

THE ROLE OF PEER RELATIONSHIPS ON POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT (PYD) AMONG MALAYSIAN ADOLESCENTS: MODERATING ROLE OF SCHOOL TYPES

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the relationship between peer relationships and Positive Youth Development (PYD) among Malaysian adolescents, focusing on the moderating role of school type (government vs. international). Grounded in Lerner's Positive Youth Development framework and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, the research adopted a descriptive-correlational design involving 231 adolescents aged 11 to 15 years ($M = 13.50$, $SD = 1.68$) from Kuala Lumpur. Stratified random sampling was used to ensure proportional representation across school types. Data were collected using the Positive Youth Development–Short Form (PYD-SF; Geldhof et al., 2014) and the Loneliness and Social Dissatisfaction Questionnaire (Asher & Wheeler, 1985). Both instruments demonstrated strong internal consistency ($\alpha = .79-.86$). Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) was employed to test hypotheses. Results revealed a significant negative relationship between loneliness in peer relationships and PYD ($\beta = -.23$, $T = 9.36$, $p < .001$), indicating that adolescents with higher-quality peer interactions demonstrated greater psychological well-being, competence, confidence, caring, and connection. However, school type did not significantly moderate this relationship, suggesting that the quality of peer relationships influences adolescent well-being similarly across different educational environments. The findings underscore the importance of fostering supportive peer connections in both school contexts to enhance social competence and emotional resilience. Recommendations include implementing structured peer support and mentorship programs, particularly in government schools, to promote belonging and psychological well-being among adolescents.

Keywords: peer relationships, positive youth development, adolescents, school type, Malaysia, PLS-SEM

1. INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is a crucial developmental stage marked by significant physical, emotional, and psychological changes. During this period, individuals develop a strong sense of identity, autonomy, and self-concept while also facing heightened social vulnerabilities. Among the key influences shaping adolescent development, parenting, peer relationships, and school environments play critical roles in fostering positive youth development (PYD) (Holder & Coleman, 2015). While extensive research has examined the individual effects of these factors, the interplay between them, particularly in the Malaysian context, remains underexplored.

Parenting plays a foundational role in adolescent development by shaping cognitive, emotional, and behavioural outcomes. Authoritative parenting, characterized by warmth, responsiveness, and appropriate discipline, has been consistently linked to better self-regulation, academic achievement, and emotional well-being (Baumrind, 1991). Conversely, authoritarian or neglectful parenting styles may contribute to lower self-esteem, increased stress, and higher engagement in risk-taking behaviours (Steinberg, 2001). However, the effectiveness of parenting styles may vary depending on external influences, including peer relationships and school environments.

Peer relationships serve as critical socializing agents during adolescence, influencing self-perception, decision-making, and overall psychological adjustment (Bukowski, 2008). Positive peer relationships provide emotional support, foster resilience, and enhance well-being, whereas negative peer influences can lead to risk-taking behaviours such as substance abuse, aggression, and impulsive decision-making (Nurwahyudin et al., 2024; Susanti et al., 2024). In today's digital age, social media has further complicated traditional peer dynamics, highlighting the need to examine both online and offline peer interactions in shaping adolescent development.

Beyond parenting and peer influence, school environments significantly contribute to adolescents' academic and emotional growth. Schools not only provide structured learning experiences but also shape social skills, self-efficacy, and leadership abilities. The Positive Youth Development (PYD) framework, a strengths-based approach, underscores the importance of supportive environments in fostering well-being, character development, and future success (Lerner et al., 2005). School climate, extracurricular activities, and teacher-student relationships play pivotal roles in enhancing adolescent resilience, social competence, and emotional regulation (Zins et al., 2004;

Thapa et al., 2013). However, different school types—public, private, religious, or alternative—may offer varying levels of support, structure, and resources that impact adolescent outcomes.

Although research on parenting, peer influence, and school environments is expanding, few studies have explored their combined effects within the Malaysian context. This study seeks to understand the relationship between peer relationships and Positive Youth Development (PYD) among Malaysian adolescents and to examine whether school type (international vs. government) moderates this relationship.

2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Adolescence is a transformative stage of life where individuals experience significant physical, emotional, and psychological changes. During this period, external factors such as parenting styles, peer relationships, and school environments play a crucial role in shaping adolescents' developmental outcomes. The Positive Youth Development (PYD) framework emphasizes the importance of nurturing environments that support adolescents in developing essential life skills, emotional resilience, and social competence (Lerner et al., 2005). While parenting has long been recognized as a key determinant of adolescent well-being, the extent to which peer relationships and school types moderate the impact of parenting on PYD remains underexplored, particularly in the Malaysian context.

Existing research suggests that authoritative parenting fosters positive developmental outcomes, including higher self-esteem, academic motivation, and emotional stability (Baumrind, 1991; Steinberg, 2001). However, adolescents do not develop in isolation; peer relationships significantly influence their decision-making, social behaviors, and psychological well-being (Bukowski, 2008). Positive peer interactions provide emotional support and reinforce prosocial behaviors, while negative peer influences have been linked to increased risk-taking behaviors, such as substance abuse, aggression, and delinquency (Nurwahyudin et al., 2024; Susanti et al., 2024). Given the rising influence of digital interactions and online peer pressure, it is crucial to examine how both offline and online peer relationships affect adolescent development.

Similarly, school types—whether public, private, religious, or alternative—play a pivotal role in shaping adolescents' academic engagement, social skills, and emotional well-being. Schools differ in their approaches to discipline, student-teacher relationships, extracurricular opportunities, and social climate, all of which can influence PYD. While some schools may foster supportive environments that enhance youth resilience, leadership, and academic success, others may lack adequate resources, leading to increased academic stress and emotional distress. However, research on how different school environments moderate the effects of parenting on adolescent development is limited, especially within the Malaysian educational system. For instance, Sheibani, Juhari, and Yoosefi Looyeh (2020) examined the moderating role of school type (Iranian vs. International schools) on the association between parenting style and positive psychological development among Iranian youth in Malaysia. Their findings showed school type did not moderate the relationships between parenting and positive psychological development among Iranian youth in Malaysia.

While the importance of peer relationships and school environments in adolescent development is well-established, few studies have investigated their interactive effects on Positive Youth Development (PYD) in the Malaysian context. Most existing research has examined these factors in isolation, often neglecting their combined impact on adolescent well-being. As Malaysian adolescents navigate increasingly complex social and educational environments, it is essential to explore how peer relationships and school type may moderate the influence of parenting styles on PYD.

The objective of this study is to examine the relationship between peer relationships and Positive Youth Development (PYD) among Malaysian adolescents, with particular focus on the moderating role of school type. Grounded in established literature and theoretical frameworks, this study seeks to test the following hypotheses: Based on prior research and theoretical perspectives, the study proposes the following hypotheses:

1. **H1:** There is a significant relationship between peer relationships and positive youth development (PYD) among Malaysian adolescents.
2. **H2:** School type (government vs. international) significantly moderates the relationship between peer relationships and PYD, such that the strength and/or direction of this relationship varies across school contexts.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Sampling

The population was categorized into two school types (international and government) and five age groups (11 to 15 years old). By using stratified random sampling of 231 adolescents (131 from government schools and 100 from international schools), aged 11 to 15 years ($M = 13.50$, $SD = 1.68$) participated in the current study.

3.2 Instrumentation

The demographic questionnaire gathered personal and family-related data to gain a deeper understanding of the participants' background characteristics. This information is crucial in evaluating the potential effects of socioeconomic and educational factors on adolescent development, parenting approaches, and peer interactions. The following instruments were used for assessing different variables.

3.2.1 Positive Youth Development-Short Form (PYD-SF)

The Positive Youth Development-Short Form (PYD-SF) is a widely used self-report measure designed to assess key developmental assets that contribute to adolescents' holistic growth. Developed by Geldhof et al. (2014), this 34-item instrument evaluates five core components of Positive Youth Development (PYD): Competence, Confidence, Character, Caring, and Connection. These five domains align with the Five Cs Model of PYD, which provides a structured framework for understanding youth development in various social and cultural contexts. The PYD-SF has been extensively validated and used in different populations, demonstrating strong psychometric properties, with Cronbach's Alpha values consistently ranging from 0.80 to 0.93, indicating high internal consistency and reliability across subscales. The Malay version yielded a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.79, whereas the English version showed a reliability coefficient of 0.82, both falling within the acceptable range for measuring positive youth development. The PYD-SF was utilized to assess overall adolescent well-being in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, enabling a comprehensive analysis of how parenting styles, peer relationships, and school types influence Positive Youth Development (PYD) outcomes. Given Malaysia's socio-cultural diversity and varied school environments, the scale provides valuable insight into the factors that foster or hinder adolescent flourishing. The PYD-SF evaluates five key dimensions: competence, confidence, character, caring, and connection. In particular, the Connection subscale includes four items assessing relationships with family, school, neighborhood, and peers. Most items use a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree), while peer connection items are rated from 1 = never true to 5 = always true (e.g., "I trust my friends"). The scale has shown strong internal consistency, with Cronbach's Alpha ranging from 0.89 to 0.92 for the Connection subscale (Geldhof et al., 2014). In the current study, the overall reliability of the PYD-SF was confirmed with a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.86, indicating robust reliability within this sample. The inclusion of PYD-SF in this study offers critical insights for shaping effective youth development interventions and policies in the Malaysian context.

3.2.2 Loneliness and Social Dissatisfaction Questionnaire (LSDQ)

The LSDQ, developed by Asher and Wheeler (1985), is a validated self-report instrument designed to assess adolescents' perceptions of loneliness and dissatisfaction in peer relationships. It has been widely used in various cultural contexts to examine the impact of peer interactions on youth mental health and well-being. Structure and Scoring: Total Items: 24; Core Items: 16 (e.g., "I am lonely", "I feel left out of things"); Filler Items: 8 (e.g., "I enjoy playing sports"), included to reduce response bias; Response Format: 5-point Likert scale (1 = Not at all true; 5 = Always true); Scoring: Only the 16 core items are summed to calculate the total score (range: 16–80). Higher scores indicate increased loneliness and dissatisfaction. Reliability: Cronbach's alpha = 0.88 (Chen & Chi-Hang Tse, 2010)

The LSDQ was employed to explore the role of peer relationships in adolescent well-being. Its strong reliability and validity support its use in examining social and emotional adjustment among Malaysian adolescents. Insights gained will contribute to understanding the prevalence of loneliness and inform strategies to promote healthier peer interactions in schools.

3.3 Research design

The research This study adopts a descriptive-correlational research design to examine and describe the phenomenon under investigation and to explore potential relationships among key variables. The primary variables examined include:

Independent Variable: Peer relationships

Dependent Variable: Positive Youth Development (PYD)

Moderating Variable: Type of school (international vs. government)

This design allows for the identification of associations between variables without manipulating the study environment. By including school type as a moderating variable, the study provides a more nuanced understanding of how different educational settings may influence the relationship between peer relationships and PYD. This approach helps uncover context-specific dynamics that contribute to adolescent development within Malaysia's diverse social and educational landscape.

For data analysis Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) is applied. SEM is a statistical method that allows for the examination of intricate relationships between unobserved (latent) constructs and their associated measured indicators (Kline, 2016). In this study, the Partial Least Squares SEM (PLS-SEM) approach is applied, which is particularly suitable for predictive research in the social sciences and is effective when the dataset does not follow a normal distribution (Hair et al., 2017).

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section outlines the demographic profile of the participants and provides context for interpreting the findings related to Positive Youth Development (PYD). The sample included a slightly higher number of male adolescents (57%) than females (42%). Most participants attended government schools (57%), with the remainder in international schools (43%). The average participant age was approximately 13 years.

In terms of parental education, a large proportion of fathers held postgraduate degrees (28% master's, 24% PhD), and a similar trend was seen among mothers (32% PhD, 28% bachelor's). Most fathers (82%) were employed, while mothers showed more variation in employment status (50% employed, 46% not formally employed).

Financially, the sample leaned toward higher-income households, with over half (55%) reporting monthly incomes above RM 6000, indicating generally stable economic conditions. This economic advantage is likely to contribute positively to adolescents' development by supporting educational, emotional, and social growth. These demographic insights are essential for understanding the factors influencing adolescents' PYD, especially how parental education, employment, and income levels shape youth aspirations, confidence, and resilience—consistent with earlier studies by Eccles (2005) and Sirin (2005).

4.1 To evaluate the influence of peer relationship quality on PYD

This study found that adolescents with low-quality peer relationships—marked by social isolation and peer rejection—reported lower levels of positive well-being ($\beta = -0.23$, $T = 9.36$, $P < 0.001$), as measured by the Loneliness and Social Dissatisfaction Questionnaire (LSDQ). In contrast, high-quality peer connections, characterized by support and acceptance, were linked to better outcomes, thus supporting the first hypothesis.

These results align with existing research emphasizing the importance of peer relationships in adolescent development, influencing self-esteem, emotional regulation, and resilience (Eccles et al., 2008; Bayer et al., 2010). Close friendships foster social competence and psychological adjustment (Bukowski, 2008; Wentzel, 2015), while negative peer experiences are linked to mental health risks like anxiety and low self-worth (Prinstein & Dodge, 2008; Rubin et al., 2009). Overall, the findings reinforce Lerner's Positive Youth Development framework, highlighting supportive peer relationships as a key driver of adolescent well-being. Further research should examine these dynamics across cultures and assess interventions that promote stronger social bonds.

Table 1: Peer Relationship and PYD

Path	Beta	SE	T value	P value
Peer R. -> PYD	-0.23	0.02	9.36	0.001

4.2 The moderating role of school type (international vs. government) on association between peer relationships and PYD

As shown in Table 2, the analysis indicates that school type (government vs. international) does not significantly moderate the relationship between peer relationships and Positive Youth Development (PYD). This finding is consistent with the results for Hypothesis 5, where school type also failed to moderate the relationship between parenting styles and PYD. These outcomes suggest that the influence of school context may differ depending on the nature of the independent variable and the characteristics of the adolescent population under study.

Previous research highlights the pivotal role of peer relationships in shaping adolescents' social, emotional, and psychological well-being (Brown & Larson, 2009). While school type is known to affect academic performance and resource availability, its moderating effect on the relationship between peer relationships and PYD remains ambiguous. Some scholars propose that peer dynamics—such as friendship quality and social acceptance—have a more direct and consistent impact on youth development, independent of school context (Ryan, 2000; Wentzel et al., 2016).

Peer affiliation also plays a crucial role in identity formation, emotional regulation, and social competence during adolescence (Berndt, 2002). Nonetheless, the broader school climate may still shape peer interactions, either supporting or hindering their positive influence (Wang & Eccles, 2013). For instance, a nurturing school environment can amplify the benefits of strong peer connections, while a negative climate may heighten interpersonal challenges.

To better understand these dynamics, future research should examine additional moderating and mediating variables, such as teacher-student relationships, school climate, and involvement in extracurricular activities (Eccles & Roeser, 2011). Longitudinal designs may also offer deeper insights into how the impact of peer relationships on PYD develops over time and across school contexts (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). Furthermore, considering cultural and socioeconomic diversity across educational settings may clarify how school type influences adolescent social development.

Table 2: Moderating effect of type of school on peer relationship and PYD

Path	International school		Iranian school			T value	P Value
	Beta	T	Beta	T	Ir - In		
Peer Relationship-> PYD	-0.39	11.7*	-0.32	5.23*	0.07	1.95	0.045

*T Value>1.96, Significance at 0.05

5. CONCLUSION

This study explored the relationship between peer relationships and Positive Youth Development (PYD) among Malaysian adolescents, offering valuable insights into how peer dynamics affect adolescent well-being. It also examined the moderating role of school type in this relationship.

Peer interactions represent a key developmental context during adolescence, fostering social learning and emotional growth. Existing research consistently demonstrates that supportive peer relationships enhance self-esteem, aid in identity formation, and build emotional resilience (Wentzel, 2017). Adolescents often depend on their peers to navigate developmental milestones, and those with strong peer connections tend to exhibit greater emotional stability and adaptability (Ryan & Shin, 2018). Furthermore, positive peer influence has been linked to better academic performance, stronger problem-solving abilities, and increased prosocial behaviors (Rubin, Bukowski, & Laursen, 2018).

Observations from this study support these findings. Adolescents who engaged actively in peer groups or maintained strong friendships showed better social adjustment and psychological well-being. These outcomes align with social connectedness theory, which posits that a sense of belonging within peer groups contributes to positive psychological functioning (Jose, Ryan, & Pryor, 2018). Peer acceptance and inclusion also emerged as protective factors against emotional difficulties, such as social anxiety and behavioral issues (Wentzel & Muenks, 2016).

The Negative Consequences of Poor Peer Relationships

Conversely, the absence of quality peer connections was linked to loneliness, social withdrawal, and maladaptive behavior patterns. Studies show that peer exclusion and rejection correlate with low self-esteem, heightened risk for depression, and increased aggression (Cillessen & Mayeux, 2020). Adolescents who face frequent victimization or isolation are more likely to adopt harmful coping mechanisms, such as substance abuse, academic disengagement, and defiance (Nesi, Choukas-Bradley, & Prinstein, 2018).

The long-term impact of peer rejection can also be severe. Adolescents who struggle with peer integration often experience difficulties in forming close relationships later in life, leading to reduced life satisfaction and increased psychological distress (Reijntjes et al., 2010). These findings underscore the need for intervention programs focused on strengthening peer relationships as a pathway to fostering PYD.

This study confirms that high-quality peer relationships play a crucial role in promoting PYD. Adolescents with supportive peer networks show greater social competence, emotional resilience, and academic engagement. In contrast, peer rejection and isolation elevate the risk of psychological issues and problematic behaviors. These results highlight the significant role of peer dynamics in adolescent development and the importance of fostering healthy peer interactions within various environments.

However, the impact of peer relationships is not uniform across all settings—it is shaped by the broader school environment, which can either amplify or buffer peer influence.

Peer Influence Across School Types

1. Government Schools – Stronger Dependence on Peer Support

In government schools, peer relationships had a greater impact on PYD outcomes. Adolescents in these settings appear to rely more heavily on peer support for their emotional and social needs, possibly due to limited access to extracurricular activities, higher student-teacher ratios, and fewer institutional supports (Cillessen & Mayeux, 2020). Students with strong peer ties in these schools reported better psychological well-being, reduced stress, and increased adaptability. These findings support the compensatory role of peer relationships in resource-constrained environments (Jose, Ryan, & Pryor, 2018).

2. International Schools – Peer Influence Balanced by Other Supports

In international schools, although peer relationships still influenced PYD, their effect was comparatively weaker. These schools often offer structured mentorship, smaller class sizes, and a wide range of extracurricular options, which provide alternative sources of emotional and developmental support (Li & Hein, 2019). As a result, students in these environments benefit from a more balanced system where peer influence is complemented by teacher guidance, family support, and institutional resources (Hofstede, 2022).

The Role of Socioeconomic and Cultural Contexts

The variation in peer influence between school types can also be understood in terms of socioeconomic and cultural contexts:

- **Government Schools** typically enroll students from lower or more diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. In such settings, shared challenges and life experiences can strengthen peer bonds, making peer support a central component of adolescent development (Lansford et al., 2020).
- **International Schools** usually serve students from more affluent backgrounds. Here, youth have access to multiple developmental supports, including parental involvement, counseling services, and enrichment programs. The multicultural peer environment may enhance social flexibility but reduce dependence on peers for emotional support (Park & Kim, 2021).

LIMITATIONS

The study's cross-sectional design limits the ability to draw causal inferences. While significant associations between peer relationships and Positive Youth Development (PYD) were identified, the temporal direction of

these relationships remains unclear. Longitudinal research is needed to determine how peer interactions influence PYD over time. In addition, data collection relied solely on self-reported questionnaires, which may be subject to biases such as social desirability and inaccurate recall. These limitations could affect the validity of the responses, particularly in sensitive areas like peer conflict, emotional well-being, or behavioral issues.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Schools—especially government schools—should develop structured peer support and mentorship programs to strengthen positive peer interactions. Given that adolescents in these settings rely heavily on peer relationships for emotional and social development, such programs can foster belonging, reduce social isolation, and promote psychological well-being and Positive Youth Development (PYD). Moreover, intervention strategies aimed at enhancing PYD should be adapted to the specific school environment. In government schools, greater emphasis should be placed on building peer networks due to limited institutional resources. In contrast, international schools should adopt a more holistic approach that integrates peer, teacher, and parental support systems to sustain balanced developmental outcomes.

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