffer and notably the people around the suppressor felt it too, reporting less warmth and lower engagement in return. Suppression, in other words, does not just change how the suppressor feels; it changes how others respond to them.

Habitual suppressors also showed weaker memory for emotionally significant events, which matters given how central such memories are to a coherent sense of self. And physiologically, chronic suppression was tied to elevated sympathetic arousal even when the person looked outwardly composed a sustained stress load that, over time, can affect hippocampal function, narrow attention, and reduce cognitive flexibility. In environments where suppression is not occasional but socially expected and rewarded, as under toxic positivity, these costs would be expected to build quietly, often without the person or the people around them noticing.

2.4 Suppression, Anxiety, and Depression: Campbell-Sills and Barlow (2009)

Michelle Campbell-Sills and David Barlow (2009) looked at suppression from a clinical angle, proposing that it is not just correlated with anxiety and mood disorders but actively involved in causing and maintaining them. Their argument was that persistent emotional avoidance suppression, thought suppression, safety behaviours, and similar strategies blocks the natural process by which fear and distress normally get processed and updated. Fear usually fades through repeated exposure to what triggers it, under conditions that let mistaken threat predictions get corrected. Avoidance interrupts that process, so the fear stays uncorrected and anxiety persists.

The cognitive fallout runs along two paths. The direct path is the same executive drain identified in the

lab studies above monitoring and inhibiting take up working memory that could be used elsewhere. The indirect path runs through the disorder itself: when suppression contributes to anxiety or depression, those conditions bring their own cognitive baggage rumination, hyper vigilance, negative attentional bias which feeds back and worsens the original problem, creating a cycle where suppression weakens cognition, weakened cognition worsens emotional processing, and that worsens the clinical picture further.

Campbell-Sills and Barlow also noted that suppression is often learned socially in families, peer groups, schools or workplaces that discourage authentic emotional expression. This links directly to toxic positivity: once positivity becomes the expected norm and negative emotion becomes unacceptable, suppression stops being a personal coping choice and becomes something closer to a social requirement the same regulatory pattern associated with anxiety and depression, just relabelled as a cultural virtue.

2.5 Toxic Positivity in Adolescents: Jindal et al. (2022)

Jindal, Gupta, Sharma and Gill (2022) were among the first to study toxic positivity in adolescents as a measurable construct in its own right, and they found that teenagers scoring higher on toxic positivity performed worse on measures of critical thinking, decision-making, and problem-solving. This was an important step: it treats toxic positivity not merely as a way of talking, but as a pattern with its own cognitive fingerprint.

Adolescence adds an extra layer of vulnerability here, because the prefrontal systems underlying working memory, inhibition, and cognitive flexibility are still developing. A teenager who suppresses emotion under toxic positivity norms is therefore carrying a double load: the suppression itself is costly, and the brain systems needed to absorb that cost are not yet running at full capacity.

Each of the affected domains makes intuitive sense. Critical thinking needs tolerance for ambiguity and a willingness to sit with contradiction; toxic positivity short-circuits this by pushing for quick emotional resolution reframe it, move on which cuts off the sustained reflection that real analysis requires. Decision-making suffers too, since emotions like doubt or concern carry useful information when weighing risk, and habitually minimising those means decisions get made with part of the relevant evidence stripped out. And problem-solving depends on tolerating frustration long enough to work through a hard task, which erodes when discomfort is treated as something to suppress rather than sit with.

Beyond the immediate cognitive hit, there is a developmental concern: repeated suppression during adolescence can shape a person's regulatory style well into adulthood, teaching them early those difficult emotions are to be hidden rather than examined a habit that tends to outlast the years in which it was formed.

2.6 Social Cognition and Maladaptive Regulation: Kämpf et al. (2023)

A meta-analysis by Kämpf, Adam, Rohr, Exner, and Wieck (2023), pulling together a large body of evidence, found that suppression, rumination, and related forms of emotional disengagement were consistently linked to weaker social well-being, less perceived support, and lower relationship quality extending the interpersonal findings of Gross and John (2003) well beyond a single study.

The broader point is that emotion regulation is not just something happening inside a person's head; it shapes how relationships work. Facial expression, tone, gesture and disclosure all carry information that lets other people read intention and empathy. When that signalling is chronically restricted, communication gets thinner for both sides: the suppressor works harder to manage their presentation, and the other person has less to go on.

This matters cognitively because so much of human thinking is social. Conversation supports reasoning, shared reflection helps memory and other people's perspectives often help solve problems that would be harder to solve alone. When maladaptive regulation weakens relationships, people lose access to this kind of social scaffolding, and they also lose some of the stress-buffering that close relationships normally provide which itself protects cognitive capacity under pressure.

The meta-analysis also confirmed that maladaptive regulation predicts anxiety, depression, eating disorders and substance-related problems each of which carries its own cognitive cost. Toxic positivity, by legitimising exactly the regulatory habits linked to these outcomes, sits squarely in the middle of this chain.

2.7 Toxic Positivity at Work: Lau et al. (2024)

Lau, Ung, Mui, and Saili (2024) took toxic positivity into the workplace, interviewing young adult employees about what it actually feels like to be expected to stay positive on the job. Their qualitative findings gave texture to what the quantitative studies had already suggested.

Participants described routinely suppressing frustration, fatigue, and uncertainty to maintain a positive professional image the same regulatory pattern found in the lab, but stretched across an entire working day, meeting after meeting, deadline after deadline, rather than compressed into a single experimental session.

One particularly telling finding was a kind of internal script participants described: an unspoken rule that they had to stay positive no matter the circumstances, paired with self-blame whenever a negative feeling surfaced anyway. Instead of treating stress as an understandable response to real pressure, many participants treated their own distress as a personal failing that needed fixing a perfectionist, almost self-punishing belief structure layered on top of ordinary suppression.

For actual job performance, this is not a small problem. Most professional roles already demand sustained concentration, working memory and quick decision-making precisely the resources suppression depletes. There is a real irony here: workplace cultures that push constant positivity in the name of motivation may be quietly undercutting the cognitive capacities that good performance actually depends on.

The study also pointed to a slower-burning risk that ongoing self-blame for having "wrong" emotions can it feed anxiety and depression, adding a further layer of cognitive cost on top of the suppression itself.

2.8 Alexithymia, Emotional Dissonance, and Resilience: Sonia (2025)

A recent synthesis by Sonia (2025) pulled together several threads emotional dissonance, alexithymia, and psychological resilience into one framework for thinking about how toxic positivity affects both emotion and cognition over time.

Emotional dissonance the gap between what someone actually feels and what they show was identified as a key mechanism. Under toxic positivity, this gap becomes a daily occurrence: people feel sad, frustrated or anxious but sense that showing anything other than calm or gratitude will not be well received. Holding that gap open takes real effort tracking the real emotion, generating a convincing alternative display, and maintaining it and that effort is not free.

What Sonia's account adds to the resource-depletion story from earlier sections is duration. Lab-based suppression is short. Emotional dissonance under everyday toxic positivity can run for hours or days at a stretch, and when it becomes habitual, the resulting fatigue does not reset it accumulates, showing up as poorer concentration, reduced flexibility and weaker decision-making.

Sonia also connects sustained toxic positivity to alexithymia difficulty identifying and describing one's own emotions, paired with attention oriented outward rather than inward. The logic is straightforward: if someone is repeatedly told that difficult feelings should be minimised or swapped out, they may gradually stop monitoring those feelings closely at all, losing the fine-grained emotional awareness that normally guides judgment, prioritises memory and supports empathy.

Perhaps the sharpest point in this synthesis is that toxic positivity can undercut the very resilience it claims to build. Real resilience comes from recognising distress, tolerating discomfort and learning from hard experiences all of which require actually engaging with the emotion rather than denying it. A culture that insists on constant positivity may therefore produce people who look resilient from the outside while remaining fragile underneath.

2.9 A Dual-Process View: Sharma and Mehta (2025)

One of the more surprising recent findings, from Sharma and Mehta (2025), is that toxic positivity is positively associated with both cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression at once strategies usually classed as adaptive and maladaptive respectively.

On its face, the reappraisal link looks like good news. Reappraisal is generally the healthier strategy: it operates early, reshaping how an event is interpreted before the emotional response fully forms, which is why it tends to go with better cognition, more positive effect and more authentic relationships. Interpreting a setback as a learning opportunity, for instance, is often a genuinely resilient response.

But Sharma and Mehta draw a sharp line between that kind of flexible reappraisal and the rigid, obligatory version built into toxic positivity. Healthy reappraisal still acknowledges the original emotion before reframing it and it is chosen internally rather than demanded socially. Toxic positivity instead pushes for an immediate swap discomfort out, positivity in regardless of whether the underlying feeling has actually been processed. The two can look similar from the outside while working in opposite directions underneath.

The parallel finding for suppression confirms that toxic positivity also carries the more obviously costly regulatory pattern. Put together, this suggests people may be doing both at once attempting to reframe an emotion while simultaneously suppressing whatever part of it resists reframing which stacks the costs of both strategies rather than substituting one for the other.

This dual-process picture is part of why toxic positivity is hard to spot in practice. Someone who looks consistently upbeat may, underneath, be doing expensive regulatory work if their positivity functions as a defence rather than an authentic response. Outward optimism, in other words, cannot be taken at face value as a sign of well-being the question is always whether it is flexible or whether it is compulsory.

2.10 Bringing It Together: Pathways to Cognitive Impairment

Taken as a whole, this body of work suggests toxic positivity is not a harmless preference for optimism it is a psychological and social process that reaches cognition through several routes at once, none of which fully explains the pattern on its own.

The most direct route is resource depletion. As Gross and Levenson's original work established and later studies confirmed, suppression requires constant monitoring and inhibition, both of which draw on working memory and attention. Concealing negative emotion while presenting a positive front therefore splits cognitive resources between the task at hand and the task of managing one's own face and under toxic positivity, this split is not occasional but ongoing, so the costs compound rather than reset.

A second, slower route runs through clinical vulnerability. Emotions that are repeatedly dismissed do not get the chance to resolve, and unresolved distress can resurface in stronger form, feeding into anxiety,

depression and other conditions that bring their own well-documented cognitive costs narrowed attention, rumination, weaker working memory. Here, toxic positivity's cognitive damage outlasts the original act of suppression by a wide margin.

A third route is developmental and social. Honest emotional expression is not just good for the individual; it is how people learn to differentiate their emotions, think through complicated situations, and build a coherent sense of self. When people are steered toward looking positive rather than being honest, these processes are disrupted a risk that is especially serious in adolescence, when executive functions and identity are both still forming, and that continues, in a different form, into adult workplaces where forced positivity thins out the honest disclosure that teams rely on for good collective reasoning.

These routes rarely act alone. A teenager suppressing emotion under toxic positivity pressure may simultaneously lose academic ground through resource depletion, lose peer closeness through reduced authenticity and gain anxiety through unprocessed distress each reinforcing the others. In workplaces, a similar spiral can form as direct suppression costs combine with self-blame and slow-building distress. The upshot is that good cognitive functioning does not come from staying positive all the time it comes from being able to engage with emotional experience honestly and without rushing to shut it down. Toxic positivity works against exactly that, which is what, makes it a genuine cognitive risk rather than just an unhelpful attitude one made more dangerous by how easily it is mistaken for resilience.

3. Method

The review above raises a testable question: does toxic positivity actually track with emotional suppression and cognitive difficulty in a real sample, and does suppression help explain that link? The study reported below was designed to find out.

3.1 Design

The study used a quantitative, cross-sectional, correlational design, allowing the identification of associations among toxic positivity, emotional suppression, and cognitive impairment without manipulating any variable experimentally. Given how young this specific literature is, a correlational approach in a naturalistic sample seemed the appropriate first step, ahead of any experimental work.

3.2 Objectives and Hypotheses

The study had four specific objectives:

1. To examine the relationship between toxic positivity and emotional suppression among young adults.
2. To assess the potential mediating role of emotional suppression in the relationship between toxic positivity and cognitive impairment.
3. To explore the association between emotional suppression and cognitive impairment.
4. To examine how persistent toxic positivity relates to emotional processing and cognitive functioning more broadly.

H1: Toxic positivity will be positively correlated with emotional suppression.

H2: Emotional suppression will be positively correlated with cognitive impairment.

H3: Toxic positivity will be positively correlated with cognitive impairment.

H4: Emotional suppression will mediate the relationship between toxic positivity and cognitive impairment.

3.3 Participants

A convenience sample of 104 young adults aged 18–30 was recruited from universities and community settings in Chandigarh, India. Convenience sampling was used given practical and time constraints. Eligibility required being able to read and understand English, providing informed consent, and having no diagnosed neurological or psychiatric condition. People with a history of head injury or cognitive impairment were excluded, as were incomplete or internally inconsistent responses.

3.4 Measures

Participants completed four instruments in a fixed order.

Sociodemographic form collected ages, gender and name for descriptive purposes.

Toxic positivity was measured with the IDR Toxic Positivity Test (IDR-TPT; Kahhoul, 2023), a 77-item Likert-style instrument developed and validated at Haigazian University, Lebanon, spanning five thematic subscales.

Emotional suppression was measured with the Expressive Suppression subscale of the Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ; Gross & John, 2003), a five-item, five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree) with well-established psychometric properties.

Cognitive functioning was measured with the Cognitive Functioning Self-Assessment Scale (CFSS), an 18-item self-report scale covering concentration, attentional control, working memory, and decision-making, also on a five-point Likert format.

3.5 Procedure and Ethical Considerations

All participants received an information sheet and gave written informed consent before taking part. The survey took roughly 15–20 minutes and was administered in a quiet setting to minimise distraction. Responses were fully anonymized, and participants were told plainly that taking part was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any point without any consequence. Ethical approval was obtained from the institution's research ethics committee, and the study followed the guidelines of the American Psychological Association and the Indian Council of Medical Research.

3.6 Statistical Analysis

Data were analysed in IBM SPSS Statistics. Descriptive statistics were computed for all variables. Pearson correlations examined the pair wise relationships among toxic positivity, emotional suppression, and cognitive impairment. Multiple linear regressions assessed the predictive contribution of toxic positivity and cognitive impairment to emotional suppression. Statistical significance was set at $\alpha = .05$ throughout.

4. Results

Table 1 summarises the descriptive statistics for the three core variables emotional suppression (V14), cognitive impairment (V33), and toxic positivity (V42) across the 104 participants. All three showed reasonable spread and distributions broadly suitable for parametric testing; mild negative skew appeared for emotional suppression (−0.47) and toxic positivity (−0.69), and mild positive skew for cognitive impairment (0.29), none severe enough to threaten the planned analyses.

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics for Emotional Suppression, Cognitive Impairment, and Toxic Positivity

Variable	N	Mean	SD	Range
Emotional Suppression (V14)	104	34.41	5.79	14–50
Cognitive Impairment (V33)	104	52.48	10.57	18–90
Toxic Positivity (V42)	104	29.97	6.05	11–40

Note. V14 = Emotional Suppression; V33 = Cognitive Impairment (self-reported); V42 = Toxic Positivity. SD = standard deviation.

Table 2 presents the Pearson correlations among the three variables. Toxic positivity correlated significantly and positively with emotional suppression (r = .236, p = .016), supporting H0. It also correlated significantly and positively with cognitive impairment (r = .277, p = .004), supporting H2. The association between emotional suppression and cognitive impairment approached significance but did not clear the conventional threshold (r = .181, p = .065), so H1 was not confirmed.

Table 2 Pearson Correlation Matrix for Toxic Positivity, Emotional Suppression, and Cognitive Impairment

Variable	1. Emotional Suppression	2. Cognitive Impairment	3. Toxic Positivity
1. Emotional Suppression	—		
2. Cognitive Impairment	.181 (p = .065)	—	
3. Toxic Positivity	.236* (p = .016)	.277** (p = .004)	—

*Note. * p < .05. ** p < .01. N = 104.*

A multiple regression was run with toxic positivity and cognitive impairment predicting emotional suppression. The overall model was significant (F(2, 101) = 3.808, p = .025), explaining about 7.0% of the variance in emotional suppression (R^2 = .070; adjusted R^2 = .052). Model and ANOVA results are in Tables 3 and 4.

Table 3 Model Summary for the Regression Predicting Emotional Suppression

Model	R	R^2	Adj. R^2	SE of Estimate
1	.265	.070	.052	10.291

Note. Predictors: toxic positivity (V42) and cognitive impairment (V33).

Table 4 ANOVA for the Regression Model

Model	Source	df	MS	F	p
1	Regression	2	403.316	3.808	.025

	Residual	101	105.914		

Note. Dependent variable: emotional suppression (V14).

Looking at the individual predictors (Table 5), toxic positivity was a significant predictor of emotional suppression (β = .201, t = 2.009, p = .047), while cognitive impairment was not (β = .126, t = 1.260, p = .210).

Table 5 Regression Coefficients Predicting Emotional Suppression

Predictor	**B**	**SE B**	**β**	**t**	**p**
Constant	33.278	7.040	—	4.727	.000
Toxic Positivity (V42)	0.366	0.182	.201	2.009	.047
Cognitive Impairment (V33)	0.220	0.175	.126	1.260	.210

Note. Dependent variable: emotional suppression (V14).

Table 6 lays out the paths relevant to the mediation hypothesis (H3). The path from toxic positivity to emotional suppression was significant (β = .201, p = .047); the path from emotional suppression to cognitive impairment was not (β = .126, p = .210); and the direct path from toxic positivity to cognitive impairment was significant (p = .004). This pattern shows that toxic positivity predicts both suppression and cognitive impairment, but it does not, on its own, provide sufficient grounds to conclude that suppression fully mediates the relationship. Formal bootstrapped mediation analysis was not conducted, so H3 remains formally untested rather than confirmed or disconfirmed.

Table 6 Summary of Mediation Pathways

Path	**β**	**t**	**p**	**Interpretation**
Toxic Positivity → Emotional Suppression	.201	2.009	.047	Significant
Emotional Suppression → Cognitive Impairment	.126	1.260	.210	Not significant
Toxic Positivity → Cognitive Impairment (direct)	—	—	.004	Significant

5. Discussion

5.1 Toxic Positivity and Emotional Suppression

The significant link between toxic positivity and emotional suppression (r = .236, p = .016) fits the theoretical story built up across the review: people who buy more into toxic-positivity attitudes also lean more on suppression to manage their emotions. The correlation is weak-to-moderate in size, but its significance suggests toxic positivity is genuinely contributing to how people handle negative emotion day to day, not just incidentally related to it.

This makes intuitive sense. Toxic positivity creates an implicit rule that negative emotion is unwelcome and should be hidden or swapped out quickly. Once someone absorbs that rule through family, peers, work culture or the general tone of social media suppression becomes the obvious behavioural response:

not necessarily feeling the emotion any less, but showing it less, to fit the expected standard. These lines up with Gross's (1998) broader point that suppression tends to develop when emotion gets managed at the level of outward display rather than through genuine internal processing.

That said, the modest effect size is a reminder that toxic positivity is only one piece of the puzzle. Personality, family background, gender socialisation, and cultural norms around emotional expression are all likely to matter too, so toxic positivity should be understood as a contributor to suppression rather than its sole cause.

5.2 Toxic Positivity and Cognitive Impairment

The strongest relationship in the whole dataset was between toxic positivity and cognitive impairment ($r = .277$, $p = .004$) participants who scored higher on toxic positivity also reported more trouble concentrating, controlling attention, holding things in working memory and making decisions. That is a meaningful finding on its own terms: it suggests the pressure to stay positive does not stop at emotion but bleeds into ordinary thinking.

A few explanations fit here, and they are not mutually exclusive. Some of the cognitive cost may come directly from the executive resources tied up in suppression and self-monitoring every bit of attention spent making sure distress does not show is attention unavailable elsewhere. Some may come from the broader burden of emotional dissonance described by Sonia (2025) the ongoing work of tracking a real feeling while maintaining an acceptable one, which is a heavier and more sustained task than suppression alone. And the fact that this relationship was actually stronger than the toxic-positivity–suppression link hints that toxic positivity's cognitive costs are not fully explained by suppression rumination, chronic self-monitoring and the friction of holding two conflicting emotional states probably all play a part too.

5.3 Emotional Suppression and Cognitive Impairment

The link between suppression and cognitive impairment came close to, but did not reach, statistical significance ($r = .181$, $p = .065$). The direction fits both theory and the broader literature, but on the conventional threshold the data do not support H1.

This sits a little oddly next to the clear experimental effects reported by Richards and Gross (2000) and others, and the likely explanation is the gap between lab and life. Laboratory studies capture the immediate cognitive hit of suppression during a tightly controlled task designed to make that hit visible. Self-report measures instead ask people to reflect on how they generally function across all kinds of everyday situations, where suppression's effects may be more diluted or inconsistent.

It also matters that this sample was young, healthy adults with no diagnosed psychiatric or cognitive condition a group in which habitual suppression may produce effects too subtle to show up reliably in self-report. And the sample, while fine for medium effects, may simply have been too small to detect an effect this size a point taken up further below. Given that the p-value sits close to .065 and the direction matches theoretical predictions, it is plausible the relationship is real but was simply underpowered here, rather than genuinely absent.

5.4 Regression and Mediation

The regression model was significant overall ($F = 3.808$, $p = .025$), and within it toxic positivity predicted emotional suppression on its own ($\beta = .201$, $p = .047$), while cognitive impairment did not ($\beta = .126$, $p = .210$) consistent with, and reinforcing, the correlational picture above.

The mediation hypothesis (H3) cannot be formally confirmed from these analyses alone. A proper mediation test would need every link in the proposed chain (toxic positivity → suppression → cognitive

impairment) to be significant, plus a bootstrapped test of the indirect effect itself, most commonly run through Hayes's (2018) PROCESS macro. Because the suppression-to-impairment path did not reach significance, the formal criteria for mediation are not met here. That does not rule out a partial or contributory role for suppression it simply means it cannot be claimed with confidence from the present data.

Overall, the pattern points toward toxic positivity affecting cognition through more than one route at once, only some of which run through suppression. Larger samples, longitudinal designs, and formal mediation testing would help pull these routes apart in future work.

6. Limitations and Future Directions

The study contributes something real to this still-developing literature, but a few limitations deserve honest acknowledgement.

Cross-sectional design Because the design was cross-sectional, no causal claims can be made. The pattern is consistent with a model in which toxic positivity drives suppression, which drives cognitive difficulty, but it is equally consistent with reverse or third-variable explanations people already struggling cognitively might gravitate toward toxic positivity as a coping scaffold, or something like trait anxiety could be driving all three variables independently. Longitudinal work would be needed to sort out direction and to see whether the reinforcing cycles suggested in the literature review actually play out over time.

Sample size and power The sample of 104 was adequate for medium effects but likely underpowered for the smaller suppression–cognition effect ($r = .181$). A rough power calculation suggests around 230 participants would be needed to reliably detect an effect this size at 80% power, so the null result for H1 may reflect a Type II error rather than a genuinely absent relationship.

No formal mediation test H3 needed a bootstrapped indirect-effects analysis, which was beyond the scope of the present regression. The regression results here are a necessary but not sufficient step toward testing mediation, so H3 remains untested rather than resolved.

Self-report and social desirability All three variables were measured by self-report, which is a particular concern in a study about the social pressure to appear positive participants who have internalised toxic-positivity norms may underreport both their suppression and their cognitive struggles, biasing correlations downward. Future work would benefit from adding physiological or behavioural measures alongside the questionnaires.

Measurement and psychometrics Internal consistency and factor structure for V14, V33, and V42 were not reported for this specific sample, which makes it hard to rule out attenuation from weak reliability a concern that compounds the power issue above.

Generalisability The sample was drawn from young adults in an urban North Indian setting. Toxic positivity and suppression both vary with gender socialisation, cultural norms, and socioeconomic background, so these findings may not generalise cleanly to other populations though the South Asian context is itself a useful addition to a literature dominated by Western samples.

No control variables The analyses did not control for trait anxiety, neuroticism, alexithymia, or prior mental health history, all of which are plausibly related to both suppression and cognition. Including these in future studies would help isolate the variance specifically attributable to toxic positivity.

7. Conclusion

This paper set out to ask whether, and through what routes, toxic positivity is tied to emotional suppression and cognitive difficulty in young adults. The answer, on this evidence, is yes on both counts, though the picture is more layered than a single mechanism would suggest.

Toxic positivity was reliably linked to more emotional suppression, consistent with the idea that when positivity is treated as a requirement rather than a resource, suppression becomes the practical way people conform hiding what they feel rather than changing how they feel it. In that sense, positivity that is meant to help can end up making people less emotionally honest.

The strongest finding of the entire link between toxic positivity and cognitive impairment suggests this emotional cost does not stay contained to emotion. Participants under more pressure to stay positive also reported more trouble with concentration, attention, memory and decisions, a pattern that fits the several pathways traced in the literature review: direct resource depletion, the burden of emotional dissonance, and the slower drift toward alexithymia and reduced resilience.

The weaker, non-significant link between suppression and cognitive impairment complicates the story slightly, suggesting suppression on its own may not be enough to produce clearly measurable cognitive difficulty in a healthy, non-clinical sample which fits the broader argument that toxic positivity likely affects cognition through several channels, not all of which run through suppression.

Taken together, these findings support a view of toxic positivity as more than a communication style or a mildly annoying social habit it looks like a genuine, if underappreciated, risk to emotional authenticity, cognitive efficiency, and long-term psychological health. The broader argument this paper wants to make is a simple one: positivity is valuable, but only when it leaves room for its opposite. A psychology that insists on constant positivity, and treats negative emotion as a problem rather than information, risks quietly undermining the resilience it claims to build.

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