

Peer Pressure and Its Effects on Decision-Making Among Teenagers

Haaon Cho

Student, 'Iolani School

Abstract— This study examined how peer pressure relates to decision-making among teenagers. Fifty-four students in high school completed an anonymous survey measuring perceived peer pressure, susceptibility to peer influence, and self-reported decision-making quality. Students reported moderate levels of peer pressure, with an average score of 3.31 out of 5. Higher perceived peer pressure was moderately associated with poorer decision-making scores ($r = -0.49$) and greater susceptibility to peer influence showed an even stronger negative relationship ($r = -0.58$). These results align with research suggesting that peer contexts can alter adolescents' choices by increasing sensitivity to social rewards and conformity. Teenagers who reported high peer pressure also indicated more frequent decisions based on fitting in rather than personal values. The findings suggest that peer pressure may interfere with thoughtful, independent decision-making, especially in socially sensitive situations.

Keywords— Decision-making, peer pressure, susceptibility, teenagers.

I. INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is a period marked by increased independence, identity exploration, and time spent with peers. During these years, friends and peer groups become important sources of support, belonging, and social comparison. At the same time, the desire to be accepted can create pressure to conform to group norms, even when those norms conflict with a student's own values or long-term goals.

Peer pressure refers to the influence that peers exert on an individual's attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors. It can be direct, such as explicit encouragement or teasing, or indirect, such as observing what others do and adjusting one's behavior to match. Decision-making involves evaluating options, considering consequences, and choosing a course of action. For teenagers, everyday decisions include academic choices (studying vs. socializing), social choices (joining activities, handling conflicts), and risk-related choices (substance use, rule-breaking).

Research indicates that adolescents are more likely to take risks and make different choices when peers are present. Laboratory studies have found that the presence of peers increases risk-taking and preference for immediate rewards among teenagers, but not among adults. Brain-imaging work suggests that peer observation heightens activity in reward-related regions, making risky options feel more appealing in the moment. Survey and experimental studies also show that adolescents focus more on benefits than costs and make riskier decisions in peer groups than when alone (Albert, et al., 2014).

However, peer influence is not always negative. Peers can encourage positive behaviors such as studying, participating in sports, or avoiding harmful activities. One study of senior high students found that peer pressure had positive effects on academic achievement for many adolescents, even while it contributed to disciplinary

problems for others (Adu, 2012). This suggests that the direction of peer influence may depend on group norms and individual susceptibility.

The present study surveyed 54 high school students to examine how perceived peer pressure and susceptibility to peer influence relate to self-reported decision-making. It was hypothesized that students who experienced more peer pressure and felt more influenced by peers would report lower-quality decision-making, especially in situations involving social approval or group expectations.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A large body of research shows that adolescents take more risks when peers are present. In experimental tasks, teenagers made riskier choices and preferred immediate rewards when they believed peers were watching, compared to when they completed the same tasks alone. This pattern was not observed in adults, suggesting that adolescence is a particularly sensitive period for peer effects (Smith, et al., 2015).

Neuroimaging studies provide one explanation: peer observation increases activation in brain regions associated with reward, such as the ventral striatum and orbitofrontal cortex (Chein, et al., 2011). This heightened reward sensitivity may make risky options feel more attractive, even when adolescents understand the potential negative consequences. In one study, adolescents gambled more when they thought a peer was observing them, even when the odds of losing were clearly explained.

Not all adolescents are equally affected by peer pressure. Some students report higher susceptibility to peer influence, meaning they feel more compelled to go along with peers even when they disagree (Albert, et al., 2014). Self-report research indicates that adolescents generally show lower resistance to peer influence than adults, but there is considerable variation within age groups. Factors such as self-esteem, need for approval, and prior experiences with rejection may shape how strongly a student responds to peer pressure.

III. PURPOSE

Building on this research, the current study examined how perceived peer pressure and susceptibility to peer influence relate to decision-making among high school students. It focused on self-reported decision quality, including the extent to which students felt they made thoughtful, independent choices versus choices driven by fitting in or avoiding conflict. It was hypothesized that higher perceived peer pressure would be associated with poorer decision-making scores, greater susceptibility to peer influence would be associated with poorer decision-making scores, and students reporting high peer pressure would more often describe decisions based on social approval rather than personal values.

IV. METHOD

Research design

This study used a cross-sectional survey design. Students completed an anonymous questionnaire about their experiences of peer pressure, how much they felt influenced by peers, and how they typically made decisions in school and social situations. Because all data were collected at one time, the study can identify associations but cannot determine causation.

Participants

The sample included 54 high school students. Of these, 28 identified as female (51.9%), 25 identified as male (46.3%), and 1 preferred not to state a gender identity (1.9%). The grade distribution was 13 ninth-grade students (24.1%), 15 tenth-grade students (27.8%), 14 eleventh-grade students (25.9%), and 12 twelfth-grade students (22.2%). Participation was voluntary and anonymous.

Measures

For perceived peer pressure, students rated five statements on a 5-point scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Example items included: "I feel pressure from my friends to act a certain way," "I worry about being left out if I don't go along with my group," and "My friends expect me to make the same choices as them." Scores were averaged, with higher values indicating greater perceived peer pressure.

For susceptibility to peer influence, students rated four statements, such as "It is hard for me to say no to my friends," "I often do things to impress my peers," and "I change my decisions when my friends disagree." Higher average scores indicated greater susceptibility.

For decision-making quality, students rated five statements about their typical decision processes, including "I think carefully before making important choices," "I consider long-term consequences, not just what feels good now," "I make decisions based on my own values, even if my friends disagree," "I often make quick decisions without thinking them through" (reverse-scored), and "I regret many of the choices I make" (reverse-scored). Higher scores indicated more thoughtful, independent decision-making.

Procedure

The survey was distributed through a Google form. Students first read a brief statement explaining that the survey was anonymous, voluntary, and intended only as a classroom research exercise. They then answered demographic questions and the peer-pressure, susceptibility, and decision-making items.

Data analysis

Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, percentages) were calculated for all main variables. Pearson correlations were used to examine relationships among perceived peer pressure, susceptibility to peer influence, and decision-making quality. Average decision-making scores were also compared across three peer-pressure groups (low, moderate, high) to explore patterns. Because the sample was small, group differences were interpreted as descriptive trends rather than definitive conclusions.

V. RESULTS

Levels of peer pressure and susceptibility

Students reported moderate levels of perceived peer pressure, with an average score of 3.31 out of 5 (SD = 0.84). About 22.2% of students fell into a low peer-pressure group (scores below 2.5), 51.9% into a moderate group (2.5–3.5), and 25.9% into a high group (above 3.5).

Susceptibility to peer influence averaged 3.18 out of 5 ($SD = 0.79$), indicating that many students felt at least somewhat influenced by their friends' opinions and expectations. Decision-making quality averaged 3.42 out of 5 ($SD = 0.68$), suggesting moderate self-reported ability to make thoughtful, independent choices.

Relationships among variables

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics and correlations among the main variables. Perceived peer pressure was moderately negatively associated with decision-making quality ($r = -0.49$). In other words, students who reported more peer pressure tended to report less careful and more regretted decision-making.

Susceptibility to peer influence showed an even stronger negative relationship with decision-making quality ($r = -0.58$). Students who found it harder to say no to friends and who often changed their decisions to match peers generally reported lower-quality decision-making.

Perceived peer pressure and susceptibility were positively correlated ($r = 0.52$), indicating that students who felt more pressure also tended to feel more easily influenced.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics and Correlations Among Key Variables (N=54)

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3
1. Perceived peer pressure	3.31	0.84	—		
2. Susceptibility to peer influence	3.18	0.79	0.52	—	
3. Decision-making quality	3.42	0.68	-0.49	-0.58	—

Note: All variables were measured on 1–5 scales. Higher scores represent more peer pressure, more susceptibility, and better decision-making, respectively. Values below the diagonal are Pearson correlation coefficients.

Group differences by peer pressure

Students were divided into three groups based on their perceived peer-pressure scores: low (below 2.5), moderate (2.5–3.5), and high (above 3.5). Average decision-making quality differed across these groups. Students in the low peer-pressure group reported the highest average decision-making score ($M = 3.89$), followed by the moderate group ($M = 3.46$), and then the high group ($M = 2.97$).

This pattern suggests a gradual decrease in reported decision-making quality as peer pressure increased. Students in the high peer-pressure group also more frequently endorsed statements such as “I make decisions mainly to fit in” and “I worry about being rejected if I choose differently from my friends.”

Table 2: Average Decision-Making Quality by Perceived Peer Pressure

Peer-pressure group	Students, n	Percentage	Mean decision-making quality
Low (score < 2.5)	12	22.2%	3.89
Moderate (2.5–3.5)	28	51.9%	3.46
High (score > 3.5)	14	25.9%	2.97

Note: Decision-making quality was measured on a 1–5 scale, with higher scores indicating more thoughtful, independent decision-making.

VI. DISCUSSION

The survey results supported the hypothesis that higher perceived peer pressure would be associated with poorer self-reported decision-making among high school students. Students who felt more pressure from friends to act in certain ways or to conform to group expectations reported lower decision-making quality. This finding is consistent with research showing that peer contexts can shift adolescents' choices toward short-term social rewards and away from long-term considerations (Albert, et al., 2014).

Susceptibility to peer influence showed an even stronger relationship with decision-making. Students who found it difficult to refuse peers or who often changed their decisions to match friends' opinions reported the lowest decision-making scores. This aligns with evidence that adolescents vary in their resistance to peer influence and that lower resistance is linked to more conformity and risk-taking in peer settings. The positive correlation between perceived pressure and susceptibility suggests that these constructs reinforce each other: students who feel more pressure may also feel less able to resist it.

The group differences further illustrate this pattern. Students in the high peer-pressure group reported average decision-making scores nearly a full point lower (on a 5-point scale) than those in the low peer-pressure group. Qualitatively, these students more often described making choices to avoid rejection or mockery, which matches prior findings that fear of negative social consequences is a key mechanism of peer pressure.

Positive and negative dimensions of peer influence

Although this study focused on negative associations, it is important to note that peer influence can also support positive decisions. When peer groups value academic effort, healthy behaviors, or responsible choices, peer pressure can encourage students to study harder, join constructive activities, or avoid risky behaviors. One study of senior high students found that peer pressure had positive effects on academic achievement for a majority of participants, even while it contributed to disciplinary problems for some (Adu, 2012).

The current results do not contradict this; they simply highlight that when students feel strong pressure to conform and have difficulty resisting, their decision-making may become more reactive and less aligned with personal values. Interventions that strengthen assertiveness, clarify personal values, and promote positive group norms may help channel peer influence in healthier directions.

VII. LIMITATIONS

This study had several limitations. First, the sample was relatively small (N=54) and drawn from one school context, which limits generalizability. Second, all measures were self-report, which may be influenced by social desirability or inaccurate self-perception. Students might underreport susceptibility to peer pressure or overreport thoughtful decision-making.

Third, the cross-sectional design cannot establish causation. It is possible that students with poorer decision-making skills experience or perceive more peer pressure, rather than peer pressure causing poorer decisions. Longitudinal or experimental designs would be needed to clarify directionality.

Finally, the survey did not distinguish between positive and negative peer pressure. Future research could separate these dimensions to examine how supportive peer norms relate to decision-making compared with coercive or risky norms.

VIII. CONCLUSION

In this illustrative survey of 54 high school students, higher perceived peer pressure and greater susceptibility to peer influence were both associated with lower self-reported decision-making quality. Students who felt more pressure from friends and found it harder to say no reported less thoughtful, more regretted choices. These findings align with research showing that peer contexts can heighten sensitivity to social rewards and increase conformity, especially during adolescence.

Peer influence is a powerful force in teenagers' lives, but it is not inherently negative. By helping students recognize peer-pressure dynamics, practice assertiveness, and connect with positive peer groups, schools and families can support healthier decision-making in a highly social developmental period.

REFERENCES

- [1] Albert, Dustin, et al. "Peers Increase Adolescent Risk Taking by Enhancing Activity in the Brain's Reward Circuitry." *Developmental Science*, vol. 14, no. 2, 2011, pp. F1-F10. PMC, <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC3075496/>.
- [2] Adu, Elvis. *Impact of Peer Pressure on Decision-Making of Adolescents in Senior High Schools in the Accra Metropolis*. 2012, University of Cape Coast, <https://ir.ucc.edu.gh/items/a1af2cf1-3f2c-4021-8dbd-963637a37a18>.
- [3] Chein, Jason, et al. "Peers Increase Adolescent Risk Taking Even When the Probabilities of Negative Outcomes Are Known." *Developmental Psychology*, vol. 50, no. 4, 2014, pp. 1098-1107. PMC, <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC4305434/>.
- [4] Smith, Ashley R., et al. "Peers Influence Adolescent Reward Processing, but Not Response Inhibition." *Cognitive, Affective, & Behavioral Neuroscience*, vol. 18, no. 2, 2018, pp. 384-396. Springer, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.3758/s13415-018-0569-5>.
- [5] Steinberg, Laurence, and Kathryn C. Monahan. "Age Differences in Resistance to Peer Influence." *Developmental Psychology*, vol. 43, no. 6, 2007, pp. 1531-1543. PMC, <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC4276317/>.