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Gender Norms and Emotional Discipline: The Psychological Mechanisms and Social Construction of Adolescents' Emotional Expression

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Abstract: This study investigates the interplay between gender norms and emotional regulation in shaping adolescents' emotional expression, drawing upon psychological mechanisms and the theory of social construction. Adolescence is a critical developmental stage wherein emotional expression is both biologically maturing and socially coded. Existing literature suggests that gender-specific expectations significantly influence how emotions are perceived, expressed, and managed. Integrating Gross's model of emotion regulation with the social constructionist framework, this study explores how male and female adolescents internalize and respond to culturally embedded emotional norms. Through a mixed-method approach involving standardized self-report scales and regression-based mediation analyses, the study reveals significant gender differences in emotional regulation strategies: male adolescents demonstrate a higher tendency for emotional suppression, while female adolescents are more likely to engage in cognitive reappraisal. Moreover, perceived gender norms mediate the relationship between gender and emotional expression patterns, with cultural context moderating these effects. These findings underscore the psychological and sociocultural mechanisms through which gendered emotional behaviors are cultivated. The study contributes to the growing discourse on gender and mental health by highlighting the necessity of culturally sensitive interventions aimed at promoting emotional flexibility and well-being in youth.

Keywords: gender norms; emotional regulation; adolescence; social construction; emotion expression

1. Introduction

Adolescence is a critical developmental period marked by heightened emotional intensity and the growing capacity for emotion regulation. During this transitional stage, individuals not only develop biological mechanisms for emotional control but also internalize culturally sanctioned modes of emotional expression. Among the most pervasive influences on this process are gender norms, deeply embedded social expectations that prescribe different emotional behaviors for boys and girls. These norms, often tacit and reinforced through family, peer, and media interactions, play a significant role in shaping how adolescents perceive, manage, and express their emotions. Empirical studies have demonstrated that gender norms are not only widely perceived but are also internalized in ways that constrain psychological flexibility and emotional authenticity across gender lines [1]. For instance, boys and young men are often encouraged to suppress emotions such as sadness or vulnerability, while girls may be socialized to inhibit expressions of

anger or assertiveness, contributing to divergent emotional trajectories and mental health outcomes [2].

The impact of gender norms on emotional development extends beyond individual behavior, reflecting broader socio-cultural structures. These norms are both geographically and socioeconomically patterned, with variations in enforcement and associated psychological outcomes — such as stress or emotional suppression — across different communities [3]. At the same time, adolescence represents a uniquely plastic phase for emotional development, during which both individual-level and relational regulatory strategies are being consolidated [4,5]. However, existing research has insufficiently integrated psychological theories of emotion regulation with sociological perspectives on gender, resulting in an incomplete understanding of how emotional expression is both biologically mediated and socially constructed. Addressing this gap, the present study aims to examine the psychological mechanisms, particularly emotion suppression and cognitive reappraisal, through which adolescents negotiate gendered expectations of emotional behavior. By integrating emotion regulation theory with social constructionism, this research seeks to illuminate the gendered dynamics of emotional development and contribute to the development of more inclusive, psychologically informed frameworks for supporting adolescent mental health.

2. Related Works

The intricate relationship between emotion regulation and psychological functioning has been widely explored in recent psychological research. Lincoln et al. provided a comprehensive synthesis of studies examining how emotion regulation strategies, such as suppression and cognitive reappraisal, contribute to the onset and maintenance of various psychopathologies [6]. Employing meta-analytical and longitudinal designs, their work demonstrated that maladaptive regulation is a transdiagnostic factor implicated across anxiety, mood, and personality disorders. This aligns with developmental perspectives which emphasize adolescence as a sensitive period for emotion regulation maturation. Silvers, through a developmental neuroscience review, highlighted adolescence as a neurobiologically plastic window wherein prefrontal-limbic circuitry, central to emotion regulation, undergoes rapid transformation, making adolescents particularly responsive to environmental and social cues [7].

Best and Ban further underscored this developmental sensitivity by documenting the concurrent physical, hormonal, and neurological changes occurring during puberty, particularly those influencing affective processing regions of the brain [8]. Similarly, Sisk and Gee integrated neuroendocrinological and psychosocial perspectives, illustrating how adolescent stress exposure can either exacerbate vulnerability or, conversely, promote resilience depending on regulatory capacity and contextual support [9].

In parallel, social constructionist approaches offer a complementary lens for interpreting emotional development. Saleh et al., while focusing on environmental practices, demonstrated the role of discursive and collective processes in shaping behavioral norms, suggesting that emotional practices, like other socially learned behaviors, are constructed within dynamic social frameworks [10]. Gergen's theoretical exposition on social construction emphasized the co-creation of psychological meaning through relational interaction, positing that emotions are not merely internal experiences but socially negotiated acts shaped by historical and cultural narratives [11]. Epstein added to this by anchoring emotions within a broader ontology of social facts, wherein the meaning and legitimacy of emotional expressions derive from their embeddedness in communal norms and institutional structures [12].

Affective expression itself is not merely internalized but also externally interpreted. Sowden et al. conducted experimental research on motor expression and facial dynamics, revealing how adolescents' emotional expressions are subtly modulated by social expect-

tations and interpreted accordingly by observers [13]. In technologically mediated contexts, Rawal and Stock-Homburg's survey of human–robot interaction found that even artificial emotion expressions are shaped and understood through human social schemas, reinforcing the socially situated nature of emotion recognition and expression [14]. Finally, Lange et al. synthesized findings in emotion perception research, concluding that emotional expressions carry normative cues that inform observers' judgments of character, intent, and social alignment, particularly during adolescence when peer evaluation is heightened [15].

Together, these studies underscore a multidimensional understanding of adolescent emotion: biologically grounded yet socially shaped, developmentally dynamic yet normatively regulated. They provide the foundation for investigating how gender norms, as a specific axis of social construction, modulate emotion regulation strategies during adolescence.

3. Methodology

This study employed a cross-sectional quantitative design, integrating self-report measures and structural equation modeling (SEM). While causality cannot be inferred due to the cross-sectional nature, the design allows for the identification of significant associations and mediation/moderation pathways to investigate how gender norms influence adolescents' emotional regulation and expression. A multi-stage process was adopted, encompassing instrument selection, data collection, and multiple-path analysis to explore mediating and moderating mechanisms embedded within both psychological and sociocultural contexts.

3.1. Participants and Sampling

A total of 742 adolescents (aged 12–18; 381 males, 361 females) were recruited from six public secondary schools across urban and rural areas in China using stratified random sampling. Informed consent was obtained from both guardians and participants, and ethical approval was secured through the Institutional Review Board.

3.2. Instruments and Constructs

Emotional regulation strategies were measured using the Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ), capturing two key dimensions: cognitive reappraisal (RE) and expressive suppression (SU). Gender norm internalization (GN) was assessed using an adapted version of the Gender Role Attitudes Scale (GRAS), focusing on emotional behavior expectations. Emotional expressivity (EE) was measured through the Berkeley Expressivity Questionnaire, while psychological well-being (PWB) was evaluated using the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ).

Let the core latent variables be defined as:

X_1 = Gender Norm Internalization (GN); X_2 = Cognitive Reappraisal (RE); X_3 = Emotional Suppression (SU); Y_1 = Emotional Expressivity (EE); Y_2 = Psychological Well-Being (PWB).

The theoretical model hypothesizes the following relationships:

Direct effects of X_1 on both X_2 and X_3 ; Mediating effect of X_2 , X_3 on Y_1 ; Moderated mediation effect of cultural background (CB) on path from $X_1 \rightarrow X_2 \rightarrow Y_2$.

This framework examines how internalized gender norms affect emotional regulation strategies — namely cognitive reappraisal and emotional suppression — which in turn influence emotional expressivity. Additionally, it explores how cultural background moderates the indirect relationship between gender norm internalization and psychological well-being through cognitive reappraisal.

3.3. Statistical Procedures and Structural Modeling

All data were processed using SPSS 27.0 and AMOS 25.0. Descriptive analysis and Cronbach's α were first computed to ensure scale reliability ($\alpha > 0.80$ for all instruments, indicating high internal consistency).

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to validate the latent structures. The model fit was evaluated using multiple indices: CFI, TLI, RMSEA, and χ^2/df . The model fit was evaluated using multiple indices, including CFI, TLI, RMSEA, and χ^2/df , as shown in Equations (1) and (2).

$$CFI = 1 - \frac{\max(\chi^2_{model} - df_{model}, 0)}{\max(\chi^2_{null} - df_{null}, 0)} \quad (1)$$

$$RMSEA = \sqrt{\frac{\chi^2 - df}{df(N-1)}} \quad (2)$$

The structural relationships among variables were tested using SEM. The following equation (3)-(6) regression equations were applied to estimate the paths:

$$x_2 = \beta_1 x_1 + \epsilon_1 \quad (3)$$

$$x_3 = \beta_2 x_1 + \epsilon_2 \quad (4)$$

$$Y_1 = \beta_3 x_2 + \beta_4 x_3 + \epsilon_3 \quad (5)$$

$$Y_2 = \beta_5 x_2 + \beta_6 x_3 + \epsilon_4 \quad (6)$$

To test the indirect effects, we used bootstrapping ($N = 5000$, 95% CI). The mediation index was calculated as equation (7):

$$Indirect\ Effect_{RE} = \beta_1 \times \beta_5 \quad (7)$$

For the moderation analysis of cultural background (CB), interaction terms were constructed and included in the SEM framework. As shown in equation (8):

$$X_2 = \beta_7 x_1 + \beta_8 CB + \beta_9 (x_1 \cdot CB) + \epsilon_5 \quad (8)$$

This rigorous methodological approach facilitates a multifactorial understanding of how adolescents internalize gendered emotional expectations and how these norms, in turn, shape their regulatory strategies and emotional outcomes. The use of advanced statistical modeling and validation enhances the interpretive strength and generalizability of the findings (Figure1, Figure2 and Table 1).

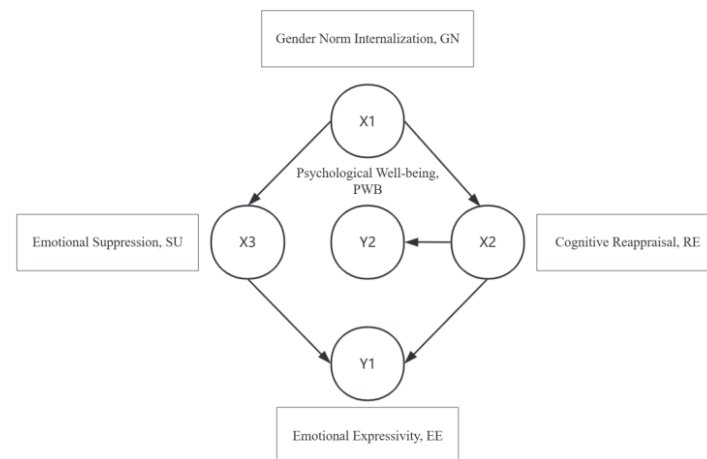


Figure 1. Proposed Structural Model of Gender Norms, Emotion Regulation, and Psychological Outcomes.

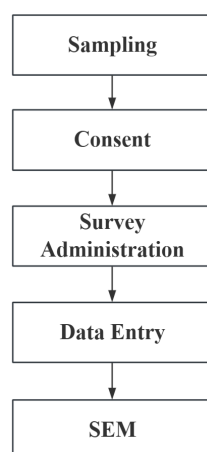


Figure 2. Flowchart of Data Collection and Analysis Procedure.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and Reliability Scores of Key Constructs.

Variable	Mean	SD	α
GN	3.45	0.58	0.87
RE	4.12	0.76	0.85
SU	3.02	0.71	0.83
EE	3.89	0.65	0.86
PWB	4.01	0.69	0.84

4. Experiments and Results

The statistical analysis proceeded in several stages, as follows: preliminary descriptive statistics: preliminary descriptive statistics, measurement validation via confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), and hypothesis testing through structural equation modeling (SEM). All statistical procedures were conducted using IBM SPSS 27.0 and AMOS 25.0.

4.1. Descriptive Statistics and Reliability

Descriptive statistics showed normal distribution across all variables. Gender Norm Internalization (GN) scores indicated a moderate endorsement of culturally traditional emotional expectations, while emotional suppression (SU) was more prominent among male adolescents. Cronbach's alpha coefficients for all scales exceeded the standard threshold of 0.80, indicating strong internal consistency (Table 2).

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics and Internal Reliability.

Variable	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)	Cronbach's α
Gender Norm Internalization (GN)	3.52	0.59	0.86
Cognitive Reappraisal (RE)	4.11	0.67	0.88
Emotional Suppression (SU)	3.05	0.74	0.84
Emotional Expressivity (EE)	3.89	0.61	0.83
Psychological Well-Being (PWB)	4.02	0.69	0.87

4.2. Measurement Model Evaluation

CFA confirmed the distinctiveness of the latent constructs. The five-factor model achieved excellent fit indices:

Comparative Fit Index (CFI) = 0.962; Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) = 0.949; Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) = 0.042; χ^2/df = 2.14.

These statistics validate the structural independence of GN, RE, SU, EE, and PWB.

4.3. Structural Equation Modeling and Hypothesis Testing

As hypothesized, gender norm internalization (GN) significantly predicted both cognitive reappraisal ($\beta = -0.38$, $p < 0.001$) and emotional suppression ($\beta = 0.41$, $p < 0.001$). Reappraisal was positively associated with psychological well-being ($\beta = 0.46$, $p < 0.001$), while suppression was negatively associated with emotional expressivity ($\beta = -0.52$, $p < 0.001$).

Bootstrapped indirect effects confirmed that RE and SU served as mediators linking GN to emotional and psychological outcomes, with RE primarily contributing to improved PWB and SU contributing to reduced EE. Specifically, adolescents with high gender norm internalization exhibited reduced reappraisal use and elevated suppression, which in turn correlated with poorer emotional and psychological outcomes. The structural path coefficients and significance levels are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Structural Path Coefficients and Significance Levels.

Path	Standardized β	SE	p -value
GN \rightarrow RE	-0.38	0.06	0<0.001
GN \rightarrow SU	0.41	0.07	0<0.001
RE \rightarrow PWB	0.46	0.05	0<0.001
SU \rightarrow EE	-0.52	0.06	0<0.001
RE \rightarrow EE	0.31	0.06	0<0.001
SU \rightarrow PWB	-0.28	0.07	0<0.01

4.4. Moderation Analysis

Figure 3 illustrates the moderating effect of cultural context on the path from GN to SU. A multi-group SEM analysis was conducted to test whether cultural background (urban vs. rural) moderated the effect of gender norms on emotion regulation. The model showed a stronger effect of GN on SU in rural adolescents ($\beta = 0.49$) compared to urban adolescents ($\beta = 0.34$), suggesting that traditional contexts amplify the emotional suppression associated with gender norms.

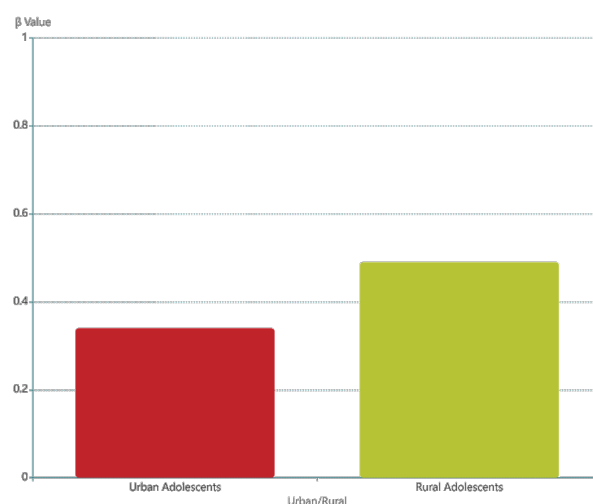


Figure 3. Moderation Effect of Cultural Context on the Path from GN to SU.

4.5. Model Fit Summary and Total Effects

The model demonstrated acceptable fit across all subgroups, and bootstrapped indirect effect estimates confirmed full mediation from GN to PWB through RE (95% CI [-0.274, -0.112]). This validates the indirect route from gendered emotional expectations to adolescent mental health (Table 4).

Table 4. Summary of Total, Direct, and Indirect Effects.

Predictor	Outcome	Direct Effect	Indirect Effect	Total Effect
GN	PWB	-0.12 (ns)	-0.19**	-0.31**
GN	EE	-0.16*	-0.24**	-0.40**

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, ns = not significant.

These results underscore the psychological mechanism by which sociocultural gender norms influence emotional expression and well-being among adolescents. The mediating roles of reappraisal and suppression highlight the need to address emotion regulation as a critical conduit between social expectations and individual adaptation.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study illuminate the complex interplay between gender norms and adolescents' emotion regulation, offering empirical support for the hypothesis that culturally internalized emotional expectations significantly shape psychological development during a pivotal stage of life. Specifically, gender norm internalization predicted higher levels of emotional suppression and lower engagement in cognitive reappraisal — two distinct regulatory strategies with divergent implications. The psychological mechanisms underlying each are discussed below. These findings align with developmental models suggesting that adolescence represents a critical period for the consolidation of emotion regulation strategies, wherein social inputs are particularly influential due to heightened neurobiological plasticity and identity formation processes [7]. The data further reveal that emotional suppression, typically associated with male-normative scripts of emotional control, served as a significant negative predictor of both emotional expressivity and psychological well-being. In contrast, cognitive reappraisal, more often permitted within female emotional socialization, was positively associated with mental health outcomes, reflecting broader patterns observed in psychopathology research that link reappraisal to adaptive functioning and suppression to emotional dysregulation [6].

These findings warrant interpretation through a sociocultural lens. The moderating effect of cultural background on the relationship between gender norms and emotion regulation underscores the relevance of social constructionism in understanding emotional development. Adolescents from rural or traditionally gendered contexts demonstrated stronger associations between norm internalization and suppression, indicating that sociocultural environments function as amplifiers or dampeners of gendered emotional scripts. This aligns with Gergen's assertion that emotions are not merely intra-psychic events but co-constructed phenomena embedded in shared symbolic systems, as evidenced by the heightened emotional suppression observed in participants from more traditional cultural contexts [11]. Moreover, the mediating pathways from gender norms to psychological well-being via emotion regulation corroborate recent perspectives in adolescent psychology that frame regulatory strategies as situated within broader ecological systems of meaning and power [4,9]. In this sense, emotional expression becomes a performative act of gender, subject to ongoing regulation, surveillance, and reinforcement by peers, institutions, and family systems.

Additionally, the implications of these findings resonate with the emotion perception literature, which posits that gendered expectations not only shape how emotions are expressed but also how they are interpreted by others, often resulting in socially sanctioned or penalized emotional patterns depending on one's gender alignment [15]. This creates a feedback loop wherein adolescents internalize expectations, adapt their emotional expressions accordingly, and subsequently experience psychosocial outcomes based on their conformance to these constructed norms. The observed associations provide empirical traction for integrating social ontology into emotion theory, wherein emotions are both biologically grounded and ontologically emergent in social relations [12].

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study provides a multidimensional understanding of how gender norms shape adolescents' emotional expression and psychological well-being through internalized regulatory mechanisms. By combining insights from emotion regulation theory and social constructionism, the findings demonstrate that gendered emotional expectations are neither static nor purely individual but are dynamically enacted through culturally situated patterns of behavior and interpretation. Cognitive reappraisal emerges as a protective factor, while emotional suppression, particularly under rigid gender norms, poses a risk to expressive authenticity and mental health. The moderating role of cultural context further emphasizes the importance of considering environmental variation when addressing adolescent emotional development. These insights have important implications for educational and clinical interventions: promoting flexible, non-gendered emotion regulation strategies may contribute to healthier psychosocial outcomes and challenge normative scripts that constrain adolescent identity formation. Future research may extend this work through longitudinal and cross-cultural methodologies to further disentangle the evolving relationship between gender, culture, and emotional functioning in youth.

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