



# **DIGITAL PEER PRESSURE: THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN ADOLESCENT DECISION- MAKING AND RISK BEHAVIORS**

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## **ABSTRACT:**

*Social media has changed the landscape of peer influence for adolescents and has created a new type of peer pressure called digital peer pressure. Digital peer pressure, in contrast to the tradition method, exist everywhere in the constant interface of social media platforms. This is especially the case for adolescents, who are willing to engage in risky behaviors — from viral challenges to substance use and cyber-bullying — that reinforce their self-concept in the social comparison environment. **LinkedIn: Examination of Digital Peer Pressure Mechanism: Effects on Adolescent Decision -Making, Mental Health and Social Relationship. Based on Social Learning Theory, Developmental Perspectives, and Social Comparison Theory, the research studies how digital platforms amplify peer influence through algorithms, validation loops and social comparisons. And the results emphasize the need for educators, parents and policymakers to intervene to prevent the deleterious effects of digital peer pressure while encouraging positive uses of social media for adolescent development.***

### **Keywords**

*Digital peer pressure, adolescents, social media, risky behaviors, mental health, social validation, social learning theory, developmental perspective, social comparison theory, intervention strategies.*

## **BACKGROUND INFORMATION:**

With the increasing importance of social media, peer influences — particularly among adolescents — have been fundamentally transformed in a short period of time. Digital peer

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pressure, perhaps one of the key phenomena catalyzed by this new age of digital, is social pressure that pushes people into 'fitting in' with the behaviors, trends, and norms reaffirmed in their online circles. Digital peer pressure is different from traditional peer pressure because, unlike the in-person type that takes place in the world, digital peer pressure is much more pervasive because it exists within the 24/7 interface of social media platforms (Tufekci, 2015). Such pressure represents part of an ongoing negotiation of content, of likes and shares, of visibility and duration, all of which increases the way our peers can shape one another (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013).

Digital peer pressure is salient in adolescence, an age when individuals are exploring identity in combination with increased susceptibility to social feedback (Steinberg, 2005). Adolescents often look to their peers for social cues on what is considered acceptable behavior and social norms. Social media platforms can provide a magnified stage for these interactions. Websites like Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, and Facebook provide a context for teenagers to be repeatedly presented with polished and sometimes unattainable depictions of their peers' lives (Smith & Duggan, 2013). This exposure breeds more intense comparisons and a greater impetus to conform, even to the detriment of personal wellbeing (Fardouly et al., 2015). This is animated by the algorithms at the core of these platforms, which favor content that resonates with its audience or a given individual, which can entrench a particular behavior or trend within a peer group (Pariser, 2011).

Social media enhances peer influence with the feedback loop of validation. For instance, when teenagers post content that is in line with a popular trend or behavior, the positive reinforcement they receive (e.g., likes, shares, comments) helps to increase the frequency or virulence of that behavior (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013). This feedback loop not only serves to reinforce conformity at a time when conformist behaviors may be more harmful than risk-taking, but also serves to normalize behaviors that may be harmful or risky. The reinforcement cycle is especially powerful in social media, with users promoting viral challenges, substance use, and other inappropriate content, a unique and potent form of digital peer pressure (Frison & Eggermont, 2015). Unlike conventional peer pressure, which is often confined to particular environments like school or social events, digital peer pressure can infiltrate the whole of life, trailing teenagers when they are alone and impacting their behavior outside of school hours (Smith & Duggan, 2013).

Digital spaces enhance peer pressure, both positively and negatively. On one side, social media can promote constructive activities, such as joining fitness challenges, spreading social causes, or working together in academics (Fardouly et al., 2015). But it also promotes risky behaviors like substance use, participation in deadly viral trends, and exposure to harmful content. This dual aspect of digital peer pressure illustrates the complexities of the role social media plays in adolescent development (Steinberg, 2005). It signals connection opportunities



(albeit with the caveat that it can also expose adolescents to risky behaviors) and growth, but it also poses major challenges that require the attention of educators, parents, and policymakers (Tufekci, 2015).

### **Problem Statement**

Digital peer pressure among adolescents is an area of increasing concern as to how it impacts adolescents' decisions and involvement in risky behaviors. Specifically, adolescents at a transitional stage of development are vulnerable to external influences owing to their desire for social acceptance and emotional validation (Casey et al., 2008). But social media enables this vulnerability by providing a place of constant, visible, and often idealized peer influence (Frison & Eggermont, 2015). Exposure can cause impulsive decisions based on wanting to fit in rather than personal judgment, with effects like reduced self-esteem and participation in unsafe activities. Digital peer pressure is evident through viral challenges, substance use trends, inappropriate interactions with strangers or social media personalities, to name just a few, all of which influence adolescent decision-making often at the expense of adolescents' mental, emotional, and physical health (Fardouly et al., 2015).

### **Research Questions**

The purpose of the study is to answer the following fundamental questions: What problems do adolescents face when it comes to making important decisions? This question explores how social media influences adolescent decision-making through elements such as peer dynamics, algorithmic platforms, and mechanisms of social validation (Tufekci, 2015).

Investigate the role of digital peer pressure in risky behaviors in adolescence. In this inquiry, we explore the role that digital peer pressure plays in behaviors like doing viral challenges, engaging in substance use, or sharing unauthorized content, and what this means for adolescent development more broadly (Frison & Eggermont, 2015).

### **Thesis Statement**

Digital peer pressure plays a pivotal role in how teens make decisions by affecting how they act according to peers. Social media has become an integral part of human life. This paper brings the opportunities to discuss how its pervasiveness often works to heighten the force and form of peer influence as well as expose the mentee to further risky behaviors and decrease positive mental health. One step in the right direction is to tackle issues of peer pressure and online influence (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013).

### **Theoretical Framework**



As such, a sound theoretical foundation is needed to understand how digital peer pressure may influence adolescent decision-making and risk behaviors. To help understand the mechanisms by which social media influences behavior, this study is guided by Theories of Social Learning, a Developmental Perspective, and Social Comparison Theory.

### **Social Learning Theory**

The Social Learning Theory was established by Albert Bandura (1977), who states that human behaviors are emulated and observed from one's environment. At every turn, adolescents are bombarded with the behavior of their peers, trends, and norms set by social media, which they follow. Social media groups and pages are the theatre where behaviors are performed, and mechanisms such as likes, shares, and comments reinforce the assumption that this behavior is "normal." Positive reinforcement, such as these, not only validates the specified actions in this passage but also motivates adolescents to repeat these actions to obtain similar praise from peers.

### **Developmental Perspective**

Adolescence, home to a range of developmental changes, is a time when some children are more open to outside influences (Steinberg, 2005). During this developmental stage, adolescents become more sensitive to social approval and a powerful sense of belonging; these are key components for understanding and predicting digital peer pressure. Developmentally, teens are still building those self-regulation and critical thinking skills, which makes them more likely to focus on immediate social rewards than the long-term risks of their actions (Casey et al., 2008). The part of the brain that controls impulse and decision-making—the pre-frontal cortex—is not fully developed during adolescence, adding to their susceptibility to peer influence. This is exacerbated by social media, which serves up constant doses of peer interactions and feedback. The combination of adolescent cognitive and emotional immaturity, along with social media's saturation, gives rise to a form of peer pressure that is ever-present and hard to resist (Fardouly et al., 2015).

### **Social Comparison Theory**

Social Comparison Theory, developed by Leon Festinger (1954), states that we compare ourselves with others based on our abilities, achievements, and value systems. This distinction is accentuated in the world of social media, as teenagers are incessantly bombarded with glorified images of their peers' lives. Such comparisons often leave them feeling inadequate or gripped by the need to live up to those apparent social norms to receive a matching amount of validation or approval (Fardouly et al., 2015).

## **Peer Pressure from Social Media on Nonsexual Risk Behaviors**

Social media's impact on adolescent behavior extends to risk-taking, with digital peer pressure playing a central role. In their quest for acceptance and validation, adolescents are particularly susceptible to the risky behaviors advocated or normalized on social media platforms (Fardouly et al., 2015). Problematic behaviors can include everything from substance use and engaging in death-defying physical stunts to being solicited in cyberbullying or exposed to sexting risks — all of which can harm their mental, emotional, and physical health (Frison & Eggermont, 2015). This section covers the types of risky behaviors social media peer pressure revolves around, examples of the consequences, and the impact of influencers and peer groups in magnifying these pressures.

### **Types of Risk Behaviors**

**Substance Use:** The potential of social media to normalize and promote substance use among adolescents is an established concern (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013). Many of these challenges are glorified on platforms like TikTok and Instagram, where young people are encouraged to engage in risky behaviors such as "vamping" or alcohol consumption to impress their peers or gain social acceptance. For example, hashtags related to vamping challenges have garnered millions of views, creating a culture in which risky behaviors are seen as fashionable or even acceptable (Fardouly et al., 2015).

**Physical Stunts and Challenges: Risky Stunts Gone Viral:** While others provide entertainment, viral challenges can be potentially life-threatening. These include the "Tide Pod Challenge," in which participants ate laundry detergent pods, and the "Blackout Challenge," which encouraged people to choke themselves until losing consciousness. These trends, many of which gain mindless traction through social media platforms, appeal to adolescents because of their reckless and provocative nature. This reinforces participation as the chase for likes, shares, and comments in the face of glaring risk continues (Tufekci, 2015).

**Frequency of Being Exposed to Cyberbullying and Sexting:** Another common risk behavior that is heightened through peer pressure is cyberbullying and sexting. Adolescents might feel pressured to send intimate pictures or videos so that they could fit in or keep in touch with their peers (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013). Likewise, the anonymous or public nature of cyberbullying on social media sites such as Twitter or Snapchat can lead to substantial psychological effects on victims, adding complexity to the social dynamics surrounding peer pressure in digital settings (Frison & Eggermont, 2015).

### **Case Studies/Examples**

Many of the sobering, highly profiled examples become commodities of social media peer pressure. For instance, consider the phenomenon known as the “Blue Whale Challenge,” which allegedly prompted those who participated to consider self-harming, and in some cases, suicide. This challenge exploited the fact that teens are particularly susceptible to social pressures and psychological manipulation, convincing them to engage in a series of increasingly dangerous behaviors (Casey, Jones, & Hare, 2008).

Anecdotally, the effects of this decision-making process are visible in recent alcohol-related epidemics, including the “Nek Nominate” craze, where participants filmed themselves drinking excessive amounts of alcohol in hazardous locations. Beyond proving deadly in several instances, this trend demonstrated how peer validation on social media can trump adolescents’ judgment and self-preservation instincts (Bandura, 1977). Such cases reflect the real consequences of social media peer pressure, especially when adolescents feel an inability to resist the urge to conform or compete in their online world (Steinberg, 2005).

### **Impact on Adolescents**

The impacts of engaging in risky behavior for the sake of peer pressure from social media are significant, affecting teenagers' mental well-being, school performance, and social interactions.

**Mental Health Consequences:** Teenagers who fall victim to digital peer pressure are often more anxious, depressed, and self-hating. The peer comparison, combined with FOMO (Fear of Missing Out), can damage self-esteem and foster long-term psychological distress (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013). The psychological trauma resulting from harmful trends or cyberbullying can lead to isolation and suicidal thoughts (Frison & Eggermont, 2015).

**The Academic and Social Ripple Effect:** Risky behaviors can also interfere with adolescents’ academic and social lives. Disciplinary action at school, strained relationships with family and friends, and less time for school work from substance use or preoccupation with dangerous challenges can all result. The public nature of social media makes these behaviors well-documented, often leading to reputational damage or significant ramifications for their future (Tufekci, 2015).

### **The Significance of Influencers and Micro-Peers**

Online influencers and peer groups play a significant role in amplifying social media peer pressure. With their massive followings, influencers frequently dictate trends that young people feel they must imitate (Smith & Duggan, 2013). For instance, influencers can negatively influence adolescents by promoting risky challenges or making substance use appear cool. They can have a substantial impact on impressionable audiences with high

aspirations (Pariser, 2011). Similarly, micro-peers — friends or smaller groups within an adolescent's immediate social network — exert strong influence by promoting conformity and legitimizing unhealthy behaviors (Steinberg, 2005).

### **Ways to Combat Digital Peer Pressure**

Digital peer pressure is widespread, requiring strategies that target its influence on adolescent well-being. Adolescents, being at a stage where they are highly impressionable, need interventions to combat social media pressures effectively.

**Parental and Educator Roles:** Parents and educators must teach adolescents digital literacy skills to help them critically analyze what they are reading online. It is essential to raise awareness about the curated nature of social media posts and the dangers of negative trends. Parents should encourage safe online behaviors, and educators can incorporate digital literacy into school curricula to complement these lessons (Bandura, 1977).

**Social Media Policies:** Platforms need to strengthen their policies to detect and remove harmful content, such as videos promoting dangerous behaviors or challenges. Content moderation should be strong and proactive, using artificial intelligence to prevent harmful trends from gaining traction (Tufekci, 2015). Age restrictions should be rigorously enforced to minimize exposure to inappropriate content.

**Adolescent Empowerment:** Teaching decision-making skills should be a core aspect of adolescent education, especially regarding their online behavior. Simulations and other activities that mimic real-world situations allow adolescents to practice saying no to peer pressure and engage in value-consistent behaviors (Steinberg, 2005). Encouraging adolescents to curate their social media feeds to highlight positive influences can reduce exposure to harmful trends and peer pressure (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013).

### **CONCLUSION**

In summary, the influence of digital peer pressure on adolescent decision-making is profound, with social media playing a key role in validating risky behaviors. While some adolescents use these platforms for constructive purposes, many are trapped in cycles of impulsive actions, such as substance abuse, viral pranks, and cyberbullying, motivated by the desire for social acceptance. These behaviors often lead to detrimental effects on mental health and academic performance. A multi-stakeholder approach, involving parents, educators, social media platforms, and policymakers, is essential to create a safer digital environment for adolescents (Pariser, 2011).

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