

ROLE OF PEER PRESSURE IN SHAPING CAREER ASPIRATIONS OF ADOLESCENTS

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Abstract

Adolescence is a transitional period in human development marked by identity exploration, peer bonding, and career-related decision-making. During this phase, adolescents experience considerable influence from their peer groups, which may shape not only their behaviours and attitudes but also their academic and professional aspirations. While positive peer influence may motivate individuals to pursue ambitious goals and enhance performance, negative peer pressure can constrain authentic self-expression and lead to unsuitable career decisions. This research paper investigates the role of peer pressure in shaping career decision-making among school-going adolescents. Specifically, it explores the types of peer pressure encountered, the extent of its impact on subject and career choices, the psychological consequences of such influences, and the mediating role of parents, teachers, and counsellors. The study draws from psychological theories and empirical research to highlight implications for career counselling and adolescent well-being.

Keywords: Peer pressure, adolescents, career decision-making, subject selection, peer influence

Adolescence represents a significant developmental stage characterized by rapid biological, cognitive, and socio-emotional changes.

At this stage, adolescents face the critical challenge of constructing personal identities while navigating the expectations of peers, family, and society (Erikson, 1968; Santrock, 2014). Among the various developmental tasks, career decision-making emerges as a milestone with long-term implications for personal fulfillment and socioeconomic mobility. Peers exert a substantial influence during adolescence. According to Brown and Larson (2009), adolescents often look to their peers for validation and guidance, sometimes more than to parents or teachers. Peer pressure, defined as the influence exerted by peers to conform to group norms, can manifest positively by encouraging desirable behaviors or negatively by inducing conformity against personal preferences

(Steinberg and Monahan, 2007).

Given the increasing importance of early career choices such as subject selection in high school and preparation for professional streams, understanding how peer influence shapes these decisions is crucial.

This paper aims to examine the nature of peer pressure among adolescents and its specific impact on career-related decision-making, with a focus on both risks and opportunities.

- **Erikson's Psychosocial Theory** identifies adolescence as the stage of *identity vs. role confusion*, during which individuals experiment with career choices as part of identity formation (Erikson, 1968).
- **Bandura's Social Learning Theory** posits that adolescents learn by observing peers and modelling behaviors, including attitudes toward academic and career pursuits (Bandura, 1977).

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- **Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory** emphasizes that peer group's form part of the microsystem influencing adolescents' development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Research consistently highlights the strong role of peer influence on adolescent behavior. Wentzel and Muenks (2016) found that peers shape not only social behaviors but also motivation and achievement. Positive peer groups can foster academic engagement, whereas negative influence may lead to disengagement and risky choices.

Career choice is a complex process involving self-assessment, opportunity awareness, and decision-making skills (Gati and Saka, 2001). Adolescents often lack complete knowledge of their abilities or opportunities, making them susceptible to external pressures. Studies in India and other collectivist societies indicate that adolescents frequently make career choices based on peer or parental expectations rather than intrinsic interests (Kaur, 2017).

Research Gaps

Although extensive research exists on peer pressure and adolescent risk behaviors, fewer studies have directly examined the link between peer influence and career decision-making. This paper seeks to address this gap by analyzing the extent and nature of such influence.

Research Questions

1. What types of peer pressure (positive and negative) are most commonly experienced by school-going adolescents in relation to career decisions?
2. How does peer pressure influence adolescents' subject and career choices?

3. What are the psychological and social outcomes of peer-influenced career decisions?
4. What role do parents, teachers, and counsellors play in mediating the effects of peer pressure on career decision-making?

Research Objectives

1. To examine the nature and extent of peer pressure experienced by adolescents regarding career choices.
2. To analyze the influence of peer groups on subject selection and career aspirations.
3. To identify the positive and negative outcomes of peer-influenced career decision-making.
4. To suggest strategies for parents, educators, and counsellors to support adolescents in making informed career choices.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a descriptive and exploratory design, combining quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews.

Population and Sample

The target population consists of school-going adolescents aged 14–18 years. A stratified random sampling technique was used to ensure representation across academic streams (science, commerce, and arts). A total of 300 students were surveyed, and 30 participated in focus group discussions.

Data Collection Tools

- **Survey questionnaire** with Likert-scale items to assess peer pressure intensity and career decision influences.
- **Semi-structured interviews** to capture in-depth perspectives on lived experiences.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and correlation tests. Qualitative data underwent thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and narratives.

Results

Survey findings revealed that academic conformity (e.g., choosing science because peers did) was the most common form of peer pressure. Positive pressures included motivation to work harder, while negative pressures included discouragement from pursuing non-traditional careers.

- 65% of respondents reported that their peers influenced their subject choice.
- 48% admitted choosing a career path popular among their friends rather than one aligned with personal interest.
- Qualitative data suggested that adolescents feared social isolation if they deviated from group norms.
- Adolescents under strong peer pressure reported higher levels of anxiety and indecision.
- Some experienced dissatisfaction after committing to peer-driven career paths.
- Positive peer influence, however, enhanced confidence and academic competitiveness.

Interviews indicated that supportive parents and school counselors could reduce susceptibility to negative pressure. Adolescents with strong family guidance were more likely to pursue authentic career interests.

1. What types of peer pressure (positive and negative) are most commonly experienced by school-going adolescents in relation to

career decisions?

Adolescents encounter both positive and negative peer pressure while making career-related decisions. Positive peer pressure often takes the form of encouragement to pursue academic subjects that align with individual strengths, sharing of valuable career-related information such as college admissions and scholarships, and motivating peers to set higher goals or improve their study habits. Negative peer pressure, however, is more pervasive, with students frequently being persuaded to follow "popular" or socially prestigious streams such as science or commerce, regardless of their interest or aptitude. In many cases, adolescents also face ridicule or social exclusion for choosing non-traditional careers such as arts, sports, or vocational fields, leading to conformity and blind imitation of their friends' subject choices.

2. How does peer pressure influence adolescents' subject and career choices?

Peer pressure exerts a significant influence on adolescents' subject selection and long-term career decisions, particularly during the crucial years of secondary and senior secondary education. Many adolescents prioritize peer approval and group belonging over their personal interests or competencies. As a result, they are often drawn toward fields such as medicine, engineering, or law because these professions carry social prestige within their peer circles.

Conversely, students may abandon unconventional paths like music, entrepreneurship, or teaching due to the fear of disapproval or ridicule. This tendency to conform frequently results in career choices that reflect group norms rather than individual aspirations.

3. What are the psychological and social outcomes of peer-influenced career decisions?

The outcomes of peer-influenced career decisions can be seen in both psychological and social domains. Psychologically, adolescents may experience stress and anxiety if they pursue careers that are inconsistent with their interests or abilities, and over time, this can contribute to low self-esteem, indecisiveness, and career dissatisfaction. On the social side, conformity to peer-driven choices often brings acceptance, approval, and a sense of belonging within the peer group. However, it can also create conflicts with family members who may have different expectations or values. In some cases, students who struggle academically in a peer-influenced field may face difficulties adjusting socially and academically, further compounding their stress and feelings of inadequacy.

4. What role do parents, teachers, and counsellors play in mediating the effects of peer pressure on career decision-making?

Parents, teachers, and counsellors play a crucial role in mediating the impact of peer pressure on adolescents' career decisions. Parents who provide balanced guidance, emotional support, and realistic advice can help their children evaluate peer suggestions critically, whereas overly authoritarian parents may intensify conflict between family expectations and peer influence. Teachers, as mentors and role models, are well positioned to highlight students' strengths and advise them on subject choices that match their aptitude and interests, thereby preventing blind imitation of peers. School counsellors add a professional dimension by offering career guidance programs, administering

aptitude tests, and creating awareness of diverse career options beyond traditionally prestigious fields. Collectively, these stakeholders can foster informed, interest-based decision-making and help adolescents build resilience against negative peer pressure.

Discussion

Findings confirm that peer pressure significantly shapes adolescents' career decision-making. In line with Erikson's theory, peer influence forms part of identity exploration. However, when conformity overrides self-assessment, the risk of career mismatch increases. The results resonate with Steinberg and Monahan's (2007) work on age differences in resistance to peer influence, showing that mid-adolescents are particularly vulnerable.

The dual nature of peer influence motivating yet restrictive underscores the importance of balanced interventions. Cultural contexts such as collectivist societies amplify peer and parental pressures, often prioritizing group norms over individuality (Kaur, 2017). Therefore, enhancing resilience and self-awareness in adolescents is crucial.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Peer pressure is an inevitable aspect of adolescence and has profound implications for career decision-making. While positive peer influence can enhance ambition and performance, excessive conformity may hinder authentic career exploration.

- Career Counselling Programs:** Schools should implement structured career guidance to provide adolescents with self-assessment tools and exposure to diverse career options.
- Parental Involvement:** Parents should be encouraged to adopt supportive,

3. not prescriptive, roles in their children's career choices.
4. **Peer Mentorship:** Positive peer leaders can be trained to promote academic and career-related encouragement.
5. **Life Skills Training:** Programs on decision-making, assertiveness, and coping strategies can strengthen adolescents' resistance to negative peer pressure.

<https://doi.org/10.1037/0012-1649.43.6.1531>

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