Navigating peer pressure: The role of friendship quality in middle school students

Thien Tat Do\textsuperscript{a} | Tham Thi Huong Phan\textsuperscript{b}

\textsuperscript{a}Faculty of Psychology, Ho Chi Minh City University of Education, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.
\textsuperscript{b}Royal International Bilingual School, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.

Abstract This study explores the relationship between peer pressure and friendship quality among middle school students in Vietnam, aiming to understand how these factors interact and affect students’ social experiences and academic outcomes. A convenience sampling approach was used to survey 403 students from Tan Tao A Secondary School and Viet My Secondary School during the 2023-2024 academic year. Participants completed the Perceived Peer Pressure Scale and the Friendship Quality Scale. Data were analyzed using SPSS to conduct descriptive and comparative statistical analyses. The findings indicate a significant relationship between peer pressure and friendship quality. Students with high-quality friendships reported higher levels of resistance to peer pressure and positive peer encouragement, while those with weaker friendships were more vulnerable to negative influences. Notably, students experiencing higher levels of peer pressure also reported higher friendship quality scores, suggesting a complex interplay between these factors. Strong, supportive friendships can act as a buffer against negative peer pressure, promoting resilience and positive behaviors among middle school students. Educational interventions that foster positive peer relationships and provide support for students with weaker friendships are essential. Further research should explore the longitudinal impact of these relationships to inform more effective interventions.

Keywords: peer pressure, friendship quality, middle school students, Vietnam

1. Introduction

Peer pressure during middle school presents a significant and multifaceted challenge, impacting numerous aspects of students’ social and emotional development. This pressure can manifest in diverse forms, ranging from overt bullying and harassment to subtle social exclusion and pressures to conform to group norms (Graham et al., 2003). These influences can exert a profound influence on students’ psychological and emotional well-being, potentially affecting self-esteem, anxiety levels, and overall mental health. Peer pressure can take various forms, including direct bullying and more nuanced tactics such as social exclusion or coercion to participate in specific activities. These pressures hold the potential to significantly impact students’ behaviors and attitudes, influencing everything from academic performance to personal values and ethical frameworks (Cullingford & Morrison, 1997). Research suggests that boys and girls may experience peer pressure differently, with girls often reporting greater pressures related to social conformity and navigating interpersonal relationships. These distinctions can influence how peer pressure impacts their experiences within the school environment and shapes their social interactions (Brown, 1982). The consequences of peer pressure are far-reaching, potentially affecting academic achievement, social skills development, and psychological health. Students who are ostracized or marginalized often face heightened challenges, including increased loneliness and interpersonal anxieties, which can negatively impact their overall school experience and future educational outcomes (Parkhurst & Asher, 1992). Effective strategies to address peer pressure require targeted interventions that prioritize fostering positive peer interactions, enhancing students’ social skills, and cultivating a supportive school climate. Programs that promote peer support and equip students with coping mechanisms can be instrumental in mitigating the negative effects of peer pressure (Loke et al., 2016).

The interplay between peer pressure, friendship quality, and academic performance in middle school students is both intricate and consequential. Positive peer relationships demonstrably correlate with stronger academic achievement (Wentzel & Caldwell, 1997). Conversely, negative peer influences can exert a detrimental impact on academic outcomes, underscoring the complex interplay between peer dynamics and school performance. Friendship quality plays a pivotal role in students’ successful navigation of the middle school transition. High-quality friendships can serve as a buffer against the negative effects of peer pressure, mitigating feelings of loneliness and fostering greater engagement in schoolwork. This protective function underscores the critical importance of nurturing supportive peer relationships during periods of significant educational transition (Kingery & Erdley, 2007). Research suggests that peer acceptance and the quality of specific friendships are highly predictive of students’ self-esteem, loneliness, and overall adjustment to the middle school environment. Students who...
experience peer acceptance and possess high-quality friendships tend to exhibit more positive emotional and academic outcomes (Klingery et al., 2011). The influence of peers on academic motivation is also noteworthy. Students who perceive positive peer relationships and high-quality friendships generally demonstrate increased motivation and set higher achievement goals. The nature of peer interactions has the potential to either bolster or diminish students’ intrinsic motivation to excel academically (Nelson & DeBacker, 2008). Intriguingly, research suggests that cross-class friendships, those formed between students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, can contribute to a reduction in class-based achievement disparities. This finding highlights the potential of diverse peer relationships to promote a more equitable distribution of academic success across social and economic boundaries (Lessard & Juvonen, 2019).

A dearth of research exists regarding the relationship between peer pressure and friendship quality among middle school students in Vietnam. However, extant studies on Vietnamese adolescents offer tangential insights. One study explored prosocial behaviors among middle and high school students, suggesting that their sense of responsibility, likely shaped by peer interactions, affects various aspects of their lives (Le et al., 2022). This implies a potential role for peer relationships in shaping positive student behavior. Additionally, another study found that students experiencing higher levels of peer pressure exhibit greater educational stress, with a significant impact on academic performance (Nguyen-Thi et al., 2024). This underscores the significant influence that peer pressure exerts on the academic life of students. Another comparative study involving Vietnamese and Taiwanese primary and middle school students revealed significant differences in friendship quality based on sex, age, country, and the interactions between these factors (Huang et al., 2019). These findings can be attributed to both general developmental trends and the cultural contexts that shape students’ experiences of friendship.

To address the research gap concerning the relationship between peer pressure and friendship quality among middle school students in Vietnam, this study was undertaken. The study seeks to investigate two primary research objectives. First, it will explore the current prevalence and characteristics of peer pressure and friendship quality among this population. Second, it will examine whether there are any significant differences in the experiences of peer pressure based on variations in friendship quality.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

This study utilized a convenience sample method to gather data from 482 students who were currently enrolled at Tan Tao A Secondary School and Viet My Secondary School during the academic year of 2023-2024. The data collection process involved participants completing a survey instrument. The sample comprised 403 students (50.12% female, 49.88% male). Grade distribution within the sample was as follows: 80 (19.85%) grade 6, 108 (26.80%) grade 7, 127 (31.51%) grade 8, and 88 (21.84%) grade 9. A detailed breakdown of participant characteristics is provided in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Tan Tao A</th>
<th>Viet My</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>15</td>
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<td></td>
<td>7</td>
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<td>21</td>
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<td></td>
<td>9</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>29</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>302</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>403</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2.2. Measurement

The study employed the Perceived Peer Pressure Scale developed by Palani and Mani (2016). This scale operationalizes perceived peer pressure through three sub-dimensions: (1) Yielding to Peer Pressure, (2) Resistance to Peer Pressure, and (3) Peers’ Encouragement. The scale encompasses 30 items measuring the degree of peer pressure experienced across various domains. Participants respond using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The original instrument demonstrated excellent internal consistency, with a Cronbach’s alpha coefficient of 0.942. The Cronbach’s alpha values for the subscales in this study were lower: 0.739 for Yielding to Peer Pressure, 0.684 for Resistance to Peer Pressure, and 0.613 for Peers’ Encouragement, yet they showed good reliability.

The study also utilized the Friendship Quality Scale developed by Thien et al. (2012). This instrument assesses friendship quality through four key dimensions: Closeness, Help, Acceptance, and Safety. The scale comprises 21 items employing a six-point Likert scale anchored by 1 (strongly disagree) and 6 (strongly agree) with intermediate options reflecting varying degrees of agreement. The original scale demonstrated high internal consistency, with Cronbach’s alpha coefficients for Safety, Closeness, Acceptance, and Help being 0.88, 0.83, 0.84, and 0.81, respectively. In the current study, Cronbach’s alpha values
for the subscales were acceptable, ranging from 0.751 (Safety) to 0.774 (Help), with Closeness (0.710) and Acceptance (0.655) showing good reliability.

2.3. Data analysis

Following data collection, the information was transferred to Excel software for organization and storage. Subsequently, the data underwent coding and cleaning procedures to address inconsistencies and missing values. As a result, 302 (62.66%) responses were valid and remained for further analysis. The prepared data was then imported into SPSS software to facilitate descriptive and comparative statistical analyses.

In the context of the Perceived Peer Pressure Scale, we categorized the level of peer pressure experienced by students based on the average score achieved on the scale as follows:

+ 1.00–1.79: Very low  
+ 1.80–2.59: Low  
+ 2.60–3.39: Average  
+ 3.40–4.19: High  
+ 4.20–5.00: Very high

Similar to the Perceived Peer Pressure Scale, we categorized the level of friendship quality based on the average score obtained on the Friendship Quality Scale as follows:

+ 1.00–1.99: Very low  
+ 2.00–2.99: Low  
+ 3.00–3.99: Average  
+ 4.00–4.99: High  
+ 5.00–6.00: Very high

3. Results

Table 2 reveals a statistically significant difference (sig = 0.000) in perceived peer pressure among students categorized by friendship quality. Interestingly, students with very high and high-quality friendships reported the highest (M = 3.31, SD = 0.289) and second-highest (M = 3.17, SD = 0.334) average peer pressure scores, respectively. This finding suggests a potential positive correlation between strong friendships and susceptibility to peer pressure. In contrast, students with average friendship quality exhibited a mid-range peer pressure score (M = 3.05, SD = 0.292), while those with low friendship quality reported the lowest average score (M = 2.84, SD = 0.339). These results indicate a possible inverse relationship between weak friendships and peer pressure.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Friendship Quality</th>
<th>Low (M, SD)</th>
<th>Average (M, SD)</th>
<th>High (M, SD)</th>
<th>Very High (M, SD)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yielding to Peer Pressure</td>
<td>1.94 (0.754)</td>
<td>1.92 (0.576)</td>
<td>1.90 (0.531)</td>
<td>1.94 (0.599)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resistance to Peer Pressure</td>
<td>3.60 (0.759)</td>
<td>3.76 (0.541)</td>
<td>3.91 (0.551)</td>
<td>3.99 (0.496)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peers’ Encouragement</td>
<td>2.93 (0.719)</td>
<td>3.65 (0.608)</td>
<td>4.00 (0.610)</td>
<td>4.42 (0.444)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Peer Pressure</td>
<td>2.84 (0.339)</td>
<td>3.05 (0.292)</td>
<td>3.17 (0.334)</td>
<td>3.31 (0.289)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: M. Mean, SD. Standard deviation.

An analysis of peer pressure sub-dimensions revealed statistically significant differences in students’ scores across friendship quality levels for “Resistance to Peer Pressure” and “Peers’ Encouragement” (Figure 1). Interestingly, for “Resistance to Peer Pressure,” students with very high and high-quality friendships reported the highest (3.99) and second-highest (3.91) average scores, respectively. This was followed by students with average quality friendships (3.76) and lastly, those with low quality friendships (3.60). A similar pattern emerged for “Peers’ Encouragement,” with very high and high friendship quality groups achieving the highest (4.42) and second-highest (4.00) average scores, respectively. Students with average quality friendships obtained a mid-range score (3.65), while those with low quality friendships reported the lowest average score (2.93). Notably, no statistically significant difference was observed in “Yielding to Peer Pressure” across friendship quality levels. These findings suggest a potential link between the quality of students’ friendships and their perception of peer pressure. Students with stronger friendships may perceive themselves as more adept at resisting peer pressure and likely experience greater encouragement from their peers. Conversely, students with weaker friendships might feel less able to resist peer pressure and receive less positive reinforcement from their peers.

Table 3 reveals a statistically significant difference (sig = 0.000) in friendship quality scores among students categorized by their level of perceived peer pressure. Interestingly, students reporting high levels of peer pressure exhibited the highest average score for friendship quality (M = 4.39, SD = 0.561). This finding suggests a potential counterintuitive association, where
students experiencing strong peer pressure might also possess the skills to navigate these pressures within positive and supportive friendships. Alternatively, students with high friendship quality may be more susceptible to peer influence. Further research is needed to explore the direction of this relationship. Students with average levels of perceived peer pressure reported a mid-range friendship quality score (M = 3.95, SD = 0.613), while those with low peer pressure reported the lowest average score (M = 3.59, SD = 0.744).

![Figure 1 Peer Pressure score and Friendship Quality.](image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Peer Pressure M (SD)</th>
<th>Low</th>
<th>Average</th>
<th>High</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Safety</td>
<td>2.96 (0.876)</td>
<td>3.42 (0.740)</td>
<td>3.82 (0.754)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closeness</td>
<td>4.10 (1.002)</td>
<td>4.26 (0.772)</td>
<td>4.68 (0.650)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acceptance</td>
<td>3.80 (0.780)</td>
<td>4.18 (0.858)</td>
<td>4.71 (0.785)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help</td>
<td>3.99 (1.302)</td>
<td>4.43 (0.970)</td>
<td>4.90 (0.980)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friendship Quality</td>
<td>3.59 (0.744)</td>
<td>3.95 (0.613)</td>
<td>4.39 (0.561)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes:** M. Mean, SD. Standard deviation.

An examination of friendship quality sub-dimensions revealed statistically significant differences (sig = 0.000) across all four aspects ("Safety," "Closeness," "Acceptance," and "Help") based on students' reported levels of peer pressure (Figure 2). As illustrated in Diagram 2.7, a clear upward trend emerges across all four dimensions of friendship quality with increasing levels of perceived peer pressure. For the "Safety" dimension, students with high peer pressure reported the highest average score (M = 3.82, SD = 0.754), followed by students with average peer pressure (M = 3.42, SD = 0.740) and lastly, those with low peer pressure (M = 2.96, SD = 0.876). A similar pattern was observed for "Closeness," with high peer pressure (M = 4.68, SD = 0.650) followed by average (M = 4.26, SD = 0.772) and low peer pressure (M = 4.10, SD = 1.002). Likewise, students in the high peer pressure group reported the highest average scores for "Acceptance" (M = 4.71, SD = 0.785) and "Help" (M = 4.90, SD = 0.980), followed by the average peer pressure group (M = 4.18, SD = 0.858 for Acceptance; M = 4.43, SD = 0.970 for Help) and lastly, the low peer pressure group (M = 3.80, SD = 0.780 for Acceptance; M = 3.99, SD = 1.302 for Help). These findings suggest a potential positive correlation between perceived peer pressure and the overall quality of friendships, along with the four specific dimensions assessed. Students experiencing higher levels of peer pressure may perceive their friendships as offering greater safety, closeness, acceptance, and willingness to help.

![Figure 2 Friendship Quality score and Peer Pressure.](image)
4. Discussion

Students embedded in strong friendships often perceive themselves as possessing greater resilience against peer pressure. These positive social bonds can foster self-esteem and confidence, essential psychological resources for resisting negative peer influences. High self-esteem can diminish the likelihood of engaging in undesirable behaviors solely to gain peer acceptance (Connor, 1994). Furthermore, this self-assuredness can facilitate the development and maintenance of meaningful friendships, promoting entry into supportive rather than coercive peer groups (Connor, 1994). It is important to acknowledge that peer influence is not inherently negative. Positive peer pressure, frequently exerted within close friend groups, can encourage prosocial behaviors such as academic achievement, healthy lifestyle choices, and offering mutual support. These positive influences can serve to bolster personal values against negative peer pressures (Baruah & Boruah, 2016). High-quality friendships characterized by trust, respect, and care cultivate a supportive environment where adolescents feel secure and validated. This sense of belonging can lessen the susceptibility to negative peer pressure, as the peer group prioritizes individual integrity over conformity (McCoy et al., 1994).

Students embedded in less supportive friendships may experience a diminished capacity to resist peer pressure and a dearth of positive reinforcement from their peers. Low self-esteem and confidence, potentially stemming from weaker social bonds, can render these students more vulnerable to negative peer pressure as they seek acceptance and validation from others (Connor, 1994). The absence of strong, supportive friendships that bolster self-assurance can make it challenging for these students to assert their own choices and resist the pressures to conform to potentially risky group behaviors (Connor, 1994). It is important to acknowledge that positive peer influence often flourishes within environments characterized by mutual respect and support. Students lacking strong friendships may be deprived of the opportunity to experience or witness positive peer pressure, such as encouragement for academic achievement or healthy lifestyle choices, leaving them more susceptible to negative influences (Baruah & Boruah, 2016). Without the protective buffer of supportive friendships, students may feel compelled to conform to any available peer group, even if it engages in negative behaviors, to avoid social isolation. This susceptibility to negative peer pressure can exacerbate existing feelings of inadequacy and potentially lead to increased engagement in risky behaviors, creating a self-perpetuating cycle of negative reinforcement (Liu, 2022). Strong friendships serve as a critical source of social and emotional support. Students lacking such relationships may not receive the necessary reinforcement to develop resilience against negative peer pressure, potentially leading them to adopt behaviors endorsed by their peers in an attempt to fulfill their social and emotional needs (Brown et al., 1986).

Interestingly, students experiencing heightened levels of peer pressure may perceive their friendships as offering a heightened sense of safety and belonging. This phenomenon, akin to “safety in numbers,” allows individuals to feel protected from external threats or negative influences. In such high-pressure environments, the peer group itself can function as a protective barrier against unwanted external pressures, fostering a safe space where members can support one another in resisting potentially detrimental behaviors or choices (Brown et al., 1986). Furthermore, friendships within a peer group often serve to reinforce shared values and norms. When these group norms are positive, they can act as a buffer against negative peer pressures from outside the group. For students grappling with significant peer pressure, the endorsement of healthy behaviors and the presence of mutual support within the friendship group can bolster individual resistance strategies, fostering a perception of the peer environment as being safer and more supportive (Baruah & Boruah, 2016). Friendships can provide a vital source of emotional support and validation, particularly crucial for individuals facing intense peer pressure. This emotional support can enhance resilience, empowering individuals to feel more competent in making their own decisions and less likely to succumb to external pressures exerted by the broader peer group. The validation received from close friends can further solidify an individual’s feelings and choices, ultimately contributing to a heightened sense of safety and well-being (Loke et al., 2016). In essence, friendships can play a pivotal role in the development and reinforcement of a positive self-concept and identity. For students confronting intense peer pressure, being embedded within a supportive friend group can serve to solidify their identity and promote consistency in their self-concept, ultimately acting as a protective factor against external pressures. This strengthened sense of identity empowers students to navigate challenges and pressures by adhering to their core values and beliefs, which are further reinforced within the supportive confines of their friendship group (Connor, 1994).

Students experiencing intensified levels of peer pressure may perceive their friendships as characterized by greater closeness. High-pressure environments can foster shared experiences amongst students, as they navigate challenges, resist pressures, or maneuver complex social situations together. This shared context can cultivate a sense of solidarity and strengthen the bonds between friends, enhancing their perceived closeness as they provide mutual support throughout common struggles (Swenson et al., 2008). Within such high-pressure environments, students may turn to their friends for emotional understanding and support that may not be available elsewhere. The heightened intensity of their interactions, often centered around coping with peer pressure, can intensify feelings of closeness as friends become essential sources of emotional support (Hallinan & Williams, 1990). When confronted with significant peer pressure, students may exhibit a heightened reliance on their immediate social network for guidance, validation, and coping mechanisms. This increased dependence can foster a sense of closeness as friends engage in frequent interactions and depend on one another to navigate social pressures and dynamics (Goguen et al., 2010). Furthermore, the need for protection and safety in response to peer
pressure can lead students to form close bonds with those they trust. Compared to the broader peer group where pressures and expectations may be more intense, friendships may be perceived as offering a safer and more protective environment. This perception of safety can further enhance the perceived closeness of these relationships (Rihtarić & Kamenov, 2013).

Students experiencing intensified levels of peer pressure may perceive their friendships as characterized by a heightened sense of acceptance. Within high-pressure environments, friends often serve as crucial sources of emotional support and validation. This unwavering support can contribute to a stronger sense of feeling accepted, particularly when students may perceive judgment or marginalization from the broader peer group. Friendships can function as sanctuaries where students are assured of their inherent worth and belonging, regardless of external pressures or criticisms directed at them (Wentzel & Caldwell, 1997). Shared experiences, such as facing peer pressure together, can cultivate a deeper sense of empathy and understanding amongst friends. This shared struggle can serve to solidify the bonds of acceptance within the group, as members are more likely to empathize with one another’s situations and provide unwavering mutual support (Connor, 1994). High levels of peer pressure can sometimes engender a hostile or competitive environment. In such contexts, friendships can become vital havens where students feel accepted for who they truly are, alleviating the pressure to conform to external expectations. In this way, friends can serve to counteract the negative aspects of peer pressure by affirming the individuality and inherent worth of each other (Bishop & Inderbitzen, 1995). When peer pressure is pervasive, the friendships formed can contribute to the development of a more robust group identity, distinct from the broader peer influences. This distinct identity can enhance the perception of acceptance within the group, as members find greater alignment with the values and norms established by their friends rather than those dictated by the wider school or community environment (de Boer et al., 2013).

Students experiencing intensified levels of peer pressure may perceive their friendships as offering a greater degree of help. Friendships serve as a vital source of emotional support, which becomes particularly valuable in high-pressure environments. Friends can provide reassurance, understanding, and a non-judgmental ear, thereby assisting individuals in navigating the stress and anxiety that often accompany peer pressure. This emotional support can significantly mitigate the negative impacts of peer pressure, rendering friends as especially helpful (Schacter & Juvonen, 2019). In situations characterized by high peer pressure, friends may offer practical guidance on navigating challenging situations. This guidance can range from providing strategies for resisting pressure to offering assistance with decision-making processes. Such support can be invaluable for students as they grapple with social challenges, while simultaneously striving to maintain both personal integrity and emotional well-being (Liu, 2022). High-quality friendships can function as a buffer against the detrimental effects of peer pressure. Students who possess a supportive network of close friends are less likely to succumb to negative peer influences. This buffering effect contributes to the maintenance of a positive self-image and emotional health for students, ultimately reinforcing the perception that their friendships are a source of significant help (Brown et al., 1986). Shared experiences and challenges, including those related to peer pressure, are common amongst friends. This shared understanding can cultivate a sense of solidarity and mutual aid, where friends actively support one another in coping with pressures and challenges. The inherent understanding and unwavering commitment to mutual support further enhance the perceived helpfulness of friendships within high-pressure environments.

5. Implications

This study underlines the importance of friendships in helping kids cope with peer pressure. Strong, supportive connections can help students build resilience to negative influences, supporting healthier habits and better decision-making. Educational institutions should prioritize fostering these positive relationships by implementing social skills programs, team-building activities, and peer mentorship initiatives. Schools can further leverage the power of positive peer pressure to encourage prosocial behaviors such as academic achievement and healthy lifestyle choices. For students embedded in less supportive friendships, targeted interventions, including counseling and social support services, are essential to assist them in developing stronger social bonds and enhancing self-esteem. Cultivating a school culture that prioritizes inclusivity and emotional well-being is crucial, particularly for those experiencing intensified peer pressure. Equipping educators and parents with the knowledge and skills to recognize and address the dynamics of peer pressure is vital in creating a holistic support system for students. Future research endeavors should delve deeper into how friendships evolve and influence behavior over time, with the goal of informing more targeted interventions. By fostering strong friendships and strategically leveraging positive peer influence, schools can effectively protect students from negative peer pressure and promote their overall well-being and academic success.

6. Conclusion

This study underscores the multifaceted interplay between peer pressure and friendship quality among middle school students. Strong friendships were found to act as a protective factor against negative peer pressure and also moderate vulnerability to it. Students with strong friendships demonstrated greater resilience in the face of peer pressure and benefited from more constructive peer influence. Educational institutions can alleviate the negative effects of peer pressure by fostering
prosocial peer relationships through social skills programs, team-building activities, and peer mentorship initiatives. Targeted interventions for students with less supportive friendships, such as counseling and social support services, are also essential. Future research should explore the longitudinal trajectories of friendships and peer pressure to inform the development of more effective interventions. By fostering supportive friendships and leveraging positive peer influences, schools can enhance students’ well-being and academic achievement.

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Ethical considerations

The Ethical Committee of the Ho Chi Minh City University of Education, Vietnam, approved this study on January 21, 2022 (Ref. No. 266/QD-DHSP).

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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