

Survey Paper

An Exploratory Survey on Self-Concept and Social Comparison Orientation in Indians

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ABSTRACT

A survey was conducted to explore potential relationships between various dimensions of personal and social self-concept with one's social comparison orientation. The survey was a combination of 4 scales measuring 9 total dimensions such as self-fulfilment, social comparison tendencies, self-esteem etc. 82 responses were collected and after testing for correlations; 21 statistically significant correlations were found, such as a negative correlation between one's sense of autonomy and social comparison orientation, though most of them were weak and moderate and no strong correlation among any of the 9 dimensions was found. Tests for gender and age differences were also conducted, with no statistically significant differences found. This exploratory survey analysis can help provide some guidance for potential avenues of investigation for larger studies on Self-Concept and Social Comparison Orientation.

Keywords: *Self-Concept, Social-Comparison*

Humanists like Rogers and Maslow played a significant role in popularizing the concept of self-concept, but it is still a broad and multidimensional concept that includes but is not limited to a large number of beliefs about ourselves in various domains such as, academic performance, gender roles, racial identity, religious identity, physical self-perception, self-esteem and so on. (Weiten, Dunn, & Hammer, 2014; Bong & Clark, 1999; Bailey JA, 2003), it encompasses peoples entire set of thoughts about themselves, including self-schemas, possible selves, and other less-developed self-images (Markus, H., 1986). In some sense self-concept is the set of answers people hold to the age-old philosophical question of "Who am I?" and it matters because people's beliefs about themselves greatly influences their motivations and behaviours. Another important point to note is self-concept need not always be congruent, meaning it does not have to reflect reality, people can hold false beliefs about themselves, in such cases the self-concept is incongruent.

As per social identity theory, self-concept includes two major aspects, that of personal and social identity, the former includes various personality traits and other individuating characteristics, whereas the latter includes identification by belonging to a group and aspects related to it (Turner, Brown, Tajfel, 1979).

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Although the specifics of how self-concept develops isn't clear, but in part social interactions play a significant role, one of them being one's social comparison orientation which can be defined as, "the inclination to compare one's accomplishments, one's situation, and one's experiences with those of others" (Buunk and Gibbons 2006, p. 16). It is a process by which people evaluate themselves by comparing themselves with others in order to improve their own understanding of themselves, it acts as a medium of information, and this information about our abilities and opinions in relation to others can potentially influence us in various ways (Festinger 1954). Due to a lack of an objective measuring criteria, people compare their own ability and opinions with those of others to better understand themselves in relation to something.

Social comparison affects various domains of self-concept, and comparison done with those that are similar to us, tends to be more informative (Suls et al., 2002). When people compare themselves with those that are similar to them, it often results in a *contrast effect* where our self-perception diverges from the perceived abilities of the target of comparison (Gerber et al., 2018). Generally comparing oneself with someone deemed superior by some standard i.e. upward comparison, typically negatively impacts peoples self-concepts especially when they perceive themselves as unable to reach a similar level (Collins, 1996). So is true vice versa as observed by the 'big fish little pond' effect, typically studied for academic self-concept, where because of social comparison, equally skilled individuals tend to have a lower self-concept in higher-achieving environment than in lower-achieving environment, as depending on whether one is a big fish in a little pond or a little fish in big pond it would facilitate different levels of upwards or downwards comparison (Marsh, 1987). But that is not always the case, though less frequent in some cases an *assimilation effect* may also occur where the self-perception of our abilities starts to resemble the perceived ability level of the target of comparison. (Dockx et al., 2019). In such cases upward social comparison can act as a form of inspiration enhancing one's self-concept suggesting that being exposed to highly skilled peers won't necessarily be negative for self-concept but rather effects of upward comparison on self-concept depends on whether one perceives the upward comparison as a form of inspiration or inferiority (Burleson et al., 2005)

A lot of variables can influence self-concept for instance, the degree of upward (or downward) comparison one engages in can vary based on their social media usage which in turn negatively or positively affects their self-concept, like when higher social media usages facilitate higher levels of upwards social comparison which therefore negatively impacts self-esteem. (Vogel, 2014)

People are also not always unbiased when doing self-evaluation by social comparison and so comparison is also dependent on factors like personal attributes and goals, for example when the goal is self-enhancement; cherry picking the standard for comparison based on one's advantage in said standard, and engaging in more downward comparison, or simply doing no comparisons at all are common behaviours but when the goal of comparison is accurate self-evaluation or self-improvement such distortions of the comparison process may not occur. (Wood, 1989)

The objective of the following analysis however is to investigate any potential relations between different dimensions of personal and social self-concept and their relation with social comparison orientation, though here the goal is not to measure the direction of the comparison being made, that is whether the target of comparison is being perceived as superior or inferior with respect to some standard. Rather the goal is to see irrespective of

the target and standard of comparison whether just the tendency of engaging in comparative behaviour itself, has some noticeable impact on self-concept or not. Another objective is to search whether there are any gender or age wise differences in any of the dimensions being measured.

METHODS

Sample

A diverse set of participants were randomly selected from various different parts of India. The sample size was (N = 82), age ranging from 13-51 with the median age of participants being 19 years old, 32.1% of the participants were 19 years old, 19.2% 18 years old and the 9% 17 years old and 9% 20 years old, the rest were below 5%. 44.6% of participants were female and 55.4% were male. Majority of the participants were undergraduate students.

Instruments

4 different questionnaires were used to measure 9 total dimensions, all of the 4 below mentioned questionnaires followed a 5-point Likert scale scoring, options ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

Personal Self-Concept (PSC) Questionnaire consisting of 18 items was used which measured personal perceptions regarding Self-fulfillment (6 items), Honesty (3 items), Autonomy (4 items), and Emotional self-concept (5 items). With high construct validity and a Cornbach's alpha reliability of 0.8 (Goñi, E et al., 2011)

Social Self-Concept (SSC) Questionnaire was used consisting of 8 items, to measure the dimensions of Social Competency (4 items) and Social Responsibility (4 items). With high construct validity and a Cornbach's alpha reliability of 0.77. (Fernández-Zabala et al., 2015)

A Single-Item Self Esteem Scale was used to measure Self Esteem, although Cornbach's alpha cannot be calculated for single items, a three-point autocorrelation procedure by Heise estimates the reliability of this single item to be 0.7 and it is strongly correlated to Rosenbergs Self-Esteem scale and is a comparable alternative to it (Robins et al., 2001).

Finally the shortened version of the Iowa-Netherlands Comparison Orientation Measure (INCOM) scale with 6 items was used, to measure the social comparison orientation, for abilities (3 items) and opinions (3 items), with high construct validity and a reliability of 0.7 (Schneider et al., 2011)

It is important to define each of the dimensions being measured. (Abbreviations for them will be used henceforth):

- *Self-fulfillment* (SF): Peoples belief about achieving the goals they have set for themselves in their life, feeling fulfilled, meeting their targets, rising to challenges and their general achievements. (Goñi, E et al., 2011)
- *Honesty* (HON): Peoples sense of being honest, upright and trustworthy in their behavior. (Goñi, E et al., 2011)
- *Autonomy* (AU): How one sees themselves as an individual equal to, but different from others, seeing oneself as someone who is independent and different from others; the feeling of not being dominated by others; being able to function without depending on others. (Goñi, E et al., 2011)

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- *Emotional Self-concept* (ESC): People's perception about themselves, in relation to more impulsive and reactive aspects of their personality, this includes the perceptions of emotional balance, sensitivity, recognition and control of one's emotions. (Goñi, E et al., 2011)
- *Social Competency* (SC): One's perception about the skills they activate in social situations and how they believe other people react to them. (Fernández-Zabala et al., 2015)
- *Social Responsibility* (SR): One's perception of how they contribute to the proper functioning of society: contribution to the common good and commitment to improving humanity. (Fernández-Zabala et al., 2015)
- *Social Comparing Abilities* (SCA): One's perception of how often they compare themselves with others based on abilities. (Schneider et al., 2011)
- *Social Comparing Opinions* (SCO): One's perception of how often they compare themselves with others based on opinions or engaging in opinion seeking behaviour in order to compare. (Schneider et al., 2011)
- *Self-Esteem* (SE): One's positive or negative evaluation of themselves, broadly about one's confidence in one's own worth or abilities. (Rosenberg, 1965)

Procedure

Data was collected using Google forms, and the participants filled the survey as per their convenience, consent was taken from each participant prior to sharing the survey. The data was then processed and analysed using Microsoft Excel, IBM SPSS v29, and Python.

Analysis

Given the exploratory scope of the survey and large number of questions, an individual item by item analysis of questions was not feasible, therefore averaging the questions that measure the same dimension, for each respondent and assigning a composite score for each dimension being measured for each respondent was preferable. Resulting in 9 variables to analyse, but such a conversion of ordinal data into numbers and then treating it as Interval data although a common practice has been a matter of debate since more than half a century now, it is a highly controversial topic (Carifio, J., & Perla, R., 2008). Descriptive statistics, such as means and standard deviations, are redundant when it comes to Likert items, or as Jamieson says "average of 'good' and 'fair' is not 'fair-and-a-half.' even when one assigns integers to represent 'fair' and 'good.'" (Jamieson, S., 2004). The problem is that Likert items are not equidistant, meaning the difference between 1-2 and 2-3 is not necessarily the same. And it seems that using non-parametric measures might be more appropriate but a lot of people have argued against such ordinalist understandings and have argued that using parametric tests for Likert scales (given the assumptions for the specific parametric test are met) is appropriate (Norman, G., 2010; Harpe, S. E., 2015; Carifio, J., & Perla, R., 2008). In this analysis recommendations from (Harpe, S. E., 2015) were followed in order to use parametric tests, though a lot of the dimensions failed to meet the assumptions for the given parametric tests therefore mostly non-parametric tests were conducted and reported even though both the tests showed comparable results.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

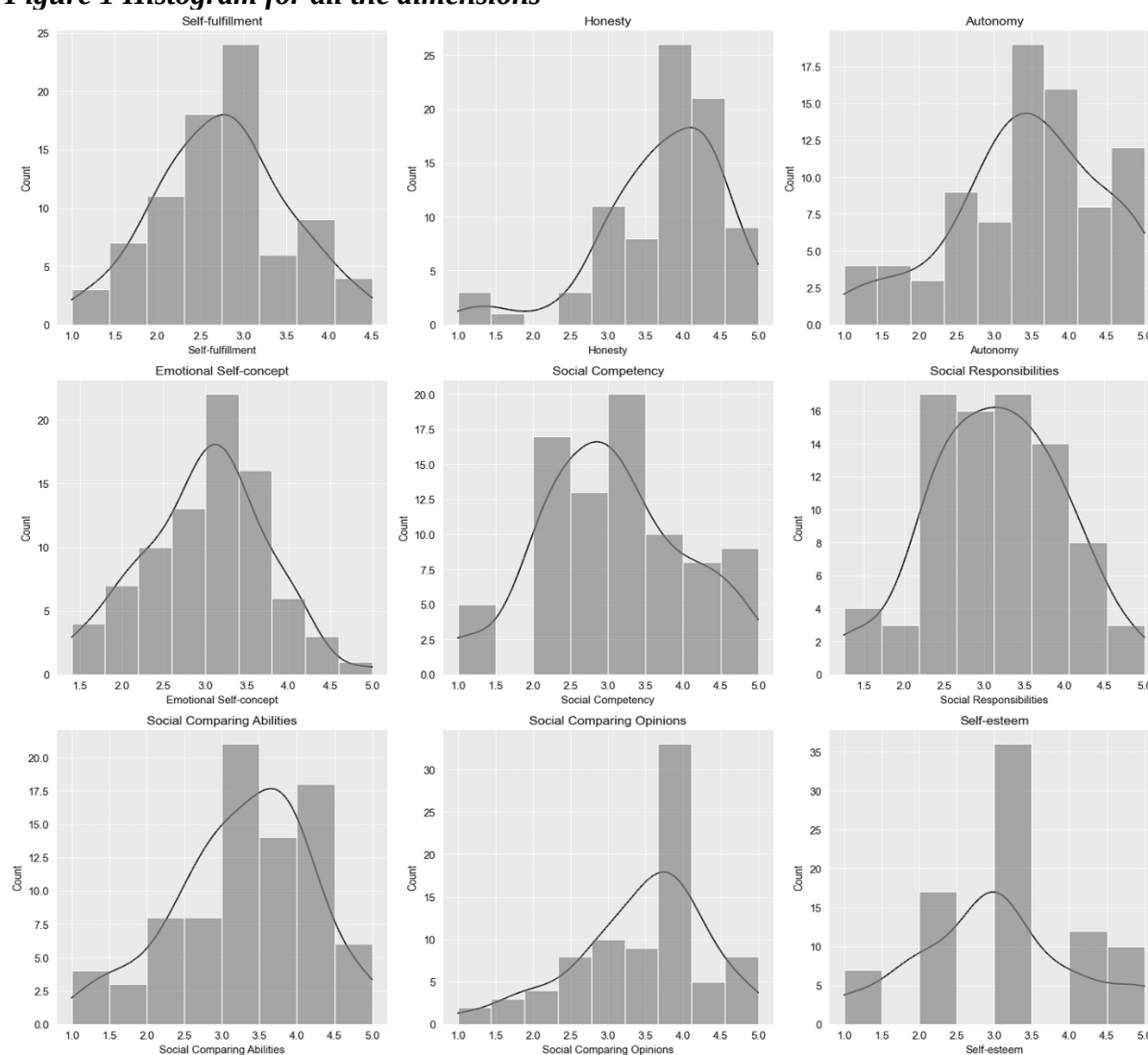
Descriptives and distribution

Table 1 Descriptives

	(SF)	(HON)	(AU)	(ESC)	(SC)	(SR)	(SCA)	(SCO)	(SE)
Mean	2.75	3.72	3.44	2.98	3.04	3.15	3.28	3.43	3.01
Median	2.83	3.66	3.5	3	3	3.25	3.33	3.66	3
SD	0.76	0.82	1	0.73	0.97	0.83	0.89	0.87	1.09
Skewness	0.05	-1.08	-0.46	-0.09	0.05	-0.09	-0.04	-0.67	0.14
Kurtosis	-	1.73	-0.11	-0.1	-0.33	-0.18	-0.1	0.4	-0.3
	0.21								

After visual inspection a few outliers in the dimensions of (HON), (AU), (ESC) and (SCO) were found however these outliers were not due to any obvious error, false or random responding therefore given that the sample size was small removing them would affect the overall data and to prevent bias and maintain data integrity winzorisation was not done, and given the outliers were small in numbers they were kept.

Figure 1 Histogram for all the dimensions



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The histograms (Figure 1) gave some idea that the dimensions were somewhat normal, but (HON) was moderately left skewed which may have been a result of social desirability bias. (SCO) also appeared to be slightly left skewed this too could've been a result of social desirability bias, even though that sounds counterintuitive there is a weak but significant correlation between social desirability and social comparison orientation, a plausible conjecture for this is that social comparison is tied to social competition which is normal for capitalist societies and, social comparisons might be perceived as practical in life rather than a sensitive issue (Schneider et al., 2011). That is plausible more so given the competitive culture that Indian students face, though further research is required to confirm this.

To further assess normality, Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk tests were conducted, it was found that for the dimensions of (SF), (ESC) and (SR), both tests indicate normal distribution ($p > .05$). The rest of the dimensions show significant deviation from a normal distribution ($p < .05$) in either both or one of the tests. (See Table 2). Log transformation was done however it did not change the deviation from normality.

Table 2 Test for normality

Dimensions	Kolmogorov-Smirnov ^a		Shapiro-Wilk	
	Statistic	P-values	Statistic	P-values
(SF)	.068	.200*	.989	.719
(HON)	.154	<.001	.906	<.001
(AU)	.095	.065	.959	.011
(ESC)	.095	.064	.981	.264
(SC)	.116	.008	.969	.041
(SR)	.075	.200*	.983	.337
(SCA)	.130	.002	.967	.032
(SCO)	.163	<.001	.949	.003
(SE)	.236	<.001	.900	<.001

Note. *. this is lower bound of true significance, df 82 for all

Correlation among dimensions

Even though the test for normality showed 3 dimensions were normal it might be a type II error due to multiple testing because visual inspection did not show good enough normality and given most of the other variables had a non-normal distribution, with outliers in them along with the previously mentioned controversy of using parametric tests for variables created by aggregation of ordinal variables like Likert item responses, and with (SE) being a single item scale; alongside considering the relatively moderate sample size it was best that a non-parametric test such as Spearman's rho be calculated. Though Pearson correlation was also calculated and the results were comparable with almost the same significant correlations with only a maximum difference of +/- 0.1 was found, the only exception being that Pearson correlation showed three more significant correlation between (AU) & (SC), (AU) & (SR) and (SCO) & (SF), though given these dimensions had outliers it was more appropriate to report the results for Spearman's rho.

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Figure 2 Spearman's rho correlation matrix

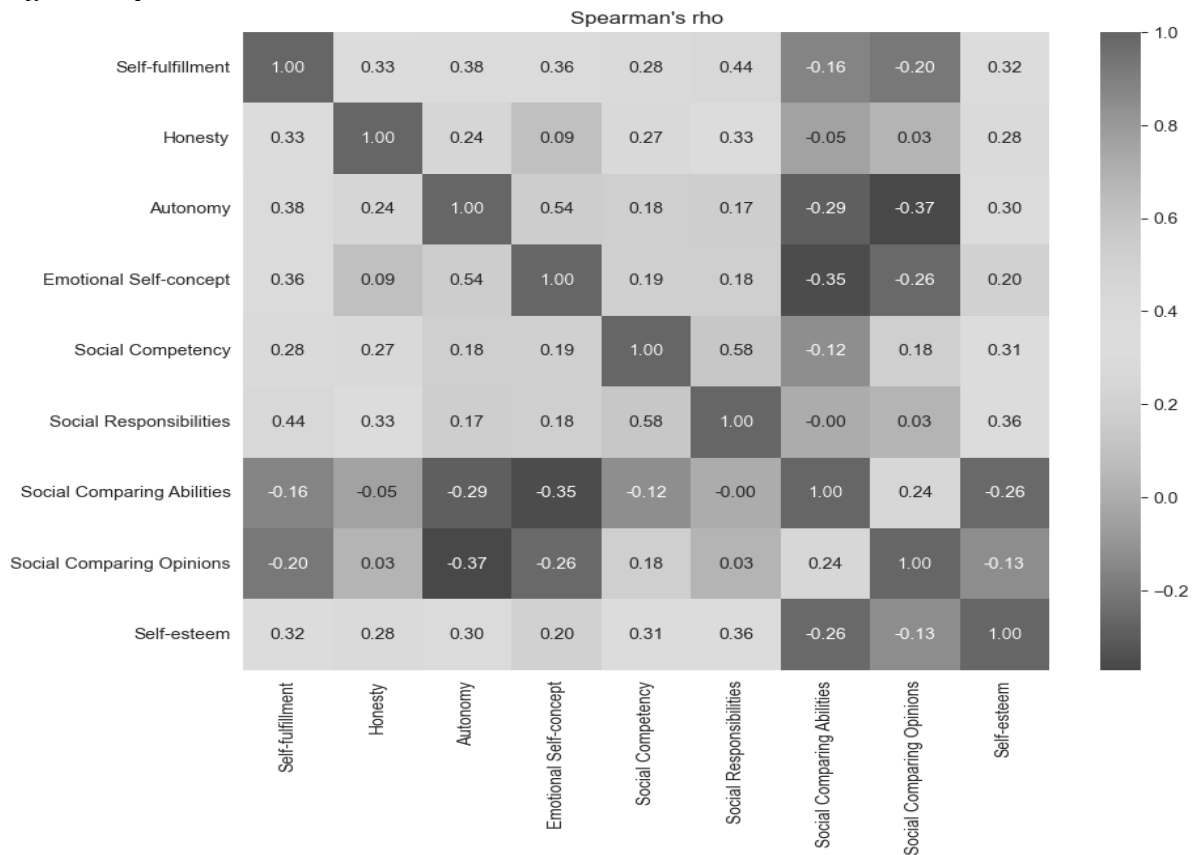
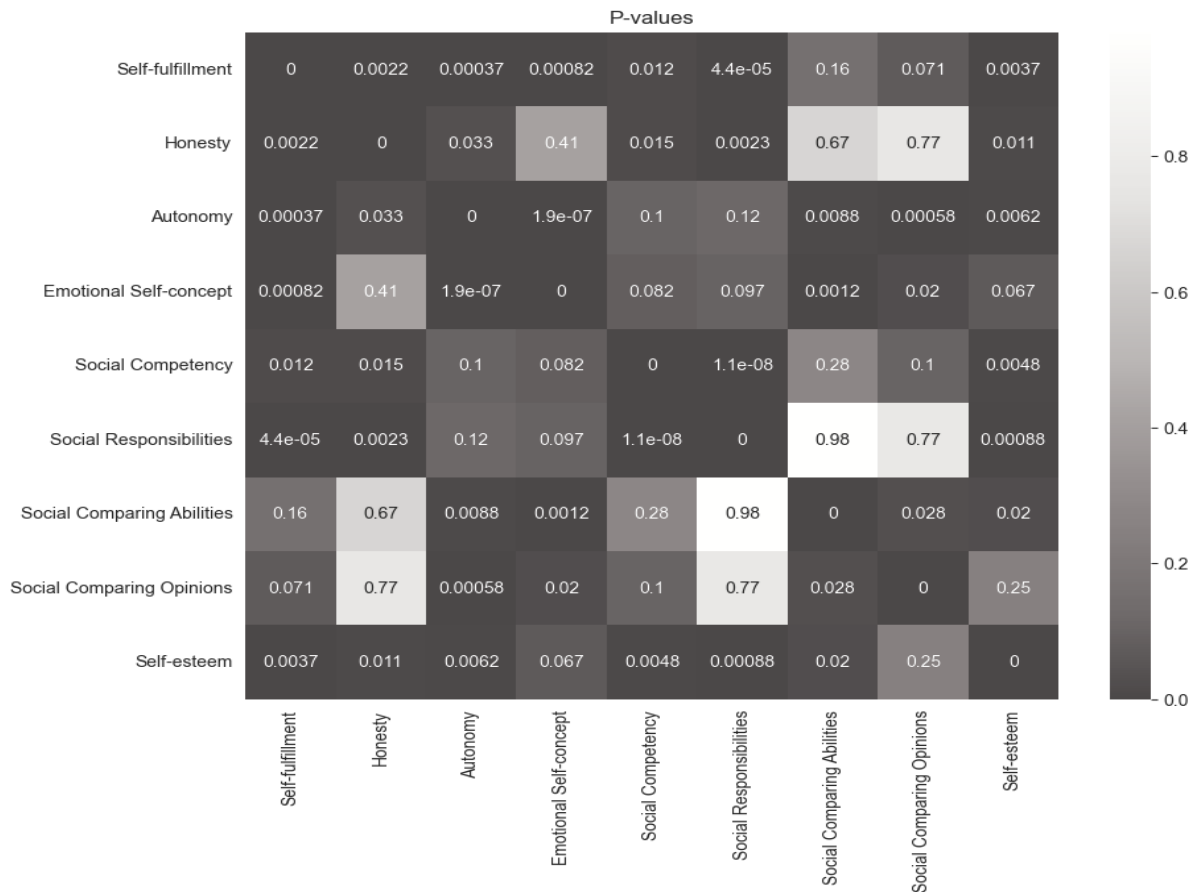


Figure 3 P value matrix for Spearman's rho



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In total 21 statistically significant correlations were found (See Figure 3). Considering correlation between personal self-concept and social self-concept dimensions, it was found that one's sense of (SF) had statistically significant moderate positive correlation with (SR) ($\rho = 0.44$, $P < 0.001$). (SF) was also weakly correlated with one's sense of (SC) ($\rho = 0.28$, $P < 0.05$). (HON) was also found to be moderately correlated with (SR) ($\rho = 0.33$, $P < 0.01$) and also weakly with (SC) ($\rho = 0.27$, $P < 0.05$)

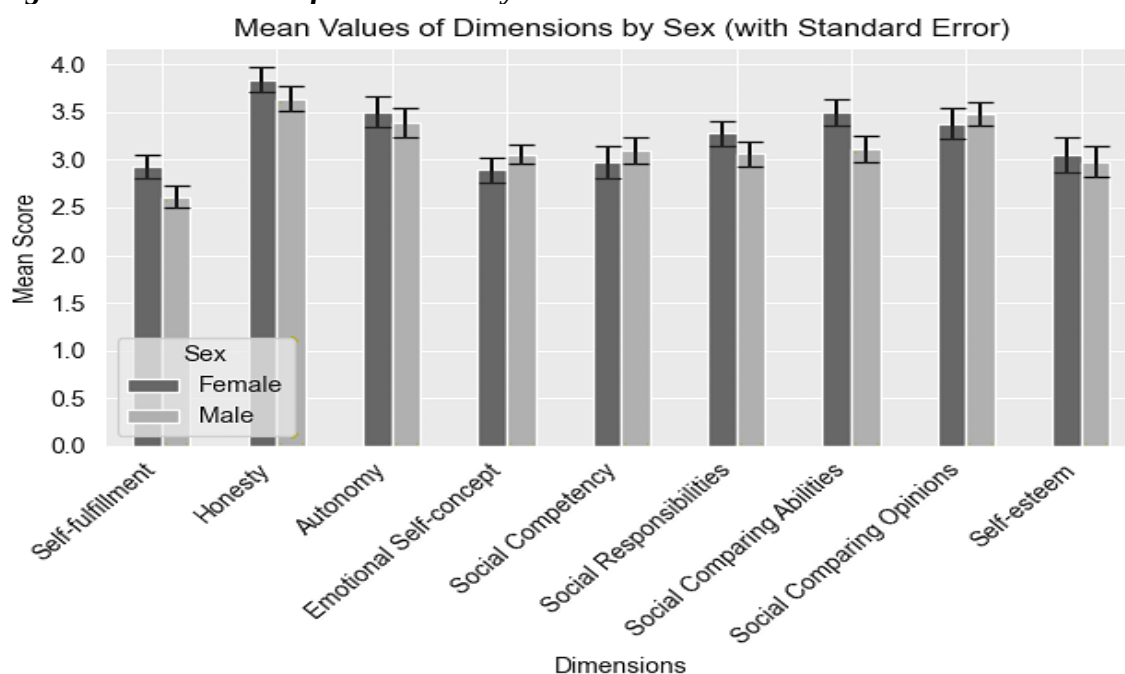
As for personal self-concept and social comparison orientation it was found that one's sense of (AU) had significant moderate negative correlation with one's tendency for (SCO) ($\rho = -0.37$, $P < 0.001$) and (SCA) ($\rho = -0.29$, $P < 0.01$). Similar results were found for (ESC), where (ESC) had a weak negative correlation with (SCO) ($\rho = -0.26$, $P < 0.05$) and moderate negative correlation with (SCA) ($\rho = -0.35$, $P = 0.0012$).

(SE) was found to have a significant weak negative correlation with (SCA) ($\rho = -0.26$, $P < 0.05$), and (SE) also had significant weak to moderate positive correlations with most of the dimensions of personal and social self-concept. (See figure 2 & 3)

Dimensions within personal and social self-concept also had multiple weak to moderate correlations among themselves (See figure 2 & 3). One notable interdomain correlation for them was a moderate positive correlation between (AU) and (ESC) ($\rho = 0.54$, $P < 0.001$)

Gender differences

Figure 4 Mean values of dimensions by sex



There did not appear any major difference across means of dimensions for different genders however to check for the significance of the minor differences an independent sample t-test was conducted and no significant gender differences were found in any of the dimensions, even though homogeneity of variance was true for the gender groups being compared, but after inspecting for normality for both gender groups for each dimensions, most of the dimensions had non normal distribution in at least one of the groups, and due to the presence of outliers and the sample size for each group not being large enough to ignore normality, Mann–Whitney U test a non-parametric alternative test to the independent sample t test was

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conducted for all of the 9 dimensions and once again no significant difference was observed in the rank sums of males and females, for any of the dimensions and the null hypothesis; “The distribution of ‘dimension in question’ is same across categories of Sex.” Was retained for each dimension with ($P > 0.05$) in each case, the effect size was also small for each dimension. (See Table 3)

Table 3 Mann-Whitney U test scores for gender difference

	(SF)	(HON)	(AU)	(ESC)	(SC)	(SR)	(SCA)	(SCO)	(SE)
U	648	711	753	931	919	742	664	873	812
Z	-1.6	-1.1	-0.7	0.9	0.8	-0.8	-1.5	0.4	-0.1
P-values	0.09	0.26	0.4	0.3	0.4	0.4	0.1	0.6	0.8
r *	0.17	0.12	0.07	0.1	0.1	0.08	0.16	0.04	0.01

Note. *r is the effect size calculated using $|Z/\sqrt{N}|$

Age wise difference

Due to significant frequency differences across ages, participants were grouped into two age groups of 13-19, and 20-29, with 69.2% in the former and 30.8% in the latter, the outliers were dropped due to the lack of frequency, reducing the sample size for the following test to ($N = 78$). Once again independent sample t test showed no significant mean difference between age groups for any of the dimensions but due to similar reasons as above a Mann-Whitney U test was also conducted to check for differences across age groups for all dimensions. It was found that effect size of the difference was very small and even this test showed no statistically significant difference between the rank sums of teenagers and those in their twenties in any of the dimensions. (See Table 4)

Table 4 Mann-Whitney U test scores for age difference

	(SF)	(HON)	(AU)	(ESC)	(SC)	(SR)	(SCA)	(SCO)	(SE)
U	712	813.5	662	595.5	620.5	749.5	625	683	785
Z	0.7	1.8	0.1	-0.5	-0.3	1.1	-0.2	0.3	1.5
P-values	0.4	0.06	0.8	0.5	0.7	0.2	0.8	0.69	0.1
r *	0.07	0.2	0.01	0.05	0.03	0.12	0.02	0.03	0.16

Note. $N = 78$, *r is the effect size calculated using $|Z/\sqrt{N}|$

CONCLUSION

Among the correlations found, Self-esteem (SE) had a positive correlation with dimensions related to well-being such as Social Responsibility (SR), Self-Fulfillment (SF), Emotional Self Concept (ESC), and Social Competency (SC). Self-esteem (SE) also had a negative correlation with Social Comparing Abilities (SCA), all of which is consistent with past research (Schmuck et al., 2019; Lee, 2022; Harris & Orth, 2020).

Interestingly, Social Comparison Orientation (SCA & SCO) had a negative correlation with dimensions of personal self-concept like Autonomy (AU) and Emotional Self Concept (ESC), which themselves were positively correlated with Self-Fulfillment (SF). Although social comparison orientation was not directly negatively correlated with Self-Fulfillment (SF), there could potentially be an indirect negative correlation between Self-Fulfillment (SF) and social comparison orientation via Autonomy (AU) and Emotional Self Concept (ESC). Further study might be required to better understand this relationship.

It was also found that high scores on Social Competency (SC) and Social Responsibility (SR) were positively correlated with well-being like dimensions such as Self-Fulfillment (SF), which is consistent with the fact that a sense of belonging positively impacts subjective well-being (Haim-Litevsky et al., 2023). No significant gender or age differences were found among these dimensions.

It's important to note that no mathematical adjustments for multiple testing were made for any of the tests (Rothman., 1990). To whomever it may be of concern they may interpret the results with caution by applying Bonferroni's correction and setting the alpha value to 0.001 for the correlation tests, even then it doesn't appear to drastically change a lot of the findings.

Limitations

- It goes without saying self-report measures are susceptible to bias. And given the relatively small sample size here, it may hamper generalizability.
- Additionally, majority of the participants were students and further study is required to assess for any age wise differences even though none were found among teens and young adults in this study, testing on a sample with a more diverse age group is required.
- The study also did not control for the Indian cultural context, modifying or creating new scales tailored and tested towards the Indian population might be more beneficial.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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