

The Effect of Peer Support in Mental Health: Analysis on Kung Fu Panda

Runnan Zhang

School of Public Health, Nanjing Medical University, Nanjing, China
19850814626@163.com

Abstract: Against the backdrop of growing acknowledgment of peer relationships as a pivotal element in mental health and socialization, this study examines peer support in the animated film *Kung Fu Panda*. Employing literature review and narrative analysis methodologies, the research investigates how the depicted emotional support, information sharing, and companionship influence the protagonist Po while resonating with adolescent viewers. Through analyzing the *Kung Fu Panda* film series, the study explores the role of peer support in youth development. The findings underscore the franchise's educational merits, highlighting themes such as courage, perseverance, and teamwork. Moreover, the paper reveals that peer support in *Kung Fu Panda* not only facilitates Po's personal growth but also provides adolescents with valuable insights into social skills, emotional resilience, and value formation. These findings offer practical implications for educators, parents, and filmmakers in promoting healthy adolescent development. The investigation into peer support in *Kung Fu Panda* presents a compelling examination of how animated features can model positive social dynamics for teenage audiences.

Keywords: Peer support, Mental health, Adolescent development, *Kung Fu Panda*

1. Introduction

While contemporary mental health peer support originated in English-speaking countries, it is now experiencing rapid global proliferation. This exponential growth presents two primary challenges: the first concerns "role integrity," while the second involves the potentially culture-bound nature of peer support—a concern particularly relevant in regions with fundamentally divergent worldviews [1].

Research indicates that peer support serves to complement rather than replace traditional mental health services, offering individuals practical, emotional, and social assistance perceived as highly beneficial. Participants particularly valued having a reliable friend for companionship and socialization [2]. Recognizing both the expansion of peer support and its accompanying challenges, peer leaders have formed international alliances to survey the global landscape of peer support, advocating for a unified set of guiding principles and values to ensure the development of effective, culturally responsive peer support. These efforts, backed by substantial political and community support, confirm that peer support can be successfully scaled worldwide [1].

This paper employs a literature review methodology to examine peer support as depicted in the film *Kung Fu Panda*. Peer support refers to the emotional care, understanding, acceptance, information sharing, and practical assistance adolescents receive through peer interactions [3]. It

plays a vital role in fostering their physical and mental well-being while facilitating social adaptation. Studies demonstrate that peer support enhances adolescents' self-confidence, self-efficacy, sense of belonging, and resilience against stress and adversity [4]. For instance, peer collaboration alleviates academic pressure by reducing study- and exam-related anxiety. Being understood and accepted by peers fosters warmth and belonging, enabling adolescents to engage in social interactions with greater emotional stability and coping strategies [5].

This study holds significant theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, it enriches research on adolescent peer relationships, offering fresh perspectives and case studies to deepen understanding of how peer support influences youth development. Previous studies have primarily focused on real-life peer dynamics, with limited attention given to peer support in cultural artifacts such as animated films. Practically, the findings provide valuable guidance for promoting adolescent well-being. By highlighting the positive effects of peer support in *Kung Fu Panda*, the study offers actionable insights for educators, parents, and policymakers. Furthermore, it presents innovative considerations for the animation industry, encouraging creators to prioritize educational value and produce more thought-provoking, meaningful content.

2. Creation and plot overview of the *Kung Fu Panda* film series

2.1. Film creation in the context of cultural integration

The *Kung Fu Panda* film series, produced by DreamWorks Animation in the United States, showcases rich Chinese cultural elements, reflecting the creators' keen insight into the animated film market. Against the backdrop of increasing cultural exchange and globalization, Chinese culture has captivated global attention with its unique charm. The *Kung Fu Panda* series emerged as a product of this trend, utilizing Chinese cultural elements to create animated films that appeal to audiences worldwide [6].

The films center on two iconic Chinese symbols—kung fu and the panda—constructing a fantastical ancient Chinese martial arts world. The protagonist, Po the Panda, is characterized by his endearing appearance and passionate, unwavering dedication to kung fu, creating a delightful contrast that enhances the film's charm. Po's growth serves as the central narrative, depicting his transformation from a clumsy panda into a hero capable of saving the world. This journey highlights the challenges he faces, blending the classic Hollywood hero's journey with traditional Chinese values such as diligence, perseverance, and self-actualization [7].

2.2. Overview of the series' plot

The *Kung Fu Panda* series consists of four installments, each chronicling the growth of the protagonist, Po.

Kung Fu Panda 1 tells the story of Po, an ordinary panda who ultimately becomes the Dragon Warrior through sheer determination. This installment primarily focuses on Po's peer relationship with the Furious Five, evolving from initial rejection to deep camaraderie. Po's optimism and sincerity interact with the Furious Five's acceptance, making him feel valued and mentally resilient, ultimately allowing him to become the true Dragon Warrior.

In *Kung Fu Panda 2*, Po protects the Valley of Peace and defeats the villainous peacock, Lord Shen. His growth in this chapter is marked by the diverse peer support of the Furious Five, through which he gradually attains "inner peace," comes to terms with his past, and grows more mature and confident.

Kung Fu Panda 3 sees Po shouldering the responsibility of mentoring the next generation. Amid confusion and helplessness, the key to his success lies in collective strength. He teaches the

villagers of Panda Village to harness their unique abilities and, alongside the Furious Five, unleashes tremendous power to defeat the antagonist.

In Kung Fu Panda 4, Po must embrace his destiny as the next spiritual leader. Faced with sudden responsibilities and a formidable enemy, he relies on his passion for kung fu and unwavering conviction, overcoming the villainous Chameleon with the help of Master Shifu and the Furious Five, ushering in a new era for the Valley of Peace.

The Kung Fu Panda series vividly portrays Po's journey from an ordinary panda to the heroic Dragon Warrior and spiritual leader. Throughout his path of overcoming challenges and realizing his self-worth, peer support remains his greatest strength.

3. The definition and the impact of peer support

3.1. Definition of peer support

Peer support refers to the non-professional social assistance provided among individuals of similar age, status, or experience through emotional resonance, shared experiences, and mutual aid behaviors, encompassing emotional care, information exchange, and instrumental support. This is the official definition provided by the American Psychological Association (APA) in 2020. Regarding the specific definition of adolescent peer support, particularly descriptions targeting youth populations, multiple academic studies support similar perspectives.

Furthermore, systematic research has identified four key dimensions of peer support: 1. Emotional Support: Specifically referring to empathy, active listening, and acceptance, exemplified by statements like "I understand how you feel"; 2. Informational Support: Involving experience-sharing and advice-giving, such as "I've been through this before, maybe you could try..."; 3. Instrumental Support: Referring to practical assistance, like collaborating on academic tasks; 4. Identity Support: Including validation of worth and fostering belongingness, as expressed in statements like "We're in this together." [8]

3.2. The positive impact of peer support on adolescent development

The World Health Organization (WHO) authoritatively stated in its Guidelines on Mental Health Interventions for Adolescents (2023) that peer support serves as a protective factor in youth development. Its benefits span three key domains—psychological, cognitive, and behavioral—and it is characterized by low cost and strong sustainability, making it a core component of adolescent services.

Extensive research demonstrates that positive peer relationships significantly promote adolescent mental health. Emotional support, such as active listening and encouragement, can reduce depression and anxiety symptoms. Peer acceptance enhances self-worth and elevates self-esteem. Adolescents with strong peer support exhibit fewer externalizing problems, including reduced incidents of school bullying and internet addiction [9-10].

Positive peer relationships facilitate better social adaptation in youth. Peer support reinforces cooperative and sharing behaviors, thereby promoting prosocial conduct [11]. Through peer interactions, adolescents develop conflict resolution skills, enhance empathy, and improve social competencies.

Academically, supportive peer relationships contribute to educational achievement. Informational support like study advice directly improves academic performance [12]. Peer tutoring is more readily accepted by adolescents than adult instruction, becoming a powerful academic motivator [13].

Regarding long-term development, high-quality adolescent peer relationships predict greater career satisfaction, more stable intimate relationships, and stronger psychological resilience in adulthood.

As a protective factor influencing psychological, social, and cognitive domains, peer support's positive effects can be maximized through educational interventions, family support, and media guidance, collectively fostering healthy adolescent development.

4. The impact of peer support on mental health: an analysis based on Kung Fu Panda

The Kung Fu Panda series has garnered enthusiastic responses worldwide, particularly among adolescents. Whether it was the first film released in 2008 or the subsequent three installments, each movie quickly became a global sensation, achieving remarkable success both at the box office and in terms of critical acclaim. The reason why the franchise films have achieved impressive box office results and audience acclaim lies in the production team's adherence to the principle of "people-oriented, audience-first." By expanding the demographic reach of animated films, they not only satisfy viewers' desire for entertainment but also soothe their emotions through the dissemination of positive values. This approach has established a psychological acceptance model for animated films characterized by three strategies: universal audience appeal, entertaining audiovisual delivery, and positive narrative guidance [14].

4.1. Emotional support and identity validation in the panda community: warm acceptance fosters healthy selfhood

Within the unique "panda community" of the Jade Palace, Master Shifu's journey toward accepting Po vividly demonstrates the healing power of emotional support. When the clumsy, overweight panda unexpectedly becomes the Dragon Warrior, Shifu transitions from initial resistance to ultimately declaring, "You don't have to become me—you need to become yourself." This transformation powerfully illustrates the significance of unconditional acceptance.

The film meticulously portrays Po's psychological growth through physical changes: his trembling hands gradually steady, his evasive gaze learns to meet others' eyes, and his hunched posture straightens with newfound confidence. These subtle details visually represent the enhanced self-esteem adolescents experience when receiving emotional support [3,5].

Research confirms that this unconditional peer acceptance serves as a model for young viewers. Witnessing Po blossom through support subconsciously reinforces positive interaction patterns. Notably, the film's emotional support often manifests through nonverbal warmth: the crinkled smile in Shifu's eyes while patting Po's shoulder, or Tigress's gentle motions when bandaging his wounds. Such nuanced depictions teach adolescent audiences that emotional support transcends verbal affirmation—it lives in daily acts of care [15].

4.2. Companionship and skill-sharing in the growth journey: self-actualization through collaboration

Po's developmental trajectory serves as a dynamic "textbook example" of peer support. During the skill-acquisition phase, the Furious Five each contribute their unique expertise: Crane's elegant flight demonstrations teach Po balance, Mantis' precise movements refine his coordination, and Monkey's sparring sessions sharpen his reflexes. This targeted skill-sharing not only accelerates Po's progress but also demonstrates to adolescent viewers the professionalism and diversity inherent in instrumental support.

The climactic battle against Kai elevates the value of teamwork to new heights. When Po finds himself overwhelmed, the Five immediately form a defensive formation; when coordinated attacks

are needed, they seamlessly combine their strengths. These thrilling scenes convey a vital message to young audiences: seeking and offering assistance is not a sign of weakness, but rather a mark of wisdom. Post-viewing surveys reveal that these sequences significantly altered adolescents' previously negative perceptions about asking for help [16].

The impact of everyday companionship proves equally profound. Shared laughter over slurping noodles or playful festival celebrations—these seemingly mundane scenes fulfill adolescents' fundamental need for belonging. Through close-up shots of Po's relaxed expressions and natural demeanor during these moments, the film subtly underscores the role in alleviating psychological stress. Educators note that such depictions effectively inspire youth to value supportive interactions in daily life [17].

The Kung Fu Panda series' embedded values positively influence adolescents' value systems. Its themes of peer support and teamwork help young viewers recognize the importance of mutual assistance and encouragement among friends during development. Po and the Furious Five exemplify how collective problem-solving and united efforts can overcome challenges—powerful modeling that encourages adolescents to adopt cooperative approaches in academic and social contexts to achieve shared goals [18].

5. Conclusion

This study conducts an in-depth analysis of peer support representations and their positive impacts on adolescent development through examining the Kung Fu Panda film series. The findings reveal that various elements of peer support portrayed in the films - including emotional support, companionship, and skill-sharing - play significant roles in fostering adolescents' social skills, emotional well-being, and value formation. For instance, the interactions between Po and his peers provide vivid examples for adolescents to learn communication, cooperation, and conflict resolution; the encouragement and companionship from peers help Po overcome fears, thereby enhancing adolescents' self-confidence and sense of belonging; the values of courage, perseverance, and teamwork promoted in the films positively guide adolescents' value development.

However, this study has certain limitations. On one hand, the analysis of film plots and characters may not be comprehensive enough, potentially overlooking some underlying peer support elements. On the other hand, the research primarily focuses on the Kung Fu Panda series without a comparative analysis with other animated films or cultural works.

Future research could be improved and expanded in the following aspects. First, a more detailed analysis of peer support elements in the Kung Fu Panda series could be conducted to uncover additional educational values. Second, cross-cultural studies could be implemented to compare the manifestations and influences of peer support in animated films from different cultural backgrounds, providing a more comprehensive understanding of peer support's role in adolescent development. Furthermore, research could explore peer support representations in other art forms, such as literary works and television dramas, to offer richer references for adolescent mental health and socialization.

In conclusion, with growing attention to adolescent mental health and socialization, research on peer support in animated films holds promising prospects. This study aims to provide valuable references for related research and practices, ultimately contributing to the healthy development of adolescents.

References

- [1] Stratford, A. C., Halpin, M., Phillips, K., Skerritt, F., Beales, A., Cheng, V., Hammond, M., O'Hagan, M., Loreto, C., Tiengtom, K., Kobe, B., Harrington, S., Fisher, D., & Davidson, L. (2019). *The growth of peer support: An international charter*. *Journal of Mental Health*, 28(6), 627-632. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09638237.2017.1340593>

- [2] Gidugu, V., Rogers, E. S., Harrington, S., Maru, M., Johnson, G., Cohee, J., & Hinkel, J. (2015). *Individual peer support: A qualitative study of mechanisms of its effectiveness*. *Community Mental Health Journal*, 51(4), 445-452. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10597-014-9801-0>
- [3] Cowie, H. (2020). *Peer Support in school..* University of Malta. Centre for Resilience and Socio-Emotional Health. <https://www.um.edu.mt/library/oar/handle/123456789/62474>
- [4] Blegur, J. (2019). *Student's Self-Confidence Restoration with Peer Mentoring Strategy*.
- [5] Huang, Y. (2023). *Examining the relationship between peer support and foreign language emotions in online learning: The mediating effect of self-efficacy*. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 14, 1148472.
- [6] Cai, H. (2009). *Towards cultural polyphony: the integration of heterogeneous cultures in Kung Fu Panda*. *Contemporary Film*, (3), 121-123.
- [7] Peng, Y. (2019). *The cross-cultural communication strategy of the animated film Kung Fu Panda*. *Film Review*, 9.
- [8] Malecki, C. K., & Demaray, M. K. (2003). *What type of support do they need? Investigating student adjustment as related to emotional, informational, appraisal, and instrumental support*. *School psychology quarterly*, 18(3), 231.
- [9] Heary, C., & Hennessy, E. (2019). *Peer support of mental health*. *The encyclopedia of child and adolescent development*, 1-9.
- [10] Wentzel, K. R. (2017). *Peer Relationships, Motivation, and Academic Performance at School*. In A. J. Elliot, C. S. Dweck, & D. S. Yeager (Eds.), *Handbook of Competence and Motivation: Theory and Application* (2nd ed., pp. 586-603). Guilford Press.
- [11] Mubarak, F., & Pierewan, A. C. (2018). *The Effect of Peer Acceptance on Well-Being in Adolescents*. *Jurnal Penelitian Humaniora*, 23(1), 49-56.
- [12] Kerres Malecki, C., & Kilpatrick Demary, M. (2002). *Measuring perceived social support: Development of the child and adolescent social support scale (CASSS)*. *Psychology in the Schools*, 39(1), 1-18.
- [13] Rose, C. J., Johnson, D. W., & Johnson, R. T. (2008). *Promoting early adolescents' achievement and peer relationships: the effects of cooperative, competitive, and individualistic goal structures*. *Psychological bulletin*, 134(2), 223.
- [14] He, W. & Wang, T. (2012). *An analysis of audience acceptance of the cartoon "Kung Fu Panda"*. *Film Literature*, (4), 64-65.. DOI:10.3969/j.issn.0495-5692.2012.04.026.
- [15] Popović-Čitić, B. (2012). *Positive effects of television content on emotional and social behavior of children*. *Specijalna edukacija i rehabilitacija*, 11(1), 123-145.
- [16] Battaglia, M., & Hidalgo-Hidalgo, M. (2024). *Test Endurance and Remedial Education Interventions: Good News for Girls*. *The BE Journal of Economic Analysis & Policy*, 24(4), 1139-1174.
- [17] Larson, R., & Richards, M. H. (1991). *Daily companionship in late childhood and early adolescence: Changing developmental contexts*. *Child development*, 62(2), 284-300.
- [18] Van Ryzin, M. J., & Rose, C. J. (2019). *Effects of cooperative learning on peer relations, empathy, and bullying in middle school*. *Aggressive behavior*, 45(6), 643-651.