



**THE INTERRELATIONSHIP OF LONELINESS,
SOCIAL DESIRABILITY AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT
IN MYANMAR ADOLESCENTS: VIEWING SOCIAL
DESIRABILITY FROM ADJUSTMENT APPROACH**

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Abstract:

This study was aimed at investigating the interrelationship of loneliness, social desirability and academic achievement of adolescents in Myanmar. 549 students from two selected high schools participated in this study. The adapted versions of Loneliness Rating Scale developed by Asher, Hymel, and Renshaw (1984) and Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale were used to measure loneliness and social desirability. First semester exam scores served as measurement of academic achievement. The results showed that loneliness had negative correlation with both social desirability and academic achievement, while social desirability was positively correlated with academic achievement. No gender differences were found in loneliness, whereas girls had higher social desirability than boys did.

Keywords: loneliness, social desirability, academic achievement, Myanmar

1. Introduction

Adolescents are at the point of meeting the broad social world, spending much of their time with peers rather than family. Thus, peer-relation in school setting plays a vital role for students of adolescence. According to Perlman and Peplau (1982), adolescents can fall into loneliness if they are not well equipped with social skill which enables them to cope with changing environment, or if they expect unrealistically decent social relationships. Heinrich and Gullone (2006) claimed that adolescents were at peak of subjective feelings of loneliness. Although situational short-term loneliness is likely to happen in normal social interaction, hardly bringing negative effect, chronic loneliness has hazardous effect on both physical and mental health of adolescents. Examining the

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link between loneliness and educational success, Benner (2011) found that youths of increasingly chronic loneliness viewed their school unfavourably and consequently they encountered difficulties in academic performance. In students of adolescence, loneliness has connection with having poor grades, being expelled from school, running away from home, and juvenile delinquency (Brennan & Auslander, 1979).

Among several factors contributing to loneliness, personal characteristics which lower the social desirability of a person can induce loneliness by limiting opportunities for social contact (Perlman & Peplau, 1981). Social desirability derives from the need for social approval, an instinct need of mankind. In common sense, social desirability refers to “the tendency of individuals to project favourable images of themselves during social interaction” (Johnson & Fendrich, 2002, p. 1661). In research of social science using questionnaire administration, social desirability is frequently investigated as lie detector, in terms of social desirability bias or impression management representing the tendency of participants to give socially desirable answers which were different from their real states. On the contrary, some scholars such as Fleming (2012) and Uziel (2013) argued that people of high social desirability could aspire of being saints even though they might not be perfect saints, and social desirability scores could not necessarily represent the fake response. These two contradictory views are known as defensiveness approach and adjustment approach. In Myanmar where a collectivist culture is practised, giving priority to harmony and interdependence within group, social desirability is expected to play a different role from the one that defensiveness approach proposes. Collectivist culture’s emphasis on group goals and interest contributes to a high need for social approval which is assumed as a manifestation of vulnerable self-esteem in defensiveness approach.

The adjustment approach considered social desirability as a source of emotional stability, agreeableness, benevolence and subjective well-being, predicting positive interpersonal outcomes for social desirability (Uziel, Sagiv & Roccas, 2008). According to Fleming (2012), people of high social desirability scores might actually give effort to perform and to be viewed as they labelled themselves, e.g., if one labelled himself as a helpful person, then he might try his best to help others. Uziel (2010) contended to view social desirability as interpersonally oriented self-control (i.e., self-control in public social settings). For students of adolescence at the peak period of need for social approval from peers, the ability to manage impression in public social context plays an important role in acquiring peer status and enhancing social interactions. In their study of peer status and loneliness, Asher et al. (1984) discovered that students of low peer-acceptance were lonelier. Therefore, predicting that social desirability as an attribute of interpersonal self-control will be related with loneliness and consequently with academic performance, the present study aims to investigate the relationship between loneliness and social desirability and academic achievement of the students during adolescence.

2. Material and Methods

Questionnaire survey was undertaken in this study. Participants were randomly selected from two purposefully selected schools. 549 students with the age range of 12 to 17 years (247 males and 302 females) participated in this study. Two self-reported questionnaires—Loneliness Rating Scale designed by Asher et al. (1984) (see Appendix A) and Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale (1960) (see Appendix B)—were adapted and used to measure students' loneliness and social desirability. For academic achievement, the total marks participants acquired in first semester examination were requested from respective class teachers under the permission of principals.

For validity of the two questionnaires, three professors from two Universities of Education examined content validity. For reliability, pilot testing to 50 Grade 9 students was performed. The Cronbach's alpha of LRS was 0.69 and that of MCSDS was 0.66. The reliability coefficient value of MCSDS was relatively low. So the questionnaire was revised and three inappropriate items (1, 23 and 24) were omitted. The reliability coefficient of 30 item MCSDS was 0.697.

LRS includes 24-items: the primary 16 items and filler 8 items. The sixteen primary items focused on participants' feeling of loneliness (e.g., "I am lonely"), feeling of social inadequacy (e.g., "I don't get along with other children"), or negative estimation of peer status (e.g., "I don't have any friends"). And these statements were coded by using a five-point Likert scale (not true at all = 1, hardly ever true = 2, true sometimes = 3, true most of the time = 4, always true = 5). Items 1, 4, 8, 10, 16, 22 were reversely coded so that higher scores reflected a greater degree of loneliness on all items. A total score was computed by summing all items which assessed global feeling of loneliness. Filler items (2, 5, 7, 11, 13, 15, 19, and 23) were not included in computing loneliness scores of the participants because these items were meant to make participants feel more relaxed.

The adapted version of MCSDS which included 30 items was asked to rate with a five-point Likert scale (Never = 1, Rarely = 2, Sometimes = 3, Often = 4, Always = 5), in order to get a clearer depiction of social desirability as interpersonal self-control. Negative statements (3, 5, 6, 9, 10, 11, 12, 14, 15, 19, 22, 28, 30 and 32) were scored reversely. Total score was acquired by summing all 30 items and the higher the score of a participant, the more socially desirable he or she was.

Participants were requested to sit in their classrooms under normal condition and to answer the two questionnaires—LRS and MCSDS—with the help of classroom teachers. The researcher gave the participants an explanation of questionnaire rating formats first. During questionnaire completion process, some participants asked the researcher about the meaning of some items and clarification was accordingly given to those participants. The whole completion process took approximately 30 minutes. The gathered data were coded and analysed through descriptive statistics, t-test and Pearson-Product Moment Correlation.

3. Results and Discussion

Prior to hypothesis testing, descriptive analysis were executed for two main constructs of this study (see Table 1) and the histograms of both loneliness and social desirability illustrated a distribution that was quite similar to normal curve. According to the average scores per item, it could be generally concluded that the participants experienced low loneliness and high social desirability.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

Variables	N	Mean	Mean per Item	Std. Deviation
Loneliness	549	34.30	2.1437	7.433
Social Desirability	549	112.991	3.766	10.353

In examining gender differences, independent sample t-test was applied separately for loneliness and social desirability (see Table 2). In order to avoid the likelihood of family-wise error, Bonferroni correction was applied and alpha level was set at 0.025. Loneliness had no gender difference with tiny effect size ($\eta^2 = 0.000942$).

With regard to the gender difference in loneliness, previous research contributed inconsistent results. In their study of gender differences in loneliness, Borys and Perlman (1985) pinpointed that only 4 of 28 studies using UCLA loneliness scale found gender effect on loneliness and in all four studies, males had higher loneliness than female. In the rest 24 studies, gender difference was not significant. Among those 24 studies, 10 studies obtained higher mean scores of loneliness in males, 8 studies obtained higher mean scores of loneliness in females and five studies did not give any information about mean scores. On the other hand, 9 of 11 studies using self-labelling questions of loneliness reported significantly higher loneliness in females. The authors contended that social influence processes accounted for those contradictory results and men were unwilling to acknowledge their loneliness because of sex role stereotypes such as men are interpersonally less sensitive and emotionally less expressive. Studies on loneliness during adolescence also presented varying gender effects. A meta-analysis on predictors for loneliness during adolescence, done by Mahon, Yarcheski, Yarcheski, Cannella and Hanks (2006) detailed that out of 30 studies, 19 studies detected no gender effect on loneliness, boys were significantly lonelier in 9 studies, whereas girls were significantly lonelier in 2 studies. In line with most studies on loneliness of adolescents, significant gender difference did not exist in the present study although male students had higher mean scores of loneliness.

Table 2: Comparison by Gender

Variables	Gender	N	Mean	t	p	η^2
Loneliness	Male	247	34.55	0.718	0.473	0.000942
	Female	302	34.09			
Social Desirability	Male	247	111.79	-2.462	0.014	0.011
	Female	302	113.97			

In social desirability, gender effect was found ($p = 0.014$), although the effect size was small ($\eta^2 = 0.011$) according to the guidelines proposed by Cohen (1988). Female students had higher social desirability than male students. This finding resonated the female conformity which was “a product of norms favouring communal concerns in women—that is, expectations that women be selflessly committed to preserving social harmony and enhancing positive feelings among group members” (Eagly & Chrvala, 1986, p. 205). It also supported the results of previous studies which showed higher social desirability in female. In a study of social desirability in children, conducted by Crandall, Crandall and Katkovsky (1965), it was revealed that at all grade (from 3rd to 12th) girls tended to provide socially desirable responses with greater frequency compared to the boys of respective grades. There are also some studies which contributed varying gender effects (Van Dixhorn, 2011), but these studies investigated social desirability as two dimensions—self-deceptive enhancement and impression management— and these varying results were established according to dimensions.

The inter-relationship of loneliness, social desirability and academic achievement was examined through bivariate correlation and the Pearson Product-moment correlation coefficients were reported in Table 3. According to the guideline of Cohen (1988) for strength of correlation, academic achievement had a moderately positive relationship with social desirability (0.331) and low negative relationship with loneliness (-0.246), while loneliness and social desirability were moderately and negatively correlated (-0.319). Hence, the higher social desirability a student had, the less lonely he/ she felt and the higher academic performance he/ she achieved.

Table 3: Pearson Correlation for the Interrelationship of Loneliness, Social Desirability and Academic Achievement

Variables	Loneliness	Social Desirability
Social Desirability	-.319**	
Academic Achievement	-.246**	.331**

Note: ** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

In reviewing the studies on loneliness of school-age children, Newsom et al. (2013) pointed out the inconsistent associations between loneliness and academic achievement. Contrary to this, Heinrich and Gullone (2006) stated, in their review of loneliness literature, that many research proved loneliness to be associated with higher dropout rates and poor academic performance. Guay, Boivin and Hoges (1999) claimed loneliness as a contributing factor to academic maladjustment through perceived academic competence processes. Exploring the relations of loneliness, social media usage and academic achievement, Neto, Golz and Polega (2015) found a weak negative correlation between loneliness and GPA. In line with the claims of Heinrich and Gullone (2006), the present study demonstrated a significant negative correlation between loneliness and academic achievement despite of a small amount of correlation.

In examining children’s social desirability, Crandall et al. (1965) discovered that children of higher social desirability had lower language proficiency, low task

performance and low tendency to rely on themselves for accomplishing assignments. The further study of Crandall (1966) explained that students of high social desirability tended to have less persistence on task performance, spending less time when they were left alone in a room on achievement tasks. Allaman, Joyce and Crandall (1972) also confirmed significant relation of social desirability with poorer intellectual functioning, in their study of the antecedents of social desirability in children and young adults. However, these results of negative relationship between social desirability and learning performance were not congruent with the results of other studies. According to the results of Brown's (1960) investigation, females of high social desirability showed higher self-confidence in learning task, with better performance on recalling information, than the females of low social desirability. Some studies (e.g., Bartels & Magun-Jackson, 2009; Peterson, Casillas, & Robbins, 2006) established no significant correlation between social desirability and GPA. According to the result of the present study, a moderate positive correlation existed between social desirability and academic achievement, indirectly in line with the results of Brown (1960).

Pertaining to the relationship of loneliness and social desirability, many studies examined social desirability for the sake of impression management effect (e.g., Bednar, 2000; Lasgaard, Goossens & Elklit, 2011; Caputo, 2017) and found different relationship – insignificant positive correlation, significant positive correlation and significant negative correlation. Regardless of positive or negative correlation, the studies justified the reason of relation based on defensiveness approach. In the present study, loneliness was negatively correlated with social desirability. Hence, defensiveness approach on social desirability was not supported by revealing social desirability had positive relationship with academic achievement and negative relationship with loneliness, i.e., social desirability contributed to positive outcomes.

4. Conclusion

Investigating the inter-relationship of loneliness, social desirability and academic achievement, the present study found loneliness was negatively correlated with social desirability and academic achievement, and in turn, social desirability was positively correlated with academic achievement. The results nullified the assumptions that social desirability was related with poor intellectual functioning. Girls were more socially desirable and this result had congruence with the previous findings. With respect to loneliness, gender difference did not exist and the results provided further evidence for no gender effect on loneliness.

5. Limitation and Recommendation for Future Research

The first limitation of this study was exploring students' loneliness only in secondary school setting with cross-sectional design. Together with school setting, taking loneliness in family setting into consideration would be of great contribution. Longitudinal studies could also give more significant and useful facts because chronic

and prolong loneliness can severely affect the students' mental adjustment, social situation and academic achievement. Second limitation was using self-report questionnaire, which has weakness in giving socially desirable response. Besides, the present study investigated social desirability as a psychological substance, not as a response style (i.e., social desirability bias). Thus, any statistical control for social desirability was not applied because such methods were assumed to have the likelihood of removing true variance. It might affect the reliability of analysed data. Future research should consider application of both self-report and other-report forms in measuring the other variables when social desirability was studied as psychological substance.

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Appendix A: Loneliness Rating Scale

- 1) It's easy for me to make new friends at school.
- 2) I like to read.
- 3) I have nobody to talk to.
- 4) I'm good at working with other children.
- 5) I watch TV a lot.
- 6) It's hard for me to make friends.
- 7) I like school.
- 8) I have lots of friends.
- 9) I feel alone.
- 10) I can find a friend when I need one.
- 11) I play sports a lot.
- 12) It's hard to get other kids to like me.
- 13) I like science.
- 14) I don't have anyone to play with.
- 15) I like music.
- 16) I like to get along with other kids.
- 17) I feel left out of things.
- 18) There's nobody I can go to when I need help.
- 19) I like to paint and draw.
- 20) I don't get along with other children.
- 21) I'm lonely.
- 22) I am well-liked by the kids in my class.
- 23) I like playing board games a lot.
- 24) I don't have any friends.

Appendix B: Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale

- 1) Before voting I thoroughly investigate the qualifications of all the candidates.
- 2) I never hesitate to go out of my way to help someone in trouble.
- 3) It is sometimes hard for me to go on with my work if I am not encouraged.
- 4) I have never intensely disliked anyone.
- 5) On occasions I have had doubts about my ability to succeed in life.
- 6) I sometimes feel resentful when I don't get my way.
- 7) I am always careful about my manner of dress.

- 8) My table manners at home are as good as when I eat out in a restaurant.
- 9) If I could get into a movie without paying and be sure I was not seen, I would probably do it.
- 10) On a few occasions, I have given up something because I thought too little of my ability.
- 11) I like to gossip at times.
- 12) There have been times when I felt like rebelling against people in authority even though I knew they were right.
- 13) No matter who I'm talking to, I'm always a good listener.
- 14) I can remember "playing sick" to get out of something.
- 15) There have been occasions when I have taken advantage of someone.
- 16) I'm always willing to admit it when I make a mistake.
- 17) I always try to practice what I preach.
- 18) I don't find it particularly difficult to get along with loudmouthed, obnoxious people.
- 19) I sometimes try to get even rather than forgive and forget.
- 20) When I don't know something I don't mind at all admitting it.
- 21) I am always courteous, even to people who are disagreeable.
- 22) At times I have really insisted on having things my own way.
- 23) There have been occasions when I felt like smashing things.
- 24) I would never think of letting someone else be punished for my wrong-doings.
- 25) I never resent being asked to return a favour.
- 26) I have never been irked when people expressed ideas very different from my own.
- 27) I never make a long trip without checking the safety of my car.
- 28) There have been times when I was quite jealous of the good fortune of others.
- 29) I have almost never felt the urge to tell someone off.
- 30) I am sometimes irritated by people who ask favours of me.
- 31) I have never felt that I was punished without cause.
- 32) I sometimes think when people have a misfortune they only got what they deserved.
- 33) I have never deliberately said something that hurt someone's feelings.

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