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The moderating role of emotion regulation between impulsivity, peer-pressure and risk-taking behaviour among young adults

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Abstract

Risk-taking behaviour during young adulthood is a growing concern as it can have lasting effects on an individual's health and overall well-being. This study focuses on understanding how impulsivity and peer pressure contribute to risk-taking behaviour, and whether emotion regulation plays a role in shaping these relationships. Data were collected from young adults aged 18 to 30 using standardised self-report measures assessing impulsivity, peer pressure, emotion regulation, and risk-taking tendencies. It was expected that higher levels of impulsivity and greater susceptibility to peer pressure would be associated with increased risk-taking behaviour. At the same time, individuals with better emotion regulation were expected to show lower levels of risk-taking, even in the presence of these factors. The findings aim to provide a clearer understanding of how individual traits, social influences, and emotional processes interact to shape behaviour, and may help develop more effective strategies to reduce risky behaviours among young adults.

Keywords: Risk-taking behaviour; Impulsivity; Peer pressure; Emotion regulation; Young adults

1. Introduction

This stage of young adulthood (18-30 years) is said to be a period of exploration, transition and growing independence (Arnett, 2000). At this time, people are not only forming their identities but also negotiating through novel social conditions and roles. Although this is a period that comes with growth opportunities, it also comes with a greater tendency to indulge in risk-taking behaviours that can have long-term effects on health and well-being (Steinberg, 2010). The reason why young adults get into such behaviours thus becomes a significant field of investigation.

Risk-taking behaviour is a form of action that has probable adverse consequences, which is performed in the hope of some perceived rewards (Steinberg, 2008). These can be behaviours like substance use, poor decision-making, or other high-risk behaviours in the context of young adulthood. Risk-taking is not an outcome of one factor but is influenced by a complex of individual tendencies, social factors, and emotional processes interacting in a complex manner.

Impulsivity is one of the important factors. Impulsivity is the habit of doing things abruptly without necessarily wanting to think about the outcomes, and it is usually influenced by the need to satisfy the impulse in the present moment (de Wit, 2009). It has always been found that the more impulsive a person is, the more he/she is likely to do something risky (Sharma et al., 2014). Moreover, some types of impulsivities that are intimately related to emotional conditions can also heighten the chances of engaging in maladaptive behaviours, especially those that are highly emotional (Cyders and Smith, 2008). Meanwhile, impulsivity is not the sole issue that can be used to explain why certain people take risks and others do not.

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Social factors, and especially peer pressure, have an important role to play in this phase of life. The importance of social acceptance and belonging is intensified as young adults become more affiliated with peer groups (Steinberg and Monahan, 2007). The Social Learning Theory states that people tend to learn behaviours through observation and imitation of other people and this behaviour is reinforced socially (Bandura, 1977). Research has indicated that the availability of peers may enhance the tendency of risk-taking behaviour (Gardner and Steinberg, 2005), and perceived peer norms may be a factor that will affect behavioural tendencies in areas like alcohol use and other risky behaviours (Borsari and Carey, 2001).

Emotion regulation is another important factor that influences behaviour in combination with these factors. Emotion regulation can be described as the way that people handle and react to the affective experiences they undergo (Gross, 1998). There are those strategies that can assist individuals to react to situations in a more adaptive manner, including reinterpreting situations, but others can be the cause of maladaptive consequences (Gross and John, 2003). Emotional regulation problems have been linked to an increased involvement in high-risk activities and impaired judgment (Aldao et al., 2010). Furthermore, lacking the ability to properly manage emotions, people can become more prone to behaving impulsively, particularly under high-pressure or emotional circumstances (Dvorak et al., 2014).

Notably, emotion regulation could moderate the relationship between impulsivity and peer pressure in terms of actual behaviour. Those who can more effectively control their emotions might be better positioned to resist their impulsive urges and societal pressures, and those who cannot effectively control their emotions may be more susceptible to risk-taking behaviour. This view enables us to get a more subtle glimpse into why people who are subjected to the same influences might act differently.

Risk-taking behaviour in young adulthood has been widely studied as an outcome influenced by a combination of individual, social, and emotional factors. Impulsivity has consistently been identified as a key predictor, with individuals high in impulsivity more likely to engage in behaviours driven by immediate rewards and reduced consideration of long-term consequences (de Wit, 2009; Sharma et al., 2014). Emotion-based impulsivity further increases vulnerability to maladaptive actions, particularly in emotionally charged situations (Cyders & Smith, 2008). Alongside individual traits, peer pressure plays a significant role, especially during developmental stages where social acceptance becomes important. According to social learning perspectives, individuals tend to adopt behaviours observed and reinforced within peer groups (Bandura, 1977), and empirical research has shown that peer presence and perceived norms significantly increase risk-taking tendencies (Gardner & Steinberg, 2005; Borsari & Carey, 2001). In addition to these factors, emotion regulation has emerged as an important process influencing behavioural outcomes. Effective emotion regulation is associated with better psychological adjustment, whereas difficulties in regulating emotions are linked to increased engagement in risky and maladaptive behaviours (Gross & John, 2003; Aldao et al., 2010). Furthermore, poor emotion regulation may strengthen the impact of impulsivity and peer influence on behaviour, suggesting its role in shaping how these factors translate into risk-taking (Dvorak et al., 2014). Together, these findings highlight the need to examine these variables in an integrated framework to better understand risk-taking behaviour among young adults.

Against these reflections, the current research paper will seek to investigate the moderating effect of emotion regulation in the association between impulsivity, peer pressure, and risk-taking behaviour among young adults.

1.1. Objectives of the Study

- To examine the relationship between impulsivity and risk-taking behaviour among young adults.
- To examine the influence of peer pressure on risk-taking behaviour among young adults.
- To investigate whether emotion regulation moderates the relationship between impulsivity, peer pressure, and risk-taking behaviour.
- To examine whether the moderating effect of emotion regulation varies across the five domains of risk-taking (ethical, financial, health/safety, recreational, and social).
- To explore the role of demographic variables (Age, Education, and Gender) in explaining variations in risk-taking behaviour.

1.2. Hypotheses

- **H_{01}:** There is no significant relationship between impulsivity and risk-taking behaviour among young adults.
- **H_{02}:** Peer pressure does not significantly influence risk-taking behaviour among young adults.
- **H_{03}:** Emotion regulation does not significantly moderate
    - The relationship between impulsivity and risk-taking behaviour, and

  - The relationship between peer pressure and risk-taking behaviour across the five domains of the domain-specific risk-taking scale (ethical, financial, health/safety, recreational, and social).
- **H_{04}:** The moderating effect of emotion regulation does not significantly differ across the five risk-taking domains.
- **H_{05}:** Age, Gender, and Education do not significantly predict variations in risk-taking behaviour among young adults.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research Design

The study employed a quantitative, non-experimental correlational research design to examine the relationships between impulsivity, peer pressure, emotion regulation, and risk-taking behaviour. A cross-sectional approach was used, with data collected at a single point in time.

2.2. Sample

The sample included 250 participants; young adults aged between 18 and 30 years from diverse socioeconomic and educational backgrounds. Convenience sampling was used, and participants were recruited through online platforms. Inclusion criteria required participants to be within the specified age range, able to understand English or Hindi, and willing to provide informed consent. Individuals with severe psychiatric disorders or those undergoing intensive psychological treatment were excluded. Incomplete or inconsistent responses were not included in the final analysis.

2.3. Instruments

2.3.1. Barratt Impulsiveness Scale - Revised (BIS-R-21)

Impulsivity was assessed using the 21-item Barratt Impulsiveness Scale – Revised (BIS-R-21). The BIS scale was originally developed by Ernest S. Barratt in 1995. The BIS-R-21 is a commonly used self-report measure that was designed to assess the behavioural and personality construct of impulsivity.

The scale consists of three primary impulsivity factors:

- Attentional Impulsivity (problems with sustained attention)
- Motor Impulsivity (acting without thinking)
- Non-Planning Impulsivity (problems with future orientation and forethought)

Participants are asked to respond to the items using a Likert-type format to indicate the degree to which they agree with the statements. Higher scores on the scale indicate higher levels of impulsivity. The BIS-R-21 has shown satisfactory internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging between .79 and .83 (Barratt, 1995).

2.3.2. Peer Pressure Susceptibility Questionnaire - Revised (PPSQ-R)

Peer Pressure was measured by using the Peer Pressure Susceptibility Questionnaire – Revised (PPSQ-R), developed by Sunil Saini and Sandeep Singh (2014).

This scale is used to measure the susceptibility of an individual to peer pressure in various domains of daily life, such as:

- Social contexts
- Academic contexts
- Behavioural and interpersonal contexts

The respondents are required to answer the scale by indicating the degree to which they are influenced by peers in a given situation. The scale is of the Likert type, and the higher the score, the more susceptible the individual is to peer pressure. The PPSQ-R has been found to be reliable, with coefficients ranging from 0.72 to 0.85.

2.3.3. Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ)

Emotion Regulation was assessed through the use of the Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ) designed by James J. Gross and Oliver P. John (2003).

The ERQ is a scale that evaluates the use of individual differences in the application of emotion regulation strategies, specifically:

Cognitive Reappraisal: the process of altering one's emotional experience through the reinterpretation of emotionally stimulating events

Expressive Suppression: the control of the outward expression of emotions

The scale is completed through the use of a Likert-type format, in which the respondent rates the items according to how they normally regulate their experience of emotions. High scores reflect the frequent use of emotion regulation strategies. The ERQ has been found to have high internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from 0.80 to 0.93.

2.3.4. Domain-Specific Risk-Taking Scale (DOSPERT)

Risk-taking behaviour was measured by the use of the Domain-Specific Risk-Taking Scale (DOSPERT), which was created by Elke U. Weber et al. (2002).

The DOSPERT is a multi-dimensional scale that was developed to measure the risk-taking propensities of individuals in five specific domains:

- Ethical Risk Taking
- Financial Risk Taking
- Health/Safety Risk Taking
- Recreational Risk Taking
- Social Risk Taking

The scale requires the participant to rate the probability of taking part in a variety of risk-related activities using a Likert-type scale. The scale has shown good reliability, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from 0.70 to 0.88.

All the scales have been shown to be valid in a variety of populations and are suitable for use with young adult samples, making them appropriate for the measurement of the variables of interest.

2.4. Procedure

Data gathering was done under very strict ethical standards. Participants were recruited through universities, social institutions, and online communities that targeted young adults. After describing the nature of the research, participants gave their consent. They were also assured of confidentiality and the voluntary nature of the study, with the right to withdraw at any time.

The questionnaires were done either online through secure websites or in paper format, depending on the accessibility of the participants. Each participant took 15-20 minutes to complete the entire battery of measures. The research team made sure that all the participants understood the questions, and answers were clarified when needed.

2.5. Statistical Analysis

Descriptive statistics were calculated to describe the characteristics of the participants and the main study variables, including impulsivity, peer pressure, emotion regulation, and risk-taking behaviour. Preliminary analyses were conducted to check assumptions of normality, linearity, homoscedasticity, and multicollinearity, which were found to be satisfactory. Hierarchical multiple regression analyses were performed to examine the moderating role of emotion regulation. Independent variables (impulsivity and peer pressure) and emotion regulation were entered in the first step, followed by the interaction term in the second step, with all predictors mean-centred before analysis. The significance level was set at $p < .05$, and all analyses were conducted using Jamovi.

2.6. Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to standard ethical guidelines for psychological research. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants. No personally identifiable information was collected, and responses were recorded anonymously to ensure confidentiality. The data were stored securely and were accessible only to the researcher and research supervisor. The study ensured that no harm or discomfort was caused to participants during the process.

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics and Normality Tests for Study Variables (N=250)

Variable	M	SD	Min	Max	Shapiro–Wilk W	p
Impulsivity (BIS Total)	43.20	8.24	26	58	0.977	< 0.001
Peer Pressure (PPSQ Total)	51.50	18.90	24	115	0.928	< 0.001
Risk-Taking Behaviour	102.0	25.40	60	210	0.898	< 0.001
Emotion Regulation (ERQ)	49.40	8.89	28	70	0.965	< 0.001

Note. M = mean; SD = standard deviation; Min = minimum score; Max = maximum score; W = Shapiro–Wilk statistic. BIS = Barratt Impulsiveness Scale; PPSQ = Peer Pressure Susceptibility Questionnaire; ERQ = Emotion Regulation Questionnaire. Significant Shapiro–Wilk values ($p < .05$) indicate deviation from normality.

Descriptive statistics were computed to examine the distributional characteristics of the study variables: impulsivity, peer pressure, emotion regulation, and risk-taking behaviour (N = 250). The mean, standard deviation, range, and normality statistics are presented in Table 2.

The results indicated that the mean score for impulsivity was $M = 43.20$ ($SD = 8.24$), suggesting moderate levels of impulsive tendencies among participants. Peer pressure had a mean of $M = 51.50$ ($SD = 18.90$), indicating variability in susceptibility to peer influence. Emotion regulation demonstrated a mean score of $M = 49.40$ ($SD = 8.89$), reflecting moderate use of regulatory strategies. Risk-taking behaviour showed a mean of $M = 102.00$ ($SD = 25.40$), indicating moderate engagement in risk-related activities.

The Shapiro–Wilk test revealed significant deviations from normality for all variables ($p < .001$), indicating violation of the normality assumption. However, given the adequate sample size (N = 250), parametric analyses were retained in accordance with the Central Limit Theorem, and subsequent analyses focused on relationships between variables rather than distributional form.

3.2. Reliability Analysis

Table 2 Reliability Analysis of Study Variables

Variables	No. of Items	Cronbach's α
Risk-Taking Behavior	30	0.85
Impulsivity	21	0.82
Emotional Regulation	10	0.83
Peer Pressure	25	0.95

Note. α = Cronbach's alpha. All scales demonstrated acceptable internal consistency (α > .70).

The internal consistency of all study measures was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficients, as presented in Table 3. All variables demonstrated satisfactory to excellent reliability, with alpha values ranging from .82 to .95, indicating that the instruments used were reliable for further statistical analyses.

3.3. Correlational Analysis

Table 3 Correlation Matrix for Study Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4
1. Impulsivity	1			
2. Peer Pressure	.312**	1		
3. Emotion Regulation	-.198*	-.142*	1	
4. Risk-Taking Behaviour	.307**	.377**	.216**	1

Note. N = 250. BIS = Barratt Impulsiveness Scale; PPSQ = Peer Pressure Susceptibility Questionnaire; ERQ = Emotion Regulation Questionnaire. p < .05. ** p < .01 (two-tailed).

Pearson's product–moment correlation was conducted to examine the relationships among study variables. Impulsivity was significantly and positively correlated with risk-taking behaviour (r = .307, p < .001), indicating that higher impulsivity is associated with increased risk-taking. Similarly, peer pressure showed a significant positive correlation with risk-taking behaviour (r = .377, p < .001), suggesting that greater susceptibility to peer influence is linked to higher engagement in risky behaviours.

Emotion regulation was positively correlated with risk-taking behaviour (r = .216, p < .01), though the relationship was weak. Additionally, emotion regulation demonstrated weak negative correlations with impulsivity (r = −.198, p < .05) and peer pressure (r = −.142, p < .05), indicating that better emotional regulation is associated with lower impulsivity and reduced susceptibility to peer influence.

3.4. Moderation Analysis

Moderation analyses were conducted to examine whether emotion regulation moderates.

Table 4 Direct and Moderation Effects on Total Risk-Taking

Predictor	B	SE	t	p
Model 1: Impulsivity Model				
Intercept	104.92	1.57	66.63	< .001
BIS_c	0.64	0.19	3.31	.001
ERQ_c	0.15	0.19	0.79	.430
BIS_c × ERQ_c	0.13	0.03	5.02	< .001
Model 2: Peer Pressure Model				
Intercept	103.88	1.55	67.01	< .001
PPSQ_c	0.38	0.09	4.14	< .001
ERQ_c	0.30	0.17	1.78	.077
PPSQ_c × ERQ_c	0.02	0.01	3.06	.002

Note. Impulsivity model: R = .404, R^2 = .163, Adjusted R^2 = .153. Peer pressure model: R = .377, R^2 = .142, Adjusted R^2 = .132. All predictors were mean-centred before computing interaction terms.

Moderation analyses were conducted to examine whether emotion regulation moderates the relationship between (a) impulsivity and risk-taking behaviour, and (b) peer pressure and risk-taking behaviour. In the first model, impulsivity significantly predicted risk-taking behaviour (B = 0.64, p = .001). Emotion regulation was not a significant direct predictor (p = .430). However, the interaction between impulsivity and emotion regulation was statistically significant (B = 0.13, p < .001), indicating that emotion regulation significantly moderates the relationship between impulsivity and risk-taking behaviour.

In the second model, peer pressure significantly predicted risk-taking behaviour (B = 0.38, p < .001), while emotion regulation was not a significant direct predictor (p = .077). The interaction between peer pressure and emotion regulation was significant (B = 0.02, p = .002), confirming a moderating effect.

These findings indicate that the strength of the relationships between impulsivity, peer pressure, and risk-taking behaviour varies as a function of emotion regulation.

4. Discussion

The present study aimed to examine the relationship between impulsivity, peer pressure, and risk-taking behavior among young adults, with a particular focus on the moderating role of emotion regulation.

The results indicated a significant positive relationship between impulsivity and risk-taking behavior. Individuals with higher levels of impulsivity were more likely to engage in risk-taking behaviors, suggesting that a tendency to act without sufficient forethought may increase vulnerability to such behaviors. Regression analysis further supported this finding, with impulsivity emerging as a significant predictor of risk-taking behavior.

A similar pattern was observed for peer pressure, which also showed a significant positive relationship with risk-taking behavior. This suggests that individuals who are more susceptible to peer influence are more likely to engage in risky behaviors, possibly due to the need for social acceptance or conformity. Peer pressure was also found to significantly predict risk-taking behavior, highlighting its strong role as a social determinant.

The study further examined the moderating role of emotion regulation and found significant interaction effects in both relationships. This indicates that emotion regulation influences how impulsivity and peer pressure translate into risk-taking behavior. Individuals with better emotion regulation may be more capable of managing impulsive tendencies and resisting peer influence, whereas those with poorer regulation may be more likely to engage in risky behaviors.

Domain-specific analyses revealed that the moderating effect of emotion regulation was significant across Ethical, Financial, Recreational, and social domains of risk-taking, but not in the Health/Safety domain. This suggests that the influence of emotion regulation may vary depending on the type of risk behavior being considered.

Finally, the role of demographic variables was examined. Gender and education were found to significantly predict risk-taking behavior, whereas age did not show a significant effect. This indicates that certain demographic factors may contribute to variations in risk-taking tendencies among young adults, while others may have a more limited role.

Taken together, the findings suggest that risk-taking behavior in young adults is shaped by a combination of individual traits, social influences, and emotional processes. The results highlight the importance of considering these factors together to better understand and address risk-taking behavior.

4.1. Implications

The findings contribute to the theoretical understanding of risk-taking behavior by highlighting the interactive role of emotion regulation in shaping the influence of impulsivity and peer pressure. The results suggest that individual differences in emotion regulation capacity alter the strength of these relationships. From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that intervention programs aimed at reducing maladaptive risk-taking among young adults may benefit from incorporating emotion regulation training. Enhancing emotional regulation skills may help individuals better manage impulsive tendencies and social pressures in high-risk contexts.

4.2. Limitations

Despite its contributions, the study has several limitations. The use of self-report measures may have introduced response biases such as social desirability and subjective interpretation. The cross-sectional design limits the ability to draw causal conclusions. Additionally, the sample was restricted to a specific group of young adults, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other populations.

5. Conclusion

The results of the study indicate that impulsivity and peer pressure are significant predictors of risk-taking behavior among young adults. Emotion regulation significantly moderates both the impulsivity–risk-taking and peer pressure–

risk-taking relationships, suggesting that emotional regulatory processes influence how personality traits and social pressures translate into behavioral outcomes. The moderating effect of emotion regulation varied across domains of risk-taking behavior. Significant moderation effects were observed in ethical, financial, recreational, and social domains, but not in the health/safety domain. This suggests that emotional processes may operate differently depending on the contextual nature of the risk-taking situation. Among demographic variables, gender and education significantly predicted risk-taking behavior, while age did not demonstrate a significant predictive role.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest

Authors Declaration

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