Conformity of Korean adolescents in their perceptions of social relationships and academic motivation

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A B S T R A C T

We tested the relationship between conformity and the perceptions of social support, academic motivation, and achievement held by Korean adolescents across two studies. Conformity had positive relationships with perceived closeness with parents, parental achievement pressure, and feelings of guilt toward parents. Conformity was also positively linked to perceived support from teachers and peers, student mastery-approach goals, and achievement in the specific domains of English and mathematics. Mastery-approach goals related positively to positive classroom affect in both subjects and to achievement scores in English. The relationship of conformity with student motivation and affect was largely mediated by perception of social support. These findings indicate that adolescents with stronger conformity, at least in the collectivistic Korean culture, benefit more by maintaining a close relationship with their teachers. The merits of conforming, therefore, appear to be most significant in learning environments where students feel supported.

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1. Introduction

The distinction between individualism and collectivism is considered important in the understanding of cultural orientation because of its impact on individuals' cognition, emotions, and motivation (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1995). Individualistic cultures emphasize the distinctiveness and independence of individuals from one another, while collectivistic cultures stress compliance with group norms and interdependence among group members. In general, countries in North America and Western Europe are considered to represent individualistic cultures, and those in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and parts of Europe are considered collectivistic (Triandis, 1993).

Whereas members of individualistic cultures value their unique inner attributes and strives for personal accomplishment, those of collectivistic cultures deem group success and group harmony more important than individual achievement (Triandis, 1995). Individuals in collectivistic cultures tend to pay greater attention to, and be more strongly influenced by, the opinions of their in-group members because an accurate understanding of the self can only be achieved in relation to significant others in their social network (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Personality traits such as conformity may thus be highly valued and functionally adaptive in collectivistic cultures.

Following the classic experiments of Asch (1956), who demonstrated that college students acquiesced to the judgment of the majority even in cases where the judgment was clearly faulty, researchers have been interested in the role of conformity in social motivational behavior. Epley and Gilovich (1999) showed that simply priming college students with words related to conformity (e.g., adhere, agree, comply, conform) was enough to encourage them to conform to a greater extent compared to those who were not primed or who were primed with words related to nonconformity (e.g., challenge, confront, counter, defy). More recently, the experiments of Haun and Tomasello (2011) demonstrated that children as young as four years old were likely to conform to clearly erroneous opinions of their peers, especially when they had to let their opinions known to others.

It is reasonable to assume, then, that collectivistic cultures, with their numerous implicit and explicit cues for conformity, would be more likely to produce individuals who align their perceptions and behavior to group norms than would individualistic cultures. Given the inherently social nature of the construct and its proven effect on perceptual and behavioral changes, we expected conformity to play an important role in determining the perceptions and motivation of adolescents in collectivistic cultures. We thus examined the role of conformity in student perceptions of social contexts and student motivation across two studies. In Study 1, we examined how conformity related to the perceived relationship with parents, perceived support from teachers and peers, student achievement goals, classroom affect, and achievement. We assessed multiple dimensions of the parent–child relationship, including thankfulness, respect, closeness, conflict, and guilt toward parents. In Study 2, we focused specifically on perceived parental achievement pressure instead of tapping the multifaceted aspects of the parent–child relationship investigated in Study 1.

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1.1. Definition and general characteristics of conformity

In general, conformity refers to the act of matching one’s attitudes and behaviors to those of the majority, even when the majority response is contradictory to one’s personal beliefs. It is also possible for a person to suppress certain behaviors for fear of being negatively judged by other group members, which is called “conformity by omission” (Sorrels & Kelley, 1984). Whether conformity is manifested as an altered response or the inhibition of a genuine response, its purpose is to allow an individual to keep in line with the majority.

Cialdini and Trost (1998) considered conformity to be a goal-directed behavior and distinguished three possible motivations: (1) “the goal of effective action” (p. 162), representing conforming to others’ opinions in an attempt to make more accurate and valid judgments; (2) “the goal of building and maintaining social relationships” (p. 166), representing conformity to gain approval and acceptance; and (3) “the goal of managing self-concept” (p. 168), representing conformity to avoid a negative self-image. Levels of compliance can change depending on the characteristics of the task (difficulty, complexity, subjectivity, and prior commitment), the group (size, cohesion, credibility, and similarity between the group and the individual), and the individual (inclination to conform, social anxiety, need for affiliation, and fear of negative evaluation).

The fact that individuals can conform subconsciously without the presence of explicit cues or pressure (Epley & Gilovich, 1999) suggests that it may be potentially beneficial or even desirable to do so. However, evidence has not been conclusive. Campbell (1975) pointed out that conformity has traditionally been regarded as a personal weakness, representing the inability to maintain beliefs and perceptions in the face of social pressure. In contrast, Markus and Kitayama (1991) suggested that, in collectivistic cultures, conformity is considered a virtue as it strengthens relationships with significant others and ensures group harmony.

1.2. Conformity in individualistic and collectivistic cultures

Kim and Markus (1999) subsequently demonstrated that whether conformity is regarded as desirable or not depends on cultural values. They stated: “Uniqueness has positive connotations of freedom and independence in American culture, whereas conformity has positive connotations of connectedness and harmony in East Asian culture” (p. 785). The authors proposed that cultural values exert a profound influence on the personal preference for uniqueness or conformity. Supporting their conjecture, when presented with five pens of two different colors, one common and the other less common (i.e., either 3 pens of one color and 2 of another, or 4 pens of one color and 1 of another), East Asians more commonly chose the pen of the majority color than Americans did. The authors concluded that individuals in East Asian cultures avoid nonconformity because it is usually recognized as deviance, while those in Western cultures perceive nonconformity as an expression of uniqueness.

Collectivistic cultures, especially those in East Asian countries, emphasize harmonious interdependence among their social members (Triandis, 1995). Conformity in these cultures is, therefore, a functionally adaptive and valued characteristic. A meta-analysis by Bond and Smith (1996) found that the levels of conformity were significantly higher when the study samples came from collectivistic rather than individualistic countries. In countries such as Korea, China, and Japan, individuals with high levels of conformity are even regarded as more mature (Markus & Kitayama, 1994).

A study by Cialdini, Wosinska, Barrett, Butner, and Gornik-Durose (1999) also documented differences in compliance behavior between individualistic and collectivistic individuals. By comparing the responses of college students in the United States and Poland (representing individualistic and collectivistic cultures, respectively) to a hypothetical compliance scenario, the investigators showed that, while the general culture of the nation was important in determining the degree of compliance among its members, more important was the orientation of individual members toward individualism or collectivism. They also demonstrated that collectivistic individuals’ decisions to comply were significantly influenced by information regarding the compliance of others to similar requests. These results indicate that the main reason to conform for collectivistic individuals is to build and maintain positive social relationships (Cialdini & Trost, 1998) by behaving consistently with group norms.

2. Conformity and student motivation

2.1. Conformity and perceptions of social relationships

Although individuals with high levels of conformity may be thought to lack uniqueness and be less independent by the standards of individualistic Western societies (Kim & Markus, 1999), conformity to group norms is essential for groups to function smoothly. Perhaps for this reason, researchers studying social interaction within groups have reported that conformists are considered normal and desirable, whereas nonconformists are considered deviant and undesirable (Levine & Moreland, 1998). Behaviors and traits that are of a conforming and collectivistic nature are greeted more positively than those of an individualistic nature, especially under collectivistic group norms (Markus & Kitayama, 1994; McAuliffe, Jetten, Hornsey, & Hogg, 2003). This social evaluation of conformity could in turn lead individuals with varying levels of conformity to perceive their social–psychological environment differently.

Triandis, Leung, Villareal, and Clack (1985), for example, compared the social perceptions and judgments of allocentrics and idiocentrics. Allocentrism represents an individual’s psychological tendency toward cooperation and collectivism, and idiocentrism that toward individuality and individualism. As a personality trait, allocentrism is similar to conformity. The researchers found that there was a positive correlation between the allocentrism scores of individuals and the number of people from whom they could garner social support when needed. Allocentric individuals also reported greater satisfaction with the support they received from others (Triandis, Bontempo, Villareal, Asai, & Lucca, 1988; Triandis et al., 1985). In collectivistic countries such as Korea, conforming individuals are thus more likely than nonconforming individuals to receive support, and thus they perceive their social environment to be more supportive.

For adolescents, conformity could make a difference in their perception of support from major social figures, including parents, teachers, and peers. East Asian adolescents in collectivistic cultures, presumably with an interdependent self (Heine, 2001), are sensitive to their parents’ expectations and demonstrate a strong desire to satisfy their wishes. The parent–child relationship in East Asian countries is also believed to be more complex than typically perceived by Western culture (Chao & Tseng, 2002). Noting this complexity, researchers studying Asian adolescents often conceptualize the parent–child relationship as a multidimensional construct, encompassing support and achievement pressure, consequently followed by feelings of indebtedness, obligation, closeness, and conflict (Bong, 2008; Park & Kim, 2006). Whether conformity selectively or uniformly reinforces these multiple dimensions is an important question that needs to be addressed.

At the same time, adolescence is characterized by a diminishing dependence on parents, accompanied or replaced by a growing reliance on teachers and peers (Berndt, 1979). Perceived social support from teachers and peers is an important determinant of adolescent academic motivation, adjustment, and achievement at school (Wentzel, 1998). Because adolescents with high levels of conformity strive to maintain positive relationships and to avoid conflict with significant others in their social system, they are more likely to receive support in return from these social figures. Coupled with the general tendency of conforming individuals to sense greater levels and a higher quality of
social support (Triandis et al., 1985, 1988), adolescents in a collectivist culture with a strong desire to conform are expected to perceive greater and more positive forms of support from various social figures than are less conforming adolescents.

2.2. Conformity and academic motivation, affect, and performance

2.2.1. Conformity and achievement goals

Schwartz (1992) viewed conformity as one of the basic human values that guide the specific motives, goals, and behaviors of an individual. One motivation construct that is presumed to be under the influence of conformity is achievement goals. Achievement goals represent the underlying purposes and reasons for student engagement in achievement-related behaviors (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). Students who pursue mastery goals engage in achievement tasks for the purpose of mastering the task and improving their competence (e.g., Ames & Archer, 1988; Nicholls, 1984). In comparison, students pursuing performance-approach goals do so to outperform others and validate their ability; those pursuing performance-avoidance goals strive to avoid doing worse than others and thus appearing incompetent (e.g., Elliot, 1999; Midgley et al., 2000). Achievement goals are important motivational constructs because they organize and predict students’ achievement-related cognition, affect, and behavior in specific achievement situations (Pintrich, 2000).

In countries with a Confucian heritage, such as China and Korea, effortful learning is valued as a means of self-improvement (Wang & Pomerantz, 2009). Adolescents with high conformity in these countries are expected to engage in achievement strivings for reasons similar to societal norms and pursue mastery-approach goals related to the gaining of knowledge and the improvement of competence. At the same time, the collectivistic norms of fitting in, not standing out, and satisfying the expectations of in-group members can increase the fear of failure and negative evaluations from peers. High conformity, then, may also lead to the adoption of performance-approach goals related to the demonstration of competence by besting others or performance-avoidance goals where the aim is to conceal incompetence by not performing worse than others (Elliot & McGregor, 2001).

When Liem, Martin, Porter, and Colmar (2012) assessed conformity and achievement goals in a group of collectivistic Indonesian high school students, both mastery-approach and performance-approach goals correlated positively with conformity. Further, conformity was related to all achievement goals via social-oriented (as opposed to individual-oriented) achievement motivation in a path model. The researchers argued that, while the desire of the students to please their parents and to meet their expectations motivated them to learn new things and improve their competence, the same desire also likely increased perceived achievement pressure and fear of failure. The achievement pressure felt by children in collectivistic cultures is increased by the strong interdependence within the family unit. Especially in collectivistic East Asian societies, children feel a strong sense of obligation to repay the sacrifice made by their parents (Chao & Tseng, 2002), often by performing well academically.

High levels of conformity, therefore, are more likely to result in mastery-approach or performance-approach goals than in performance-avoidance goals. It is also unlikely that conforming adolescent students in collectivistic cultures pursue work-avoidance goals, which represent the desire to attain achievement outcomes with minimal effort (Meece, Blumenfeld, & Hoyle, 1988). Because this type of goal is antithetical to the societal norm of investing effort to learn and improve, adolescent students with a strong tendency to conform would strive to maintain a positive self-image and constructive social relationships by trying to achieve and resisting work-avoidance goals.

2.2.2. Conformity and classroom affect

Santor, Messervey, and Kusumakar (2000) observed that conformity among a group of Canadian high school students had a positive correlation with their English grades and a negative correlation with depression and indexes of risky behavior such as alcohol and cigarette consumption, theft, and drug use. This suggests that conformity as a personality trait may be beneficial to students’ psychological and behavioral adjustments at school even in individualistic cultures. However, few empirical studies have directly tested the relationship between conformity and school-related variables of well-being.

In Sinha and Verma (1994), the relationship between allocentrism, a construct analogous to conformity, and psychological well-being among a group of graduate students in India depended on the extent of social support they received; it was only among individuals with strong social support that allocentrism correlated positively with psychological well-being. This result allows us to conjecture that the relationship between conformity and the subjective well-being of students, such as classroom affect, may also depend on their perceptions of social support. Students with higher levels of conformity may perceive social relationships within the classroom to be more supportive than would those with lower conformity (Triandis et al., 1985, 1988) and this perception of strong social support would subsequently produce a more positive classroom affect.

2.2.3. Conformity and academic achievement

The effect of conformity on academic outcomes such as achievement scores should also be positive because conformist adolescents are more likely to try to achieve compared to nonconformists. Surprisingly, evidence has not been conclusive for this particular relationship. In Santor et al. (2000), high school students who reported greater conformity were more likely to attain higher grades in English. Yet conformity and mathematics grades for the same group of students did not correlate significantly. For Indonesian high school students, conformity related negatively to student grades in English and did not relate significantly to those in mathematics (Liem et al., 2012). These inconsistencies, however, are not surprising when potential mediators are considered.

If the relationship between conformity and psychological and behavioral outcomes is mediated or moderated by perceived social support, as in Sinha and Verma (1994), examining the direct relationship between conformity and behavioral outcomes is less useful than uncovering the degree to which conformity augments or dampens the perception of social support. Likewise, if conformity leads adolescent students to adopt particular achievement goals, its relationship with classroom affect and performance would be mediated by these goals. If these presumed mediators are not taken into account, the observed relationship between conformity and eventual outcomes are likely to be inconsistent.

3. Present study

In this research, we tested the relationship of conformity to student classroom affect and academic achievement among Korean adolescents across two studies, with student perceptions of social support and achievement goals as potential mediators. To assess social support, we tapped the support adolescents believed they received from their parents, teachers, and peers. Parental support was operationalized differently in the two studies. In Study 1, we assessed multiple dimensions of perceived parent–child relationship and treated them as indicators of perceived parental support. In Study 2, we assessed perceived parental pressure instead of perceived parental support to more directly examine the thesis that conformity increases perceived achievement pressure (Liem et al., 2012). Fig. 1 presents the schematic representation of the model tested in this research. Specifically, we generated the following hypotheses:

H1. Conformity would relate positively to student perceptions of gratitude, respect, closeness, and guilt toward parents but negatively to student perceptions of conflict with parents (Study 1 only).
H2. Conformity would relate positively to student perceptions of parental achievement pressure (Study 2 only).

H3. Conformity would have a positive relationship with student perceptions of support from teachers and peers.

H4. Conformity would relate positively to student mastery-approach and performance-approach goals but negatively to student performance-avoidance and work-avoidance goals.

H5. Conformity would have a positive relationship with positive classroom affect and academic achievement and a negative one with negative classroom affect.

H6. Student perceptions of social support would mediate the paths from conformity to student achievement goals, classroom affect, and academic achievement.

H7. Student perceptions of parental achievement pressure would mediate the paths from conformity to student achievement goals, classroom affect, and academic achievement (Study 2 only).

H8. Student achievement goals would mediate the paths from conformity and student perceptions of social support to student classroom affect and academic achievement.

4. Study 1

We explored the role of conformity in adolescent perceptions of social support, achievement goals, classroom affect, and academic achievement. Perceived support from parents, teachers, and peers were assessed separately; in particular, perceived parental support was assessed with a multidimensional parent–child relationship scale developed specifically for Korean adolescents, which comprised feelings of gratitude, respect, closeness, conflict, and guilt.

As discussed earlier, adolescents with high levels of conformity are expected to feel more positive about their relationship with their parents, and consequently experience less conflict, as they would be better at maintaining harmony with others. On the one hand, conforming adolescents would strive to satisfy their parents by performing well in an attempt to gain their social approval, as high academic expectations for children are ubiquitous among Asian parents (Chao & Tseng, 2002). Bong (2008) has pointed out that most Korean students study hard because they believe it is the surest way to please their parents. On the other hand, these adolescents are likely to develop stronger feelings of guilt than those with low conformity when they are not successful in meeting parental expectations.

4.1. Method

4.1.1. Participants and procedure

Data were collected from 310 seventh graders attending a public middle school in a suburban city in Korea. Korea implements a 6–3–3 system from elementary to high school; Grade 7 is the freshman year at middle school. The ages of the participants ranged from 12 years and 5 months to 13 years and 4 months at the time of the survey. Surveys were paper-based and were administered during regular classroom hours, several days before the school-wide final examinations. A trained research assistant attended each class before the survey and explained to students that the questions on the survey would ask them about their personal beliefs regarding various aspects of their life and learning at school. The research assistant also informed the students that the confidentiality of their responses on the survey would be strictly protected. Students were encouraged to respond as honestly as possible to each question. There were 113 items on the survey and students took about 20 to 30 min to complete it. The achievement goal responses were used in another study that examined different research questions (Bong, Hwang, Noh, & Kim, 2014). No incentive was provided for participation in the survey.

4.1.2. Measures

All survey items were written in Korean and referred to English and mathematics classes, except for those related to conformity and the parent–child relationship, both of which are believed to function similarly in a diverse range of contexts. The parent–child relationship scale was developed in Korean. Items from the other scales were originally written in English and then put through the translation-and-back-
translation procedure suggested by Brislin (1970). A group of graduate students who spoke both languages and were familiar with the content initially translated the items into Korean. The first and second authors of this research checked the translated items and made sure that they conveyed the same meaning as the original items. Two bilingual graduate students, who did not participate in the English-to-Korean translation, independently translated the Korean items back into English. The same authors independently examined the back-translated items and concurred that they were all consistent in meaning with their original counterpart, except for slight variations in exact wording.

The questionnaire presented items on the perceived parent–child relationship first, followed by those on conformity. It then asked about student achievement goals, perceived support from peers, perceived support from teachers, and classroom affect, first for the subject of English and then for mathematics. We used full scales, rather than selected only a few representative items on the scales, to measure the constructs.

Participants rated the survey items using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all true) to 5 (very true). Missing values were estimated with the expectation-maximization algorithm in SPSS 12.0.

4.1.2.1. Conformity. Seven conformity items (e.g., “I usually do what I am told,” “I usually obey my parents”) were adopted from Santor et al. (2000).

4.1.2.2. Parent–child relationship. We used the perceived parent–child relationship scales developed by Park, Kim, and Chung (2004) and revised by Bong (2008). The original scale consisted of five subscales assessing adolescent perceptions of gratitude, guilt, closeness, conflict, and respect toward their parents. Each subscale contained seven items. The reliability coefficients of these subscales were acceptable (αs ≥ .75). However, we found that the correlation coefficients among these five subscales were extremely high after confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), ranging between .84 and .91. Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) with principal axis factoring and varimax rotations demonstrated that three factors accounted for the relationships among all parent–child relationship items. Further, items measuring gratitude and respect had double loadings on the guilt and closeness factors. Therefore, we excluded the gratitude and respect subscales, continuing the analysis with the perceived guilt, conflict, and closeness subscales.

4.1.2.3. Teacher support and peer support. Eight items for teacher support and nine items for student support were adopted from Johnson, Johnson, and Anderson (1983). The original scale was designed to measure two different types of support, academic and personal. However, we merged the two scales because of the extremely high correlation between the two after CFA (rs ≥ .91). Similar results were reported in Patrick, Ryan, and Kaplan (2007).

4.1.2.4. Achievement goals. Nine items based on the 2 × 2 achievement goal framework were adopted from Elliot and McGregor (2001). Mastery-avoidance goals were excluded in the current study due to their theoretical ambiguity. In addition, five work-avoidance goal items were taken from Meece et al. (1988).

4.1.2.5. Classroom affect. Three items for positive affect and four for negative affect at school were adopted from Kaplan and Maher (1999). We revised the items so that they assessed positive and negative affect in the subject-specific classes of English and mathematics.

4.1.2.6. Academic achievement. The school provided students’ final English and mathematics examination scores to be used as achievement indexes. The scores on these exams could range from 0 to 100. Each score was used independently for the respective subject.

4.2. Results

4.2.1. Descriptive statistics

Respondents who failed to complete the survey or who provided insincere responses were removed from the sample. The final sample consisted of 282 participants (142 girls, 140 boys). Table 1 presents the reliability coefficients and descriptive statistics for the observed variables. CFA was conducted using the maximum-likelihood method with AMOS 7.0. The correlation coefficients for the latent variables are also presented in Table 1.

4.2.2. Tests of measurement models

To overcome potential problems associated with the small sample size (N = 282) in comparison to the number of parameters to be estimated, we reduced the number of indicators for each latent variable by creating three random item parcels (MacCallum, Widaman, Zhang, & Hong, 1999). We fit the measurement model with all latent variables before testing the structural paths of interest. Three indexes were consulted to determine the goodness of fit of the model (Hu & Bentler, 1999): the comparative fit index (CFI), the Tucker–Lewis coefficient (TLI), and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA).

We tested the models separately for English and mathematics because constructs such as perceived teacher and peer support, student achievement goals, and classroom affect are formed in a context-specific manner such that students may pursue different achievement goals in different subject classes (Bong, 2001). The measurement model demonstrated an adequate fit in both domains: χ²(552, N = 282) = 877.867, p = .000 (CFI = .940, TLI = .927, RMSEA = .046 [90% CI = .040, .051]) in English and, χ²(552, N = 282) = 858.193, p = .000 (CFI = .944, TLI = .933, RMSEA = .044 [90% CI = .039, .050]) in mathematics. All factor loadings were significant at p < .001, indicating the latent variables were represented well by their respective indicators.

Conformity correlated positively with all but two perceived support variables: it correlated negatively with adolescent perceptions of conflict with parents (r = −.19) and did not correlate with peer support in mathematics domain (r = .14, p > .05). Therefore, the hypotheses H1 and H3 were generally supported. Fisher’s z-tests further revealed that conformity correlated significantly more strongly with perceived closeness with parents than other perceived support variables (ps < .05, two-tailed). Conformity also correlated positively with mastery-approach goals (r = .29 in English and .26 in mathematics) and negatively with work-avoidance goals (r = −.25 in English and −.22 in mathematics). However, it did not correlate with either performance-approach or performance-avoidance goals in either domain. Hypothesis H4 was thus only partially supported. Consistent with hypothesis H5, conformity correlated positively with positive classroom affect (r = .35 in English and .30 in mathematics) and academic achievement (r = .20 in English and .21 in mathematics) and negatively with negative classroom affect (r = −.23 in English and −.28 in mathematics). Overall, the correlations were remarkably similar in the two domains with only a few exceptions.

4.2.3. Structural equation modeling

We proceeded to test the paths among the latent variables in structural equation models. Based on the modification indexes and for theoretical reasons, we covaried the disturbance terms of teacher support and peer support, those of performance-approach and performance-avoidance goals, and those of positive and negative classroom affect. Model fit statistics indicated a reasonable fit in both domains: χ²(568, N = 282) = 1043.559, p = .000 (CFI = .912, TLI = .897, RMSEA = .055 [90% CI = .049, .060]) in English and, χ²(568, N = 282) = 1056.468, p = .000 (CFI = .911, TLI = .896, 1 Confidence interval.
### Table 1

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<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Conformity</th>
<th>Parent: closeness</th>
<th>Peer support</th>
<th>Performance-avoidance goal</th>
<th>Positive classroom affect</th>
<th>Negative classroom affect</th>
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Note: Correlation coefficients from English are below the diagonal; those from mathematics are above the diagonal. The descriptive statistics and the correlations between conformity and parent-child relationships are the same in both domains and are thus presented only once in the English section. RMSEA = .055 [90% CI = .050, .060] in mathematics. Fig. 2 displays the path coefficients among the latent variables that were statistically significant at \( p < .05 \).

Conformity related significantly to all three perceived parent-child relationship variables, positively in the cases of perceived guilt (\( \beta = .43 \) in English and .45 in mathematics, with the difference in coefficients due to the simultaneous estimation of other parameters in the model) and closeness toward parents (\( \beta = .64 \) in English and .65 in mathematics), and negatively in the case of perceived conflict with parents (\( \beta = -.36 \) in both English and mathematics). Conformity was also positively correlated with both perceived teacher support (\( \beta = .32 \) in English and .20 in mathematics) and perceived peer support (\( \beta = .28 \) in English and .19 in mathematics). There was also a direct positive path from conformity to mastery-approach goals in both subject domains (\( \beta = .34 \) in English and .30 in mathematics) and a direct negative path to work-avoidance goals, but only in English (\( \beta = -.34 \)). Finally, conformity demonstrated a direct positive connection to achievement in both subjects (\( \beta = .25 \) in English and .32 in mathematics) but not to classroom affect in either domain.

Consistent with the hypothesis H6, the adolescent perception of social support partially mediated the relationships between conformity and student achievement goals, classroom affect, and academic achievement. We tested the significance of this mediation using the phantom model approach (Macho & Ledermann, 2011). A specific phantom representing each indirect effect was added to the main structural model and tested for significance. Bias-corrected percentile bootstrapping with 1000 randomly selected samples and 95% confidence intervals was applied. The indirect paths from conformity to achievement goals via perceived social support, those from conformity to classroom affect and achievement via perceived social support or achievement goals, and those from perceived social support to classroom affect and achievement via achievement goals were tested for significance. Table 2 summarizes the results.

Adolescent feelings of guilt toward parents significantly mediated the paths from conformity to all student variables in English except for work-avoidance goals and negative affect. As conformity increased, so did feelings of guilt toward parents, which then related positively to student mastery-approach goals (\( \beta = .28 \)), performance-approach goals (\( \beta = .21 \)), and performance-avoidance goals (\( \beta = .29 \)). The same guilty feelings also related negatively to English achievement (\( \beta = -.30 \)) and positive affect in English classes (\( \beta = -.15 \)). Adolescent perception of guilt also had a negative relationship with mathematics achievement (\( \beta = -.19 \)). The two approach goals further mediated the paths from feelings of guilt to academic achievement in English (\( \beta = .22 \) for mastery-approach goals, .20 for performance-approach goals).

Perceived conflict with parents was also a partial mediator in the link between conformity and performance goals. As students expressed stronger conformity, they felt less conflict with their parents. Increased conflict with parents made it more likely that students adopted both performance-approach (\( \beta = .28 \) in English and .24 in mathematics) and performance-avoidance goals (\( \beta = .26 \) in English and .21 in mathematics) in both domains.

Of the two classroom-specific support variables, teacher support appeared to play a more important role than did peer support in student achievement and affect. Perceived support from teachers in English class partially mediated the path from conformity to academic achievement in English. As levels of conformity became higher, the perception of support from the teacher in both English and mathematics classes also became stronger. In English, perceived teacher support related to greater English achievement in the students (\( \beta = .16 \)). As perceived support from teachers increased, stronger positive affect (\( \beta = .29 \) in English and .33 in mathematics) and weaker negative affect (\( \beta = -.18 \) in English and -.28 in mathematics) in the classroom were reported. Hypothesis H6 thus received stronger support in the subject of English than it did in mathematics.
In addition to mastery-approach and performance-approach goals, work-avoidance goals were also a mediator of the conformity–outcome relationships in English but the mediation effect was significant only with regard to negative classroom affect in English. Students with stronger conformity reported weaker work-avoidance goals in English ($\beta = -0.34$), which in turn connected positively to negative affect in English classes ($\beta = 0.44$). Hypothesis H8, which posited that achievement goals would mediate the paths from conformity and perceived support to classroom affect and achievement, was only partially supported.

4.3. Discussion

Consistent with our hypotheses (H1 and H3) and previous reports (Triandis et al., 1985, 1988), conformity related significantly to all perceived social support and relationship variables assessed in this study. Korean adolescent students are presumed to construe themselves largely in terms of their relationships with others and to hold a strong desire to maintain harmony in their social network (Heine, 2001; Markus & Kitayama, 1991); those with higher levels of conformity in the present study tended to perceive greater support and more positive relationships both at home and at school.

Students with stronger conforming behavior perceived the relationship with their parents to be closer and contain less conflict (H1). At the same time, they also felt stronger feelings of guilt toward their parents (H1), which is not necessarily conducive to positive motivation or academic achievement. In fact, stronger feelings of guilt were associated with lower academic achievement in both domains. Considering the high investment in education that Korean parents commonly provide for their children, it seems possible that students who were deeply concerned about the sacrifice and effort made by their parents experienced a heavier emotional and cognitive burden compared to those who were not as concerned, thus interfering with the learning process.

Because the data were correlational in nature, however, it is equally possible that lower-achieving students were more likely to express strong feelings of guilt. In other words, Korean adolescents who demonstrate high levels of conformity may blame themselves more and strive harder to succeed as their achievement scores decrease compared to those who are less conforming. This interpretation is consistent with the finding that adolescent students in collectivistic cultures try to attain better academic achievement for the purpose of pleasing their parents and compensating for the sacrifice their parents have made for their education (Chao & Tseng, 2002), which also works as a source of strong achievement pressure and fear of failure for these adolescents (Nie & Liem, 2013).

Conformity also linked directly to academic achievement (H5) and mastery-approach goals (H4) in both domains, which in turn related to English achievement and positive affect in both English and mathematics classes (H8). This indicates that students with stronger conformity, at least in the Korean education system, are more likely to demonstrate better academic performance and to feel happier in class, which is not surprising given the value attached to scholastic accomplishment in Korean society. The fact that conformity more consistently resulted in stronger mastery-approach goals than performance-approach goals further suggests that the underlying motive to conform for these students was more than merely securing social approval by demonstrating their superior competence. Supporting our conjecture and consistent with the Confucian norm of effortful learning (Wang & Pomerantz, 2009), conforming Korean adolescents appeared to fundamentally improve themselves in the process of acquiring new knowledge and mastering new skills.

In this sense, the present results are not in complete agreement with those of Liem et al. (2012), who showed that conformity formed a relationship with student achievement goals mainly via social-oriented achievement motives, rather than individual-oriented ones. The significant paths from conformity to the range of social relationships and...
support observed in the current study are clear evidence that social-oriented motives were in operation. Nevertheless, these motives did not automatically yield stronger performance goals, contrary to our expectations. At least with the present data, it was only when students experienced conflict with their parents that they became more likely to adopt performance goals.

With regard to the relationship between conformity and classroom affect, student perceptions of the support provided by the subject teacher was a critical mediator that decided whether higher conformity resulted in increasingly more positive or negative classroom affect (H6). Greater perceived support from the teacher related to stronger positive affect and weaker negative affect in the subject classroom, a finding consistent with that of Patrick et al. (2007). Whereas conformity also strengthened student perceptions of the support that they received from their peers (H3), this perception demonstrated neither consistent nor noteworthy consequences for student motivation, affect, or achievement.

Overall, the relationships among the constructs, especially between conformity and achievement goals, were rather small in magnitude. Compared to other personality traits such as the need for achievement and fear of failure, which directly relate to achievement motivation, conformity has a stronger relationship with social behaviors and perceptions as demonstrated by the mediating role played by perceived social support in the relationship between conformity and academic motivation and achievement observed in this study. The relatively weak association of conformity with student motivation, therefore, makes sense.

5. Study 2

Findings from Study 1 generally supported the notion that conformity plays a positive role in collectivist adolescent perceptions of social support, motivation in the form of mastery-approach goals, and academic achievement. However, we also observed that adolescents with higher levels of conformity also reported stronger feelings of guilt toward their parents. This guilt was associated with both positive and negative academic outcomes; the former represented by stronger mastery-approach and performance-approach goals in English, and the latter by stronger performance-avoidance goals, weaker positive classroom affect, and stronger negative classroom affect in English, and lower academic achievement in both English and mathematics. Nie and Liem (2013) argued that a social-oriented achievement motive for adolescents in collectivistic cultures acted as a double-edged sword; this may also be true of conformity. The strong obligation to please parents in East Asian countries (Beng et al., 2014; Chao & Tseng, 2002), when accompanied by unsatisfactory achievement records, could lead students to feel guilty by reinforcing perceptions of achievement pressure and fear of failure (Nie & Liem, 2013). Students with high levels of conformity may experience this pressure more keenly, given their wish to please and not disappoint their parents. To test this hypothesis, we measured adolescent perceptions of parental achievement pressure directly in Study 2 and examined whether students with higher levels of conformity also reported stronger parental achievement pressure.

Another finding from Study 1 inconsistent with our hypotheses concerned the relationship between conformity and the two performance goals. Given the positive motivational function of conformity in collectivistic cultures, we hypothesized that conformity would relate positively to approach goals and negatively to avoidance goals. Conformity indeed demonstrated a consistent relationship with mastery-approach goals in both English and mathematics, with or without the presence of perceived social support as a mediator. Contrary to our expectations, however, conformity did not demonstrate a
consistent path to the two performance goals. Instead, it formed a connection with performance goals only via perception of conflict with parents as a mediator.

The achievement goals in Study 1 were assessed with the scales used by Elliot and McGregor (2001), which emphasize normative competence as a core element in the two performance goals. Accordingly, the performance-approach goal items focus on the outperformance of others, while the performance-avoidance goal items measure the desire to avoid performing worse than others. We suspected that the hypothesized social-orientated achievement motive and the desire to satisfy the standards set by significant others in the social network (Liem et al., 2012; Nie & Liem, 2013), both of which are thought to support conformity, might not have been adequately captured by these scales. We believed that performance-goal scales that focus more heavily on adolescents’ desire to demonstrate competence and have it validated in front of significant others would be better able to establish the connection between conformity and a social-orientated achievement motive, should it exist. To test this possibility, we assessed student achievement goals with this type of scale in Study 2.

5.1. Method

5.1.1. Participants and procedure

Participants were 329 eighth graders from two public middle schools in a metropolitan city in Korea, none of whom participated in Study 1. Surveys were administered during regular classroom hours, two weeks prior to the midterm examination period. The administration procedure was the same as in Study 1. The ages of the participants ranged from 13 years and 8 months to 14 years and 7 months at the time of the survey. With the exception of conformity and parental achievement pressure, all variables were assessed in reference to English and mathematics classes. There were one-hundred and fifty-six items on the survey and students took about 40 to 50 min to complete the survey. The responses of achievement goals, perceived teacher and peer support, and classroom affect were used in another study that examined different research questions (Jeon, Bong, & Kim, 2010). No incentive was provided for participation in the survey.

5.1.2. Measures

All survey items were written in Korean. Students responded to the items on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not true at all) to 5 (very true). Missing values were imputed using an expectation–maximization algorithm. Complete scales were adopted from published sources. The order of the scales on the questionnaire was perceived support from teachers, perceived support from peers, student achievement goals, classroom affect, conformity, and parental academic pressure, hence differing from that in Study 1.

5.1.2.1. Conformity. Items measuring conformity were identical to those used in Study 1 (Santor et al., 2000).

5.1.2.2. Parental achievement pressure. Nine items for student perception of parental achievement pressure came from Kim and Park (1999). This scale was originally developed in Korean. A sample item is, “My parents press me to get high scores on tests.”

5.1.2.3. Teacher support and peer support. Items from Johnson et al. (1983) used in Study 1 were used again. As in Study 1, academic and personal support items were treated as indicators of a single support factor due to the extremely high correlation between the two after the CFA (rs ≥ .99).

5.1.2.4. Achievement goals. Six items for mastery-approach goals, five for performance-approach goals, and six for performance-avoidance goals were adopted from the Patterns of Adaptive Learning Scales (PALS; Midgley et al., 2000). The biggest difference between PALS and the achievement goal scales of Elliot and McGregor (2001) lies in the definition of a performance goal. Elliot and McGregor (2001) view performance-approach goals as those that lead individuals to seek to outperform others in order to attain normative superiority, and performance-avoidance goals as those concerned with not doing worse than others to avoid normative inferiority. In comparison Midgley et al. (2000), while acknowledging the importance of normative competence in performance goals, deem the motivation to validate one's ability as an equally important component of a performance goal, if not more so. Thus performance-approach goals represent the desire to best others in order to demonstrate and validate one’s superior ability, while performance-avoidance goals represent the desire to conceal one’s inferior ability by not performing worse than others. As such, these scales more explicitly embody the social concerns that are also presumed to underlie the motivation to conform. Student work-avoidance goals were assessed with the same items as in Study 1.

5.1.2.5. Classroom affect. As in Study 1, both positive and negative classroom affect were assessed using the items from Kaplan and Maher (1999).

5.2. Results

5.2.1. Descriptive statistics

After excluding the respondents who failed to complete the survey or provided insincere responses, 313 students (180 girls, 133 boys) remained in the final sample. Table 3 presents the reliability coefficients and descriptive statistics for the observed variables, along with the correlation coefficients for the latent variables from the CFA.
5.2.2. Tests of measurement models

We followed the same procedure for testing the measurement model, using random item parcels as indicators. The model fit was satisfactory in both domains, \( \chi^2(360, N = 313) = 828.968, p = .000 \) (CFI = .939, TLI = .926, RMSEA = .065 [90% CI = .059, .070]) in English and, \( \chi^2(360, N = 313) = 701.097, p = .000 \) (CFI = .951, TLI = .940, RMSEA = .055 [90% CI = .049, .061]) in mathematics. All factor loadings were significant at \( p < .001 \), indicating that all latent variables were represented well by their respective indicators.

As we suspected, conformity correlated positively with perceived parental achievement pressure \( (r = .31) \). Hypothesis H2 was thus supported. As in Study 1 and consistent with hypothesis H3, positive correlations were observed between conformity and teacher support \( (r = .34 \text{ and } .18 \text{ in English and mathematics, respectively}) \) and peer support \( (r = .25 \text{ and } .24) \). Conformity also correlated positively with student mastery-approach goals \( (r = .31 \text{ and } .35 \text{ in English and mathematics, respectively}) \) and positive classroom affect \( (r = .38 \text{ and } .31) \) in both subject domains, thus only partially supporting hypotheses H4 and H5.

Although the general pattern was similar to that in Study 1, several differences are still noteworthy. Compared to the 7th graders in Study 1, who reported stronger mastery-approach goals \( (M_s = 4.02 \text{ in English and } 4.04 \text{ in mathematics}) \) than performance-approach goals in both domains \( (M = 3.21, t[281] = 11.24, p < .001, \text{ in English and } M = 3.26, t[281] = 10.67, p < .001, \text{ in mathematics}) \), the Korean 8th graders pursued performance-approach goals more strongly \( (M = 3.24 \text{ in English and } 3.23 \text{ in mathematics}) \) than they did mastery-approach goals \( (M = 3.12, t[312] = 2.53, p < .05, \text{ in English and } M = 2.90, t[312] = 6.42, p < .001, \text{ in mathematics}) \).

In addition, Fisher’s z-tests revealed that the correlations between conformity and performance-approach goals was significantly stronger \( (p < .05, \text{ two tailed}) \) in this group of 8th graders \( (r = .30 \text{ in English and } .33 \text{ in mathematics}) \) than in the group of 7th graders \( (r = .30 \text{ in both domains}) \). In contrast, the significant negative correlations between conformity and work-avoidance goals \( (r = -.25 \text{ in English and } -.22 \text{ in mathematics}) \) and negative classroom affect \( (r = -.23 \text{ in English and } -.28 \text{ in mathematics}) \) observed among the 7th graders became weaker and nonsignificant in this group of 8th graders \( (rs = -.12 \text{ in English and } -.03 \text{ in mathematics, both } ps > .05, \text{ for work-avoidance goal, and } rs = -.11 \text{ in English and } .03 \text{ in mathematics, both } ps > .05, \text{ for negative classroom affect}) \).

5.2.3. Structural equation modeling

We tested structural equation models to examine the relationships among the constructs. As in Study 1, by consulting relevant theory and modification indexes, we covaried the disturbance terms of teacher support and peer support, of mastery-approach and performance-approach goals, of performance-approach and performance-avoidance goals, and of positive and negative classroom affect. The final models demonstrated a satisfactory fit to the empirical data in both subject domains, \( \chi^2(366, N = 313) = 889.810, p = .000 \) (CFI = .932, TLI = .919, RMSEA = .068 [90% CI = .062, .073]) in English and, \( \chi^2(366, N = 313) = 795.586, p = .000 \) (CFI = .938, TLI = .926, RMSEA = .061 [90% CI = .056, .067]) in mathematics. Fig. 3 displays the path coefficients among the latent variables that were statistically significant at \( p < .05 \). We used the same phantom model approach to test the statistical significance of the mediation paths. Table 4 presents the result for each path.

Conformity demonstrated a significant positive path to the perception of parental achievement pressure \( (is = .37 \text{ in English and } .35 \text{ in mathematics}) \). Parental pressure related negatively to positive affect \( (is = -.12) \) and positively to negative affect in the classroom \( (is = .15) \), but only in mathematics. Hypothesis H7 thus received partial support. Consistent with the results of Study 1, conformity connected positively to student perception of teacher support \( (is = .41 \text{ in English and } .28 \text{ in mathematics}) \) and peer support \( (is = .30 \text{ in English and } .27 \text{ in mathematics}) \) in both domains. Whereas conformity had a direct relationship with student mastery-approach goals in both domains in Study 1, it linked to mastery-approach goals indirectly via student perception of teacher support and peer support in Study 2. As levels of conformity became higher, perceived support from teachers and peers in the subject classroom was stronger, which in turn helped in the adoption of mastery-approach goals in the subject domains \( (is = .26 \text{ and } .21 \text{ from teacher support and } is = .24 \text{ and } .30 \text{ from peer support in English}) \).

![Fig. 3. Standardized path coefficients from the final model in Study 2. Path coefficients in English are presented to the left of the slash; those in mathematics to the right. Only the paths significant at \( p < .05 \) in at least one of the domains are presented. Thick lines indicate the paths significant in both domains. Correlation coefficients among the exogenous variables and disturbance terms are not presented for clarity. CFM = conformity; PPRE = perceived parental achievement pressure; TS = perceived teacher support; PS = perceived peer support; MAP = mastery-approach goals; PAP = performance-approach goals; PAV = performance-avoidance goals; WAV = work-avoidance goals; PAFF = positive classroom affect; NAFF = negative classroom affect.](image-url)
and mathematics, respectively). Increases in perceived support from the subject teacher was also correlated with increases in positive affect in the subject classroom (β = .27 in English and .29 in mathematics). Direct paths from conformity to student achievement goals or classroom affect were not consistently observed in either of the two domains. Therefore, the results again demonstrated that hypothesis H6, which proposed mediation by social support, was most valid for teacher support.

In comparison to H6, the hypothesis H8 – the mediating role of achievement goals – received only weak support. Except for mastery-approach goals, none of the remaining achievement goals functions as a significant mediator between conformity and classroom affect in either domain. Achievement goals did mediate the relationship between perceived support in the classroom and student classroom affect. However, only mastery-approach goals were a consistent mediator between both perceived teacher and peer support and positive classroom affect in both domains. Performance-approach goals significantly mediated the path from perceived teacher support to student positive affect in English but not in mathematics; they also mediated the path from perceived peer support to student positive affect in mathematics but not in English.

5.3. Discussion

In the absence of positive forms of parental support in the model, higher levels of conformity correlated with increased perception of parental achievement pressure among Korean adolescents (H2). This finding supports our earlier argument that conformity has both advantages and disadvantages for student motivation and achievement, especially in collectivistic countries with a strong achievement norm such as Korea. Park and Kim (2006) have argued that rather than focusing on high scholastic accomplishment as an end in itself, Korean students view academic achievement as a means to attain positive social approval. Those with high conformity identify with social norms more strongly and consequently feel a greater pressure to achieve, as demonstrated in the present study.

We also found that perceived achievement pressure from parents mediated the path from conformity to student affect in the classroom (H7), but only in mathematics. Contrary to our expectations, perceptions of parental achievement pressure did not mediate the paths from conformity to any of the achievement goals. This result differs from that of Study 1, in which perceived guilt and conflict with parents mediated the paths from conformity to student achievement goals in one or both domains. Another difference from Study 1 is the mediation by perceived teacher and peer support of the paths from conformity to achievement goals. In Study 1, student perception of teacher support mediated the link between conformity and performance-approach goals in mathematics, while student perception of peer support did not mediate any of the links between conformity and student achievement goals. In comparison, student perceptions of support from either teachers or peers were significant mediators of the paths from conformity to student achievement goals (H6) in at least one domain in Study 2. Consistent with our hypothesis and the results of Study 1, conformity again demonstrated significant positive relationships with perceived support from teachers and peers (H3), both of which then indicated stronger mastery-approach goals in both English and mathematics (H6).

We attribute the difference between the two studies to three factors. One is the assessment of only a single dimension of the parent–child relationship in Study 2. Had we assessed parental pressure along with other parent-related dimensions such as perceived conflict or guilt, the results may have been different. The other is the year level of the participating students. The participants in Study 1 were seventh graders, for whom Grade 7 marked the first year of middle school. For these students, parents may still have been a more important social figure than their teachers or peers. The participants in Study 2 were eighth graders, who had presumably adjusted to middle school. In addition, as students move from early to late adolescence, their reliance on their parents gradually decreases and that on teachers and peers increases (e.g., Collins & Laursen, 2004).

Finally, achievement goals were assessed with a different scale in Study 2. In particular, the performance goal scales emphasized on their parents gradually decreases and that on teachers and peers increases (e.g., Collins & Laursen, 2004).

Table 4

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Note: Only mediation paths at p < .05 in at least one of the domains are presented. Bootstrap J = 1000; CI = confidence interval; CFM = conformity; PPRE = perceived parental achievement pressure; TS = perceived teacher support; PS = perceived peer support; MAP = mastery-approach goals; PAP = performance-approach goals; PAW = performance-avoidance goals; PAFF = positive classroom affect; NAFF = negative classroom affect.  
* p < .05.  
** p < .01.
evidence that conformity encourages students to pursue performance goals directly or indirectly via perception of social support. Even though we employed scales that more strongly emphasized social aspects in the assessment of the two performance goals, conformity did not exhibit consistent relationships with these goals.

6. General discussion

The goal of the present research was to investigate, in a group of collectivistic Korean adolescents, the role of conformity in student perceptions of social support, academic motivation, and achievement within specific subject domains. Compared to those of individualistic cultures, members of collectivistic societies are more willing to maintain group harmony and fulfill their personal responsibilities within the group they are affiliated with (Bond & Smith, 1996; Kim & Markus, 1999). Based on these observations, we hypothesized that conformity would be a desirable trait for the academic functioning of adolescents under collectivistic group norms. Supporting this hypothesis, both of the two independent groups of Korean middle school students participating in this research perceived their social environment to be more supportive, with one group also performing better academically, as their conformity levels increased. Conformity in this collective environment was thus free of the negative connotations it often carries for individuals in Western countries (Markus & Kitayama, 1994).

Although conformity was generally associated with positive perceptions of social relationships, such as greater closeness and less conflict with parents and stronger support from teachers and peers in the classroom, it also strengthened feelings of guilt toward parents and perceptions of parental achievement pressure. These manifestations of greater social obligation, however, were not necessarily maladaptive as they correlated positively with student mastery-approach and performance-approach goals and positive classroom affect.

Paradoxical findings regarding the Asian parent–child relationship have often been observed in research on parenting styles, where controlling and authoritarian parenting proved neutral or even beneficial in terms of student motivation and achievement. Such parenting styles typically produce negative student outcomes in other cultures. These inconsistencies have been attributed to the different ideologies governing child rearing in Asian and non-Asian parents. In a study by Chao (1994), for example, Chinese mothers were significantly more likely to compare child rearing to training than were European-American mothers. Chinese mothers also believed more strongly that it was their prime responsibility to raise their children to become hard working and disciplined. Chao (1994) argued that this strict and controlling style of Asian parents is viewed by Asian children as an expression of parental concern and caring. A similar psychological mechanism could explain the mixed effects associated with the feelings of guilt and the perception of parental achievement pressure in the present groups of Korean adolescents.

The benefit of conformity on observed gains in student motivation and scholastic performance largely depended on the characteristics of the specific achievement situation. Across both studies, the paths from student conformity to subject-specific motivation and affect were mediated by various social perceptions. Whereas conformity did directly link to certain motivational beliefs that were consistent with group achievement norms, such as mastery-approach goals, the connections between conformity and student motivation and affect were mostly indirect, passing through the social relationships that students maintained with their parents, teachers, and peers. The merits of conforming, therefore, appear to be most significant in learning environments where students feel supported.

In particular, we observed that student perceptions of support from the subject teacher consistently emerged as a positive mediator between conformity and classroom affect in both subject domains across the two studies. These results support the notion that, as adolescents perceive greater support from their teachers in the classroom, they are more likely to experience positive academic motivation and psychological well-being in school (Patrick et al., 2007; Wentzel, 1998). Researchers have suggested that the teacher–student relationship in Korean school settings is understood in society as an extension of the parent–child relationship (Kim & Park, 1999). Our findings suggest that Korean students, especially those with a strong desire to conform, profit more from maintaining a close relationship with their teachers.

There were also interesting domain-related differences observed in this research. Two such differences, one in Study 1 and the other in Study 2, were especially noteworthy. In Study 1, feelings of guilt toward parents linked to lower achievement scores in both English and mathematics. However, in English, perceived guilt also related to stronger mastery-approach and performance-approach goals among students, both of which in turn related to higher student achievement scores.

English proficiency is highly valued in Korean society, considered to be the most coveted personal ability and an effective means to achieve career success (Choi, 2003). According to one study, 83.4% of the parents of Korean elementary school students responded that their children received some type of private English education outside of school (Nam, 2010). Korean parents spend a substantial amount of money on their children’s English education and, for this reason, many college students view English proficiency as a symbol of family wealth (Choi, 2003). In fact, the burden on household economies was one of the significant factors reported by Korean parents that explained reduced expenditure on private English education for their children (Nam, 2010). The present results indicate that Korean adolescent students strived to master English and perform better than others in English, in addition to achieving better in English, when they felt guilty toward their parents. Presumably, these students wanted to recompense their parents for the effort and economic sacrifice made for their English education with their English achievement.

Another notable between-domain difference came from Study 2, which involved the role of student perception of peer support in their motivation. Perceived support from peers related to stronger mastery-approach goals among students in both English and mathematics. It was also predictive of stronger performance-approach and performance-avoidance goals, but in only mathematics and not English. As conformity became stronger, students perceived greater support from their peers in their mathematics class and this perception encouraged them to not only want to master new mathematics tasks and improve their mathematics skills, but also to prove to others that they could perform well (or conceal from others that they were performing poorly) in mathematics.

Berndt (1979) reported that conformity with parents and that with peers often correlated negatively in different age groups and, as conformity with parents decreased from the third to twelfth grades, that with peers increased to reach a peak in the ninth grade. As peers became important social agents, the participating eighth graders, we presume, wanted to make a good impression on their peers by appearing able. This desire may be stronger in mathematics because it is easier to see who is correct and who is not in mathematics than it is in English. Bong (2005) offered a similar conjecture when perceived mastery goal structures in the classroom predicted student performance goals among Korean high school girls. She surmised that the girls who perceived their teachers to be genuinely caring about their learning and progress might have felt a stronger desire to please the teachers by simultaneously mastering the tasks and demonstrating their competence. This interpretation is speculative, however, and requires further evidence.

7. Limitations and directions for future research

Several limitations of the present study should be noted. First of all, our results relied on survey data, which did not allow us to establish causal relationships. The threat of social desirability in responses, an inherent limitation of the self-report instruments, applies to this research.


