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Editorial

It is with great enthusiasm that we present the second volume, second issue of *The Journal of Shankari School*. As an academic platform, our mission remains steadfast—to encourage scholarly discussions, inspire critical thinking, and foster a culture of intellectual inquiry among students, educators, and researchers.

The studies presented in this issue collectively illuminate the complex interplay between identity, peer influence, and learning in contemporary education. Each paper, though distinct in focus, converges on the theme that students’ mental health and personal growth are deeply shaped by social dynamics and institutional structures.

Manushee Dhama highlights the hidden stressor of academic identity shaped by peer pressure, reminding us that schools must balance achievement with well-being. Rubi Regmi underscores the transformative yet challenging role of friendships in adolescent development, situating peer relationships as both anchors and catalysts. Anuva Subedi explores the tension between perfectionism and authenticity, using the metaphor of the “uniform” to critique conformity while celebrating resilience through imperfection. Finally, Shreyansha Gautam raises timely questions about AI in education, cautioning against over-reliance while recognizing its potential to enhance confidence and accessibility.

Together, these contributions invite educators, policymakers, and students to reflect on how identity, peer influence, and technology intersect in shaping the learning journey. They call for educational practices that nurture resilience, authenticity, and balanced growth—ensuring that academic success does not come at the expense of mental health and individuality.

Editorial Board

The Journal of Shankari School



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Academic Identity and Peer Pressure: A Hidden Stressor in Students' Mental Health

Manushee Dhami

Abstract

This paper explores how academic identity shaped by peer pressure can negatively impact students' mental health. Drawing on psychological and educational theories, it examines how social comparisons and the pressure to meet academic expectations impact self-worth and stress. The study highlights the role of schools in recognizing and mitigating this hidden stressor. Data gathered from various journals, self-reflection, and personal experiences have been discussed. A mixed-methods approach combining surveys and reflections highlights that many students tie their self-worth to academic performance, making them vulnerable to anxiety and low self-esteem. Findings suggest that schools should foster supportive environments that value both student well-being and academic success. Additionally, this study suggests that how students perceive themselves as learners is strongly influenced by peer pressure.

Keywords: *Peer pressure, Academic identity, Social comparisons, Mental health*

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Introduction

Peer pressure in education refers to the influence students experience from their peers on academic choices, behaviors, and attitudes. This influence can be positive—encouraging achievement, healthy habits, and collaboration—or negative, leading to academic dishonesty, substance misuse, or risky behaviors. Supportive peer groups motivate one another to stay focused, share resources, and build confidence. In such environments, collaboration and encouragement often result in higher engagement and improved academic outcomes.

Peer pressure is especially significant during adolescence, shaping both social interactions and academic performance. The World Health Organization (2023) reports that one in seven adolescents experiences a mental health disorder, often linked to school-related stress. Students

may strive not only for future success but also to gain peer approval or avoid exclusion (Coleman, 1961). This raises a critical question: *Do students adjust their academic effort primarily because of peer pressure, even when it conflicts with their personal beliefs about education?*

While research on student mental health is growing, many studies emphasize clinical symptoms or performance metrics, overlooking the nuanced relationship between academic identity and peer influence. Numbers and statistics dominate, while students' voices—their personal stories, thoughts, and feelings—are often absent. Black (2012) notes that peer groups provide a sense of security and help adolescents explore questions of identity, such as “*Who am I?*” and “*What do I want out of life?*” Given that adolescents spend twice as much time with peers as with adults, studying peer influence is essential.

Problem Statement

Students often internalize academic expectations and link their self-worth to grades, which can create stress, anxiety, and feelings of inadequacy. Yet, the combined effect of peer pressure and academic identity on mental health remains underexplored. The desire for peer acceptance may push students to prioritize social activities over academics. Bankole and Ogunsakin (2015) found that many secondary students with substance abuse problems began using drugs or alcohol due to peer pressure.

Omotere (2014) observed that socially accepted students who mismanage their time often achieve lower grades than less socially active peers. This suggests that social concerns may overshadow academic focus, ultimately harming achievement. Peer pressure can also foster a deep need for academic validation, intensifying stress and negatively impacting mental health.

Purpose of the Study

Understanding how students experience these challenges is vital. It enables schools and teachers to design support systems that reflect students' real needs, rather than relying solely on test scores or behavior. This study contributes by highlighting how peer pressure influences academic identity and mental health—an area often overlooked in education.

By centering students' experiences, teachers, curriculum developers, and researchers gain insights into hidden emotional struggles. Such understanding can help educators build supportive classrooms, guide curriculum developers to reduce unhealthy competition, and open new research avenues on the link between social dynamics and learning. Ultimately, these insights support reforms that balance academic success with student well-being.

This article explores how peer pressure shapes students' academic identity and mental health. It examines how expectations from peers influence self-image as learners and the emotional

consequences—stress, anxiety, and low self-esteem. It also emphasizes the lack of student voices in existing research, urging educators and policymakers to create more supportive learning environments.

Review of Literature

Research on peer pressure consistently shows that it is a powerful social influence, particularly during adolescence, when individuals are most sensitive to peer validation. According to Brown, Clasen, and Eicher (1986), peer pressure can be either explicit, where peers directly encourage or discourage certain behaviors, or implicit, where the mere presence of a peer group creates an expectation of conformity. The effects of peer pressure are not limited to negative behaviors; it can also promote positive outcomes, such as academic motivation (Ryan, 2000). Research by Wentzel (2017) also found that students with academically motivated friends often perform better and report lower levels of stress. Peer study groups, mentoring relationships, and collaborative projects can help students feel supported, making academic challenges less overwhelming. According to cognitive developmental theory (Kohlberg, 1984), moral reasoning progresses through distinct stages, with peer interactions playing a role in advancing moral understanding. Peers provide opportunities for perspective-taking, moral deliberation, and moral discourse, contributing to moral development (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998).

Social comparison theory is a psychological concept that posits that individuals assess their own worth and abilities by comparing themselves to others. This theory, introduced by Leon Festinger in 1954, emphasizes that people often evaluate their qualities, such as appearance, body weight, and socio-economic status, against those of their peers. The impact of social comparison is significant, especially among children and adolescents who often gauge their self-worth against the standards set by their peers. This can lead to a decline in academic performance and make students feel their efforts aren't enough. However, another theory by Richard Ryan and Edward Deci, called the 'Self-determination theory', suggests that individuals' true motivation and self-worth come from within; from personal growth, enjoyment, and self-set goals, not from competition or ranking. The social comparison theory suggests that a student studies hard to achieve higher grades than their classmates. In contrast, the self-determination theory posits that a student studies hard because they want to improve for their own sake.

Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, integrating quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews to examine how peer pressure shapes students' academic identity and mental

health. The participants were secondary-level students drawn from three diverse schools, selected to capture variation in socio-cultural and academic contexts.

In the quantitative phase, students' academic identity was measured using a self-report scale administered electronically via Google Forms, prompting them to reflect on how they perceive themselves as learners. Peer pressure was assessed through a structured questionnaire designed to capture social expectations and the influence of classmates on academic choices. Mental health outcomes were measured using standardized instruments that evaluate stress, anxiety, and self-esteem.

In the qualitative phase, semi-structured interviews were conducted to capture students' personal experiences, narratives, and reflections. These interviews provided deeper insights into how peer dynamics intersect with academic identity and emotional well-being, complementing the survey data with rich, contextual detail.

Limitations

The study was restricted to a small sample of schools, which constrains the generalizability of findings. Future research should expand to include a broader range of schools and cultural contexts to better understand variations in the effects of peer pressure.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical protocols were rigorously followed. Informed consent was obtained from both students and their parents. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured throughout the study, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty.

A Narrative Reflection

I still remember the knot in my stomach as our teacher handed back the final exam papers. Around me, friends were smiling, comparing grades, their laughter echoing across the classroom. My score wasn't a failure, but it wasn't enough to keep the "top student" identity I had carried for years. Heat rushed to my face, and disappointment quickly turned into shame. I began tying my worth to grades and the approval of my peers.

In the weeks that followed, comparison consumed me. Study sessions with friends felt less like learning and more like competitions. Late nights became battles against exhaustion, driven by the fear of no longer being "the smart one." Learning, once joyful, now felt like a race I couldn't afford to lose. Admitting struggle seemed impossible—it felt like betraying my teachers, my parents, and even myself. Then one afternoon, during a group study, a classmate I admired broke down in tears. She confessed that she, too, felt crushed by expectations, terrified of slipping behind.

Her honesty shattered the illusion that everyone else was fine. For the first time, I realized that the pressure wasn't mine alone—it was something many of us carried silently.

That moment changed me. I began asking harder questions: What do I actually enjoy learning? Who am I beyond grades and rankings? Slowly, I started separating my self-worth from performance. I spoke up more, asked for help when I needed it, and let go of the pursuit of perfection. The biggest lesson I learned was that the danger isn't just the workload—it's the silence. Too many of us carry expectations alone, hiding behind perfect scores or cheerful faces. Behind every grade sheet lies a student fighting unseen battles, balancing identity, friendship, and the weight of peer approval.

To better understand these experiences, I surveyed students from three different schools. The questions explored how peer pressure and academic expectations shaped their feelings about learning and self-worth. Their responses gave me valuable insight into how deeply peer influence affects both academic identity and mental health.

Survey Analysis

A survey was conducted to better understand students' experiences with academic and peer pressure. In total, 81 responses were collected. The questionnaire included items related to academic validation, the causes of academic pressure, the role of peer influence, and the effects of these pressures on students' mental health. The data gathered from this survey provided valuable insights into how students perceive themselves as learners, how peer expectations shape their choices, and how these factors contribute to stress, anxiety, and self-esteem. The results are presented below.

Table 1: *The age group of the participants*

Age group	Percentage
Under 12	42%
12-18	58%

The survey responses reveal important insights into how students construct their academic identity. Out of the total participants, 51% reported that their self-worth depends on academic performance, suggesting that grades are not merely markers of achievement but deeply tied to personal identity and emotional well-being. This aligns with findings from the World Health Organization (2023), which highlight that academic stress is a major contributor to adolescent mental health challenges. When academic success becomes the primary source of validation, unmet expectations can lead to anxiety and diminished self-esteem (Beck, 1976).

Meanwhile, 30% of students expressed confidence in their academic talents, showing that

some learners maintain a positive self-image rooted in ability rather than external validation. However, this group is smaller than those equating self-worth with grades, reflecting the tension between intrinsic confidence and external pressure. This imbalance echoes Festinger’s (1954) social comparison theory, which explains how students often measure themselves against peers, reinforcing performance-based identity.

Interestingly, only 15% identified primarily as hardworking students, and an even smaller 4% valued learning new things over grades. These figures suggest that effort and curiosity—qualities emphasized in educational philosophy—are overshadowed by the dominance of performance-based identity. This finding contrasts with Deci and Ryan’s (2000) self-determination theory, which emphasizes intrinsic motivation, personal growth, and self-set goals as healthier drivers of learning.

Taken together, the data illustrate a troubling trend: students are more likely to define themselves through grades and peer approval than through effort or the joy of learning. Such reliance on external validation may foster anxiety, perfectionism, and unhealthy competition, while limiting resilience and intrinsic motivation. As Neff (2003) argues, cultivating self-compassion can help students separate self-worth from performance, offering a healthier alternative to grade-centered identity. These findings underscore the need for schools to create environments where learning and growth are valued as much as performance, helping students build identities that are not solely dependent on academic outcomes.

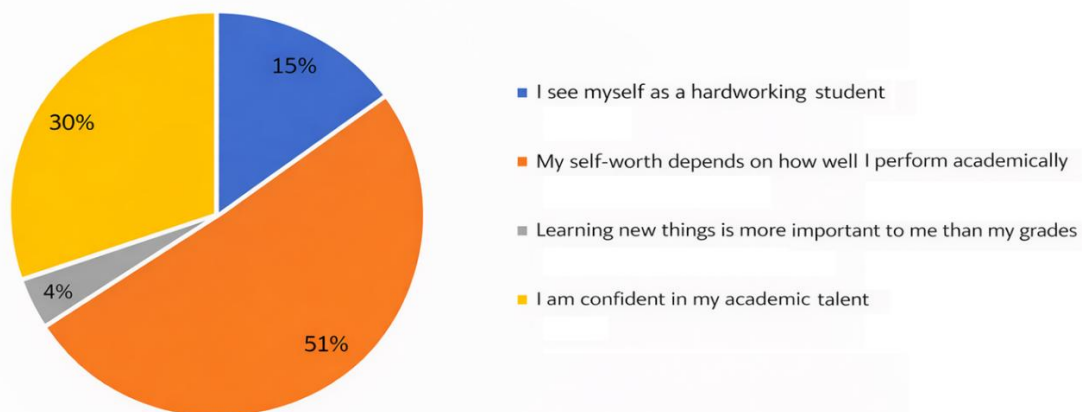


Figure 1: *Academic Validation among Secondary Students*

On the question of what kind of pressure students felt, the data highlights the significant role of peer influence in shaping academic behavior. Nearly half of the respondents (46.15%) reported experiencing direct pressure from peers to achieve good grades. This finding connects closely with the earlier results on academic validation, where more than half of students tied their self-worth to academic performance. Together, these patterns suggest that peer expectations and

grade-centered identity reinforce one another, creating a cycle of external validation that can heighten stress and anxiety.

Brown, Clasen, and Eicher (1986) describe such dynamics as explicit peer pressure, where students are actively encouraged—or discouraged—by peers, often leading to conformity in academic effort. Coleman (1961) similarly observed that adolescents frequently adjust their school performance to gain approval or avoid exclusion, underscoring the social dimension of academic identity. In this context, peer pressure does not merely shape study habits but becomes intertwined with students’ sense of self-worth, amplifying the emotional stakes of academic success.

A further 25.27% of students indicated that their friends’ opinions influenced how they studied, suggesting that peer expectations extend beyond grades to shape study habits and learning strategies. This aligns with Ryan’s (2000) work, which emphasizes that peer groups serve as contexts for the socialization of motivation, often determining whether students adopt productive or maladaptive study behaviors.

Interestingly, 18.68% of students admitted to comparing their test scores with those of friends. This reflects Festinger’s (1954) social comparison theory, which posits that individuals evaluate themselves by measuring their performance against peers. Such comparisons can foster competition and anxiety, particularly when academic identity is closely tied to self-worth.

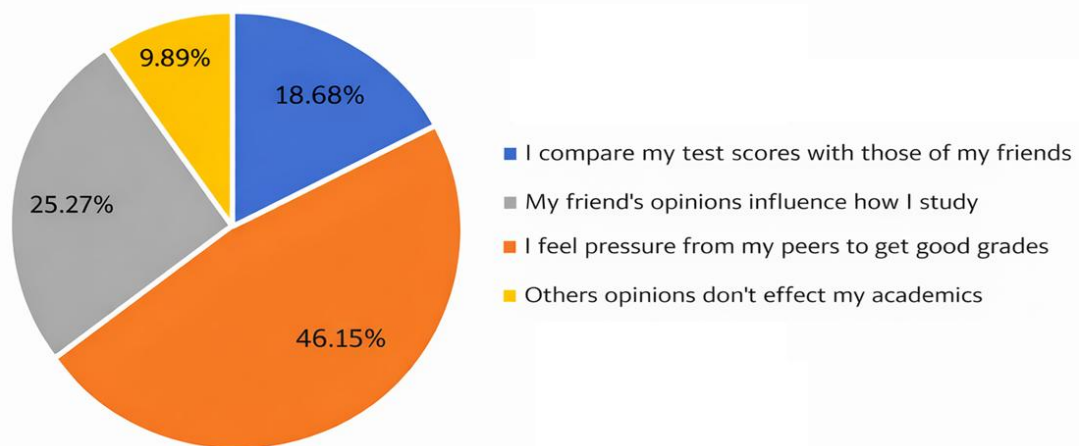


Figure 2: *Peer Pressure and Academic Influence*

Only 9.89% of students reported that others’ opinions did not affect their academics. This minority suggests that while some students maintain autonomy in their learning, most are significantly influenced by peer dynamics. The dominance of peer-driven pressure underscores Black’s (2012) point that peer groups provide both security and stress, shaping adolescents’ sense of identity and belonging.

Taken together, the findings illustrate that peer influence is not peripheral but central to students’ academic identity. Whether through direct pressure, subtle opinions, or comparisons,

peers play a decisive role in how students perceive success and failure. This reliance on peer validation may contribute to heightened stress and anxiety, reinforcing the need for educational environments that encourage intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000) and self-compassion (Neff, 2003), rather than competition alone.

But why do so many students feel this intense anxiety before exam results? What role do peers play in amplifying these emotions? The findings suggest that peer expectations are not just external pressures but internalized standards that shape how students evaluate themselves. More than half of the respondents (55.56%) reported feeling anxious before receiving exam results, underscoring how peer dynamics magnify performance-related stress. This aligns with the World Health Organization’s (2023) observation that academic stress is a major contributor to adolescent mental health challenges, often manifesting as anxiety disorders. Beck (1976) similarly noted that cognitive distortions—such as equating self-worth with grades—can intensify anxiety and depressive symptoms.

A further 33.33% of students indicated that academic expectations from peers caused them stress. This reflects Coleman’s (1961) argument that adolescents frequently adjust their performance to gain peer approval or avoid exclusion, and supports Brown, Clasen, and Eicher’s (1986) finding that explicit peer pressure often leads to conformity in academic effort. Such expectations can create a cycle where students internalize external standards, heightening vulnerability to stress and burnout.

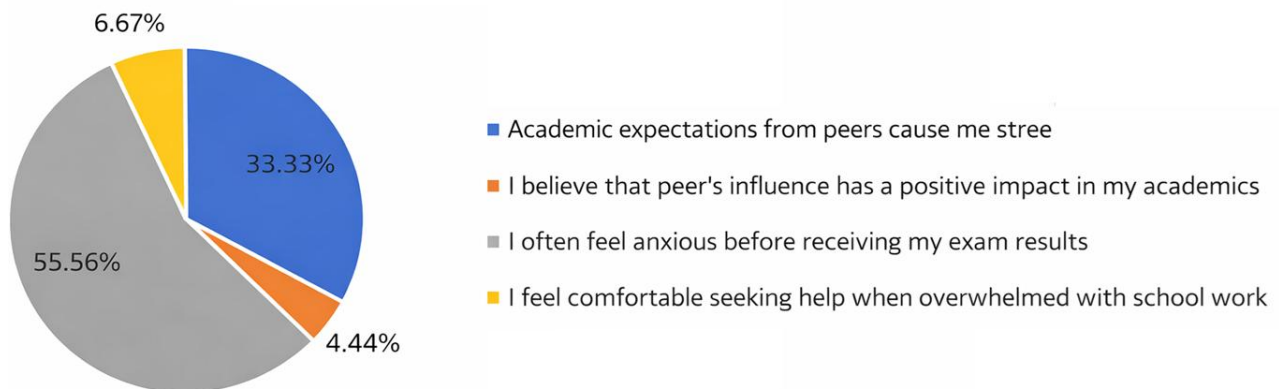


Figure 3: *Emotional Impact of Peer Pressure on Academics*

Interestingly, only 6.67% of students felt comfortable seeking help when overwhelmed, suggesting that silence and stigma remain barriers to support. Neff (2003) emphasizes that cultivating self-compassion is critical in breaking this cycle, allowing students to acknowledge struggles without equating them with failure.

Finally, a mere 4.44% believed that peer influence had a positive impact on their academics. While Ryan (2000) and Wentzel (1994) have shown that academically motivated peer groups can

foster resilience and achievement, the present data suggest that such positive influence is rare compared to the dominant pressure-driven culture.

Taken together, these results illustrate that peer expectations often function less as encouragement and more as an additional burden, contributing to heightened anxiety and stress. Left unaddressed, such pressures risk escalating into mental health challenges, including anxiety disorders and depression. The findings underscore the need for schools to cultivate supportive peer environments that emphasize collaboration, intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000), and emotional well-being alongside academic success.

Subjective Section: Coping Strategies and Dual Impacts

This study highlights the importance of overcoming the constant need for academic validation, which often leads to stress, anxiety, and even burnout. To explore this, participants were asked open-ended questions about how they cope with the pressure to seek peer approval and validation. A recurring theme in the responses was the value of setting personal goals rather than constantly comparing oneself to peers. Many students emphasized that focusing on their own progress helped reduce the negative effects of peer influence. This aligns with Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), which posits that intrinsic motivation, personal growth, and mastery enhance autonomy and well-being. By minimizing social comparisons, students reduce the harmful impact of peer pressure, as suggested by Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954).

Another frequently mentioned strategy was practicing self-compassion and positive self-talk. Respondents noted that treating themselves kindly during academic setbacks helped decrease feelings of inadequacy. This approach is supported by Self-Compassion Theory (Neff, 2003), which emphasizes resilience through kindness toward oneself, and by Cognitive Behavioral Theory (Beck, 1976), which demonstrates how reframing negative thoughts can protect mental health and reduce burnout.

Students also reflected on the dual nature of peer pressure. Many reported that positive peer influence—such as encouragement to study, participate in class, or adopt healthy routines—acted as a motivating factor that enhanced productivity and personal growth. This perspective resonates with Vygotsky’s Social Development Theory (1978), which emphasizes that supportive social interactions foster learning and development.

Conversely, participants described negative peer pressure, including excessive comparison, judgment, and competition, which led to stress, anxiety, and feelings of inadequacy. These experiences are consistent with Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954), which suggests that constant comparison undermines self-esteem and intrinsic motivation. Several respondents

highlighted the importance of distinguishing between constructive and harmful peer influence as a crucial step toward maintaining mental well-being and avoiding academic burnout.

Overall, the responses underscore that peer pressure is a double-edged phenomenon. While positive social influence can encourage growth and resilience, negative peer pressure can exacerbate stress and reliance on external validation. Understanding and navigating these influences is therefore critical for maintaining a balanced academic identity and healthy social relationships.

Insights from the Study

Academic Identity and Validation

The survey revealed that academic identity and peer pressure are closely intertwined, collectively shaping how students perceive themselves and their academic worth. A significant majority of respondents (68 out of 91) reported that their self-worth depended on academic performance. This finding reflects a deeply ingrained culture of academic validation, where grades become the dominant measure of success. Only a small number of students valued learning for its own sake, suggesting that intrinsic motivation is overshadowed by external expectations and competition.

This reliance on grades as a marker of identity aligns with Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954), which explains how individuals evaluate themselves relative to others rather than through personal growth. When academic success is pursued primarily for validation, students risk developing fragile self-concepts that are vulnerable to stress, anxiety, and diminished confidence.

Peer Influence and Emotional Impact

Peer influence was found to play a major role in reinforcing this dynamic. Many participants reported comparing their test scores with friends or feeling compelled to meet peer expectations. Such comparisons create cycles of competition and emotional strain, often discouraging vulnerability and openness. The emotional impact was evident: most students admitted to feeling anxious before receiving exam results, while only a few felt comfortable seeking help when overwhelmed. This suggests that peer pressure often functions as a silent stressor, promoting fear of failure and discouraging disclosure of struggles.

At the same time, the survey revealed instances of resilience. Some participants described coping strategies such as setting personal goals, focusing on self-improvement, and reducing comparison. These insights support Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), which emphasizes intrinsic motivation and autonomy as key factors in maintaining mental well-being.

Similarly, participants who practiced self-compassion and positive self-talk reflected the principles of Self-Compassion Theory (Neff, 2003), showing that kindness toward oneself can mitigate the negative effects of constant comparison.

Taken together, the findings illustrate that while peer pressure can occasionally foster motivation, it more commonly reinforces a culture of competition that undermines emotional health. Academic success, when pursued for validation rather than learning, risks creating a fragile sense of self-worth. Educational institutions must therefore cultivate environments that balance achievement with emotional support, encouraging collaboration, open dialogue, and self-acceptance.

Evaluating the Boundaries of the Study

While the study provides valuable insights, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the sample was restricted to a small number of schools, which constrains the generalizability of the findings. The experiences of students in different regions, school types, or cultural contexts may vary significantly, and thus, the results cannot be assumed to represent all secondary-level students. Second, the reliance on self-report surveys introduces the possibility of bias, as participants may underreport or overreport their experiences due to social desirability or fear of judgment. This limitation is particularly relevant in studies of peer pressure and academic identity, where students may feel compelled to present themselves in ways that align with perceived expectations.

Third, cultural and contextual factors unique to the participating schools may have influenced responses, limiting the applicability of results to broader populations. For instance, the emphasis on grades and academic validation may be more pronounced in certain educational systems, while others may prioritize holistic development. Without comparative data across diverse contexts, it is difficult to determine whether the observed patterns are universal or context-specific.

Additionally, the cross-sectional design of the study captures student experiences at a single point in time, which restricts the ability to examine how academic identity and peer pressure evolve across developmental stages. Longitudinal research would provide richer insights into whether reliance on academic validation decreases, intensifies, or transforms as students progress through adolescence.

Finally, while the qualitative interviews added depth to the survey findings, the scope of the interviews was limited. A broader qualitative sample could have uncovered more nuanced coping strategies or cultural variations in how students interpret peer influence.

Conclusive Remark and Future Direction

This study demonstrates that peer pressure and academic identity are deeply interconnected, exerting a significant influence on students' mental health. Many participants reported tying their self-worth to grades, a pattern that often leads to heightened stress, anxiety, and diminished confidence. While peers can sometimes inspire one another to work harder or adopt positive habits, the findings suggest that constant comparison more often generates pressure and competition rather than genuine motivation.

The results highlight the importance of shifting focus from external validation to intrinsic growth. Students benefit when they set personal goals, cultivate self-confidence, and practice self-compassion, as these strategies reduce the negative effects of peer pressure and foster resilience. Such approaches align with theoretical perspectives that emphasize autonomy, intrinsic motivation, and self-kindness as protective factors against burnout.

Equally important, teachers and schools play a pivotal role in shaping the academic environment. By fostering supportive classrooms where students feel safe to discuss their struggles, educators can help normalize vulnerability and reduce the stigma around academic setbacks. Encouraging progress over perfection, collaboration over competition, and dialogue over silence can create conditions where emotional well-being is valued alongside academic achievement.

Looking ahead, future research should explore how cultural contexts, diverse school environments, and longitudinal experiences shape the evolving relationship between academic identity, peer influence, and mental health. Educational institutions must also consider practical interventions—such as peer mentoring, resilience-building programs, and curricula that emphasize holistic development—to ensure that students form healthier, more authentic academic identities.

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Exploring the Thoughts on a Collaborative Lab as an Active Learner

Rubi Regmi

Abstract

This study explores the transformative role of friendship in adolescent development, focusing on confidence building, emotional resilience, and identity formation within collaborative learning contexts. Drawing from autoethnographic reflection and survey data among students in grades 8–10, the research highlights how peer relationships function as emotional anchors and developmental catalysts. Findings reveal that supportive friendships encourage self-expression, motivation, and resilience, while also shaping identity through shared experiences and collaborative engagement. The study situates these insights within Erikson’s psychosocial theory and contemporary scholarship on peer influence, underscoring the dual nature of friendships as both empowering and challenging. While friendships foster growth and well-being, they may also introduce pressures and competition, emphasizing the need for balanced educational interventions. Ultimately, the research affirms that identity and learning are co-constructed through social bonds and that cultivating healthy peer networks is essential for holistic adolescent development.

Keywords: *Friendship, Adolescence, Identity formation, Collaborative learning, Emotional resilience*

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Introduction

In today’s evolving educational landscape, collaborative spaces are no longer passive backdrops—they are dynamic laboratories where learners construct meaning through shared inquiry, dialogue, and reflection. Wentzel and Muenks (2016) emphasize that such environments foster motivation and academic performance by situating learning within peer relationships. As an active participant in such a lab, I have come to see learning not as a solitary pursuit but as a co-authored journey shaped by diverse voices and lived experiences. This narrative explores my

evolving thoughts within a collaborative lab setting, where vulnerability, curiosity, and collective agency converge. Through this reflection, I aim to illuminate how dialogic engagement fosters deeper understanding, personal growth, and a renewed sense of responsibility toward learning and community.

They say you become like the people you spend the most time with—and for many of us, that journey begins in school. Beneath the laughter of lunch breaks and the shared panic over homework lies something more enduring: the friendships that shape who we are. Brown and Larson (2009) argue that peer relationships are central to adolescent development, shaping both social and emotional growth. What may begin as casual greetings, inside jokes, or fleeting conversations often grows into the emotional scaffolding of our identity. As Helen Keller once said, “Walking with a friend in the dark is better than walking alone in the light.”

I’ve often paused to reflect on the impact of these friendships. The people I’ve cried with, laughed with, and grown alongside didn’t just create memories—they helped shape my character in ways I never anticipated. Delgado, Serna, Martínez, and Cruise (2022) highlight that peer relationships, supported by attachment and trust, play a critical role in shaping self-perception and emotional resilience. With each new friendship, I noticed subtle shifts in my thoughts, behaviors, and sense of self. Some friends inspired me to reach beyond my limits; others challenged my confidence. But each one, in their own way, influenced the person I’ve become.

Throughout my school life, I’ve encountered a rich tapestry of personalities: the bold and the quiet, the brilliant and the misunderstood, the deeply vulnerable and the remarkably resilient. Each carried their own strengths and flaws, leaving behind traces of their presence in my evolving identity. Güroğlu (2022) explains that friendships hold developmental significance even at the neurological level, reinforcing their role as emotional anchors during adolescence. On the days my friends were absent, I felt the quiet ache of their missing energy—a reminder of how much brighter and more meaningful school felt when they were around.

This reflection, then, is not just about friendship—it is about how collaborative relationships within educational spaces shape our emotional and intellectual growth. Tenenbaum, Winstone, Leman, and Avery (2019) demonstrate through meta-analysis that peer interaction significantly facilitates learning, underscoring the academic value of collaboration. At the same time, Crocetti (2017) and Erikson (1994) remind us that adolescence is a critical stage of identity formation, where social interactions consolidate commitments and shape self-concept. Schimmelpfennig (2025) adds that peer relationships are essential for sustaining motivation, while Ehrhardt and Schacter (2024) extend this influence to physical health outcomes, showing that friendships impact

wellbeing in multiple dimensions. In doing so, I hope to better understand how learning communities become catalysts for transformation.

Unspoken Aspects of Collaborative Learning

In many educational settings, the emotional and relational dimensions of learning—particularly the role of peer relationships—remain underexplored. While collaborative labs and dialogic spaces are increasingly recognized for their academic value, their influence on students' identity formation and emotional development is often overlooked (Wentzel & Muenks, 2016). School friendships, though seemingly informal, play a critical role in shaping learners' self-perception, motivation, and sense of belonging (Brown & Larson, 2009; Delgado, Serna, Martínez, & Cruise, 2022). This study seeks to address the gap in understanding how these interpersonal dynamics within collaborative learning environments contribute to students' evolving identities and reflective growth.

Context of the Study

This study aims to explore how active participation in collaborative learning spaces—particularly through the lens of school friendships—shapes students' personal and academic development. Drawing from lived experiences within a collaborative lab, the research investigates how peer relationships influence identity formation, emotional resilience, and reflective growth (Crocetti, 2017; Erikson, 1994).

By examining the subtle interplay between dialogic engagement and interpersonal connection, the study seeks to illuminate the emotional and cognitive impact of friendships on learners' evolving sense of self. It also considers the dual nature of these relationships—their capacity to empower, challenge, and transform—and how they shape students' choices, behaviors, and reflections over time (Schimmelpfennig, 2025).

Ultimately, this inquiry contributes to the broader discourse on student-centered learning by highlighting the transformative potential of relational dynamics in educational spaces. It advocates for a more holistic understanding of learning—one that honors the emotional architecture of collaboration and the quiet power of friendship in shaping who we become (Wentzel & Muenks, 2016).

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design grounded in narrative inquiry and reflective practice, complemented by responses to a small set of questionnaires administered among peers. At its core, the methodology embraces lived experiences within a collaborative lab setting,

using personal reflection as both a lens and a source of insight. Through autoethnographic reflection, the study explores the emotional and cognitive dimensions of school friendships, tracing how these relationships shape identity, agency, and belonging.

Data Collection

Two primary sources of data were utilized:

Dialogic self-record: Reflective entries and peer conversations were recorded to capture the subtle interplay of interpersonal influence and self-awareness. These journals served as dialogic spaces where meaning was co-constructed and revisited over time.

Questionnaires: A small set of structured questionnaires was distributed among friends to gather additional perspectives on collaborative learning, peer influence, and identity formation. These responses provided complementary insights, allowing the study to integrate both personal reflection and peer narratives.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed thematically through iterative reading and reflection. Recurring motifs—such as vulnerability, emotional resonance, relational agency, and transformation—emerged organically rather than being imposed. The integration of questionnaire responses enriched the analysis by highlighting convergences and divergences between the researcher’s reflections and peers’ perspectives, thereby strengthening the interpretive depth of the study.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical integrity was prioritized throughout the survey. Empathy and authenticity guided the collection and use of both personal reflections and peer responses. All participants were assured that their voices would be represented respectfully and confidentially. The methodology reflects a commitment to ethical storytelling, where the boundaries between self and other are navigated with care, and where the emotional architecture of learning is treated with the respect it deserves.

Narrative Reflection: Friendship and the Journey of Self-Discovery

My story may not be unique, but it reflects an experience many students encounter during their school years. For me, it all began on what seemed like an ordinary day, until my bench partner was changed. I had been sitting with the same friend for months, even years—we were inseparable, sharing secrets, laughter, and even our worries about exams. Naturally, I was upset and angry when the teacher separated us. Yet, after a few days with my new bench partner, I began to understand why. The teacher had seen something in me that I could not see in myself. I needed this change for my own growth—to step out of my comfort zone, to focus more deeply on my studies, and to

challenge myself in new ways.

Through this new friendship, I realized that being seatmates was more than simply sharing a desk; it was about supporting each other to become better versions of ourselves. My old friend was wonderful too, but I discovered that with different people, you grow and glow in different ways.

I have seen this lesson repeated in other moments of my school life. In Year IX, the pressure of exams and the constant comparisons among classmates often made me feel small. I used to be extremely shy, barely able to speak a word in class discussions. Many people tried to push me to speak up, but instead of helping, it often left me startled and afraid. I thought this was just who I was. Everything changed in sixth grade, when I met a friend who encouraged me to be more confident and even suggested I try public speaking. At first, I was uncomfortable, but because she believed in me and agreed to do it with me, I gave it a try. Slowly, I found myself doing it more often without her having to encourage me. By Year IX, I was not only answering questions in class but also volunteering to present group projects.

Friendships also shaped how I handled academic stress. During exam season, my friends and I would gather in the library or under the big tree in the schoolyard, revising together. Sometimes we laughed more than we studied, but those moments gave me courage. When I felt overwhelmed, a simple “You can do it” from a friend made all the difference. As Wentzel and Muenks (2016) explain, peer relationships often function as motivational anchors, providing emotional support and encouragement during stressful academic phases. Schimmelpfennig (2025) further emphasizes that such peer interactions are central to sustaining motivation and resilience in adolescence.

On the other hand, there were times when peer pressure made me doubt myself—like when everyone seemed to score higher marks, and I felt left behind. Yet even in those moments, I learned resilience. A friend once reminded me, “Marks don’t define you; effort does.” That sentence stayed with me and helped me rebuild my confidence. Brown and Larson (2009) note that friendships can have a dual nature, both challenging and empowering adolescents. Similarly, Delgado, Serna, Martínez, and Cruise (2022) highlight that peer relationships shape emotional resilience and self-perception, even when they involve moments of tension or comparison.

Looking back, I realize that these friendships were essential parts of my journey. They shaped not just my social life but also my confidence, my skills, and my identity. In Year IX, when the challenges of adolescence felt heavier, my friends became my anchors. They taught me that growth happens not only through textbooks but also through the bonds we form, the encouragement we share, and the lessons we learn from one another. Erikson (1994) argued that adolescence is a

critical stage of psychosocial development, where identity is formed through social interaction. Crocetti (2017) similarly observed that peer relationships play a central role in shaping identity commitments and fostering self-discovery during this period.

Survey Analysis

A quick survey was conducted among a few students in grades 8 to 10. The survey questionnaire included questions related to peer pressure and self-esteem, collaborative learning, social development, friendship in adolescents, etc. The data collected from the survey is presented below,

When asked about the role of friendship in confidence building, 80% of students responded “Yes”, while only 7% said “No” and 13% selected “Maybe.” This overwhelming majority highlights that friendships are perceived as a powerful influence on personality development and self-confidence. Peer relationships appear to function as scaffolding for self-image, providing encouragement and validation that help students navigate academic and social challenges. The small minority who disagreed or remained uncertain suggests that while friendship is generally supportive, its impact may vary depending on individual experiences or the quality of peer interactions.

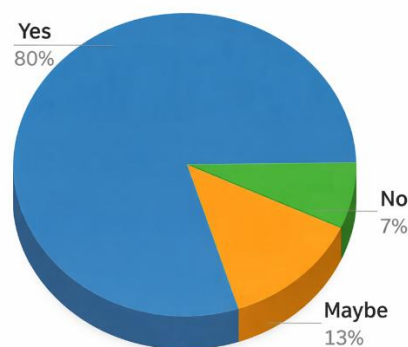


Figure 1: *Importance of friendship in confidence and personality development*

Responses to the second question revealed that 73% of students acknowledged friendship as a key factor in overcoming fear, shyness, or self-doubt, while 14% disagreed and 13% remained uncertain. This finding underscores the emotional dimension of peer relationships, showing that friends often act as informal counselors who provide reassurance during vulnerable phases. The data suggests that peer encouragement plays a critical role in emotional resilience, helping students confront insecurities and develop greater self-assurance. The minority responses, however, indicate that not all friendships offer constructive support—some students may lack peers who actively nurture confidence.

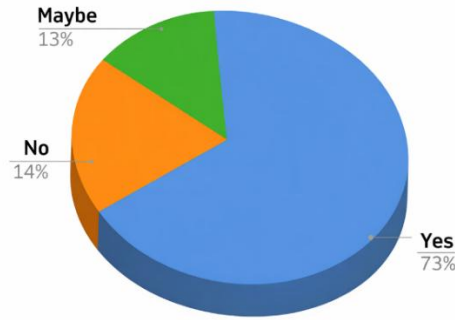


Figure 2: *Role of friendship in overcoming fear, shyness, or self-doubt*

The third question revealed that 67% of respondents felt more confident during group activities, while 20% said “No” and 13% selected “Maybe.” This demonstrates that collaborative learning environments foster active participation and shared responsibility, which in turn enhances confidence. Group work appears to reduce the fear of individual failure by distributing tasks and creating opportunities for peer validation. However, the one-fifth of students who reported no increase in confidence suggests that group dynamics can sometimes be intimidating or competitive, highlighting the need for teachers to structure collaboration carefully to ensure inclusivity.

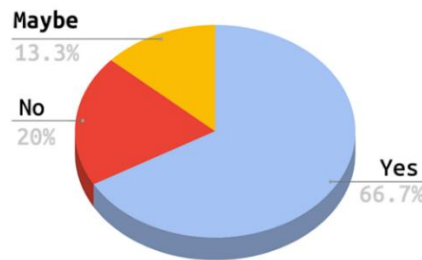


Figure 3: *Confidence during collaborative or group activities*

Finally, when asked about the role of friendship in identity formation, 60% agreed, 27% remained neutral, and 13% disagreed. This indicates that a majority of students recognize friendships as central to shaping self-perception and personal growth during adolescence. The relatively high proportion of neutral responses suggests that some students may not consciously connect friendships with identity development, even though such influences often operate subtly. The small group who disagreed may reflect students who prioritize family, academics, or individual pursuits over peer influence.

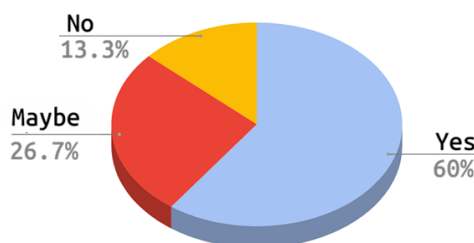


Figure 4: *Role of friendship in identity formation during adolescence*

Synthesis of Findings

Across all questions, the data consistently demonstrates that friendship is a critical factor in confidence building, emotional resilience, collaborative engagement, and identity formation. Scholars such as Brown and Larson (2009) have long emphasized that peer relationships are central to adolescent development, shaping both social and emotional growth. Similarly, Wentzel and Muenks (2016) highlight how peer interactions directly influence motivation and academic performance, reinforcing the idea that friendships extend beyond social comfort into educational outcomes.

While most students affirm the positive role of peer relationships, the presence of dissenting and neutral responses reveals that friendship is not universally empowering. Delgado, Serna, Martínez, and Cruise (2022) note that peer dynamics can vary significantly depending on the quality of relationships and the presence of supportive networks, which explains why some students may experience peer influence as challenging rather than uplifting.

Overall, the findings highlight that friendships function as both emotional anchors and developmental catalysts in adolescence. They provide encouragement, foster collaboration, and shape identity, but they can also introduce challenges when peer dynamics are competitive or unsupportive. This duality reflects Erikson's (1994) psychosocial theory, which situates adolescence as a stage of identity versus role confusion, where peer relationships play a decisive role in shaping self-concept. Crocetti (2017) further supports this by showing that identity commitments are consolidated through social interactions, underscoring the importance of cultivating healthy peer relationships within educational settings to maximize their positive influence on student growth. Schimmelpfennig (2025) adds that peer relationships are essential for sustaining motivation, making them a cornerstone of both emotional and academic development.

Insights from the study

Friendship as a Catalyst for Confidence and Emotional Growth

This reflective study highlights how friendships serve as powerful catalysts for confidence-building and emotional resilience during adolescence. My personal experience—such as the change in seatmate that initially caused hesitation but ultimately fostered growth—illustrates how new social bonds can push individuals beyond their comfort zones. These relationships encourage students to recognize hidden strengths and embrace challenges with greater self-assurance. As Wentzel and Muenks (2016) explain, peer relationships are closely tied to motivation and academic performance, while Schimmelpfennig (2025) emphasizes their role in sustaining resilience and

confidence.

Survey data reinforces this observation: 80% of respondents agreed that friendships influence personality development, while 73% reported that friends helped them overcome fear and self-doubt. Brown and Larson (2009) note that peer relationships are central to adolescent development, shaping both social and emotional growth. Similarly, Güroğlu (2022) highlights the neurological significance of friendships, showing how they act as emotional anchors during stressful phases of adolescence. These findings suggest that peer support functions as an informal yet vital mechanism for emotional development, providing encouragement during vulnerable phases and helping students confront insecurities.

Friendship and Identity Formation in Collaborative Contexts

Friendships also play a central role in shaping identity and self-perception during adolescence. The survey revealed that 67% of students felt more confident in collaborative or group activities, and 60% acknowledged the role of friendships in identity formation. Tenenbaum, Winstone, Leman, and Avery (2019) demonstrate through meta-analysis that peer interaction significantly facilitates learning, underscoring the academic value of collaboration. From a psychological perspective, Erikson (1994) situates adolescence within the stage of identity versus role confusion, where social interactions are decisive in shaping self-concept. Crocetti (2017) builds on this by showing that identity commitments are consolidated through peer relationships, while Delgado, Serna, Martínez, and Cruise (2022) emphasize that attachment and friendship quality are crucial for emotional resilience.

Friendships provide both emotional comfort and opportunities for self-expression, acting as scaffolds for students to negotiate their evolving identities. Ehrhardt and Schacter (2024) extend this understanding by demonstrating that adolescent friendships influence not only psychological development but also physical health outcomes, reinforcing their multidimensional importance.

Critical Discourse on the Study

While the findings highlight the transformative role of friendships, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the study's sample size was relatively small, which constrains the generalizability of the results. Larger and more diverse samples across different schools and cultural contexts would provide a more comprehensive understanding of peer influence. As Brown and Larson (2009) caution, peer dynamics vary widely, and not all friendships are equally supportive.

Second, the reliance on self-reported data introduces potential bias. Students may have overemphasized the positive aspects of friendship due to social desirability or underreported

negative experiences such as peer pressure, exclusion, or conflict. Delgado et al. (2022) note that peer relationships can foster both resilience and vulnerability, depending on their quality.

Third, the study primarily reflects the researcher's personal experiences and perspectives, which enrich the narrative but also risk subjectivity. While autoethnographic reflection provides depth, it may limit objectivity and balance. Integrating more peer voices through interviews or focus groups could strengthen the validity of the findings.

Finally, the study emphasizes the positive dimensions of friendship but gives less attention to its potential drawbacks. Peer relationships can also foster unhealthy competition, reinforce stereotypes, or contribute to stress when expectations are misaligned. Erikson (1994) reminds us that adolescence is a stage of identity exploration, where confusion and conflict are natural parts of development. A more balanced exploration of both constructive and harmful aspects of friendship would provide a fuller picture of its role in adolescent growth.

Conclusion

This study highlights the powerful role of friendship in shaping emotions, confidence, and identity during adolescence. Drawing from personal experiences, reflective narratives, and supporting survey data, it becomes evident that peer relationships significantly influence personal development. Transitions into new social settings—such as changes in seatmates or group dynamics—may initially cause discomfort, but they often become turning points for growth, self-discovery, and resilience (Brown & Larson, 2009; Delgado, Serna, Martínez, & Cruise, 2022).

The findings confirm that supportive peer relationships encourage healthier self-expression, stronger confidence, and a more secure sense of identity. Adolescence is a critical phase in which individuals seek belonging, self-understanding, and affirmation, and friendships serve as an essential foundation in this journey (Erikson, 1994; Crocetti, 2017). By recognizing the positive influence of peers, students can develop greater awareness of how relationships shape their values, boundaries, and future aspirations (Wentzel & Muenks, 2016; Schimmelpfennig, 2025).

This study also reinforces the idea that identity is not formed in isolation but emerges through daily interactions, shared experiences, and collective support. Collaborative learning environments, therefore, are not merely academic spaces but social ecosystems that nurture emotional needs, personality development, and holistic growth (Tenenbaum, Winstone, Leman, & Avery, 2019). At its core, the research affirms that human beings are inherently social, and meaningful learning emerges through connection, communication, and collective effort (Güroğlu, 2022; Ehrhardt & Schacter, 2024).

Future Directions and Recommendations

While this study provides valuable insights into the role of friendship in confidence building, emotional resilience, and identity formation, it also opens pathways for deeper exploration. Future research should expand the sample size and diversity, including students from different schools, cultural contexts, and age levels. Such breadth would allow for a more comprehensive understanding of how peer relationships function across varied environments and developmental stages (Brown & Larson, 2009; Delgado et al., 2022).

Longitudinal approaches are also essential. Tracking students over time would reveal how friendships evolve and how their influence on identity formation changes as adolescents transition into adulthood (Crocetti, 2017; Erikson, 1994). This would provide richer insights into whether peer support remains consistent, diminishes, or transforms with age and shifting social contexts. Equally important is the need to examine the negative dimensions of friendship. While this study emphasizes positive peer influence, friendships can also foster exclusion, unhealthy competition, or negative pressure (Delgado et al., 2022; Schimmelpfennig, 2025). Exploring these aspects would provide a more balanced perspective, acknowledging that peer relationships can both empower and challenge students' emotional well-being.

In addition, future research should investigate educational interventions that intentionally harness the positive potential of friendships. Schools could design collaborative spaces, peer mentoring programs, and dialogic activities that encourage supportive peer networks while minimizing harmful dynamics (Wentzel & Muenks, 2016; Tenenbaum et al., 2019). Such interventions would not only strengthen academic engagement but also promote emotional resilience and healthier identity development (Güroğlu, 2022; Ehrhardt & Schacter, 2024).

By pursuing these directions, future studies can deepen our understanding of the dual role of friendships in adolescence—both as sources of empowerment and as potential challenges. More importantly, they can provide educators with actionable strategies to foster inclusive, supportive, and transformative learning environments where students thrive both academically and emotionally.

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Beyond the Uniform: Identity, Change, and Expression in the Lives of Year IX Students

Anuva Subedi

Abstract

Adolescence is a formative stage marked by identity exploration, social change, and emotional growth. This study investigates how students experience perfectionism and self-expression within the structured environment of school. Using a self-narrative approach, the study draws on autoethnographic reflection and informal peer conversations to capture lived experiences. Findings reveal three central themes: fear of criticism, identity confusion, and resilience through imperfection. Perfectionism often manifests as anxiety, stress, and self-doubt, reinforced by societal, familial, and educational expectations. Yet, students also demonstrate that mistakes can foster authenticity, creativity, and confidence. The metaphor of the “uniform” illustrates how institutional sameness can obscure individuality, while imperfections allow students’ true selves to emerge. The study contributes to broader debates on adolescent identity and critical pedagogy. It calls for educational practices that value effort, vulnerability, and emotional well-being alongside academic achievement.

Keywords: *Adolescence, Perfectionism, Identity Formation, Resilience, Critical Reflection*

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Introduction

Adolescence is often described as a time of discovery, inquiry, and gradual change. In the ordinary setting of school, students experience transformations not only intellectually, but also socially, emotionally, and personally. For Year IX students, these changes appear in both subtle and obvious ways. They are asked to follow rules, wear uniforms, attend classes, and complete homework, yet beneath these routines, each student is quietly shaping their own identity. This study explores how Year IX students express themselves and build identity during this transitional stage.

The metaphor of the “uniform” is central: while uniforms promote equality and discipline, they can also blur individuality. The question becomes: how do students show who they truly are in a place that values sameness?

Most Year IX students are forging new interests, beliefs, and ways of presenting themselves. These variations, though subtle, form the early foundations of identity. Personally, I’ve noticed that parts of my personality—my taste in music, how I solve problems, or what matters most to me—rarely appear in the classroom or in a school uniform. Friends often share this feeling: that there is more to them than what is visible in assemblies or classes. This shared sense inspired me to explore how we, as students, define ourselves in school.

Psychologists such as Erik Erikson (1968) describe adolescence as a stage of identity vs. role confusion, when individuals search for who they are beyond roles imposed by others. Later scholars, including Carol Gilligan and James Marcia, emphasize that identity formation is ongoing, shaped by relationships, expectations, and reflection (Kroger, 2017). Within schools, this process can be supported or suppressed depending on how much space is given for voice and individuality. While most studies focus on grades and behavior, fewer examine the inner emotional and psychological journeys of students (Chęć et al., 2025).

The purpose of this study is to capture those quieter, personal aspects of Year IX life—experiences not reflected in grades or reports. It asks: What parts of ourselves do we show, and what do we hide? What values are we building, and how are they shaped by family, culture, peers, and school? Using informal conversations with peers, I gathered reflections and analyzed recurring themes. Though not representative of all Year IX students, these voices offer insight into the lives of many who were willing to share (Goswami & Baksi, 2025).

Ultimately, this study is a compilation of candid voices—sometimes confident, sometimes uncertain, but always genuine. It reflects the complexity of adolescence in today’s schools, portraying how students balance belonging with individuality. Readers are invited to step into our shoes, to see not just the uniform but the unique selves beneath it (Sohn, 2024).

Perfectionism and the Adolescent Struggle for Worth

As I started to think about why I wanted to make this study, I realized that one of the biggest challenges we have as students is not so much homework or exams, but the expectation of perfection. The perception that we are expected to always get perfect scores, never fail, never make mistakes, and always meet every expectation weighs heavily on us. To most people, this burden is equivalent to lugging around an unseen backpack that is heavier than the books we bring with us to school.

Society, family, schools, and even social media reinforce this pressure. Online, we share awards and rankings; teachers warn us about exams that “decide our future”; parents compare us with neighbors. Over time, these expectations become overwhelming, and anything less than perfection feels unacceptable. The effects are real, though often hidden. Stress and anxiety become part of daily life, as perfectionism has been shown to act as a catalyst for anxiety and burnout among students (Goswami & Baksi, 2025). Some friends lose sleep before exams, others cry silently over a single lost mark. I, too, have felt the sinking disappointment of mediocre performance. And it’s not only about grades—it extends to sports, appearance, and confidence. Many of us begin to believe our worth depends solely on perfection, not on who we truly are (Sohn, 2024).

This problem is both personal and systemic. Families and schools often praise only the “top achievers,” overlooking effort, improvement, or creativity. This reinforces the belief that we are defined by report cards rather than by our growth (Chęć et al., 2025).

Reimagining Success: *Emotional Balance in Schools*

Perfectionism is not just an academic issue—it affects mental health. Nepal’s education system, like many others, focuses heavily on outcomes: percentages, rankings, and positions. Yet little attention is given to the hidden cost of chasing these numbers—our psychological well-being (Sohn, 2024). Understanding how perfectionism impacts students emotionally allows us to find ways to reduce its harm. For students, this study is reassuring, as it shows we are not alone in feeling overwhelmed (Goswami & Baksi, 2025). For teachers, it suggests new approaches—valuing creativity and mistakes as part of learning. Parents can be encouraged to praise effort rather than only results. Curriculum designers might even include space for reflection and mental health in courses (Paesani & Menke, 2025).

This study matters because it combines personal experiences with peers’ voices, making it authentic. It is not just theory from a textbook—it is the lived reality of Year IX students in Nepal today. By sharing these reflections, this study contributes to ongoing discussions about student life, perfectionism, and identity (Kroger, 2017).

Methodology

For this study, I adopted a qualitative, self-narrative inquiry approach, as my focus was on lived experiences rather than statistics. To explore the pressures of perfectionism, I used autoethnography, reflecting openly on my own struggles with constantly striving to be “perfect.” This personal lens allowed me to connect theory with the everyday realities of student life.

In addition, I engaged in informal conversations with a few peers, asking casual questions about how they cope with school pressure. Their responses revealed diverse strategies: some admitted staying up late to rehearse so as not to disappoint parents, while others described masking nervousness during assemblies. These were not formal interviews but candid exchanges, which I later analyzed for recurring themes.

To examine these reflections, I looked for patterns such as repeated mentions of stress, fear of failure, and moments where small mistakes became growth opportunities. My analysis was guided by theoretical frameworks, including Erikson's stage of identity vs. role confusion and the concept of self-authorship, which explains how adolescents gradually develop their own sense of identity despite external expectations.

This combination of auto-ethnography and peer narratives provided a layered understanding of perfectionism among Year IX students. It highlighted both the personal dimension—my own lived struggle—and the collective dimension, as shared through peers' voices. Together, these perspectives form the foundation of this journal's inquiry into identity, pressure, and self-expression.

Narrative reflection: *Identity, Vulnerability, and Resilience*

I recall one particular time in school that reminded me of the heavy weight of perfectionism. I had put a great deal of effort into a project and believed I had done nearly everything correctly. When the feedback came, instead of noticing all the things I had achieved, my attention was drawn instantly to the one minor flaw that was pointed out. It didn't matter that I had performed better than ever before; I felt like I had failed. That single comment overshadowed all the progress I had made.

In conversations with my friends, I discovered that many of them carry the same burden. One friend explained that she becomes anxious if her notebook isn't arranged neatly, even when her answers are correct. Another admitted that he avoids participating in class discussions because he fears making a mistake in front of everyone. These examples confirmed for me that perfectionism is not only about grades—it extends to how we present ourselves, how we imagine others perceive us, and the fear of even the smallest error.

Perfectionism shows up in subtle ways. A classmate once told me that she rewrites her notes multiple times, not because she doesn't understand the content, but because she feels her handwriting must look flawless. Another friend confessed that she spends hours rehearsing speeches for assemblies, terrified that a single stumble will make her look unprepared. These

behaviors reveal how deeply the expectation of perfection shapes our daily routines. It is not simply about academic achievement; it is about the image we project and the silent pressure to appear “perfect” in every aspect of school life.

Over time, however, I began to realize that mistakes are not always an adversary. One day, during a group performance, I completely forgot my lines and had to improvise. At first, I was embarrassed, convinced that I had ruined the presentation. But later, my teacher told me that my honesty and natural reaction added more authenticity than if I had delivered a rehearsed speech. That moment taught me that our faults can contribute to our sincerity—and often, sincerity is what people value most. Talking with peers reinforced this idea. One friend shared how she once mispronounced a word in a debate competition. She thought it would ruin her performance, but the judges appreciated her confidence and ability to continue without hesitation.

Reflecting on these experiences, I see how perfectionism is both personal and systemic. Personally, it makes us doubt ourselves, asking questions like: *Am I enough? Am I only my report card?* Systemically, schools and families often reinforce perfectionism by praising only the highest achievers. This creates a culture where effort, imagination, and improvement are overlooked, a pattern consistent with findings that perfectionism often acts as a catalyst for anxiety and burnout in students (Goswami & Baksi, 2025).

Yet, within these struggles, there are lessons. Perfectionism teaches us discipline, but it also teaches us vulnerability. It reminds us that identity is not built on flawless performance, but on how we respond to challenges. As Erikson (1968) noted, adolescence is a stage of identity exploration, where role confusion can easily arise if self-worth is tied only to achievement. For Year IX students, this stage of life is about experimenting, failing, and trying again. It is about discovering that mistakes can be part of growth, not proof of inadequacy (Chęć et al., 2025).

This reflection connects directly to the purpose of my study. By narrating these lived experiences—my own and those of my peers—I aim to show that perfectionism is not just an abstract psychological concept. It is a daily reality that shapes how we think, act, and feel in school. It influences our identity, our confidence, and our relationships (Kroger, 2017). And yet, by recognizing its impact, we can begin to challenge it. We can learn to value sincerity over flawlessness, effort over outcomes, and growth over perfection (Paesani & Menke, 2025).

Ultimately, this narrative is not only about the burden of perfectionism but also about the possibility of transformation. Beneath the uniform, each student carries unique stories of struggle and resilience. By sharing these voices, we remind ourselves—and our teachers, parents, and communities—that identity is not defined by perfection, but by authenticity (Sohn, 2024).

Insights from the Narrative Reflection

1. Fear of Criticism and the Pressure of Constant Surveillance

One of the most striking insights from the reflection is how perfectionism creates a persistent fear of criticism. Students often feel as though they are under constant surveillance—watched by teachers, peers, and even parents—where every small mistake could be magnified. This sense of being observed leads to anxiety, hesitation, and self-censorship. Research confirms that perfectionism is closely linked to heightened stress and anxiety in adolescence (Goswami & Baksi, 2025). For instance, some students avoid speaking in class because they fear public embarrassment, while others obsess over the neatness of their notebooks or the precision of their handwriting. These behaviors reveal that perfectionism is not only about academic scores but also about self-presentation. The fear of criticism becomes internalized, shaping how students perceive themselves and how they interact with others. At the Year IX level, this pressure is particularly intense because adolescence is already a time of heightened self-awareness (Erikson, 1968). The constant worry about being judged prevents students from experimenting, asking questions, or taking risks—all of which are essential for learning. Thus, perfectionism transforms school into a stage where students perform for approval rather than a space where they can freely explore and grow.

2. Identity Confusion and the Narrow Definition of Success

Another key insight is that perfectionism contributes to identity confusion. When students begin to equate their worth solely with grades, rankings, or flawless performances, they lose sight of their broader strengths and individuality. Identity becomes narrowly defined by external measures of success rather than internal values, creativity, or resilience. Kroger (2017) emphasizes that identity formation in adolescence is an ongoing process shaped by relationships and reflection, yet perfectionism narrows this process to achievement alone. For example, a student who excels in art or sports may still feel inadequate if their academic scores are not “perfect.” This confusion is intensified by societal and familial expectations, where praise is often reserved for the “top achievers” (Sohn, 2024). As a result, students may start questioning their self-worth: Am I only my report card? Am I enough if I am not perfect? Such questions reflect the struggle between external validation and internal identity formation. At the Year IX stage, when adolescents are actively shaping their sense of self, this conflict can be damaging. Instead of embracing diverse talents and interests, students may suppress them to fit into a narrow mold of success. This insight highlights the need for schools and families to broaden their definitions of achievement, valuing effort, creativity, and personal growth alongside academic excellence (Chęć et al., 2025).

3. Resilience Through Imperfection and the Value of Authenticity

The most transformative insight is that resilience can emerge from imperfection. Mistakes, rather than being signs of weakness, can become opportunities for growth and authenticity. The reflection illustrates this through moments when errors—such as forgetting lines in a performance or miscalculating in a science experiment—led to unexpected learning. Teachers and peers often respond positively to sincerity and adaptability, showing that authenticity is valued more than flawless execution (Paesani & Menke, 2025). This realization allows students to reframe their relationship with failure: instead of fearing mistakes, they can see them as stepping stones toward confidence and innovation. At the Year IX level, this shift is crucial because adolescence is a time of experimentation (Erikson, 1968). By embracing imperfection, students learn to take risks, express themselves honestly, and develop resilience in the face of challenges. A useful metaphor is the broken clay pot: while cracks may seem like weaknesses, they allow light to shine through, revealing strength and beauty. Similarly, imperfections allow students' true selves to radiate. This insight suggests that schools should create environments where mistakes are normalized as part of learning, encouraging students to be adventurous, reflective, and authentic (Sohn, 2024).

Critical Discourse and Study Limitations

Perfectionism among adolescents must be understood not only as an individual struggle but also as a product of wider educational and cultural discourses. Schools often emphasize measurable outcomes—grades, rankings, and awards—as the primary indicators of success. This discourse privileges performance over process, reinforcing the belief that identity is tied to achievement (Kroger, 2017). Families and communities, influenced by social comparison and digital culture, further perpetuate the narrative that “perfection” is the standard (Sohn, 2024). Such discourses marginalize creativity, emotional resilience, and authenticity, leaving students vulnerable to stress and identity confusion (Chęć et al., 2025).

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study. The insights presented here are drawn from a small set of personal reflections and informal peer conversations. While these narratives are valuable for illustrating lived experiences, they cannot claim to represent the full diversity of Year IX students or broader adolescent populations. The validity of the findings is therefore constrained by the limited sample size and the subjective nature of autoethnography (Goswami & Baksi, 2025). Nevertheless, these accounts highlight critical themes that resonate with existing psychological theories and educational debates.

Critical pedagogy suggests that education should challenge dominant norms by valuing

imperfection as part of learning. By reframing mistakes as opportunities, schools can resist the narrative of flawless achievement and instead cultivate spaces where students' voices, vulnerabilities, and diverse strengths are recognized (Paesani & Menke, 2025). Thus, perfectionism must be seen not merely as a psychological issue but as a cultural construct requiring systemic transformation—while future studies should expand the scope to include larger, more diverse student populations for greater validity.

Conclusion and Future Direction

This study demonstrates that perfectionism plays a significant role in shaping the psychological and emotional well-being of Year IX students. While it often produces anxiety, stress, and diminished self-esteem, it also has the paradoxical potential to foster resilience. Three central lessons emerged from the narratives: first, perfectionism cultivates fear of judgment, creating the sense that students are constantly observed and evaluated; second, it contributes to identity confusion, narrowing self-worth to achievements alone while obscuring individual strengths; and third, imperfections, when embraced, can become sources of strength, opening pathways to authenticity, creativity, and courage.

The metaphor of the cracked clay pot captures this transformation vividly. At first, cracks appear as flaws, but when light passes through them, they reveal warmth and beauty. Similarly, students' vulnerabilities allow their authentic selves to shine. Accepting flaws is not a sign of weakness but a step toward freedom, imagination, and self-acceptance.

The findings suggest that education must aim beyond grades and rankings, toward cultivating emotional balance and holistic growth. Schools should create safe spaces where students can be vulnerable without fear of punishment. Teachers can design opportunities for trial-and-error learning, valuing creativity and effort alongside outcomes. Parents, too, can shift their focus from results to persistence and improvement, while peers can support one another by celebrating honesty and resilience rather than perfection.

Looking ahead, future research could explore how perfectionism manifests across different cultural contexts, or how digital tools—such as reflective journaling platforms or AI-based study companions—might help students process their experiences more constructively. Such studies would deepen our understanding of how identity and resilience are shaped in adolescence. For now, the message is clear: behind every uniform is a student who longs to be seen not as flawless, but as human. Recognizing this truth is the first step toward building an education system that values authenticity, nurtures resilience, and empowers students to grow into their fullest selves.

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AI tutors and ChatGPT: Are we really understanding or just copying?

Shreeyansha Gautam

Abstract

This study explores the role of AI in learning, focusing on its impact on understanding, retention, confidence, and overall study habits. Using observational and reflective methods, the study examined how students interact with AI tools while completing assignments and learning new concepts. The findings reveal that AI provides quick guidance, simplifies complex topics, and boosts confidence, making learning more accessible. However, it also encourages over-reliance, reduces opportunities for independent practice, and can foster a comfort-seeking approach that limits discipline and deep learning. The study highlights the need to balance AI use with traditional learning practices, emphasizing reflection, self-practice, and resilience. Thoughtful integration of AI can enhance learning without compromising personal growth or critical thinking.

Keywords: *Artificial Intelligence, ChatGPT, Critical Thinking, Deep Learning, Self-Reflections*

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Introduction

I still remember how learning used to feel just a few years ago: memorize, write, and eventually forget. That was the cycle most of us followed in school. We focused more on remembering the right answers than on understanding what they meant. But lately, something has been shifting. With the new curriculum and the growing presence of technology, learning feels different now. According to Gabut et al. (2026), students who engage in deep learning strategies—such as reflecting on concepts and applying knowledge—tend to achieve stronger academic performance in science compared to those who rely mainly on rote recall.

At the same time, outside the classroom, another change is happening. Many of us have started turning to digital tools, especially AI, when we're stuck. One of the most common is ChatGPT. I won't lie, AI has helped me understand things I couldn't grasp in class. Whether it's

solving a tricky math problem or understanding a tough chapter in science, I've relied on it often. Bettayeb et al. (2024) note that conversational AI like ChatGPT often provides clear, structured answers that make learning feel easier and more accessible, which explains why the responses I received felt both immediate and sensible.

But over time, I began to wonder: are we really thinking deeper, applying ideas, and actually learning? Or are we just getting used to copying better and easier answers from AI? It started to feel like we were all caught in the middle of a shift—between old ways of learning and the new. We're expected to be independent, critical thinkers. But with technology at our fingertips, are we really becoming more independent... or just more dependent (Hassen, 2025)?

That's what made me want to explore how AI is really affecting the way we learn today. As someone growing up in this digital age, surrounded by screens, apps, and search engines, a question that stayed with me till the very end of the study was: Is AI helping us grow as learners or changing the meaning of learning itself? Is it replacing the need for actual learning? This study explores that confusion. We're living in a time where learning feels like it's changing. AI tutors like ChatGPT are fast, accurate, and always available (Munaye et al., 2025). But I sometimes miss the feeling of struggling through a chapter and finally understanding it on my own. It made me question: Is convenience replacing effort? Are we depending on AI too much? And most of all—how do I know when I'm actually understanding something, and not just copying it down (Gabut et al., 2026)?

Rethinking Learning in the Age of AI Beyond Homework

"It was 10 PM. My science book stared back at me. I had a test the next day, and nothing made sense. I was too tired to read, but I wasn't too tired to type: 'Explain the difference between force and pressure in depth'. Seconds later, ChatGPT answered, and I finally got the hang of it by just lying down on my bed".

Although this little incident may not seem like much, it reflects a larger shift in how students are learning today. With the rapid rise of digital tools and AI platforms, education is moving beyond textbooks and traditional classrooms (Asgar, 2025).

Despite the increasing popularity of AI-powered tools like ChatGPT among students, there remains a noticeable gap in understanding how these platforms are truly shaping the way we learn. While they offer instant answers and simplified explanations, it's unclear whether they're helping us deeply understand concepts or just making it easier to get through homework (Bettayeb et al., 2024). Speaking from experience, it often feels like a shortcut—convenient, yes, but maybe too convenient. In Nepal, where digital literacy is still developing and critical thinking is a major goal of the curriculum, it becomes important to ask not just how students are using AI, but why and

what that means for real learning (Munaye et al., 2025). Right now, there's a lack of student-driven reflections on this shift—how it's affecting our habits, how we approach problems, and whether we're truly learning or just relying on smarter tools (Hassen, 2025).

Student Voices in the Age of AI

As students, we are often the ones most affected by changes in education, but our voices are rarely heard when decisions are made about learning. This study offers a glimpse into how students like me are navigating the rise of AI in our everyday study routines. By reflecting on my own learning habits and those of my peers, I hope to highlight both the support and the challenges that come with relying on digital tools like ChatGPT (Gabut et al., 2026). These personal insights can help teachers, curriculum developers, and researchers better understand what's really happening behind the scenes—how students are processing information, where critical thinking may be growing or slipping, and how technology is quietly reshaping learning (Hassen, 2025). In a time when Nepal's education system is shifting toward deeper understanding and skill-based learning, it's important to listen to student experiences. Only then can reforms truly respond to the needs of those they're meant to serve (Munaye et al., 2025).

Exploring Student Experiences with AI in Learning: Objective and Research Focus

The main objective of this study is to explore how students like me are experiencing the growing use of AI tools, such as ChatGPT, in our everyday learning routines. This study aims to reflect on the benefits and challenges of using such technology, focusing on how it affects understanding, motivation, and critical thinking (Bettayeb et al., 2024). It also seeks to capture the ways students adapt to new learning methods as Nepal's education system shifts toward deeper, skill-based learning (Asgar, 2025). By sharing personal experiences and observations, this study hopes to provide useful insights for teachers, curriculum developers, and researchers, helping them better understand student perspectives (Panke, 2025). Ultimately, the goal is to show how technology is shaping the way students learn today and to encourage educational reforms that truly meet students' needs (Munaye et al., 2025).

Methodology

This study draws upon a combination of informal surveys, peer conversations, and personal reflections to explore how students are engaging with AI tools such as ChatGPT in their everyday learning routines. Rather than adopting a strictly formal research design, the approach is intentionally reflective and student-centered, aiming to capture lived experiences and authentic perspectives. Panke (2025) emphasizes that autoethnographic and reflective approaches are

valuable for exploring how generative AI shapes both teaching and learning, which aligns with the design of this study.

Information was gathered through casual discussions with classmates, friends, and family members, supplemented by short surveys that provided insight into common patterns of use. These interactions revealed that many students rely on ChatGPT not only for homework and exam preparation but also for tasks such as speech writing, debates, and school projects. Bettayeb et al. (2024) similarly note that conversational AI is increasingly embedded in academic practices, offering structured explanations that students find accessible.

Alongside these peer accounts, I critically examined my own daily use of ChatGPT. This autoethnographic element allowed me to reflect on how AI tools shape my study habits, motivation, and understanding of concepts. By situating personal experiences within the broader context of peer narratives, the methodology captures both individual differences and shared tendencies. Asgar (2025) highlights that examining AI tutoring systems across contexts reveals both common patterns and diverse impacts, reinforcing the importance of blending personal reflection with peer perspectives.

Importantly, this reflective approach acknowledges its limitations. The reliance on informal surveys and conversations means the findings are not statistically representative; however, they provide valuable qualitative insights into how students perceive and integrate AI into their learning. Munaye et al. (2025) argue that while AI offers opportunities for accessibility and motivation, systematic reviews also reveal challenges of dependency and uneven adoption. The blending of personal reflection with peer perspectives therefore offers a nuanced view of how technology is quietly reshaping thinking, creativity, and study practices in Nepal's evolving educational landscape.

Narrative Reflection: *AI as Ally, Not Replacement*

One of the most meaningful changes in my learning did not arrive with a sudden breakthrough; it unfolded quietly, almost invisibly, through the small habits I began to form. In the past, when I struggled with a topic, I would sit with it for hours, wrestling with textbooks, class notes, and my own reasoning. That long pause—sometimes frustrating, sometimes rewarding—was part of the process. Today, that pause has shortened. Confusion rarely lingers because AI often steps in immediately. While this shift feels efficient, it has also made me reflect deeply on how my learning process has changed.

At first, using ChatGPT felt empowering. Concepts that once seemed tangled became

clearer, explanations were neatly structured, and learning felt less stressful. In science, especially, where understanding processes and relationships matters more than memorizing definitions, AI fills gaps left by rushed classroom explanations. I remember struggling with the difference between force and pressure—a topic that had confused me for weeks. A quick conversation with ChatGPT broke it down into simple analogies, and suddenly the idea clicked. That moment gave me the confidence to approach topics that had previously intimidated me. For a while, it felt as though learning had finally become easier, almost effortless.

But as I looked more closely at my academic outcomes, a different realization emerged. During times when I relied less on AI and worked independently, my understanding felt stronger, and my performance improved. I could recall ideas more vividly and apply them in new contexts. In contrast, when I leaned heavily on AI, learning felt faster but less personal. The knowledge did not stay with me for long—it skimmed the surface rather than sinking deep. This made me reconsider something teachers often warn us about: that over-reliance on AI can weaken our thinking skills. I used to dismiss this as an exaggeration, but now I see the truth in it.

Observing my peers reinforced this realization. Some of my friends, who use AI sparingly, seem to grasp core concepts more deeply. In group discussions, they can apply ideas flexibly, connecting them to different situations rather than repeating pre-packaged answers. Their learning feels rooted, not borrowed. I recall one debate practice where a friend explained Newton's laws using everyday examples from sports, while I leaned on AI-generated phrasing. His explanation felt alive and convincing, while mine sounded polished but detached. That contrast made it clear: understanding grows through effort, not convenience. AI can assist, but it cannot replace the mental struggle that builds real learning.

Through these experiences, I have come to realize that true learning is not just about arriving at the correct answer. It is about forming ideas, questioning explanations, and developing confidence in one's own thinking. Gabut et al. (2026) emphasize that students who adopt deep learning strategies—such as reflecting on concepts and applying knowledge—achieve stronger academic performance compared to those who rely on rote recall. AI can guide that process, but it should not control it. Recognizing this has helped me become more aware of how I learn, not just what I learn. I now notice the difference between moments when I am truly understanding and moments when I am merely copying. That awareness, I believe, is one of the most valuable lessons this journey has given me.

In the context of Nepal's education system, where the curriculum increasingly emphasizes critical thinking and skill-based learning, this reflection feels especially relevant. Hassen (2025)

argues that while AI can support comprehension, over-reliance risks weakening critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Many students, including myself, are caught between the convenience of digital shortcuts and the deeper struggle of independent thought. My journey shows that while AI can be a powerful ally, it must be balanced with effort, curiosity, and persistence. Munaye et al. (2025) similarly highlight that AI tools offer opportunities for accessibility and motivation but must be consciously integrated to avoid dependency. Only then can technology support—not replace—the human process of learning.

Insights from the Study

AI as a Catalyst for Accessible Learning

The study highlights how AI tools, particularly ChatGPT, are reshaping the way students approach learning. For many, AI provides immediate clarity on confusing topics, reducing stress and making knowledge more accessible. Bettayeb et al. (2024) observe that conversational AI often delivers structured explanations that students find relatable, which helps them overcome barriers in subjects like science and mathematics. This aligns with Nepal’s curriculum shift toward deeper understanding and skill-based learning. However, this accessibility also raises questions about the nature of learning itself. Asgar (2025) notes that while AI tutoring systems can enhance comprehension, they risk turning learning into a process of consumption rather than exploration. The purpose of this reflection is not to dismiss AI, but to understand how it can serve as a supportive ally. By recognizing both its strengths and limitations, students can use AI to complement—not replace—their own critical thinking and effort.

The Risk of Over-Reliance

A recurring concern in the study is the problem of over-reliance on AI. Students often find themselves leaning on ChatGPT for instant answers, which shortens the struggle traditionally associated with learning. Munaye et al. (2025) caution that while AI offers opportunities for accessibility and motivation, dependency can weaken long-term retention and reduce opportunities for independent reasoning. The narrative reflection shows that knowledge gained through AI sometimes “skims the surface” rather than sinking deep, leaving students less confident when applying ideas in new contexts. Gabut et al. (2026) provide evidence that deep learning strategies—such as reflection and application—lead to stronger academic performance compared to surface-level approaches, reinforcing the risks of shortcut learning. This problem is particularly relevant in Nepal, where critical thinking is a central goal of the evolving curriculum. Addressing this challenge requires balancing AI use with persistence, curiosity, and independent problem-solving.

AI as Ally, Not Replacement

The narrative reflection emphasizes that true learning is not just about arriving at the correct answer but about questioning, connecting, and owning knowledge. Hassen (2025) argues that while AI can support comprehension, over-reliance risks weakening critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Students who balance AI support with independent effort report stronger outcomes, both academically and personally. The reflection also reveals how awareness of one's own learning habits is crucial: recognizing when understanding is genuine versus when it is borrowed from AI. In Nepal's context, where education reforms aim to foster skill-based and reflective learning, this insight is particularly valuable. Munaye et al. (2025) similarly highlight that AI should be framed as an ally—an accessible tutor that supports exploration—rather than a replacement for effort. By cultivating this balance, students can harness technology to enhance learning while preserving the human qualities of curiosity, persistence, and critical thought.

Critical Discourse and Study Limitations

AI offers undeniable benefits, but critics argue that it risks creating a generation of passive learners. Hassen (2025) points out that the convenience of instant answers can erode patience, perseverance, and the ability to wrestle with complex problems. Instead of fostering creativity, AI may encourage conformity, as students often reproduce polished but generic responses. Furthermore, reliance on AI can blur the line between genuine understanding and superficial familiarity, leaving learners ill-prepared for tasks that demand originality or critical thought. Bettayeb et al. (2024) also caution that AI tools, though powerful, are not infallible—they can misrepresent information or oversimplify nuanced concepts. Without careful guidance, students risk mistaking convenience for mastery. Thus, the challenge lies not in rejecting AI, but in using it responsibly—balancing its support with the discipline of independent inquiry.

While this study offers valuable insights into how students are experiencing AI in their learning routines, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. The research relied primarily on peer conversations and personal reflections rather than formal, statistically representative methods. Panke (2025) validates reflective and autoethnographic approaches for exploring AI in education, but also notes their subjective nature. As a result, the findings capture qualitative perspectives but cannot be generalized to all students in Nepal or beyond. The size of the information was small and drawn mostly from peers within similar educational contexts, which may limit the diversity of experiences. Additionally, the reflective approach means that interpretations are influenced by personal biases and subjective observations. The study also focused specifically on ChatGPT, leaving out other AI tools that may shape learning differently. Despite these limitations, the

narratives provide meaningful insights into student voices, highlighting patterns and concerns that can inform future, more comprehensive research.

Conclusive Remark and Future Direction

This study set out to examine whether the increasing use of AI tutors such as ChatGPT enhances genuine understanding or encourages surface-level learning among students. Through reflective analysis of personal experiences and peer observations, it explored how AI influences comprehension, independence, and academic confidence. Bettayeb et al. (2024) note that conversational AI can be a powerful ally—clarifying complex concepts and reducing stress—but it also carries the risk of fostering dependency. Learning achieved through constant AI assistance often feels faster but less meaningful, with weaker long-term retention. In contrast, Gabut et al. (2026) show that independent effort and deep learning strategies promote stronger understanding, flexible application of ideas, and greater confidence.

The central insight is clear: true learning develops through active struggle, questioning, and reflection. AI should therefore be integrated as a supportive guide, not a substitute for thinking. Looking ahead, Munaye et al. (2025) suggest that future research should expand beyond personal reflections to include diverse student populations, formal surveys, and comparative studies across different AI platforms. Such work would provide richer evidence on how technology is reshaping education in Nepal and beyond. Ultimately, the challenge is not whether to use AI, but how to use it responsibly—balancing convenience with effort, and ensuring that critical thinking and intellectual growth remain at the heart of learning.

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