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Prioritization of Personality and Environmental Predictors of Emotional Dysregulation among High School Students

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A B S T R A C T

Objective: This study aimed to identify, categorize, and prioritize personality and environmental predictors of emotional dysregulation among Malaysian high school students using a sequential exploratory mixed-method design.

Methods and Materials: A sequential exploratory mixed-method approach was employed in two distinct phases. The first phase involved a qualitative thematic analysis through an extensive literature review conducted until theoretical saturation, using NVivo 14 for coding and theme development. Nine main categories of predictors were identified: impulsivity and poor self-control, neuroticism, low emotional awareness, family dysfunction, peer stress, academic pressure, digital exposure, coping deficits, and social-cultural expectations. The second phase used a quantitative ranking design with 180 Malaysian students aged 15–18 years, selected via stratified random sampling. A structured Likert-scale questionnaire based on the qualitative themes was administered. Reliability and validity were confirmed, and data were analyzed using SPSS version 26 through descriptive and inferential statistics.

Findings: Results indicated that personality-based factors were the strongest predictors of emotional dysregulation, with impulsivity and poor self-control (M = 4.63) ranked highest, followed by neuroticism and emotional instability (M = 4.51) and low emotional awareness and alexithymia (M = 4.42). Among environmental predictors, family dysfunction and parenting style (M = 4.37) and peer relationship stress (M = 4.28) were most influential. The lowest-ranked predictor was social and cultural expectations (M = 3.82). Statistical comparisons revealed significant mean differences ($p < 0.05$) between personality and environmental domains, confirming that internal dispositional factors exert a stronger influence on emotional dysregulation than contextual stressors.

Conclusion: The findings underscore that impulsivity, emotional instability, and family dysfunction are key determinants of adolescent emotional dysregulation. These insights emphasize the need for school-based interventions and family-centered programs that enhance emotional awareness, impulse control, and supportive communication within cultural contexts.

Keywords: *Emotional dysregulation; impulsivity; neuroticism; family dysfunction; adolescence*

1. Introduction

Emotional dysregulation has become an increasingly salient issue in adolescent psychology, representing a multidimensional construct encompassing difficulties in monitoring, evaluating, and modulating emotional responses to contextual demands. During adolescence—a period characterized by rapid biological, cognitive, and social transformations—effective emotion regulation is essential for adaptive functioning, mental health stability, and academic success (Crumly-Goodwin & Samek, 2024). However, many adolescents fail to develop mature emotion regulation mechanisms, leading to maladaptive outcomes such as impulsivity, aggression, anxiety, and self-destructive behaviors (Friedman & Mezulis, 2025; Liu et al., 2022). The phenomenon of emotional dysregulation has thus emerged as a pivotal predictor of various psychological and behavioral problems during the secondary school years (Mittermeier et al., 2024).

Adolescence marks a critical developmental window in which the interplay between personality traits and environmental influences shapes emotional self-regulation capacity (Rachma & Hendrawan, 2025). Emotional dysregulation has been linked with impulsive and neurotic personality profiles, which predispose adolescents to heightened emotional reactivity and limited inhibitory control (Lokita et al., 2021). Personality traits such as high neuroticism and low conscientiousness are often accompanied by maladaptive coping patterns and irrational thinking styles, resulting in excessive emotional arousal and instability (Singh, 2022). At the same time, contextual variables—including parenting styles, peer interactions, academic stress, and social media exposure—exert cumulative pressure that undermines adolescents' capacity to manage their emotions effectively (Chen et al., 2024; Türk & Koçyiğit, 2025).

Among internal personality predictors, impulsivity has been repeatedly identified as a central factor driving emotional dysregulation (Fisher-Fox et al., 2024). Impulsive adolescents demonstrate a tendency to react to emotions immediately and excessively without cognitive moderation. This heightened emotional urgency often results in maladaptive coping behaviors such as self-injury, substance use, and risky decision-making (King et al., 2023; Liu et al., 2022). The urgency model proposed by Cyders and colleagues, supported by recent findings, indicates that emotional dysregulation mediates the link between impulsivity and maladaptive outcomes (Fisher-Fox et al., 2024). Neuroticism further compounds this relationship by increasing emotional sensitivity and reducing tolerance for stress, leading to cycles of anxiety, irritability, and emotional exhaustion (Friedman & Mezulis, 2025).

Deficits in executive functioning also appear to underlie difficulties in emotional regulation (Rachma & Hendrawan, 2025). Adolescents with impaired executive control often struggle to inhibit maladaptive emotional impulses and fail to employ effective cognitive reappraisal strategies. Emotion regulation thus becomes reactive rather than proactive, characterized by suppression, avoidance, or rumination (Ucuz et al., 2023). Similarly, alexithymia—difficulty in identifying and describing emotions—has been shown to intensify emotional dysregulation by obstructing awareness of affective states and preventing appropriate expression (Pedrini et al., 2021). In many adolescents, these internal deficits contribute to a pattern of reactive rather than reflective emotion management, which can manifest in aggression, depression, or social withdrawal (Dibaj et al., 2023; Mittermeier et al., 2024).

The family context is one of the most influential environmental predictors of adolescent emotional regulation. Research emphasizes that parenting characterized by inconsistency, emotional unavailability, or harsh discipline is strongly associated with emotional instability (Rosharudin et al., 2023). Emotional neglect deprives adolescents of the opportunity to learn emotional labeling and modulation through parental modeling (Chiang et al., 2023). Conversely, parental warmth, empathy, and open communication act as buffers against emotional dysregulation (Chiang et al., 2024). Parents who validate emotional experiences help adolescents internalize adaptive regulation strategies, fostering resilience in the face of academic or peer stress (Friedman & Mezulis, 2025).

However, dysfunctional family systems—characterized by conflict, low cohesion, or inadequate supervision—are often correlated with self-destructive or oppositional emotional responses (Andersson et al., 2022). Adolescents exposed to interparental conflict tend to develop hypervigilance, emotional numbing, or heightened anger as defensive mechanisms (Gong & Popescu, 2024). In extreme cases, such emotional dysregulation becomes a mediating pathway between family adversity and self-injurious behaviors (Andersson et al., 2022; Dibaj et al., 2023). Furthermore, cultural variations in parenting norms, such as the emphasis on obedience and collectivism in Asian societies, can compound emotional suppression and internalization of distress (Rosharudin et al., 2023).

Beyond family dynamics, peer relationships constitute a powerful environmental domain shaping emotional regulation. The adolescent peer group provides both social validation and emotional learning contexts, yet it also poses risks of rejection, bullying, and peer pressure (Rens et al., 2024). Studies have demonstrated that adolescents experiencing peer victimization exhibit elevated emotional reactivity, low self-worth, and tendencies toward internalizing disorders (Aguayo–González et al., 2023). Bullying, whether physical or digital, disrupts emotional stability by triggering chronic vigilance and anxiety, thereby reinforcing maladaptive coping mechanisms (Rens et al., 2024).

Conversely, peer belonging and emotional intelligence foster adaptive regulation skills. High trait emotional intelligence enables adolescents to understand and manage emotions effectively, reducing impulsive reactions and social conflicts (Rens et al., 2024). However, peer environments emphasizing social comparison—particularly through social media—may exacerbate emotional dysregulation by fueling envy, low self-esteem, and compulsive online behaviors (Türk & Koçyiğit, 2025). Digital overexposure has been associated with impulsive emotional expression, cyberbullying engagement, and psychological distress, highlighting the dual role of technology as both a facilitator and disruptor of adolescent emotion regulation (Zapolski, Whitener, Khazvand, Crichlow, Revilla, Salgado, Aaslma, et al., 2021; Zapolski et al., 2022).

The school environment is another critical context where emotional regulation is continuously tested. Academic expectations, performance pressure, and evaluation systems create emotional strain that can trigger dysregulation in vulnerable students (Chen et al., 2024). Adolescents who perceive teachers as unsupportive or critical report higher anxiety and lower emotional competence (Chiang et al., 2024). Furthermore, the fear of failure and perfectionistic tendencies amplify internal pressure, leading to emotional exhaustion and low academic engagement (Gasol et al., 2022).

Intervention research has underscored the effectiveness of emotion regulation training in school settings, particularly through dialectical behavior therapy (DBT) approaches that teach mindfulness, distress tolerance, and emotional control (Whitener et al., 2025; Zapolski et al., 2022). School-based DBT programs have been found to significantly improve emotional regulation, reduce self-harming behaviors, and enhance overall psychological well-being among adolescents (Gasol et al., 2022; Whitener et al., 2025). These findings highlight the importance of embedding emotional education within academic curricula to address the root causes of emotional dysregulation rather than its consequences.

Cultural expectations play an important role in shaping emotional expression norms. In many societies, particularly collectivist cultures, open emotional expression is discouraged, and emotional restraint is valued (Türk & Koçyiğit, 2025). Adolescents internalize these cultural scripts, often suppressing distress or anger to conform to social expectations, which can intensify emotional dysregulation over time (Ucuz et al., 2023). Gender norms further influence how emotions are expressed; males may be conditioned to suppress vulnerability, while females may experience societal tolerance for emotional expressiveness but also greater emotional burden (Peñacoba et al., 2024). Socioeconomic inequalities, limited access to psychological support, and cultural stigma surrounding mental health exacerbate these patterns (Aguayo–González et al., 2023).

Emotional dysregulation does not merely constitute a transient emotional difficulty but is a transdiagnostic mechanism underpinning various adolescent psychopathologies. It has been implicated in non-suicidal self-injury, borderline traits, eating disorders, and substance misuse (King et al., 2023; McQuade, 2022; Trompeter et al., 2022). For instance, emotionally dysregulated adolescents may use alcohol or food as maladaptive strategies to cope with distress, reinforcing addictive cycles (Peñacoba et al., 2024; Trompeter et al., 2022). Similarly, impulsivity-driven behaviors—such as self-harm or aggression—often serve as attempts to externalize unmanageable emotions (Gong & Popescu, 2024; Liu et al., 2022). These behavioral outcomes indicate that emotional dysregulation functions both as a mediator and a predictor of adolescent maladjustment (Andersson et al., 2022).

Emerging research emphasizes that interventions targeting emotion regulation—particularly dialectical behavioral therapy and mindfulness-based approaches—yield substantial benefits in reducing adolescent risk behaviors (Whitener et al., 2025; Zapolski, Whitener, Khazvand, Crichlow, Revilla, Salgado, Aalsma, et al., 2021). Moreover, programs integrating parental guidance and school involvement enhance the sustainability of these emotional regulation improvements (Crumly-Goodwin & Samek, 2024).

The theoretical framework of this study integrates the bioecological model of human development and the process

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model of emotion regulation. According to Bronfenbrenner's ecological perspective, adolescents' emotional development is influenced by interdependent systems—family, school, peers, and cultural contexts—that interact dynamically (Chiang et al., 2024; Rens et al., 2024). Gross's process model conceptualizes emotion regulation as a sequence of processes—situation selection, cognitive change, and response modulation—through which individuals manage their emotional experiences (Pedrini et al., 2021). The integration of these frameworks allows for a comprehensive exploration of how personality dispositions and environmental pressures jointly contribute to emotional dysregulation trajectories (Singh, 2022; Ucuz et al., 2023).

Despite extensive studies on adolescent emotion regulation, gaps remain in understanding the relative prioritization of personality and environmental predictors across cultural contexts, particularly in Southeast Asia. Most previous research has examined these predictors separately rather than in a comparative or hierarchical structure (Gong & Popescu, 2024; Rosharudin et al., 2023). Few studies have simultaneously explored the integrative effect of personality traits (such as impulsivity and neuroticism) and contextual variables (such as family conflict, academic stress, and peer rejection) on emotional dysregulation in school-aged adolescents. Furthermore, the Malaysian context, characterized by collectivist values and high academic pressure, presents unique sociocultural dynamics that merit specific investigation (Rosharudin et al., 2023; Türk & Koçyiğit, 2025).

To address these gaps, the current research adopts a mixed-method approach—qualitative thematic analysis followed by quantitative ranking—to systematically identify and prioritize the most salient personality and environmental predictors of emotional dysregulation among high school students in Malaysia.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This study employed a sequential exploratory mixed-method design consisting of two distinct phases. The first phase was qualitative, aimed at identifying key personality and environmental predictors of emotional dysregulation among high school students through an extensive review of related literature. The second phase was quantitative, focusing on ranking and prioritizing the identified predictors using statistical analysis.

The target population for the quantitative phase included high school students from Malaysia. A total of 180 participants were selected through stratified random sampling to ensure diversity in terms of gender, age, and school background. Inclusion criteria required participants to be enrolled in public or private high schools, aged between 15 and 18 years, and willing to participate voluntarily. Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant educational authorities, and written informed consent was secured from all participants and their guardians.

2.2. Measures

Phase One: Qualitative Literature Review and Theoretical Model Development

The first phase focused on an integrative literature review to identify personality and environmental factors influencing emotional dysregulation in adolescents. The search strategy encompassed peer-reviewed articles, theses, and theoretical sources published between 2010 and 2025 across databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, and ScienceDirect.

The process continued until theoretical saturation was reached, meaning no new predictors or conceptual themes emerged from the reviewed literature. All extracted factors were coded, categorized, and analyzed using NVivo 14 qualitative data analysis software. Through open, axial, and selective coding, recurring themes were classified into two main domains—personality-related factors (e.g., impulsivity, neuroticism, low self-regulation) and environmental factors (e.g., family conflict, peer pressure, academic stress). The output of this phase formed the conceptual framework used in the quantitative phase.

Phase Two: Quantitative Prioritization and Ranking of Predictors

The second phase adopted a descriptive and correlational survey design to prioritize and rank the predictors derived from the qualitative phase. A structured questionnaire was developed based on the conceptual categories identified earlier, using a five-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (5).

Before large-scale administration, the instrument underwent expert validation by five psychologists and educational researchers to ensure content validity and cultural appropriateness. A pilot study with 30 Malaysian students was also conducted to assess reliability, yielding a Cronbach's alpha coefficient above 0.80, indicating acceptable internal consistency.

JAYPS Adolescent and Youth Psychological Studies
E-ISSN: 2981-2526

Data were collected through online and paper-based surveys distributed to selected schools in Kuala Lumpur, Selangor, and Penang. Respondents completed the questionnaires anonymously to encourage honest responses and minimize social desirability bias.

2.3. Data Analysis

Data analysis was performed using SPSS version 26. The analysis proceeded in several stages:

1. Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, and frequency) were computed to summarize demographic variables and general trends.
2. Reliability testing (Cronbach's alpha) was used to assess internal consistency of the measurement scales.
3. Normality tests (Kolmogorov–Smirnov and Shapiro–Wilk) were conducted to verify data distribution.
4. Ranking analysis was carried out using mean scores and standard deviations to prioritize the identified predictors of emotional dysregulation.
5. Inferential analyses, such as independent samples t-tests and one-way ANOVA, were applied to examine whether personality and environmental predictors differed significantly across demographic subgroups (e.g., gender, age, and school type).

The combined qualitative and quantitative findings allowed for an integrated interpretation, identifying the most influential personality and environmental factors contributing to emotional dysregulation among Malaysian high school students.

3. Findings and Results

The qualitative phase of this study was designed to identify and conceptualize the major personality and environmental predictors of emotional dysregulation among high school students. Using an extensive literature review and theoretical synthesis approach, data were gathered from scholarly databases including Scopus, Web of Science, and ScienceDirect. The analysis followed open, axial, and selective coding procedures using NVivo 14 software to ensure theoretical rigor and conceptual clarity. Through iterative coding and comparison, nine overarching themes (categories) emerged, each encompassing several subthemes and concepts (open codes) that represent patterns of influence on emotional dysregulation. These themes collectively depict how internal personality dispositions and external environmental pressures interact to shape adolescents' capacity for emotional control.

Table 1

Thematic Structure of Personality and Environmental Predictors of Emotional Dysregulation

Category (Main Theme)	Subcategory (Subtheme)	Concepts (Open Codes)
1. Impulsivity and Poor Self-Control	Behavioral impulsivity	Acting without thinking; difficulty delaying gratification; risk-taking tendencies; overreacting to emotions
	Cognitive impulsivity	Rapid decision-making; lack of planning; mental restlessness; inattentiveness
	Emotional impulsivity	Sudden anger outbursts; inability to regulate arousal; frustration intolerance
2. Neuroticism and Emotional Instability	Anxiety sensitivity	Persistent worry; overinterpretation of threat; physiological hyperarousal
	Mood volatility	Rapid mood swings; irritability; unpredictable affective responses
	Self-criticism	Harsh self-evaluation; guilt; internalized failure beliefs; low self-worth
3. Low Emotional Awareness and Alexithymia	Difficulty identifying emotions	Confusion about feelings; inability to label emotions; emotional numbness
	Difficulty describing emotions	Limited emotional vocabulary; suppression of affect; verbal inhibition
4. Family Dysfunction and Parenting Style	Authoritarian control	Harsh discipline; lack of emotional support; punitive environment
	Inconsistent parenting	Mixed messages; unpredictable reactions; poor parental boundaries
	Parental conflict	Exposure to arguments; emotional contagion; fear of rejection; family instability
	Emotional neglect	Lack of warmth; absence of validation; emotional deprivation
5. Peer Relationship Stress	Peer rejection	Bullying experiences; exclusion; low peer acceptance
	Negative peer influence	Exposure to deviant peers; normalization of aggression; peer pressure to conform
6. Academic Pressure and Performance Anxiety	Excessive workload	Homework overload; fatigue; cognitive overload
	Fear of failure	Performance anxiety; test-related stress; perfectionistic striving
	Teacher–student tension	Lack of teacher empathy; perceived unfairness; fear of judgment
7. Digital and Social Media Exposure	Social comparison	Envy from social media; body dissatisfaction; low self-esteem

JAYPS Adolescent and Youth Psychological Studies
E-ISSN: 2981-2526

	Cyberbullying	Online harassment; emotional exhaustion; social withdrawal
	Overuse and addiction	Late-night screen time; sleep deprivation; emotional dependency on devices
8. Coping Deficits and Maladaptive Strategies	Emotion-focused coping	Rumination; crying; avoidance of problems; self-blame
	Dysfunctional regulation	Substance use; self-harm ideation; suppression of emotions
	Cognitive distortions	Catastrophizing; overgeneralization; personalization; dichotomous thinking
9. Social and Cultural Expectations	Gender norms	Pressure to conform to gender roles; emotional suppression in males; relational overemphasis in females
	Cultural stigma around emotions	Shame in emotional disclosure; emphasis on endurance; minimizing mental health concerns
	Socioeconomic stressors	Financial hardship; social comparison; limited access to emotional support resources

1. Impulsivity and Poor Self-Control

The first major theme that emerged from the qualitative analysis was *impulsivity and poor self-control*, reflecting adolescents' difficulty in regulating immediate reactions and impulses. Participants and reviewed literature consistently highlighted that emotionally dysregulated students tend to act without forethought, struggle with delaying gratification, and display high behavioral reactivity when frustrated or provoked. Cognitive aspects of impulsivity, such as rash decision-making and poor planning, further contribute to erratic emotional responses. Emotional impulsivity manifests through intense, short-lived outbursts of anger, aggression, or sadness that are disproportionate to the triggering event. This cluster of behaviors suggests a core deficit in inhibitory control and emotional restraint, which underpins maladaptive emotional regulation among adolescents.

2. Neuroticism and Emotional Instability

The second theme, *neuroticism and emotional instability*, encompasses tendencies toward anxiety, worry, and mood volatility that amplify susceptibility to emotional dysregulation. Adolescents characterized by high neuroticism exhibit frequent emotional fluctuations and an exaggerated response to perceived threats or criticism. Persistent self-doubt and self-criticism were also noted as recurrent patterns, with students often internalizing failure and experiencing guilt or shame disproportionate to their performance. This unstable emotional baseline fosters vulnerability to stress and impairs adaptive coping, leading to chronic dysregulation in emotional expression and interpersonal relationships.

3. Low Emotional Awareness and Alexithymia

A recurring internal factor contributing to emotional dysregulation was *low emotional awareness and alexithymia*. Many adolescents lack the vocabulary or cognitive insight to identify and articulate their feelings effectively. Difficulties in recognizing emotional states—whether sadness, anger, or anxiety—often lead to emotional confusion and suppression. This inability to name emotions prevents constructive expression, resulting in tension, irritability, or physical manifestations such as fatigue and somatic complaints. The qualitative synthesis showed that alexithymic tendencies hinder adolescents from seeking emotional support, reinforcing cycles of internalized distress and uncontrolled affective expression.

4. Family Dysfunction and Parenting Style

Family dysfunction and parenting style formed one of the most dominant environmental predictors of emotional dysregulation. Authoritarian, inconsistent, or neglectful parenting environments were repeatedly associated with low emotional stability and weak regulation in children. Exposure to parental conflict, punitive discipline, and emotional neglect deprives adolescents of modeling effective coping behaviors. Conversely, a lack of parental warmth and validation limits the development of self-soothing and emotion-labeling abilities. These familial stressors create chronic emotional insecurity, which translates into reactivity, withdrawal, or defiance within school and peer settings. Thus, the family environment serves as a foundational context shaping both emotional resilience and vulnerability.

5. Peer Relationship Stress

The theme of *peer relationship stress* reflects the social dimension of emotional dysregulation among high school students. Peer rejection, bullying, and exclusion emerged as powerful sources of emotional pain that trigger anger, sadness, and withdrawal. Adolescents who experience persistent social rejection often develop defensive coping styles such as aggression or emotional numbness. Additionally, association with deviant peer groups was found to normalize maladaptive behaviors like aggression, impulsivity, and emotional detachment. Peer stress thus acts both as a direct emotional strain and as a contextual reinforcer of poor emotional regulation habits within adolescent social ecosystems.

JAYPS Adolescent and Youth Psychological Studies E-ISSN: 2981-2526

6. Academic Pressure and Performance Anxiety

Academic pressure and performance anxiety represent a major situational stressor influencing adolescents' emotional regulation capacities. Heavy workloads, competitive academic environments, and fear of failure generate chronic psychological tension. Students frequently report feeling overwhelmed by expectations from teachers and parents, leading to irritability, frustration, and emotional fatigue. Perceived unfair treatment or lack of empathy from teachers further intensifies these emotional strains. This academic environment often reinforces perfectionistic tendencies and performance-based self-worth, fostering cycles of anxiety-driven dysregulation and burnout in students.

7. Digital and Social Media Exposure

The seventh theme, *digital and social media exposure*, captures how online interactions exacerbate emotional instability. The reviewed data indicated that adolescents frequently engage in social comparison on platforms that amplify feelings of inadequacy and envy. Experiences of cyberbullying and online harassment were also highlighted as triggers for emotional exhaustion and social withdrawal. Furthermore, excessive screen time and dependency on digital interactions were associated with sleep deprivation, emotional detachment, and addictive behaviors. These digital patterns not only diminish real-life emotional connectedness but also heighten the volatility of adolescents' mood regulation.

8. Coping Deficits and Maladaptive Strategies

Coping deficits and maladaptive strategies emerged as an internal mechanism perpetuating emotional dysregulation. Adolescents lacking effective problem-solving or emotion-focused coping skills tend to resort to avoidance, rumination, or self-blame. Dysfunctional strategies such as emotional suppression, substance use, or self-harm ideation were identified as frequent outcomes of ineffective regulation. Moreover, the presence of cognitive distortions—such as catastrophizing or overgeneralizing—further distorts emotional perception and response. This theme underscores the role of deficient regulatory mechanisms in transforming manageable stress into persistent emotional instability.

9. Social and Cultural Expectations

Finally, *social and cultural expectations* were found to significantly shape the expression and suppression of emotions among adolescents. Gender norms impose distinct expectations, with males encouraged to suppress vulnerability and females socialized toward excessive emotional expressiveness. Cultural stigma surrounding mental health also discourages open emotional communication, fostering shame and denial of emotional needs. Additionally, socioeconomic challenges and inequalities create chronic background stress that undermines adolescents' emotional equilibrium. Together, these societal pressures cultivate environments where emotional regulation is either constrained or distorted by external expectations and cultural narratives.

The second phase of the study focused on quantifying and ranking the identified predictors of emotional dysregulation derived from the qualitative stage. Using a structured questionnaire distributed among 180 high school students in Malaysia, participants rated the importance of each identified theme on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (very low importance) to 5 (very high importance). The data were analyzed using SPSS version 26, and mean scores were computed to establish a ranking order. This ranking provided a structured overview of which personality and environmental factors exert the greatest influence on emotional dysregulation among adolescents.

Table 2

Ranking of Personality and Environmental Predictors of Emotional Dysregulation

Rank	Predictor (Theme)	Mean Score	Standard Deviation (SD)
1	Impulsivity and Poor Self-Control	4.63	0.42
2	Neuroticism and Emotional Instability	4.51	0.47
3	Low Emotional Awareness and Alexithymia	4.42	0.50
4	Family Dysfunction and Parenting Style	4.37	0.56
5	Peer Relationship Stress	4.28	0.61
6	Academic Pressure and Performance Anxiety	4.15	0.58
7	Digital and Social Media Exposure	4.09	0.63
8	Coping Deficits and Maladaptive Strategies	3.94	0.66
9	Social and Cultural Expectations	3.82	0.70

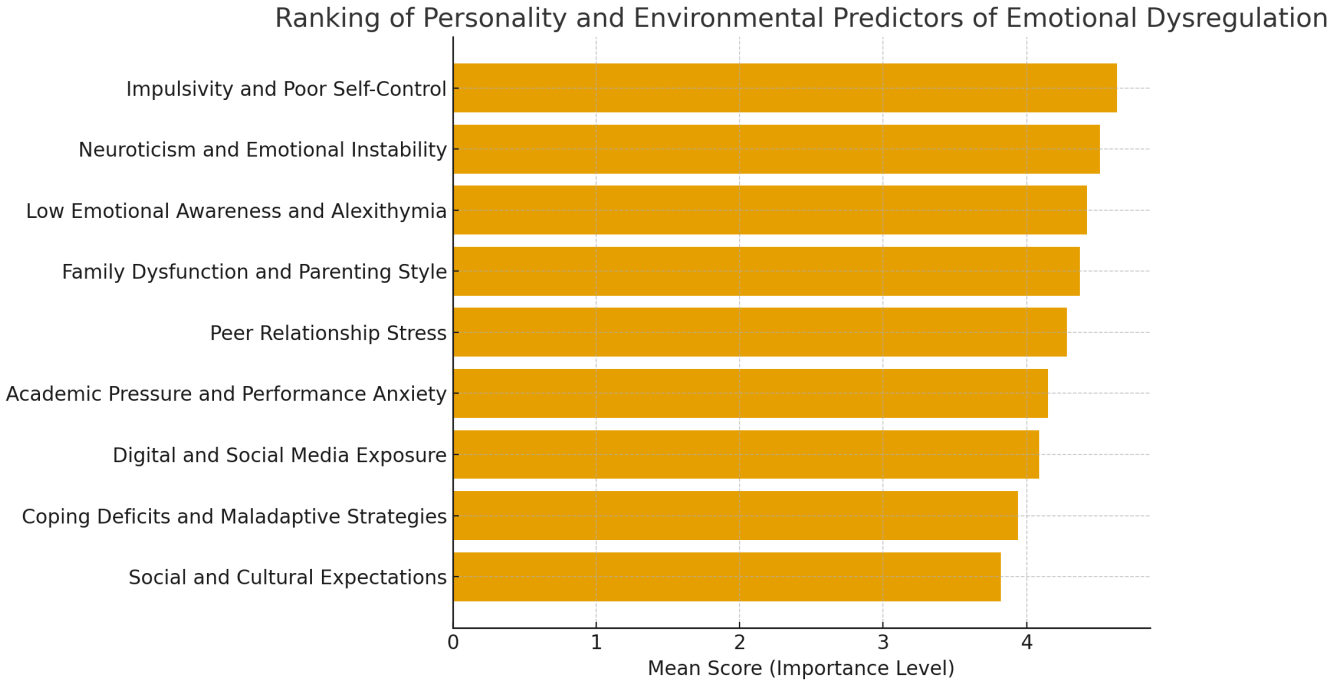
JAYPS
Adolescent and Youth Psychological Studies
E-ISSN: 2981-2526

The ranking results reveal that impulsivity and poor self-control received the highest mean score (M = 4.63), indicating it as the most influential predictor of emotional dysregulation among Malaysian adolescents. This was closely followed by neuroticism and emotional instability (M = 4.51) and low emotional awareness and alexithymia (M = 4.42), highlighting the centrality of personality traits in shaping emotional responses. Among environmental factors, family dysfunction and parenting style (M = 4.37) and peer relationship stress (M = 4.28) ranked highly, reflecting the critical role of relational contexts in emotional adjustment. Meanwhile, academic pressure, digital exposure, and coping deficits showed moderate importance, suggesting that while these factors contribute to emotional dysregulation, they may operate as secondary stressors rather than primary causes. The lowest-ranked theme, social and cultural expectations (M = 3.82), though less immediate in impact, still plays a contextual role by shaping emotional expression norms and perceived stigma around emotional vulnerability.

Overall, the quantitative phase underscores a dual dynamic: internal personality vulnerabilities amplify susceptibility to emotional instability, while environmental and social contexts act as reinforcing mechanisms that either buffer or exacerbate emotional dysregulation in high school students.

Figure 1

Ranking of Personality and Environmental Predictors of Emotional Dysregulation



4. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study aimed to identify and prioritize personality and environmental predictors of emotional dysregulation among high school students in Malaysia using a sequential exploratory mixed-method design. The qualitative phase revealed nine dominant themes—impulsivity and poor self-control, neuroticism and emotional instability, low emotional awareness and alexithymia, family dysfunction and parenting style, peer relationship stress, academic pressure, digital exposure, coping deficits, and social-cultural expectations. The quantitative phase then ranked these predictors, showing that impulsivity and poor self-control emerged as the strongest predictor, followed by neuroticism, low emotional awareness, and family dysfunction, whereas social and cultural expectations had the lowest rank. These findings illuminate the multi-level and interdependent nature of adolescent emotion regulation and align with global evidence emphasizing the interaction of internal personality traits and external environmental contexts in shaping emotional stability.

JAYPS
Adolescent and Youth Psychological Studies
E-ISSN: 2981-2526

The finding that *impulsivity and poor self-control* ranked highest among predictors underscores the central role of personality-based vulnerabilities in adolescents' emotional maladjustment. Impulsive adolescents are often driven by high emotional urgency, poor inhibitory control, and a preference for immediate gratification, which collectively heighten their susceptibility to dysregulation (Fisher-Fox et al., 2024; Liu et al., 2022). Previous studies confirm that impulsivity predicts emotional lability and reactive aggression, particularly in contexts of social stress or academic frustration (Friedman & Mezulis, 2025; King et al., 2023). In the Malaysian sample, impulsivity likely interacts with sociocultural norms that discourage overt emotional expression, producing cycles of internal tension and explosive outbursts when suppression fails (Türk & Koçyiğit, 2025). This finding corroborates the urgency model proposed by (Zapolski et al., 2022), where emotional dysregulation mediates the link between impulsive traits and maladaptive coping strategies.

The second strongest predictor, *neuroticism and emotional instability*, reflects adolescents' heightened sensitivity to stress and their tendency to overreact emotionally. Adolescents high in neuroticism experience greater anxiety and mood volatility, which predispose them to rumination and emotional exhaustion (Singh, 2022). The consistency of this finding across cultural settings suggests that neurotic traits may represent a universal vulnerability factor for emotional dysregulation (Ucuz et al., 2023). Furthermore, neuroticism interacts with poor parental emotion socialization to exacerbate maladaptive emotional patterns, particularly when adolescents perceive low empathy or validation at home (Friedman & Mezulis, 2025; Rosharudin et al., 2023). In line with (Mittermeier et al., 2024), adolescents with high emotional instability are also more prone to suicidal ideation and self-destructive tendencies, indicating that emotion dysregulation acts as both a mediating and maintaining mechanism in psychopathological development.

The third-ranked personality factor, *low emotional awareness and alexithymia*, highlights the cognitive underpinnings of emotion dysregulation. Adolescents who cannot identify or describe their emotions struggle to regulate them effectively, often resorting to suppression or avoidance (Pedrini et al., 2021). These difficulties restrict the development of emotional intelligence and impede adaptive coping strategies (Crumly-Goodwin & Samek, 2024). The present study aligns with (Ucuz et al., 2023), who found that adolescents with alexithymic traits exhibit greater emotional confusion and heightened reactivity to interpersonal stress. Limited emotional literacy prevents adolescents from interpreting emotional cues in themselves and others, which may explain the overlap between alexithymia and impulsive or neurotic profiles (Rachma & Hendrawan, 2025). This convergence underscores the necessity of emotional education programs emphasizing emotional labeling and reflective awareness during adolescence.

Environmental influences were also found to significantly contribute to emotional dysregulation, particularly *family dysfunction and parenting style*, which ranked fourth. This finding reinforces a long-standing consensus that family climate serves as a foundational context for emotional development (Chiang et al., 2024). Adolescents who experience inconsistent or authoritarian parenting frequently develop insecure attachment patterns and weak emotional control (Rosharudin et al., 2023). Family conflict and emotional neglect further deprive adolescents of role models for adaptive emotional expression (Andersson et al., 2022; Chiang et al., 2023). As (Friedman & Mezulis, 2025) notes, parents who overreact to negative emotions may unintentionally reinforce maladaptive emotional responses. Conversely, open parent–child communication and emotional validation act as protective factors, reducing adolescents' emotional vulnerability (Whitener et al., 2025).

The fifth-ranked predictor, *peer relationship stress*, aligns with literature identifying peer dynamics as critical in shaping emotional outcomes. Bullying, rejection, and exclusion were linked to elevated emotional instability, supporting findings by (Rens et al., 2024), who demonstrated that peer victimization diminishes trait emotional intelligence and increases emotional reactivity. Adolescents experiencing social rejection often develop defensive coping styles such as emotional withdrawal or aggression (Aguayo–González et al., 2023). These maladaptive patterns are especially salient in collectivist contexts like Malaysia, where social harmony is highly valued and deviation from group norms may result in ostracism. The association between peer stress and dysregulation is also consistent with (Gong & Popescu, 2024), who reported that exposure to interpersonal violence predicts aggression and poor emotional control. Together, these results suggest that adolescents' peer environments can either reinforce maladaptive emotional habits or serve as corrective socializing agents.

JAYPS Adolescent and Youth Psychological Studies
E-ISSN: 2981-2526

Academic pressure and performance anxiety ranked sixth, reflecting the emotional burden of competitive educational systems. Excessive academic demands, combined with fear of failure, trigger chronic stress responses that compromise emotion regulation capacity (Chen et al., 2024). The association between academic stress and dysregulation mirrors findings by (Gasol et al., 2022), who demonstrated that emotion regulation interventions within school settings significantly reduce students' anxiety and frustration. Moreover, students perceiving low teacher support reported greater emotional lability, consistent with (Chiang et al., 2024), who found that weak teacher–student relationships predict heightened emotional volatility. This pattern suggests that school climate plays an essential role in either exacerbating or mitigating emotional distress among adolescents.

The findings also highlight the increasingly important role of *digital and social media exposure* in adolescents' emotional lives. Ranked seventh, this category encapsulates online behaviors such as social comparison, cyberbullying, and excessive digital engagement. The results align with (Türk & Koçyiğit, 2025), who reported that social media addiction and fear of missing out (FoMO) are mediated by emotional dysregulation, leading to loneliness and low self-esteem. Adolescents' tendency to compare themselves with idealized online representations may foster chronic dissatisfaction and emotional instability. Additionally, exposure to online aggression and cyberbullying contributes to heightened emotional distress (Zapolski, Whitener, Khazvand, Crichlow, Revilla, Salgado, Aaslma, et al., 2021). While technology offers opportunities for social connection, its unregulated use appears to erode adolescents' emotional resilience, reflecting the broader digital paradox in adolescent mental health.

Coping deficits and maladaptive strategies ranked eighth, illustrating the limited repertoire of adaptive emotion regulation skills among adolescents. Many rely on avoidance, rumination, or substance use to manage distress, as also observed by (King et al., 2023). Dysfunctional coping strategies exacerbate emotional instability by reinforcing short-term relief and long-term emotional vulnerability (Dibaj et al., 2023). These findings echo (Singh, 2022), who demonstrated that deficits in emotion regulation predict engagement in health-risk behaviors. Moreover, (McQuade, 2022) found that emotional dysregulation interacts with attention-deficit symptoms to produce borderline traits, further underlining its transdiagnostic nature. The current results confirm that teaching cognitive restructuring, mindfulness, and distress tolerance can mitigate maladaptive coping cycles (Whitener et al., 2025).

The lowest-ranked predictor, *social and cultural expectations*, nonetheless plays a significant contextual role. Cultural norms surrounding emotional restraint, gendered expectations, and stigma toward mental health shape adolescents' emotional expression patterns (Peñacoba et al., 2024). Males, for instance, are often discouraged from displaying vulnerability, while females may experience social reinforcement for emotional expressiveness but are simultaneously stigmatized for emotional "excess." This duality reflects findings by (Ucuz et al., 2023), who noted gendered variations in emotion regulation styles linked to cultural norms. Additionally, socioeconomic stressors and cultural pressures for academic achievement further intensify internal emotional conflicts (Aguayo–González et al., 2023). Although these influences may not directly cause dysregulation, they provide the sociocultural backdrop that determines how emotions are perceived, expressed, and managed in adolescence.

The integration of personality and environmental findings underscores a transactional model of emotional dysregulation in adolescence. The data suggest that internal vulnerabilities—such as impulsivity, neuroticism, and alexithymia—interact dynamically with external stressors—such as family conflict, academic pressure, and social comparison—to amplify emotional instability. This pattern reflects Bronfenbrenner's bioecological framework, wherein emotional outcomes arise from interactions between personal characteristics and environmental systems (Chiang et al., 2024; Rens et al., 2024). Consistent with (Crumly-Goodwin & Samek, 2024), the findings demonstrate that emotional regulation develops contextually and is continuously shaped by family, peers, and institutional settings.

Empirical studies support this multi-level perspective. (Mittermeier et al., 2024) found that emotion dysregulation mediates the relationship between trauma exposure and suicidal ideation in adolescents, while (Andersson et al., 2022) identified it as a key link between childhood abuse and self-injury. These findings mirror the present study's emphasis on environmental trauma and relational instability as core predictors. Similarly, intervention research provides convergent evidence that school-based DBT programs effectively strengthen adolescents' regulatory capacities (Whitener et al., 2025; Zapolski et al., 2022). This alignment reinforces the view that emotion regulation skills are

JAYPS Adolescent and Youth Psychological Studies E-ISSN: 2981-2526

modifiable and can be enhanced through structured psychoeducational approaches.

Taken together, the current study contributes to the growing body of cross-cultural evidence suggesting that adolescent emotion dysregulation results from the interaction between temperament-based predispositions and socio-environmental challenges. The Malaysian context, characterized by academic rigor, collectivist family structures, and pervasive digital influence, provides a nuanced landscape for understanding how these predictors manifest uniquely. Importantly, the prioritization results guide practitioners and educators in identifying which domains warrant the most immediate intervention—specifically, targeting impulsivity, emotional awareness, and family communication patterns.

5. Limitations & Suggestions

Despite its contributions, this study is subject to several limitations. First, the reliance on self-reported measures in the quantitative phase may have introduced response biases such as social desirability or recall inaccuracies, especially given the cultural tendency toward emotional restraint among Malaysian adolescents. Second, the cross-sectional design restricts causal inference, preventing definitive conclusions about the directionality of relationships between predictors and emotional dysregulation. Third, the qualitative phase was limited to literature-based data rather than direct interviews or focus groups, potentially omitting context-specific nuances of emotional experience. Additionally, the study's sample—comprising 180 participants from selected Malaysian schools—may limit generalizability to other cultural or socioeconomic groups. Finally, while the ranking approach effectively identified priority predictors, it did not examine interaction effects among them, which future longitudinal or structural modeling studies could explore in greater depth.

Future studies should incorporate longitudinal and cross-cultural designs to examine the developmental trajectories of emotional regulation and its predictors across adolescence. Integrating multi-informant perspectives—including parents, teachers, and peers—could enrich the understanding of contextual influences and reduce self-report bias. Furthermore, experimental and intervention-based studies should assess how enhancing emotional awareness and impulse control can alter maladaptive emotional patterns over time. Expanding research to diverse cultural contexts, especially within Southeast Asia, will also facilitate the identification of universal versus culturally specific determinants of emotional dysregulation. Lastly, employing advanced analytic techniques such as structural equation modeling or machine learning could refine the prioritization of predictors and uncover latent dimensions underlying emotional dysregulation mechanisms.

Practically, the findings highlight the need for school-based emotional regulation programs that integrate mindfulness, cognitive restructuring, and distress tolerance training into daily curricula. Parental training workshops should be developed to strengthen supportive communication and model adaptive emotional expression. Educational policymakers are encouraged to reduce academic pressure by promoting socio-emotional learning frameworks that balance performance with well-being. Mental health practitioners working with adolescents should prioritize interventions that target impulsivity and emotional awareness while incorporating culturally sensitive approaches that respect local norms around emotion expression. Finally, fostering collaboration among schools, families, and community organizations will ensure a holistic support system for adolescents navigating the challenges of emotional development.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this article.

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