Psychological Analysis of Young Adults' Social Emotions under Group Emotional Pressure

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ABSTRACT

Group emotional pressure, defined as the emotional social pressure perceived by individuals within group contexts, has become a critical variable for understanding contemporary young adults' social emotional difficulties. This paper first delineates the concept of group emotional pressure and systematically reviews analytical frameworks including social comparison theory, emotional contagion theory, and Le Bon's group psychology theory. It then reveals three core psychological mechanisms through which group emotional pressure shapes young adults' social emotions: anxiety arousal triggered by social comparison, emotional assimilation driven by emotional contagion, and self-suppression under conformity pressure. The findings indicate that group emotional pressure exerts a dual effect on young adults' social emotions: moderate pressure can facilitate social connection and emotional resonance, whereas excessive pressure leads to negative outcomes such as social anxiety, collective loneliness, and emotional exhaustion. On this basis, the paper proposes adaptive pathways including cognitive reappraisal, emotional boundary construction, and digital detox, thereby offering a theoretical reference for understanding and intervening in young adults' social emotional issues.

Keywords: Group Emotional Pressure; Young Adults; Social Emotions; Social Comparison; Emotional Contagion

1. INTRODUCTION

In an era where social media is deeply embedded in daily life, young adults are experiencing unprecedented challenges in social emotions. Emerging phenomena such as "the shame of exquisite self-presentation," "covert coping" (stealth mode), "collective loneliness," and "social exhaustion" have drawn considerable scholarly attention. A common thread underlying these phenomena is that individuals' social emotional experiences do not arise in isolation; rather, they are shaped, amplified, and even distorted by sustained pressure from group contexts [1].

The concept of "group emotional pressure" refers to the social pressure perceived by individuals during group interactions, which originates from others' emotional expressions and emotional expectations. Unlike traditional "group pressure," which emphasises behavioural and attitudinal conformity, group emotional pressure highlights the emotional dimension—it demands not only behavioural alignment but also convergence in emotional experience and expression. For young adults, who are in a critical period of identity formation, this pressure is particularly pronounced. Research has shown that anxiety has become a pervasive emotional syndrome among the younger generation in an accelerating age, manifesting as multiple forms including time-loss anxiety, social-clock anxiety, peer-pressure anxiety, and social-isolation anxiety [2].

However, existing studies lack a systematic analysis of the specific psychological mechanisms through which group emotional pressure affects young adults' social emotions. This paper aims to examine the following aspects: the conceptual connotation and characteristics of group emotional pressure, the psychological mechanisms by which it operates on young adults' social emotions, its positive and negative consequences, and effective psychological adaptation strategies. By integrating theories from social psychology and emotional psychology, this paper attempts to construct an analytical framework for understanding social emotions under group emotional pressure.

2. CONCEPTUAL DEFINITION AND CHARACTERISTIC ANALYSIS OF GROUP EMOTIONAL PRESSURE

2.1 Conceptual Connotation

"Group emotional pressure" can be defined as the psychological pressure individuals experience when they perceive the emotional tone, emotional expression patterns, and emotional expectations of group members during group interactions.

It comprises three core components: (1) the stressor is the collective emotional climate—the shared emotional state pervading the group; (2) the transmission medium is emotional expression and contagion—emotions spread among individuals through verbal, facial, and behavioural channels; (3) the outcome is the perceived pressure towards emotional convergence—an internal demand that "I should feel the same as everyone else" [3].

This concept differs from traditional "group pressure" (which focuses on behavioural and attitudinal conformity) and from "peer pressure" (which centres on achievement and status comparisons); instead, it specifically addresses the normative pressure regarding emotional experience and expression. In the social media era, this pressure is further magnified by algorithms—social media platforms are not merely containers of information but have become amplifiers and even manufacturers of emotions.

2.2 Main Characteristics

Pervasiveness and permeability: Group emotional pressure does not appear as explicit commands but pervades group interactions as an emotional atmosphere. Without explicit verbal demands, young people in dormitories, classrooms, workplaces, or online communities can readily perceive implicit expectations to "be happy," "be angry," or "be anxious."

Contagiousness and amplification effect: Group emotional pressure spreads rapidly through emotional contagion mechanisms. Highly arousing emotions are more likely to form lasting emotional memories and propagate more effectively than mild emotions. When minor anxieties converge in cyberspace, they easily lead to group polarisation, degenerating into irrational emotional revelry through continuous venting. Group emotional pressure can foster positive social connection and emotional resonance, but it can also lead to negative emotional exhaustion and psychological distress. This duality requires a dialectical perspective in understanding its effects [4].

3. THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON HOW GROUP EMOTIONAL PRESSURE AFFECTS YOUNG ADULTS' SOCIAL EMOTIONS

3.1 Social Comparison Theory

Festinger's social comparison theory posits that when objective standards are unavailable, individuals evaluate their own opinions and abilities by comparing themselves with others. Under group emotional pressure, young people compare not only external achievements and status but also internal emotional experiences—for instance, "Do others also feel anxious?" and "Is my emotional reaction normal?" Research indicates that the affective pressure stemming from social comparison is a significant contributor to information anxiety and social avoidance among young adults. When individuals perceive a discrepancy between their own emotions and the group's emotional tone, they experience unease and anxiety [5].

3.2 Emotional Contagion Theory

Emotional contagion refers to the unconscious transmission and diffusion of emotions between individuals. Adolescence and emerging adulthood are developmental stages characterised by heightened social sensitivity, making young people particularly susceptible to socially transmitted emotions. Within a group, an individual's intense emotional response can quickly spread to other members, causing the entire group to share a common emotional state. In social media environments, this contagion effect is further reinforced by algorithmic "emotional filter bubbles"—algorithms precisely track users' emotional fluctuations and repackage anger, empathy, and anxiety as traffic-driving content, continuously pushing homogeneous emotional material [6].

3.3 Le Bon's Group Psychology Theory

In The Crowd, Le Bon identified three major psychological traits of groups: emotionality and impulsiveness, suggestibility and conformity, and anonymity and responsibility diffusion. These traits are especially pronounced among young adults, who have yet to establish a fully stable self-identity and have a strong need for group acceptance, making them prone to falling into the trap of "groupthink" unconsciously. Under group emotional pressure, individuals are willing to "exchange their intelligence for that reassuring sense of belonging." This psychological mechanism explains why young people readily abandon independent thinking and passively adopt the group's emotional tone under group emotional pressure [7].

4. PSYCHOLOGICAL MECHANISMS OF YOUNG ADULTS' SOCIAL EMOTIONS UNDER GROUP EMOTIONAL PRESSURE

4.1 Anxiety Arousal Mechanism Triggered by Social Comparison

Group emotional pressure first triggers emotional anxiety through social comparison. On social media, young people are constantly exposed to others' carefully curated "highlight reels"—travel, gourmet food, success, happiness—which constitute a persistent emotional comparison field. When individuals compare their genuine emotions with the emotions presented by the group, they are prone to the illusion that "only I am unhappy," thereby arousing anxiety.

This anxiety exhibits self-reinforcing properties. Research has shown a bidirectional relationship between anxiety and social interaction: high anxiety levels lead to social avoidance and skill deterioration, and social avoidance, in turn, exacerbates anxiety. Under sustained group emotional pressure, young people may become trapped in a vicious cycle of "more anxiety → more avoidance → more anxiety" [8].

4.2 Emotional Assimilation Driven by Emotional Contagion

The second psychological mechanism is emotional assimilation driven by emotional contagion. During group interactions, emotions spread unconsciously among individuals through facial expressions, vocal tone, and verbal content. When young people browse social media, algorithmically recommended content constantly reinforces a particular emotional tone—angry content triggers anger, anxious content magnifies anxiety.

This assimilation mechanism is particularly evident in the phenomenon of "inhabiting online groups." Online communities have become vital spaces for young people to seek identity confirmation, psychological comfort, and emotional belonging, yet they also readily induce blind conformity to others' opinions and emotions. When a particular viewpoint gains early prominence, bystanders are swayed by the number of likes and the "bandwagon effect," resulting in conformity. Extreme views amplify extreme emotions, while moderate and rational voices are drowned out [9].

4.3 Self-Suppression Mechanism under Conformity Pressure

The third mechanism is self-suppression of emotions triggered by conformity pressure. Upon perceiving the group's emotional expectations, young people often suppress their genuine emotions that deviate from the group tone in order to gain acceptance and belonging. This suppression takes two forms: (1) performative expression—displaying emotions consistent with the group even when one does not truly feel them; and (2) withdrawal avoidance—simply withdrawing from the emotional expression arena to evade pressure through silence.

The "shame of exquisite self-presentation" is a typical manifestation of this mechanism. When individuals proactively display refined behaviours, they perceive that such behaviours deviate from group norms and consequently feel constrained, uneasy, and ashamed, fearing negative evaluation. Its core lies in the conflict between the need for group conformity and the desire for unique self-expression. The "covert coping" (stealth mode) phenomenon similarly reflects this mechanism—young people employ a "stealth" strategy to transition from anxiety to self-acceptance, from internal friction to accumulation, and from pressure to relief [10].

5. DUAL EFFECTS OF GROUP EMOTIONAL PRESSURE ON YOUNG ADULTS' SOCIAL EMOTIONS

5.1 Positive Effects: Social Connection and Emotional Resonance

Moderate group emotional pressure is not entirely negative. First, it facilitates social connection—shared emotional experiences are a vital source of interpersonal intimacy. When young people feel that "everyone else feels the same as I do," their loneliness is alleviated and a sense of belonging is established. Second, group emotional pressure gives rise to emotional resonance—in contexts such as concerts, sports events, and collective activities, group-level emotional synchrony can produce profound positive emotional experiences.

Moreover, moderate group emotional pressure also serves an emotion-regulating function. Research indicates that active participation in online social groups helps young people develop positive life attitudes and alleviates anxiety. Sharing emotions and gaining resonance within a group is itself an effective emotion-regulation strategy [11].

5.2 Negative Effects: Social Anxiety, Collective Loneliness, and Emotional Exhaustion

However, when group emotional pressure exceeds an individual's tolerance threshold, its negative consequences become prominent.

Social anxiety: Persistent group emotional pressure generates anticipatory anxiety about social situations—fearing that one's emotional expressions are "inappropriate" and that one may be excluded by the group. This anxiety leads to social avoidance, which in turn undermines social skills, creating a vicious cycle.

Collective loneliness: The stronger the group emotional pressure, the more likely young people are to feel lonely even within a lively group. There is a significant positive correlation between social media dependence and collective loneliness, with social anxiety moderating this relationship. Young people are "together yet alone"—physically connected but psychologically distant.

Emotional exhaustion: Prolonged emotional pretence and suppression deplete psychological resources. From "surface-level acquaintances" to "social exhaustion," from "performative socialising" to "pseudo-relaxation," young people constantly exhaust their emotional energy under group emotional pressure. Research has found that while "prefabricated socialising" achieves efficiency goals, it severely weakens the affective dimension of interaction, carrying multiple risks such as undermining social competence, creating social illusions, and eroding authentic selfhood [12].

6. ADAPTIVE PATHWAYS AND INTERVENTION STRATEGIES

6.1 Cognitive Reappraisal: Reframing the Understanding of Group Emotional Pressure

Cognitive reappraisal is a core strategy in emotion regulation. Young people need to recognise that group emotional pressure is a normal component of social interaction and need not be perceived as a threat. Individuals should learn to differentiate between "the group's emotions" and "my own emotions"—the former reflecting the group climate, and the latter representing genuine internal experience. Through this cognitive restructuring, young people can maintain social connectedness while safeguarding emotional autonomy [13].

6.2 Emotional Boundary Construction: Balancing Connection and Independence

Emotional boundaries refer to an individual's capacity to distinguish between self and others at the emotional level. Under group emotional pressure, young people need to establish healthy emotional boundaries—neither completely isolating themselves from group emotions (which leads to isolation) nor fully assimilating to group emotions (which results in loss of self). Specific strategies include: deliberately choosing the objects and degree of emotional engagement, reserving space for self-reflection during group interactions, and learning to say "no" to protect emotional resources [14].

6.3 Digital Detox and Technological Reflexivity

Given that social media is a major amplifier of group emotional pressure, digital detox becomes a necessary adaptive measure. Young people can reduce the intensity of group emotional pressure input by limiting social media usage time, actively filtering information sources, and consciously stepping out of "emotional filter bubbles." More importantly, cultivating a reflective awareness of algorithmic mechanisms—understanding how emotions are designed, amplified, and monetised—enables individuals to maintain sobriety when emotionally involved [15].

6.4 Social Support and Professional Intervention

The construction of social support systems is indispensable. Educational institutions and society at large should work in concert to guide young people in managing stress and learning to co-exist with it. For those who already suffer from severe social anxiety or emotional distress, professional interventions based on cognitive-behavioural therapy are effective—by identifying and correcting irrational beliefs, and conducting social skills training, the "anxiety-avoidance" vicious cycle can be broken [16].

7. CONCLUSION

Group emotional pressure is a pivotal concept for understanding contemporary young adults' social emotional difficulties. By integrating social comparison theory, emotional contagion theory, and Le Bon's group psychology theory, this paper has revealed three psychological mechanisms through which group emotional pressure influences young adults' social emotions—anxiety arousal, emotional assimilation, and self-suppression. This analytical framework

demonstrates that group emotional pressure is not a unilaterally negative force but a social-psychological phenomenon with dual effects: moderate pressure fosters social connection and emotional resonance, whereas excessive pressure leads to social anxiety, collective loneliness, and emotional exhaustion.

As social media and algorithmic technologies become ever more deeply embedded in young people's daily lives, the intensity and speed of group emotional pressure have reached unprecedented levels. Consequently, helping young adults develop a clear awareness and effective coping strategies for group emotional pressure has become an important task for mental health education and youth work. Future research should further empirically examine the measurement dimensions, boundary conditions, and individual differences of group emotional pressure, so as to provide a more solid foundation for targeted psychological interventions.

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