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Investigation of conformity effect towards gang embeddedness in adolescents

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Article Info	Abstract
Keywords: Gang embeddedness, conformity, adolescents.	Gang embeddedness is a key concept for understanding the extent to which students are psychologically and socially tied to a youth gang. However, empirical studies on the factors influencing this involvement remain relatively limited, particularly within adolescent populations. This study aims to analyze the influence of conformity on gang embeddedness in adolescents. The conformity was measured using a scale developed from Myers with Cronbach's Alpha of 0.850, while gang embeddedness was measured using a scale based on Pyrooz et al. with Cronbach's Alpha of 0.948). This study employed a quantitative method with a correlational design. A total of 109 students were selected using a purposive sampling technique. The data were analyzed using simple linear regression. The analysis showed that conformity has a significant positive influence on gang embeddedness ($p < .001$, $\beta = 0.740$). This indicates that the higher an adolescent's level of conformity, the deeper higher their involvement in a gang. This finding underscores the importance of guidance and counseling interventions in schools to develop critical thinking, assertiveness, and independent decision-making skills, thereby enabling adolescents to resist juvenile delinquency of peer pressure.
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Introduction

Adolescent engagement in youth gangs represents a growing social concern that demands critical attention within Indonesia's educational landscape. A gang is broadly characterized as a youth collective identified by distinct symbols and communication styles. It usually maintains a street presence for a defined period and participates in criminal activities (Curry & Decker, 1998). Affiliation with such groups predominantly begins in early adolescence, particularly from ages 13 to 15, with members disproportionately being male, belonging to ethnic minorities, and originating from lower socioeconomic strata (Densley, 2015).

The statement is supported by the longitudinal research by Thornberry et al. (2003). They discovered that youth gang involvement can impede significant life course transitions, including the attainment of a high school diploma, stable employment, and the formation of marital or cohabiting partnerships, in addition to elevating the risk of adolescent pregnancy. In addition, Krohn et al. (2011) established a correlation between youth gang affiliation and subsequent adult economic difficulties, familial instability, and heightened criminal activity. The detrimental effects are cumulative; as Pyrooz (2014) notes that youth gang membership substantially reduces the probability of completing upper secondary education when compared to peers with no history of gang involvement.

Moreover, the youth gang affiliation carries significant mental health implications. Watkins and Melde (2016) found that adolescent gang members exhibit higher levels of depression, serious suicidal thoughts, and suicide attempts, with a prevalence that surpasses the general population. To be precise, youth gang membership is associated with a 67% increase in suicidal ideation and a 104% increase in suicide attempts. Gang members are also exposed to a greater risk of both immediate and long-term victimization, being 34.1% more likely to report an assault than non-affiliated youth (Taylor et al., 2008).

In the Indonesian context, this phenomenon frequently materializes as violent altercations between student groups. The National Commission for Child Protection in Banten Province reported that between May and November 2022, 286 youths were implicated in such brawls, which led to four fatalities from stab wounds (Ridho & Susanti, 2022). A parallel event in the Cirebon Regency also led to the death of a junior high school student (Mahardika, 2024).

For a deeper understanding of the variability in the youth gang members' involvement, Pyrooz et al. (2013) put forward the concept of gang embeddedness. It is defined as the extent to which an individual is integrated into the social fabric of the gang. Embeddedness encompasses not just membership status, but also levels of participation, loyalty, recurring engagement, interpersonal ties, and the length of affiliation. High levels of embeddedness lead to greater participation in the youth gang activities, make disengagement more difficult, and extend the duration of membership for longer than three to four years in some instances. This deep-seated connection is shaped by the adolescent's surrounding social dynamics that creates pressure to maintain their involvement in the group.

Furthermore, the social environment is a key determinant in fostering adolescent behaviors that strengthen such embeddedness. Adolescents are naturally driven to conform to socially accepted norms of behavior in order to secure peer approval (Bose et al., 2023). This is critical during early adolescence as the social validation it offers is rewarding and bolsters self-esteem when belonging to a peer group is paramount (Bose et al., 2023). Within the process of group interaction, adolescents typically adapt to the group norms and behaviors. The phenomenon is known as conformity, defined as the alteration of one's behavior or beliefs to match those of others (Myers, 2010). Conformity is observable in prosocial and deviant groups alike, including gangs. In addition, Wood (2014) also demonstrates that intensive in-group interaction and communication are highly influential in shaping deviant behavior among adolescents. Consequently, they become particularly vulnerable to negative social pressures, especially when their identity is strongly tied to the group.

According to social identity theory from Hogg and Reid (cited in Wood (2014)), social identification show significant increase of conformity to group norms. The more strongly an adolescent identifies with a gang, the greater their adherence to the values and rules prevalent within that gang (Kim & Park, 2011). In addition, Asch (cited in Wood (2014)) demonstrated that an adolescent conforms to a majority decision despite it being clearly incorrect, solely to gain social acceptance. In the context of gangs, this encourages adolescents to participate in criminal activities they might otherwise avoid in order to build greater commonality with other members.

Furthermore, the peer pressure within gangs compels adolescents to comply with the gang's values, especially when a dominant authority figure is present. A charismatic gang leader often serves as a source of information deemed credible and substantial influence on the attitudes and behaviors of members (Chakraborty, 2023). Thus, conformity is not merely a process of adaptation but also a social mechanism that reinforces adolescent embeddedness in the gang.

Although various studies have been conducted on conformity and deviant behavior, a study that specifically examine the influence of conformity on gang embeddedness remains limited. Therefore, this study is conducted to fill this gap and provide a deeper understanding of the role of conformity in strengthening adolescents' attachment to gangs. The findings of this study serve as a foundation to develop contextual and preventive guidance and counseling services to support efforts to prevent adolescent involvement in gangs.

Method

This study utilized a correlational design to investigate the population of public junior high school students in Cirebon with known gang affiliation. A purposive sampling method was employed to select participants. In addition, the minimum required sample size was calculated using G*Power software version 3.1.9.7. The participants were selected based on their confirmed involvement in youth gang activities, which was identified through records from school counselors and a preliminary assessment conducted by the researcher. The final sample consisted of 109 students.

Data were collected using two primary instruments: conformity and gang embeddedness scales. The conformity scale consists of 15 items adapted from Myers (2010) with Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.850; while the embeddedness scale consists of 28 items adapted from Pyrooz et al. (2014) with Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.948. The data were analyzed using a Pearson's bivariate correlation in Jamovi version 2.3.28. Statistical significance was established at $\alpha < .05$.

Result and Discussion

The descriptive analysis presented in Table 1 shows that the conformity variable has a mean score of 54.7 with a standard deviation (SD) of 14.3. This indicates that the level of adolescent conformity is in the moderate-to-high category, with considerable variation among respondents. Meanwhile, the gang embeddedness variable has an average score of 69.3 with a standard deviation of 21.0. It means that that adolescent involvement in gangs falls into the moderate category. However, the wide range of scores indicates significant differences among individuals in their level of gang involvement.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics

	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Conformity	54.7	14.3	21	75
Gang embeddedness	69.3	21.0	28	140

Further analysis was conducted using simple linear regression (Table 2). The results revealed the F value of 36.7 with $p < .001$. It indicates that the model was statistically significant. In addition, the R^2 value was 0.256, indicating that the model accounts for 25.6% of the variance in gang embeddedness.

Table 2. Results of simple linear regression test

Variable	β	SE	t	p
Conformity	0.740	0.122	6.06	<0.001

Based on the simple linear regression results in Table 2, the conformity variable has a positive and significant effect on gang embeddedness ($p < 0.001$, $\beta = 0.740$). The positive coefficient value indicates that the higher the level of conformity, the higher the level of gang embeddedness. The significance at $p < .001$ suggests that this relationship is statistically very strong; thus, it can be concluded that conformity is a significant predictor in explaining the variation in gang embeddedness.

These findings are interpretable through the lens of adolescent development framework from Erickson (1968). He characterized adolescence as a critical period for identity formation, a quest in which peer groups exert profound influence. During this stage, adolescents actively seek acceptance and validation by assimilating the values and behaviors of their peers. As Steinberg and Monahan (2007) indicated, once an individual begins to identify with a group, they experience heightened pressure, whether actual or perceived, to conform to its styles, values, and interests. This dynamic compels adolescents to modify their behavior to secure social acceptance, often prioritizing peer opinion over personal judgment and conforming to group norms to avoid social exclusion.

Moreover, as Cooper et al. (cited in Wood (2014)) argue, the adolescents' vulnerability to negative social influence increases when they identify with the group. This aligns with the research of Kim and Park (2011), which demonstrated that social identification fosters conformity. When the identity confusion of adolescence is compounded by inadequate social control from family or school, they may gravitate toward alternative social structures, such as gangs. Gang affiliation offers a pathway to a new identity structured around collective norms, which may include deviant or criminal behaviors (Wood, 2014). Consequently, the stronger an adolescent's identification as a gang member, the greater their adherence to the group's internal codes and values.

Asch (cited in Wood (2014)) asserts that individuals may conform to others' decisions to gain acceptance, even when those decisions are clearly wrong. In the context of gangs, this explains the impetus for adolescents to participate in criminal activities they would not individually choose, in order to build commonality and solidarity with other members. In addition, Research by Warr (2002) and Wood and Alleyne (2010) support this finding. The results shows that adolescents tend to comply with their group to avoid rejection, gain social status, and maintain loyalty, a sense of belonging, and self-identity. Adeniyi and Jinadu (2021) also found that peer pressure significantly influences adolescent involvement in gang activities.

The results of this study are in line with the work of studi Patacchini and Zenou (2012), who discovered that adolescents tend to align their behavior with the norms of their close friend groups, thereby strengthening involvement in gang activities. This phenomenon confirms that the more strongly adolescents identify with a group, the greater their tendency to follow its norms, including deviant ones. This concept is relevant for understanding gang embeddedness; where conformity serves not only as a catalyst for initial involvement but also as a mechanism for strengthening compliance with the gang's internal codes.

Moreover, the findings are consistent with a study by Ganta and Soetjiningsih (2022) who revealed a robust positive correlation between peer conformity and juvenile delinquency among junior high school students. The mechanisms through which peer pressure operates parallel the processes of gang embeddedness such as group rules, status-seeking, and the need for safety. In this process, gang-affiliated youth adhere to internal, often illicit, norms to preserve their role, recognition, and sense of community within the group. These findings carry significant implications for guidance and counseling services in educational settings. The positive correlation between conformity and gang embeddedness highlights the necessity of interventions aimed at peer dynamics. Implementing personal-social group guidance to cultivate positive peer networks presents a promising strategy for fostering healthy social affiliations and mitigating the influence of deviant peer pressure.

Both individual and group counseling interventions can be employed to cultivate adolescents' positive potential, specifically focusing on assertiveness skills and effective decision-making capabilities. It is also imperative to foster a school environment conducive to prosocial norms, robust support systems, and a strong sense of bonding among students to their school and to positive peer groups. These findings are not only pertinent for school-level interventions but also offer a foundation for national education policies aimed at preventing youth gang involvement and curbing juvenile delinquency. Within this framework, school counselors serve as key agents in reinforcing a healthy school culture by facilitating prosocial values, strengthening interpersonal relationships within the school community, and promoting student engagement in constructive activities that foster identity and a sense of school belonging.

Furthermore, cross-sectoral collaboration is essential. School counselors can work with homeroom advisors, subject teachers, parents, law enforcement agencies, and community organizations to establish a holistic prevention system. Such collaborative efforts could encompass social literacy initiatives, joint extracurricular programs, informational campaigns on the dangers of gangs, and mentorship for influential youth figures. The key player targeting approach from Patacchini and Zenou (2012) also offers a relevant strategy. This strategy focuses on identifying and providing intensive coaching to core individuals or groups who hold significant influence within the school's social network. Within counseling services, this can be implemented by mapping peer structures to identify pivotal members of gangs and subsequently empowering them with a positive identity, enhanced social skills, and meaningful alternative pursuits. This strategy aims to diminish the allure of gangs and sever the chain of negative influence.

Nonetheless, this study is subject to several limitations. First, its analytical scope is constrained by the exclusion of other variables that may impact gang embeddedness. Second, the reliance on self-report measures is vulnerable to perceptual biases, which could compromise the accuracy of the data. Consequently, future research is recommended to integrate additional variables and employ a mixed-methods design that incorporates techniques such as observation, in-depth interviews, and other qualitative approaches to enhance the validity of the findings and provide a more nuanced analysis.

Conclusion

This research shows that conformity has a significant influence on gang embeddedness. This finding indicates that the tendency of adolescents to conform to the norms and behaviors of their peer group increases their risk of involvement in gang activities. This result reinforces the theory that social pressure and the need for group acceptance play a key role in shaping adolescent behavior. Therefore, school-based guidance and counseling interventions, such as assertive skills training and the development of positive peer groups, need to be implemented to prevent adolescent involvement in the youth gangs. These findings can also serve as a basis for national education policy to reduce juvenile delinquency through contextual preventive approaches.

Author Contributions Statement

Retno Wulandari: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Data curation, Writing – original draft. **DYP Sugiharto:** Formal analysis, Validation, Supervision, Writing – review & editing. **Siti Nuzulia:** Resources, Project administration, Visualization, Writing – review & editing. All authors participated in reviewing the manuscript and approved the final version for publication.

Declaration of Generative AI

During the writing and preparation of this article, the authors used ChatGPT to assist in refining the language and enhancing the clarity of the manuscript. The authors subsequently evaluated and revised the relevant content and assume full responsibility for the accuracy, integrity, and final published version of the article.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known financial interests or personal relationships that could have compromised the objectivity of this study or influenced the presentation of its findings.

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