

The Impact of Positive Peer Pressure on Academic Performance

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Abstract

Peer pressure in adolescence plays a pivotal role in influencing behaviours and attitudes among learners pursuing secondary education. Self-identification and Social image are pivotal at this stage of their development. The prevalence of peer pressure in secondary schools among adolescents is most likely to negatively influence their academic performance. Therefore, this study aims to examine how positive peer pressure can boost the adolescent's self-confidence, self-esteem, encourage a sense of belonging and promote the development of a strong sense of self-worth and enhanced academic performance. Drawing on established psychological theories such as Social Learning Theory and Social Identity Theory, this study reviews existing literature on the topic and identifies key factors of peer pressure that contribute to academic performance. Regarding the methodology, this study applied a qualitative approach. Data was collected from 15 participants using semi-structured individual interviews, focus-group interviews and field notes. Thematic analysis was used to analyse and interpret data. The findings revealed that positive peer pressure enhances self-esteem and self-confidence, encourages positive decision-making, positive choices and promotes constructive behaviour that culminates in academic excellence. Learners who excel in their academic performance support, encourage others who need assistance with their studies

Keywords: *peer pressure, positive peer pressure, adolescent learners, academic performance, friendships, self-esteem, self-confidence.*

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Introduction

Peer pressure is a powerful social influence that affects learners' behaviour, attitudes, and academic performance, as adolescents who prioritise social acceptance over academic achievement may struggle in their studies. The academic performance of adolescent learners in secondary schools in the Rustenburg district has become a significant concern because of peer pressure that learners are exposed to. As reported by the Department of Basic Education (DBE, 2012) in many schools in the area, the negative influence of peer pressure on adolescent learners seems to be rife. Bowker et al., 2022 purport that peer relationships, interactions with one another, the presence of peer groups and friendships affect the learners' academic achievement, self-esteem and emotional wellbeing. Additionally, studies by Homel et al., (2020) have shown positive peer pressure contributes to better academic performance through increased motivation, improving learning engagement, and creating a positive social learning environment where academic goals are shared and supported. Conversely, according to Chen and Deng (2022), peer influence among teenagers does not necessarily have a negative impact; its effect depends upon the extent to which students are influenced by the peer dynamics and the environment within their group.

This study makes a significant contribution to the existing body of knowledge on the impact of positive peer pressure in academic settings. It investigates complex relationships among adolescent learners' peer groups, including how positive peer pressure enhances self-esteem which leads to improved academic performance. Also, it combines various findings from studies in different countries, highlighting the effects of positive peer pressure on academic performance. Thus, the study may provide insight for further research in other countries. The study further enriches and deepens our understanding of the influence of positive peer pressure on how peers and friendships impact academic performance by considering the influence of peer group norms and values on individual academic performance and achievement.

2.Theoretical framework

Two major theories that informed this study were Bandura's social learning theory and Tajfel and Turner's social identity theory.

- **Social learning theory:** According to (Bandura, 1977), this theory states that individuals learn behaviour, values, and attitudes through observing and interacting with others, particularly those they consider to be role models within their immediate social context. In the context of peer pressure and academic performance, this theory suggests that learners are influenced by their peers' behaviour, which can either positively or negatively impact their grades and overall academic performance. Moreover, it stipulates that the environment in which learners find themselves influences their behaviour. Therefore, it illuminates, how learners adapt their behaviour and attitudes to what they experience in their environment, by imitating other learners who have power and influence around them. This theory suggests that adolescents are likely to emulate or adopt the behaviours of their peers especially when those behaviours are perceived as rewarding or accepted by group members. For example, if a learner values academics, studies diligently, or engages in positive academic behaviour, that learner is more likely to adopt those behaviours to align with the group; leading to improved academic performance. Conversely, a learner might engage in risk-taking behaviour, for example learner truancy, if their friends who do the same without suffering negative consequences.
- **Social Identity Theory:** According to (Tajfel and Turner, 1979), this theory highlights the role of group membership in shaping individual identity. The theory emphasises that learners derive a sense of self-esteem and belonging from their affiliation to specific groups, such as friends and peer groups at school. Therefore, to retain group membership and self-esteem, learners often conform to group norms, even when those norms involve deviant behaviours. Conversely, group membership could be determined by affiliation to study groups leading to improved academic performance. These theories reveal that peer pressure is not exclusively about external influences but is closely intertwined with personal identity and social learning processes, and personal

worth. For example, in some instances peers can play a role of encouraging positive behaviours like forming collaborative study groups, achieving good grades, maintaining good habits such as participating in extracurricular activities thus enhancing academic achievement. Alternatively, in other instances peer pressure can lead to negative outcomes like skipping school and classes, engaging in risk-taking behaviours such as bullying and aggression; including drinking alcohol and taking drugs which may lead to academic disengagement.

3. Literature Review

A study conducted in the United States of America (USA) by Chen and Deng (2022) found that peer influence has long been known as a major factor in adolescent deviant behaviours involving substance use. Similarly, other studies conducted by (Allen et al., 2022) on substance abuse, smoking and alcohol drinking among adolescents revealed that peer pressure was the main cause of such risk-taking behaviours. On the other hand, Ryan (2020) indicates that in the Philippines, the influence of peer groups among learners can increase their anxiety and affect decision-making especially pertaining to their academic performance. Furthermore, another study, conducted in Botswana in Southern Africa, highlights that peer pressure in Botswana's secondary schools can lead to negative behaviours like substance abuse, risky sexual activity and bullying (Monyamane & Keletsositse, 2021). The study also revealed that peer-group members believed that risky behaviours increase their standing in the eyes of their peers and assured their acceptance in the group. These scholars posit that peer groups are among the most influential social structures affecting adolescent behaviour and academic performance.

3.1. Positive peer pressure on academic performance

In this study, the influence of peer pressure is discussed in terms of positive peer pressure on academic performance. According to Zhang et al. (2021) positive peer behaviours are shown to enhance academic performance, whereas deviant peer behaviours have negative effects on academic performance. Dong et al. (2023) demonstrate that low-achieving learners can be positively influenced by the positive effects of high-achieving peers, particularly in terms of academic and learning attitudes. However,

negative intense peer pressure can lead to anxiety and low self-esteem resulting in learners' failing to improve their grades which has a direct bearing on their academic performance (Chen & Deng, 2022). Thus, adolescent learners who constantly compete to achieve academic excellence will be motivated and determined to perform well academically. This occurs when adolescent learners have good relationships with other peers who promote academic engagement (Soares et al., 2020).

3.2. Encouraging positive peer pressure

Research by Molleman et al. (2022) reveals that peer pressure can yield positive results when adolescent learners are encouraged by peers to uphold positive norms and values within peer groups. This can lead to pressure to excel in academics or extracurricular activities. Furthermore, according to (Molleman et al., 2022) positive peer pressure can encourage adolescents to make good choices such as abstaining from drugs and alcohol, while negative peer pressure can lead them to engage in risky behaviours including, smoking, alcohol use and truancy. Ibrahim and Zaatari (2020) assert that positive peer pressure is associated with lower levels of conflict, greater engagement, increased school liking and greater academic achievement among learners. As such, Bello, (2022) maintains that creating an environment that nurtures positive learning hinges on ensuring harmonious co-existence among the various stakeholders, namely the learners, teachers, parents and educational authorities. Consequently, Wang et al. (2021) state that in a conducive school environment where teachers and parents support and encourage positive relationships among learners, learners can interact better with their peers and perform well academically.

3.3. Self-esteem and Confidence on Academic Performance

Developing self-esteem is a crucial aspect of resisting peer pressure. To this end, research by (Zawadzka et al., 2022) demonstrates that lower levels of self-esteem are related to susceptibility to peer pressure, resulting in an increased risk of engaging in deviant behaviours, academic disengagement and poor academic performance. Peer pressure can affect academic strengths and challenges that an adolescent already possesses. For

example, an adolescent with low self-esteem and few close friends may be more vulnerable to the effects of negative peer pressure and perform poorly academically, while a confident, extroverted adolescent with high self-esteem may excel academically and is more likely to give and receive positive peer pressure.

3.4. Teacher's Impact on Self-esteem and Confidence

Teachers must provide positive teaching and guidance to build learners' confidence. Learners with strong self-esteem and confidence are less likely to succumb to negative peer pressure. Therefore, teachers can help learners develop enhanced confidence in their abilities and reinforce their sense of individuality. Furthermore, by acknowledging the learners' strengths and talents, teachers help build their confidence and self-worth. During adolescence, the best weapon with which to fight peer pressure is a strong sense of self-worth, self-confidence and self-esteem (Schab, 2022). Positive reinforcement from teachers not only boosts confidence but also empowers learners to resist peer pressure and empowers them to make their own choices and decisions, in line with Social Learning Theory. Dudock & Piko (2023) also reveal that self-esteem has been considered a protective factor against various risk-taking behaviours such as substance use and alcohol consumption. When an adolescent believes in their strong personality coupled with academic capabilities and appearance, they will be better equipped to resist any form of negative peer pressure. Hence, teachers must incorporate lessons on decision-making, critical thinking, and assertiveness skills to help learners recognise and resist negative peer pressure and set personal and academic goals.

3.5. Peers Impact on Self-esteem and Confidence

Joy and Bindu (2022) discovered that a correlation exists between peer pressure and academic stress among secondary school adolescent learners, which might raise significant challenges for them. Nevertheless, with the right attitude and support from trusted others, a boost in their self-esteem and confidence may occur and enable them to make positive choices that align with their personal values. By learning effective ways to resist negative peer pressure, and recognising the power of positive peer

influence, adolescents can build a peer support network comprising of friends and members of peer groups (Van Rijsewijk et al., 2020) to develop strong decision-making skills based on their personal values.

Assisted by positive peer pressure from peers, adolescent learners will choose quality of friendship networks which are positively associated with high academic outcomes (Wu and Wang, 2023). Additionally, Mendoza et al. (2020) reiterate that the role of friendships and positive peer relationships is crucial for developing and sustaining adolescent learners' wellbeing. Adversely, intense peer pressure can lead an adolescent to develop anxiety and low self-esteem, resulting in poor academic performance and apathy towards improving grades. Constructively, if adolescent learners support each other and establish collaborative study groups, they will be more motivated to work together for improved academic achievement (Chen & Deng, 2022). According to the influence-compatibility model, an important function of peer pressure is to enhance similarity between friends and peers – as similarity increases self-esteem, areas of potential disagreement decrease (Laursen & Veenstra, 2021).

3.6. Parents Impact on Self-esteem and Confidence

Parents play an important role in supporting their children and building their self-esteem and confidence, as children are faced with different forms of peer pressure. By building open communication and establishing trust and support, parents create a safe space for adolescents to communicate confidently, express their concerns and seek guidance about peer pressure. The guidance helps in safeguarding the adolescents' emotional well-being and equips them with skills to effectively handle situations of negative peer pressure. In addition, parents can support their adolescent children who are victims of negative peer pressure emotionally through expressions of love, empathy, warmth, and concern as well as offering material assistance (Chentsova Dutton et al., 2020). Pursuant to that Simpson et al. (2020) contend that parents can teach adolescents to have enhanced self-esteem and confidence through praising and modelling. This cultivates the resilience and fortitude required to remain firm in their own

choices and maintain an insouciant attitude towards being disliked by others. In agreement, Sheridan et al. (2020) suggest that parental involvement can provide emotional support and guidance to the adolescent children. Consequently, Parents, caregivers and teachers all play a vital role in the development of adolescents' personal life, independence, self-identity, self-esteem, self-confidence and self-management which are vital for creating positive attitudes towards enhanced academic performance (Simpson et al., 2020).

Research aims

This study aims to:-

- Investigate how positive peer pressure influences academic performance.
- Describe how positive peer pressure enhances the learner's self-esteem.
- Ascertain the influence of enhanced self-esteem on academic performance.

Research questions

- What is the impact of positive peer pressure on the learner's academic performance?
- How can positive peer pressure enhance the learner's self-esteem?
- What influence does enhanced self-esteem have on academic performance?

4. Research methodology

4.1. Selection of participants

Two secondary schools were selected as sites for conducting this study. The purposive non-probability sampling described by Nikolopoulou (2023) was used, as a method where individuals are selected based on non-random criteria, and not every individual in the population has an equal chance of being included. It uses non-sampling criteria like the availability, geographic proximity, or expert knowledge of the individuals sought to answer a research question (Nikolopoulou, 2023).

The sample consisted of fifteen(15) adolescent learners from two schools. The selected participants were considered as people with knowledge on peer pressure as they were secondary school learners where peer pressure is common. A form of purposive sampling was

used, eight female participants: P4F1 (Yr12;female), P2F1 (Yr11;female), P3F1 (Yr11;female), P6F1 (Yr11;female), P7F2 (Yr12;female), P10F2 (Yr10;female), P13 (Yr11;female), P14 (Yr11;female) and seven male participants P1F1 (Yr11;male), P5F1 (Yr12;male), P8F2 (Yr12;male), P9F2 (Yr12;male), P11F2 (Yr11;male), P12F2 (Yr10;male), P15 (Yr11;male), from school A and B.

The following figure represents the key to the presentation of data.

Key of abbreviations

P: Participant

P1-6: Focus-Group 1 in school A

P7-12: Focus-Group 2 in school B

P13-15: Individual Semi-Structured Interviews in school A

For example,

P1F1 refers to participant 1 in Focus-Group 1

P7F2 refers to participant 7 in Focus-Group 2

P13 refers to participant 13

Yr refers to year of study or Grade

Figure 1: Keys for presenting data

The inclusion criteria are as follows:

- Grade 10-12 learners; learners who were willing to participate voluntarily in the study and learners who were under 18 years of age whose parents gave consent.

The exclusion criteria were as follows:

- Grade 8-9 learners; learners who were not willing to participate; teachers and parents.

4.2 Design and methods

The qualitative research methodology was used in a form of a case study approach as an appropriate research design for the current study. A variety of methods used for data collection included individual interviews, focus groups and field notes. Several authors define a case

study as, a methodological research approach used to generate an in-depth understanding of a contemporary issue or phenomenon in a bounded system (Bloomberg and Volpe, 2022). Therefore, a case study approach is particularly useful to employ when there is a need to obtain in-depth appreciation of an issue, event, or phenomenon of interest (Creswell and Poth, 2018). This study opted for a case study approach because it sought to draw from the qualitative data, deep insights and conclusions that may vary from others' constructions and interpretation of experiences of peer pressure by adolescent learners. The current study agrees with some significant features of qualitative research methods as listed by Lincoln et al., (2024). The concept of "*Trustworthiness*" provides a framework to maintain reliability and rigour of qualitative data (Johnson et al., 2023). In the current study, trustworthiness was enhanced through credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Enworu, 2023) Each quality criteria applicable to this study is discussed below.

4.2.1. Credibility

Credibility refers to deliberate efforts to authenticate the correct interpretation of data (Hag et al., 2023). It is ensured through extended involvement, persistent observation and triangulation. In this study, credibility was maintained through the following:

- Prolonged engagement: This describes an extended period entailing dedicating ample time in the field (Adler, 2022). Meetings with participants were held to introduce myself and build rapport to understand their perspectives deeply. Individual interviews and focus-group discussions were conducted, and feedback was given to all participants.
- Reflexivity: Entails keeping an open-minded attitude recognising personal biases and practising self-reflection throughout the entire study process (Hag et al., 2023; Adler, 2022). Possible personal influences, biases, perspectives and preconceptions were examined throughout the research process. A reflexive journal was kept in which notes that assisted the researcher guard against personal views and biases were documented.
- Triangulation: Refers to the use of multiple methods or data sources to develop a more comprehensive set of findings or understanding of the phenomena related to the research

question (Natow, 2020). This was ensured by employing multiple data sources or methods, like individual interviews, focus groups, field notes to cross-verify findings. This strategy assisted in corroborating the findings.

4.2.2. Dependability

Dependability refers to the stability and consistency of the research process and findings across time (Hag et al., 2023; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Riazi et al., 2023). It is achieved through rigorous documentation and the creation of an audit trail. In this study, it was ensured by using the following steps:

- Methodological documentation: Here researchers document nature of research findings (Amin et al., 2020), their approach, techniques of data gathering, procedures and analysis. Research procedures were detailed and decisions were made during the study by documenting all methodological decisions, coding schemes and analysis procedures. This was ensured by providing raw data to the supervisor and discussing the coding process as part of the thematic analysis and by presenting participants extracts verbatim.
- Audit trails: Entails creating and preserving an audit trail documenting decision (Eryilmaz, 2022). The researcher recorded an audit trail of research decisions taken, changes made, as well as data analysis processes followed to ensure traceability.

4.2.3. Confirmability

According to Enworo (2023), confirmability is an element of neutrality in ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research. It is ensured through peer debriefing, member checking and reflexive journaling. Thus, confirmability ensures that the findings are free from researcher bias as neutrality in this case focuses on data and not on the researcher.

- Peer debriefing: Entails soliciting input from colleagues or experts to authenticate interpretations and mitigate research bias (Riazi & Ghanbar, 2023; Amin et al., 2020). The researcher engaged with colleagues and supervisor to review interpretations discussing refining research interpretations and addressing potential researcher biases.

- Member checking: A process in which participants thoroughly examine and validate the accuracy of the findings (Amin et al., 2020). The researcher recorded verbatim quotes from participants. This was done to share the findings with participants to ensure the participants' narratives were accurately reported. The participants were allowed to review and confirm the accuracy of the findings to enhance confirmability.
- Reflexive journal: A reflective journal was kept where personal thoughts, biases and reflections promoting transparency and reducing subjectivity were documented throughout the study. The researcher documented field notes and reflected on what was seen and heard. A reflexive journal also helped in guarding against the researcher's views and biases about peer pressure.

4.2.4. Transferability

Transferability emphasises the importance of providing the applicability or fitness of findings constructed in one context to other contexts in which the reader might want to apply them (Adler, 2022; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

- Thick descriptions: These include rich and thick descriptions across participants' accounts to support the findings and report data saturation (Rahimi & Khatooni, 2024). This study provided detailed contextual information including participants' demographics, the study's setting and context to enable readers and other researchers to assess the transferability of findings.
- Sampling strategies: These are used to enhance transferability (Busetto et al., 2020). The study articulated the sampling process by explaining how participants were sampled and criteria used.
- Transparency in reporting: Researchers should adhere to the standards for reporting Qualitative Research (Busetto et al., 2020), to ensure that all items are relevant for the research question under study which will contribute to transparency. The findings of this study were reached by explaining the method of data analysis using Tesch's steps to systematically structure data presentation.

- Data storage: To protect the data the researcher upheld research ethical codes and principles, and data collected from participants was stored in manual files under lock and key. No data was stored in any electronic device, even the audio recorded data was transcribed manually and deleted from the recordings.

4.3. Ethical Considerations

In this study the researcher adhered to the ethical standards as set out by the University of South Africa's College of Education Research Ethics Committee which granted approval to conduct the study; The Northwest Province Department of Education which granted permission to conduct the study in the selected schools and from their Principals; and informed consent from the participating learners and parents. According to Nii Lryeafio and Ogbewe (2023) emphasis is placed on the importance of conforming to ethical standards by obtaining informed consent. The parents and participants were informed of the purpose of the study before acceding or declining to participate. The objectives of the study methods and procedures were explained in detail, such as maintaining anonymity and confidentiality of the data they provided (Spencer, 2020).

4.4. Data Collection Methods

The methods used in this study for collecting the desired data were individual semi-structured interviews, focus groups interviews, and field notes. The advantages of these data collection methods were that they gave the researcher an opportunity to establish rapport during face-to-face interactions with the participants. Through individual interviews the researcher was able to collect rich significant information about how positive peer pressure impacts academic performance. Furthermore, these were more flexible because more information could be obtained from an additional moderator, who observed and interacted with the participants to drive more in-depth responses from the group. The interviews for data collection took place outside teaching and learning time on site.

5. Analysis and interpretation of the research data

The researcher categorised the data into themes and sub-themes based on the multiple perspectives of different participants in this research. Thematic data analysis that focuses on identifying recurring ideas,

themes and patterns (Braun & Clarke 2022; Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022; Swartz-Shea & Yanov, 2020) was used. The analysis included data that emerged from the individual interviews, focus group discussions and field notes. Therefore, in this study the researcher noted in detail what the participants reported about positive peer pressure on academic performance, audio-recorded what was said during the interviews and later transcribed the recordings verbatim in a journal in which field notes were compiled. The language used in the interviews was English because it was accommodative to all participants. There was no need for translation. An inductive approach was adopted during the process of data capturing and data analysis. Coding and recoding of identical words, phrases, and statements that emerged from the interviews was used to categorise similar responses into categories of a theme and sub-themes. The identification of a theme and sub-themes provided depth and insight about deeper meaning and understanding of individual adolescent learners' views regarding positive peer pressure on academic performance. Specifically, the researcher applied the steps by:

- Organisation of data: Specific facts about positive peer pressure on academic performance were arranged in a logical order as they emerged from data.
- Comparing the data from different sources: Common statements emerging from interviews were compared.
- Condensing the data: Large bodies of text were broken down into smaller units in a form of stories, sentences or individual words recording and documenting adolescent learners' accounts of naturally occurring phenomena; for example, impact of positive peer pressure on self-esteem and confidence. Data sets were reduced to specific elements as well as expanding pieces of data by adding extensive interpretations.
- Categorisation and interpretation of data: The researcher read over the entire data set several times to get a sense of what it contained as a whole and jotted down notes that suggested possible categories or interpretations developed from field notes and discussions and conversations during interviews. Comments were written in the margins of a journal and used to capture the researcher's preliminary thoughts.

- Identifying general categories or themes: Each piece of data was classified according to patterns that emerged which gave a sense of what the data meant and enabled me to generate themes.
- Synthesising the data into an overall picture of the case: Data was summarised and integrated by combining what participants reported about positive peer pressure and compared statements about the impact and experiences in their interaction with peers, friends and classmates.

The next section elaborates on the data collected and focuses discussions on the two sub-themes namely, positive peer pressure on academic performance, and encouraging positive peer pressure. Additionally, in this section the question asked is stated and extracts from interviews are outlined. The question asked and extracts from participants' responses follow hereunder.

- Theme 1: Impact of positive peer pressure on academic performance.
- Question: What is the impact of positive peer pressure on academic performance?
- Sub-theme 1: Positive peer pressure on academic performance

Participants alluded to the fact that there were times when they were exposed to more positive peer influences than negative influences. They highlighted organised study groups and other peer groups with a positive focus on academic achievements and sports. The excerpts below illustrate the participants' views:

P15 stated: *"I hang out with study groups and sometimes I hang out with my friends or other groups in sports. I also belong to a soccer team here at school and we train together for fitness because I must be fit to compete so most of the time on sports days I work hard at my fitness. Most of my friends do well in their studies so we motivate each other to study hard and do well and we always get good marks in our tests. We encourage each other to do our homework during free periods and sometimes we sit in the classroom and read our books or talk about our future careers. I am serious about what I want for me when I leave school to Tertiary, I know what I want to do."*

P14 said: *"In my group of friends, we are a team that support each other. We help each other share information and the behaviour is*

positive. I feel safe and comfortable in this group, I trust them, and they are serious with schoolwork. They don't use drugs and alcohol because they want to do well at school. Most of the time we sit and discuss schoolwork and prepare for tests together."

P13 mentioned that: *"The study group that I belong to is a group of friends who give me a lot of support, and I trust them. You find bad and good learners in one group sometimes, but the friendly and good ones will protect you and encourage you to study. When I am with this group, I feel happy and I am not afraid, we solve many problems in different subjects and help each other to do well and obtain good marks."*

Choosing good friends is difficult because people change. In relation to this P11F2 mentioned that: *"My friends are mostly in study groups, I hang out with study groups, but sometimes I hang out with other groups. What they wear makes me feel less confident, some of them wear expensive clothes and carry lots of money and that makes me feel out of place, friends are not equal, some are rich others are poor, but I don't mind I concentrate on my studies, friends can influence you to do wrong and I don't want to be expelled."*

P12F2 reported on positive peer pressure which forces them to study and achieve high grades. He further said they got this positive inspiration from some of their peers and friends who do well in academics and in sports: *"Most of my friends are in study groups and sports, I like them because we support and encourage each other to study hard and do well at school."*

Evidently, the sub-theme highlights the importance of positive peer pressure in promoting academic achievement. The participants' views reflect the existence of positive peer pressure and influence which promotes focus on studying and achieving good grades in academics and good performance in sports. These learners also expressed some positive aspects of their interactions with their peers such as support, trust, hard work and desire for fitness. Literature review that supports the findings by Chen and Deng (2022) posits that positive peer pressure is about this group of learners supporting and motivating each other to achieve their goals. In the researcher's perspective, peer pressure has the potential to motivate learners in a positive way; assisting them to adopt constructive behaviours such as focusing on

their studies with the enhancement of academic performance as the goal.

- Sub-Theme 2: Encouraging positive peer pressure.

It emerged that peers encourage others to conduct themselves positively to reduce peer pressure. The excerpts below show their views in this regard :-

P13 said: *"I always feel safe in my group of friends, we respect each other and if you don't come to school because you are sick, at least you know you will get homework from them."*

P15 mentioned that: *"Sometimes it's positive and constructive when friends encourage you to study and participate in sports."*

P14 stated: *"In my group of friends, we are a team that support [sic] each other. We help each other share information and the behaviour is positive. I feel safe and comfortable in this group, I trust them, and they are serious with schoolwork. They don't use drugs and alcohol because they want to do well at school. Most of the time we sit and discuss schoolwork and prepare for tests together."*

P12F2 said: *"Most of my friends and I study hard to get high marks we want to do well both in academics and in sports."*

The sub-theme reports on friendships that promote positive peer pressure and focus on studies. Evidently, Pabian (2019) purports that friendships can mitigate negative feelings because friends are trustworthy and care about each other's wellbeing. Furthermore, Chen and Deng (2022) mention that peers who tend to compare themselves positively are likely to be motivated. They show self-confidence to resist negative peer pressure by focusing on their interests and talents both in academics and in sports. Molleman et al. (2022) emphasise that positive peer influence can encourage adolescents to make good choices which enable them to focus on their studies for improved academic excellence and abstain from deviant behaviours such as drugs and alcohol use which result in disengagement from their studies.

6. Findings and discussions

The findings revealed that peer relationships directly and significantly impact adolescent learners' academic performance. The learners reported the existence of friendships that promote positive peer

influence especially towards their studies. This is corroborated by an international study by (Bowker et al., 2022) which reveals that having close friendships is important for academic excellence. Where learners were exposed to positive peer pressure their self-esteem and confidence were enhanced, and their academic performance was increased. Whereas, where they experienced negative peer pressure their academic performance declined. These findings can be attributed to the notion that secondary school learners in the Rustenburg district, who had positive peer relationships within the school environment, received positive influences and greater support not only from their peers but also from their teachers and their parents in their studies and learning endeavours. Consequently, this increased support coupled with positive peer influence boosted their confidence levels, and enhanced their self-esteem, thereby contributing to improved academic performance.

6.1. Limitations of the study

- **Site effect** - A limitation here was that only two schools out of the five schools in the township in the Rustenburg District participated in the study. Therefore, the results would have been strengthened if more schools participated in the study. Furthermore, the sampled schools did not represent all the schools in the district, therefore the limitation was that the findings could not be generalised to the other schools.
- **Participants' bias** - Limitations derived from the adoption of a qualitative approach is that data collected from verbal reports could contain several sources of bias which should be noted as a limitation, because it relies strictly on what participants say in the interviews. Furthermore, it was difficult to hold focus groups within the allocated time. The time coincided with the pick-up time for school transport at the end of the day. Therefore, some participants seemed fidgety and, in a hurry, to catch their transport. Also, some learners who volunteered to take part in the study withdrew for personal reasons. However, this limitation was mitigated by conducting follow-up sessions to verify learners' responses and the validity of the data.
- **Recording effect** - Though multiple data collection methods were used for triangulation, one limitation may have been caused by audio recording, which could not capture non-verbal

expressions which the researcher perhaps missed. However, this limitation was mitigated by compiling field notes during the interviews.

- **Time effect** - Time was another limitation factor to the process of data collection. Because participants were preparing to write tests, their focus was on preparing for tests rather than attending focus-group discussions. This might have been a limitation on the outcomes of data collection processes. To mitigate this limitation, the researcher ensured that data was collected outside the teaching and learning time after school. Furthermore, the time to conduct interviews may have been too short to yield sufficient results.
- **Bias Effect** - Bias could not be ruled out. The researcher's long experience as an official in the DBE, working closely with the schools, may have had an effect. However, this was mitigated by using researcher reflexivity to acknowledge personal bias. In the detailed documentation of the research process, careful consideration was taken to remain objective to guard against bias. In addition, the researcher ensured continued discussion with the supervisor consistently seeking clarity, engaged with study colleagues and supervisor to review own interpretations to refine the findings.

6.2. Implications for future research

- Future research must examine the association between negative peer pressure and poor academic performance.
- Future research must also include other potential factors such as academic pressure and academic ability which may influence academic performance.
- Future studies could benefit from including and incorporating data from parents and teachers to provide a wider perspective.
- Parents and teachers can utilise their role as mature caregivers to give constructive guidance and support to the adolescent children by providing positive teaching that builds confidences, self-esteem and self-management.
- A qualitative study could be conducted to investigate the effectiveness of the collaboration between teachers and parents

in supporting adolescents facing peer pressure. Establishing parent-teacher collaborative working groups to address negative attitudes and behaviours caused by negative peer pressure could be invaluable in the schools.

- A case study or mixed-method research could assess how collaboration between parents and schools impacts learner resilience against peer pressure.
- A mixed-methods study combining quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews could explore the prevalence, types, and effects of peer pressure among adolescents.
- A qualitative phenomenological study could explore how learners with special needs experience peer pressure in inclusive educational settings.
- A comparative qualitative or mixed-method study could explore how gender influences both the nature and impact of peer pressure.
- A policy analysis study supported by interviews with district education officials could examine how education policies address peer pressure and how effectively they are implemented at school level.

7. Conclusion

Based on the findings, it has been revealed that peer pressure can have negative and positive impact on academic performance. In this regard, there are ways teachers, parents and peers can reinforce the self-esteem and confidence of individuals, by promoting and encouraging positive peer pressure among adolescent learners, to focus more on their studies and promote enhanced academic performance. This also mitigates negative peer pressure among learners which often results in disengagement from their studies resulting in poor performance leading to academic failure. Furthermore, peer pressure can also adversely affect academic performance, as learners who prioritise social acceptance over academic achievement may struggle to keep up with their studies and consequently fail. The findings also revealed that peer pressure is not always bad. The fact that many learners have confidence in their friends and peers to establish collaborative learning groups in connection with studies, assist them to support each other to improve knowledge and enhance their academic performance.

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