

Awareness of Peer Acceptance and Depression

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ABSTRACT: The dynamics of peer acceptance and the presence of depression play significant roles in shaping the emotional development of adolescent students. This study aimed to know adolescents' level of awareness of peer acceptance and depression factors and their relationship. Employing a descriptive-correlational approach, data were collected using a modified research instrument. Mean and Standard Deviation were used to measure the respondents' overall awareness of peer acceptance and depression factors, and Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient to determine the relationship between the variables. Results revealed that respondents possess a significant level of awareness regarding the contributions of psychological, environmental, and academic factors to peer acceptance. Particularly, there is a high awareness of environmental factors, whereas awareness of academic factors is comparatively lower. Furthermore, respondents not only acknowledged but are also aware that the indicators presented on depression can serve as potential precursors to depression with trauma, injury, and emotional stress. A significant positive correlation was found between awareness of peer acceptance and depression across all factors. This indicates that as individuals become more aware of factors influencing peer acceptance, they also become more attuned to the signs or potential causes of depression. These results highlight the role of peer acceptance in adolescent wellbeing. It is recommended to implement educational programs that foster awareness, promote supportive relationships, and build coping skills for depression.

KEYWORDS: academic, awareness, depression, peer acceptance, psychological

I. INTRODUCTION

The evolving passage of time brings about not only fresh challenges but also heightened obstacles, particularly in the realm of mental health. Among the numerous factors influencing mental well-being, the dynamics of peer acceptance and its intricate relationship with depression emerge as critical areas worthy of exploration. Navigating the complexities of adolescence entails experiencing both moments of excitement and moments of challenge, where the pursuit of identity and belonging intersects with mental health considerations. In this crucial developmental stage, the dynamics of peer acceptance and the presence of depression play significant roles in shaping the emotional development of adolescent students. Peer relationships serve as mirrors reflecting individuals' self-worth and social belonging, while also serving as crucibles for personal growth. However, alongside the ebbs and flows of social interactions, the specter of depression looms, silently threatening resilience and well-being.

During adolescence, a significant portion of daily life is spent at school, providing a context for both positive and negative social interactions (Juvonen et al., 2018). Even when physically absent, adolescents often contemplate past or potential school-related events (Portt et al., 2020). Consequently, the peer group within the school environment emerges as a paramount adolescent socialization and reference unit. The acceptance and support of peers can act as a powerful defense against emotional distress and mental health issues (Manalao, 2018).

Studies have suggested that interpersonal experiences are particularly relevant to mental health. Peer relationships are social connections formed and nurtured through interactions among individuals of similar psychological development, serving as a type of social support (Wang & Hu, 2021). Peer relationships or peer acceptance, to be specific, may play a key role in the mental health of adolescents. According to Motillon-Toudic et al. (2022) and Oco (2023), individuals with weak social ties or inadequate social support are more susceptible to poor mental wellbeing. The lack of social integration and support may lead to feelings of isolation, loneliness, and hopelessness. Peer relationships can also hinder social and emotional growth through negative experiences like bullying, exclusion, and involvement in harmful peer activities (Bierman, 2018).

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Meanwhile, depression is a prevalent mental health condition that can significantly affect an individual's holistic well-being (World Health Organization, 2023). The impact of depression is heightened in the teenage population, defined by the World Health Organization as those aged 10 to 19 years, due to the critical role played by social connections and interpersonal stressors, particularly peer rejection (Ha et al., 2019). In addition, according to the 2021 Young Adult Fertility and Sexuality Study (YAFSS), 7.5% of Filipino youth aged 15-24 have ever experienced depression, equivalent to almost 1.5 million youth. This is an increase from 6.4% in 2013. The same study also found that close to one in five Filipino youth have ever considered ending their life. This negative mental state leads to poor decision-making, particularly in high school students who experience difficulty identifying their emotions as they go through a period of rapid physical and emotional development (Hashmi, 2022).

Observable early indicators of depression in students includes changes in behavior, mood, and academic performance. Anhedonia and poor mood are commonly reported symptoms, emphasizing the importance of school climate in supporting adolescent mental health (Rymsha & Lysytsia, 2020; de Leon and Oco, 2024). Furthermore, adolescents' perceptions of peers with signs depression significantly impact their social inclusion or exclusion. Specifically, when peers with depression are perceived as having little control over their condition, they tend to be more socially accepted (Tang et al., 2019). Germany delved into how peer relationships shape depressive symptoms among German adolescents. Analyzing data from 446 adolescents aged 14 to 17, researchers discovered a significant correlation between peer acceptance and the severity of depressive symptoms.

Notably, adolescents who felt accepted by their peers exhibited fewer depressive signs (Adedeji et al., 2021). Moreover, heightened emotional reactivity to peer feedback has been identified as a predictive factor for adolescents' vulnerability to depression (Stone et al., 2018). As such, peer acceptance processes and the prevalence of depression both have a major impact on how students develop emotionally. Thus, this study aimed to know adolescents' level of awareness on peer acceptance and depression factors and their relationship.

This study utilized Ecological Systems Theory, developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979), provided a comprehensive framework for understanding the complex interactions between individuals and their environments. This theory offers a holistic view, asserting that human development is shaped by a network of interconnected systems, from the immediate microsystem to the overarching macrosystem, with the added dimension of the chronosystem accounting for temporal changes over time.

At the forefront of this theory is the microsystem, comprising the immediate environment in which a developing individual is immersed. Here, influences like family dynamics and school interactions exert significant impact bidirectionally; that is, the child is influenced by others, and in turn, influences them. For example, supportive parental relationships or positive peer associations profoundly shape a child's developmental trajectory (Guy-Evans, 2024). Expanding beyond the microsystem, the mesosystem encapsulates the interplay between different microsystems within an individual's life. Research by Butler et al. (2022) underscored that supportive familial environments and constructive peer relationships synergistically contribute to peer acceptance, thereby fostering better mental health outcomes.

Moving outward, the exosystem encompasses environments indirectly impacting individuals. Although not directly experienced, factors like parental occupation can profoundly affect family dynamics and resources, with frequent job-related relocations potentially disrupting stability and adjustment (Guy-Evans, 2024). Meanwhile, the macrosystem widens the lens encompassing cultural values, societal norms, and historical contexts. Kitchen et al. (2019) suggested that the functioning of smaller systems, such as families and schools, is deeply influenced by this broader societal milieu. Furthermore, Bronfenbrenner highlighted the impact of social interactions and environmental factors on individual growth.

The chronosystem acknowledges the dynamic influence of time on development, encompassing normative life transitions and non-normative events. As children navigate new environments and undergo physical and cognitive changes, they encounter evolving social expectations, such as those during puberty and transitioning to middle school, which can significantly affect self-esteem and academic performance (Guy-Evans, 2024). Moreover, aging itself interacts with shifting social norms over the lifespan within the chronosystem.

II. METHODOLOGY

The data analysis process of this study entailed the utilization of, Mean and Standard Deviation, and Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient or Pearson (r). The Mean and Standard Deviation were used to answer the research Problems 1 and 2, measuring the level of awareness on peer acceptance and depression as perceived by the respondents. The Mean represents a single value that can effectively describe the overall trend or pattern of a dataset (Privitera, 2023). On the other hand, the Standard Deviation measures the dispersion or variability of data points within the dataset (Haggrave, 2023).

Furthermore, it quantifies how individual data points deviate from the mean and provides insights into the spread of the data. Using the Mean and Standard Deviation, the researcher could understand the typical values of the variables of interest and

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assess the variability among the responses. Meanwhile, to answer the third research problem, Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient or Pearson (r) was used to determine the significant relationship variables.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Problem 1. What is the level of awareness of peer acceptance factor as perceived by the respondents in terms of:

- 1.1. psychological;
- 1.2. environmental; and
- 1.3. academic?

Table 1 presents the respondents overall awareness on peer acceptance across different factors: Psychological, Environmental, and Academic. It reveals an overall Mean of 3.96 with SD=0.55, described as Agree and interpreted as Aware. The Mean score indicates the average level of agreement among respondents regarding each factor, while the standard deviation reflects the variability of responses. This implies that the respondents consider these factors influence their perception of acceptance within their peer group. Additionally, they are aware that it plays a significant role in accepting and rejecting peers.

Table 1: Overall Awareness of Peer Acceptance

Variables	Mean	SD	Description Agree	Interpretation
Psychological Factor	4.02	0.55		Aware
Environmental Factor	4.07	0.56	Agree	Aware
Academic Factor	3.79	0.55	Agree	Aware
Overall	3.96	0.55	Agree	Aware
Note: 4.21 – 5.00 Highly Aware 3.41 – 4.20 Aware 2.61 – 3.40 Uncertain 1.81 – 2.60 Less Aware 1.00 – 1.80 Not Aware				

Furthermore, environmental factor got the highest Mean 4.07 and SD= 0.56 described as Agree and interpreted as Aware. The variables for this factor highlight various aspects such as participation in school activities and the importance of diversity in fostering positive peer relationships. Thus, it implies that respondents acknowledge the influential role of the environment in shaping social dynamics and fostering positive peer interactions. Further, the awareness of the Environmental Factor underscores the significance of considering broader contextual influences on peer relationships especially within the school setting. This aligns with existing literature; Adedeji et al. (2021) and Shehu (2019) emphasized the environment's impact on peer relationships, while Otegbayo et al. (2019) noted environment quality's role in relationship nature.

Meanwhile, academic factor obtained a Mean of 3.79 and SD= 0.55, described as Agree and interpreted as Aware. This indicates that respondents generally acknowledge the importance of academic influences on peer relationships. Implying that while academics play a role in shaping peer relationships, they may not be perceived as the primary driving force behind social dynamics among peers.

Moreover, the respondents' awareness on this factor suggests that they possess an understanding of the role that academic factors play in shaping peer interactions. This awareness may encompass various aspects such as shared academic goals, collaborative learning experiences, or the impact of academic performance on social status within the peer group. As found in the study of Liu et al. (2019), peer influence moderate students' academic performance, with peers demonstrating high academic engagement positively impacting achievement. The academic environment, including the collective aptitude within the class, affects perceptions of social acceptance among students (Verschueren et al., 2019).

Finally, despite the complexities of human relationships, this study provides insight into how adolescents view the factors in peer acceptance. However, further research could delve deeper into the specific ways in which these factors intersect and influence social interactions among peers.

Problem 2. What is the level of awareness on depression as perceived by the respondents?

Table 2 shows the level of awareness on depression of the respondents. Each indicator is evaluated based on its Mean score and Standard Deviation (SD). The overall Mean is 3.82 with an SD=0.56, categorized as Agree and interpreted as Aware. This suggests that respondents generally acknowledge and are conscious of depression-related triggers. This finding is paralleled to Ecological Systems Theory that asserts that human development is shaped by network of interconnected systems

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(Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This heightened awareness among respondents underscores the importance of proactive measures in addressing mental health concerns and promoting supportive environments for individuals affected by depression.

Upon closer examination, indicator 2, *Trauma, injury, and emotional stress can cause depression among students*, received the highest Mean of 4.31 with SD= 0.50, described as Agree and interpreted as Aware. This indicates a strong consensus among respondents regarding the significant impact of traumatic experiences, injuries, and emotional stress on students' mental health. Such awareness suggests a deep understanding of the interconnectedness between adverse life events and mental well-being. This echoes with the findings of World Health Organization (2023) and Ha et al. (2019), adverse life events and social difficulties pose detrimental effects on mental health. This negative mental wellbeing leads to poor decision-making, particularly in high school students who experience difficulty in identifying their emotions (Hashmi, 2022).

Interestingly, despite its slightly lower Mean score, the first indicator, *Losing parents, family members, or loved ones may contribute to depression* (Mean 4.26, SD=0.52), also received a high rating. While both indicators address significant life events that can contribute to depression, the higher rating for the second indicator could indicate a heightened awareness of the larger scope of traumatic experiences, injuries, and emotional stressors that impact students' mental health.

Table 2: Awareness on Depression

Indicators	Mean	SD	Description	Interpretation
1. Losing parents, family members, or loved ones may contribute to depression.	4.26	0.52	Strongly Agree	Very Aware
2. Trauma, injury, and emotional stress can cause depression among students.	4.31	0.50	Strongly Agree	Very Aware
3. Problematic relationships with friends, loved ones, or family members can trigger depression.	4.16	0.53	Agree	Aware
4. Incurring diseases, sickness, or health problems may lead to depression.	3.84	0.56	Agree	Aware
5. Rejection, unacceptance, or isolation by peers or classmates can cause depression.	3.89	0.55	Agree	Aware
6. Fear of not being recognized in the institution may lead to depression.	3.57	0.58	Agree	Aware
7. Fear of having few friends in school may contribute to depression.	3.29	0.59	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Uncertain
8. Scared of being far away from families may stimulate depression.	3.78	0.57	Agree	Aware
9. Alarmed by the increasing number of crimes due to lack of companionship may ignite depression.	3.75	0.57	Agree	Aware
10. Disturbed by the thought of separation or detachment from friends after graduation may stir up depression.	3.40	0.58	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Uncertain
Overall	3.82	0.56	Agree	Aware
Note: 4.21 – 5.00 Highly Aware 3.41 – 4.20 Aware 2.61 – 3.40 Uncertain 1.81 – 2.60 Less Aware 1.00 – 1.80 Not Aware				

As found in the study of Najeeb et al. (2023) psychosocial determinants play a significant role in the development of poor mental wellbeing among young individuals. This underscores the multifaceted nature of the causes of depression and the importance of recognizing various forms of adversity in supporting students' mental well-being.

Moreover, indicator 7, *Fear of having few friends in school may contribute to depression*, scored the lowest compared to other indicators Mean 3.29 with

SD=0.59 described as Neither Agree or Disagree and interpreted as Uncertain. This finding suggests a more ambivalent stance among respondents regarding the relationship between social connectedness and depression. The relatively lower Mean score and higher Standard Deviation indicate greater variability in perceptions compared to other indicators.

While some respondents may recognize the potential impact of social isolation on mental health, others may perceive the connection as less significant or may harbor uncertainties about its causal relationship with depression. This variability in responses highlights the complex nature of social dynamics and their influence on mental well-being among students. According to Kang (2023), as individuals age, the quality of relationships becomes more important than quantity. While having more close friends is associated with higher life satisfaction, this correlation weakens over time. This could be particularly true among adolescents as they are in the stage characterized by learning who they are (Erikson, 1959).

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Problem 3. Is there a significant relationship between the awareness on peer acceptance factors and awareness on depression as perceived by the respondents?

Table 3 presents the results obtained from Pearson's correlation test, which aimed to explore the relationship between the respondents' awareness on peer acceptance and depression. The analysis delved into three distinct factors of peer acceptance: psychological, environmental, and academic, examining their correlations with perceived levels of awareness on depression. The findings underscored significant correlations, validated at a significance level of 0.05, between the awareness on factors of peer acceptance and depression.

Notably, the psychological and environmental factors exhibited moderate positive correlations with depression, as evidenced by respective *r*-values of 0.508 and 0.533, both accompanied by *p*-values of 0.001. While, the academic factor displayed a weaker positive correlation, with an *r*-value of 0.428 and a *p*-value of 0.001. Despite the varying strengths of correlation, all three factors of awareness on peer acceptance were evidently associated with awareness on depression among respondents.

Table 3: Test of Correlation Between Awareness of Peer Acceptance and Awareness of Depression

Variables	r-value	pvalue	Level of Correlation	Description	Interpretation
Psychological Factor	0.508	0.001	Moderate Positive Correlation	Reject Ho	Significant
Environmental Factor	0.533	0.001	Moderate Positive Correlation	Reject Ho	Significant
Academic Factor	0.428	0.001	Weak Positive Correlation	Reject Ho	Significant

Note: 1.00 Perfect Positive Correlation 0.70 – 0.99 Strong Positive Correlation

0.50 – 0.69 Moderate Positive Correlation 0.10 – 0.49 Weak Positive Correlation

0.00 – 0.09 No Positive Correlation *Significant when computed p-value <0.05.*

The positive correlation between awareness of peer acceptance factors and awareness of depression suggests that as individuals become more aware of the various factors contributing to peer acceptance, they also tend to become more aware of the triggers of depression. Moreover, this suggests that fluctuations in the level of awareness on peer acceptance experienced by individuals correspondingly impact their awareness on depression. Putting simply, changes in peer acceptance variables aligned with changes in depression, highlighting the pivotal role of peer acceptance in safeguarding adolescents' mental well-being. This indicates a link between understanding the dynamics of social acceptance and recognizing the potential mental health challenges faced by individuals within peer groups.

Furthermore, these insights align with prior research highlighting the impact of peer relationships and environmental factors on mental health outcomes (Wang & Hu, 2021; Ha et al., 2019; Ventriglio et al., 2022). This emphasizes the importance of fostering supportive peer networks and creating conducive social environments to mitigate the risk of depression among adolescents. Finally, contrary to the null hypothesis (Ho), the correlation analysis revealed a significant relationship between the examined variables. Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

Drawing from the aforementioned findings, the following conclusions are made:

1. The strong awareness of environmental influences on peer acceptance suggests that students recognize how their surroundings and social dynamics shape their interactions and sense of belonging.

2. The strong recognition of trauma, injury, and emotional stress as contributors to depression suggests that students are more attuned to overt, personally impactful experiences as mental health triggers.

3. As students become more aware of the factors influencing peer acceptance, they concurrently develop a greater understanding of the signs and possible causes of depression.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the study's findings and conclusion presented, the following recommendations are suggested:

1. The school administration may take proactive measures, such peer support programs, group activities, and inclusive community-building activities, to improve social connectivity and peer acceptance among students.

2. The teachers, together with guidance counselors, may incorporate discussions and activities that address the presented indicators of depression. This will help students recognize and understand the signs and potential causes of depression while promoting supportive peer relationships and resilience-building skills.

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3. Schools, as melting pots of diverse experiences and social interactions, may sustain the training and resources necessary to further enhance students' understanding of their personal and social growth. Additionally, establishing a support system within the school community and at home is essential.

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