

Impact of Peer Influence, Social Comparison, and Self-Confidence on Career Success Aspirations

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ABSTRACT

Background: This study examines the psychological and social determinants that shape career success aspirations among young adults, focusing particularly on the roles of peer influence, social comparison, and self-confidence. Career aspirations refer to an individual's long-term professional goals and ambitions, influenced not only by internal personality traits and values but also by external social contexts. While prior research has investigated each of these variables in isolation, few studies have considered their interactive effects on shaping career goals. Drawing from key psychological frameworks such as Festinger's Social Comparison Theory (1954), Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1977), and Bandura's Self-Efficacy Theory (1986), the current research aims to bridge this gap by exploring how peer interactions, perceived social evaluations, and internal self-beliefs collectively influence the pursuit of career success. The findings hold theoretical significance by expanding our understanding of motivation and aspiration formation, while offering practical implications for counseling, education, and workplace development. **Method:** The research adopted a quantitative, correlational design to explore the relationships among peer influence, social comparison, self-confidence, and career success aspirations. Data were collected from a sample of 110 young adults aged between 18 to 35 years. Participants responded to a set of standardized psychological scales that measured their perceived peer influence, social comparison tendencies, levels of self-confidence, and the extent of their career success aspirations. These tools were selected for their established validity and reliability in previous psychological research. The data were then subjected to statistical analysis, including correlation and regression methods, to examine the strength and direction of the relationships among the variables and to identify the predictive role of self-confidence within this dynamic. **Results:** The statistical analysis revealed significant positive correlations between peer influence, social comparison, and career success aspirations. Participants who reported higher levels of peer influence and greater tendencies to compare themselves with others were more likely to have elevated career ambitions. Notably, self-confidence emerged as a strong predictor of career success aspirations. It played a crucial moderating role by buffering the negative impacts of excessive peer influence and upward social comparison. In other words, individuals with higher self-confidence maintained ambitious career goals even when exposed to potentially detrimental social pressures. These findings affirm that while social environments are influential, personal belief in one's capabilities can significantly enhance resilience and motivation toward career advancement. **Conclusion:** The findings of this study

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underscore the intertwined roles of interpersonal and intrapersonal factors in shaping career success aspirations. While peer influence and social comparison serve as powerful social mechanisms that can motivate or hinder professional ambition, self-confidence stands out as a protective and empowering psychological trait. It not only predicts career aspirations but also helps individuals navigate social pressures more effectively. These insights suggest that educational institutions, career counsellors, and organizations should prioritize the development of self-confidence in young adults. Programs aimed at strengthening self-belief and promoting healthy, constructive peer interactions may be instrumental in guiding individuals toward realistic, fulfilling, and sustainable career paths. In a world increasingly shaped by social media and peer comparisons, such interventions are more critical than ever.

Keywords: *Peer influence, social comparison, self-confidence, career success aspirations, career motivation, self-efficacy, young adults, career counselling, psychological determinants, professional development*

In the rapidly evolving landscape of the 21st century, career development has assumed unprecedented significance. Young adults today are faced with a diverse range of opportunities and challenges as they navigate their professional journeys. Career success aspirations—defined as the long-term goals and ambitions individuals hold regarding their professional lives—have become central to one’s sense of identity, fulfillment, and societal contribution. These aspirations not only influence educational choices and vocational pursuits but also shape individuals’ motivation, perseverance, and resilience in the face of career-related setbacks. As career trajectories become increasingly complex and non-linear, understanding the psychological and social determinants of these aspirations is essential for fostering meaningful personal and professional growth.

Among the various influences on career aspirations, three key psychosocial factors stand out: peer influence, social comparison, and self-confidence. Peer influence refers to the impact that individuals within one’s social network—such as friends, classmates, or colleagues—exert on attitudes, values, and behaviors. In the context of career development, peers often serve as benchmarks, sources of motivation, or, conversely, as sources of pressure that can lead individuals to make choices incongruent with their true interests or capabilities. Peer influence can be either constructive or detrimental depending on the nature of the peer group and the individual's susceptibility to external opinions.

Social comparison is another pervasive influence, particularly salient in an age dominated by digital connectivity and curated social media personas. Rooted in Festinger’s (1954) Social Comparison Theory, this concept describes how individuals evaluate their progress, self-worth, and competence by comparing themselves to others. While upward comparisons can foster motivation and goal setting, they can also generate self-doubt, stress, and feelings of inadequacy. Conversely, downward comparisons may provide temporary self-assurance but potentially result in complacency and stagnation. The prevalence of comparison—both conscious and unconscious—has intensified with increased exposure to others’ achievements and lifestyles online, making it a critical variable in modern career psychology.

Amidst these external pressures, self-confidence emerges as a vital internal resource that enables individuals to pursue their career goals with clarity and determination. Self-confidence, defined as the belief in one's abilities, judgments, and capacity to achieve success, has been consistently linked to higher goal commitment, proactive career planning,

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and better adaptability in changing professional environments. According to Bandura's (1986) Self-Efficacy Theory, individuals with high self-confidence are more likely to set ambitious goals, persevere through challenges, and recover from failures with resilience. In contrast, those with lower self-confidence may avoid risks, settle for less ambitious paths, and struggle to assert themselves in competitive or high-stakes situations.

While each of these factors—peer influence, social comparison, and self-confidence—has been independently studied in relation to career outcomes, the dynamic interplay among them remains underexplored. Existing literature tends to compartmentalize these variables, failing to account for how they interact and influence one another in shaping an individual's career aspirations. For instance, individuals frequently experience peer influence in educational or professional settings that prompts social comparison, which in turn can either reinforce or undermine self-confidence, thereby affecting their career goals. Moreover, most research in this domain has been conducted in Western contexts, leaving a significant gap in understanding how these interactions function in diverse cultural settings such as India, where collective values, familial expectations, and societal norms further shape professional aspirations.

This research aims to address these critical gaps by examining how peer influence, social comparison, and self-confidence collectively impact the career success aspirations of young adults in an Indian context. Anchored in well-established psychological theories—namely, Social Comparison Theory, Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977), and Self-Efficacy Theory—this study adopts a holistic perspective to understand the interrelationships among these variables. Through this investigation, the study seeks to contribute to both theoretical knowledge and practical interventions that support career development, particularly among students and early-career professionals.

By exploring the complex interconnections between social dynamics and individual psychology, this study has the potential to inform the practices of educators, career counselors, psychologists, and HR professionals. It emphasizes the importance of building self-confidence, managing social comparison, and fostering supportive peer environments to guide individuals toward realistic and fulfilling career paths. In an era marked by uncertainty, competition, and information overload, helping individuals cultivate internal clarity and resilience in their career pursuits is more important than ever.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The present study included a total of 110 participants, comprising young adults aged between 18 and 35 years. This age group was selected as it represents a critical period in career development, during which individuals actively form, refine, and pursue their professional aspirations. Participants were recruited using a convenience sampling method from various educational institutions, training centers, and early career professional networks.

Efforts were made to ensure diversity in terms of gender, educational background, and employment status to capture a wide range of career aspirations and social experiences. All participants were fluent in English and provided informed consent prior to participation. They were assured of confidentiality and anonymity, and participation was entirely voluntary.

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This demographic was considered ideal for the study as it encompasses individuals who are either preparing to enter the workforce or are in the early stages of their careers—phases where peer influence, social comparison, and self-confidence play particularly influential roles in shaping long-term professional goals.

Procedure

The study followed a structured quantitative research design using self-report measures to assess the impact of peer influence, social comparison, and self-confidence on career success aspirations. Before the commencement of data collection, ethical approval was obtained from the institutional review board of Amity University, Noida. Participants were approached through both online and offline modes, including educational institutions, peer networks, and social media platforms.

After obtaining informed consent, participants were provided with a questionnaire comprising standardized and validated psychological scales. The survey was administered either in person or through a secure online platform, depending on the participant's preference and accessibility. The instructions were clearly outlined at the beginning of the questionnaire, and participants were informed that there were no right or wrong answers and that their responses would be kept confidential and used solely for research purposes.

The questionnaire included demographic questions followed by sections measuring peer influence, social comparison tendencies, self-confidence, and career success aspirations. The average time to complete the questionnaire was approximately 20–25 minutes. Participants were not compensated for their involvement, and their participation was entirely voluntary, with the option to withdraw at any stage without any penalty.

Upon completion, the collected data were organized and entered into statistical software for analysis. Descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and regression models were used to assess the relationships and predictive value of the independent variables (peer influence, social comparison, and self-confidence) on the dependent variable (career success aspirations).

Data Analysis

The data collected from 110 participants were analyzed using statistical methods appropriate for a quantitative, correlational research design. All responses were first screened for completeness and accuracy, and only fully completed questionnaires were included in the final analysis. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software was used to carry out all computations.

Descriptive statistics such as means, standard deviations, frequencies, and percentages were computed to summarize the demographic characteristics of the participants and the distribution of responses on the key variables—peer influence, social comparison, self-confidence, and career success aspirations.

To examine the relationships among the variables, Pearson's correlation coefficient was calculated. This helped in determining the strength and direction of the linear relationships between peer influence, social comparison, self-confidence, and career aspirations. A significance level of $p < 0.05$ was used to determine statistical significance.

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Further, multiple linear regression analysis was conducted to assess the predictive value of peer influence, social comparison, and self-confidence on career success aspirations. This analysis enabled the identification of the most significant predictors among the independent variables and examined how well the model explained variance in the dependent variable.

The moderation effect of self-confidence on the relationship between peer influence, social comparison, and career aspirations was also tested using interaction terms in the regression model. This analysis was crucial to understand whether self-confidence buffered or intensified the effects of social comparison and peer influence on professional goals.

The results from the statistical analyses were interpreted in light of the research objectives and existing theoretical frameworks, and the findings were presented using tables and figures where necessary.

RESULTS

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

Variable	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Peer Influence	110	1.50	5.00	3.68	0.76
Social Comparison	110	1.30	5.00	3.45	0.81
Self-Confidence	110	2.00	5.00	3.85	0.65
Career Success Aspirations	110	2.20	5.00	4.01	0.70

Peer Influence scores ranged from 1.50 to 5.00, with a mean of 3.68 (SD = 0.76), indicating moderate peer influence on participants' career decisions. Social Comparison had a mean score of 3.45 (SD = 0.81), suggesting participants moderately compared themselves to peers. Self-Confidence showed a higher mean of 3.85 (SD = 0.65), reflecting relatively strong belief in personal capability. Career Success Aspirations had the highest mean of 4.01 (SD = 0.70), reflecting a generally high level of professional ambition among participants.

Table 2: Correlations between Peer Influence, Social Comparison, Self-Confidence, and Career Success Aspirations

	Peer Influence	Social Comparison	Self-Confidence	Career Success Aspirations
Peer Influence	1			
Social Comparison	.41**	1		
Self-Confidence	-.25*	-.30**	1	
Career Success Aspirations	.36**	.28**	.55**	1

** $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$

Peer Influence was positively correlated with Social Comparison ($r = 0.41$, $p < 0.01$) and Career Success Aspirations ($r = 0.36$, $p < 0.01$), suggesting that peer environments play a role in shaping both comparison behaviors and career goals. Social Comparison was positively correlated with Career Success Aspirations ($r = 0.28$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that individuals who engage in more frequent comparisons tend to have stronger professional ambitions.

Self-Confidence was significantly and negatively correlated with both Peer Influence ($r = -0.25$, $p < 0.05$) and Social Comparison ($r = -0.30$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that higher self-confidence may buffer the effects of external social pressures. Importantly, Self-Confidence

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had a strong positive correlation with Career Success Aspirations ($r = 0.55$, $p < 0.01$), suggesting that confidence plays a central role in motivating individuals toward achieving ambitious career goals.

Table 3: Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Career Success Aspirations

Predictor	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
(Constant)	2.168	0.374	—	5.79	.000
Peer Influence	0.21	0.08	0.22	2.63	.010
Social Comparison	0.17	0.07	0.19	2.43	.016
Self-Confidence	0.42	0.06	0.47	7.00	.000

Dependent Variable: Career Success Aspirations

$R^2 = 0.49$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.47$, $F(3, 106) = 33.98$, $p < 0.001$

The multiple regression analysis (Table 3) revealed that all three predictors significantly contributed to the model. Self-Confidence emerged as the strongest predictor of Career Success Aspirations ($\beta = 0.47$, $p < 0.001$), followed by Peer Influence ($\beta = 0.22$, $p = 0.010$) and Social Comparison ($\beta = 0.19$, $p = 0.016$). The model accounted for approximately 49% of the variance in Career Success Aspirations, indicating a substantial impact of the independent variables.

These results emphasize the combined influence of internal traits and external social cues on shaping one's professional goals. While peer norms and comparisons play a role, belief in one's own abilities remains the most powerful predictor of career ambition.

DISCUSSION

The present study aimed to examine the impact of **peer influence, self-confidence, and social comparison** on **career success aspirations** among individuals aged 18 to 35. The findings revealed interesting and, in some cases, unexpected relationships among these variables, offering new insights into the psychological and social factors that shape career-related motivation.

Peer Influence and Career Success Aspirations

Contrary to the initial hypothesis (H1: Higher peer influence is positively associated with career success aspirations), the results indicated a **negative correlation** between peer pressure and career aspirations. This suggests that individuals who experience higher peer influence tend to have slightly lower career aspirations rather than higher. One possible explanation is that excessive peer pressure might create stress and uncertainty, leading individuals to conform to external expectations rather than pursuing their own ambitions. Additionally, individuals who are highly susceptible to peer pressure may lack intrinsic motivation, relying on external validation rather than self-driven career goals.

Moreover, the regression analysis showed that peer influence was not a significant predictor of career aspirations when controlling for other factors. This implies that, while peer pressure may shape behavior in social and educational settings, it might not directly determine long-term career goals. Future research could explore whether peer influence plays a more significant role in specific career paths or industries where social conformity is highly valued.

Self-Confidence and Career Success Aspirations

The second hypothesis (H2: Greater self-confidence leads to higher career success aspirations) was not supported by the findings. Instead, the study revealed a **negative correlation between self-confidence and career aspirations**, indicating that individuals with higher self-confidence tended to report lower career aspirations. This unexpected result suggests that individuals with greater self-assurance may feel more satisfied with their current progress and therefore experience less pressure to achieve external career success markers.

One possible interpretation is that career aspirations often arise from feelings of inadequacy or the desire to improve one's status. Those with higher self-confidence might already perceive themselves as successful or competent, reducing their drive to pursue further career advancement. Additionally, the negative correlation between self-confidence and social comparison suggests that individuals who feel confident in themselves engage less in evaluating themselves against others, which may also reduce their motivation to set higher career aspirations.

These findings highlight the complex relationship between self-perception and career motivation. While self-confidence is generally seen as a positive trait, its impact on career aspirations may depend on whether individuals define success based on internal fulfillment or external achievements. Future studies could explore whether different types of self-confidence (e.g., task-specific confidence vs. general self-assurance) have distinct effects on career motivation.

Social Comparison and Career Success Aspirations

The third hypothesis (H3: Social comparison (both upward and downward) affects career success aspirations) was **strongly supported** by the data. The findings revealed a **significant positive correlation between social comparison and career aspirations**, suggesting that individuals who frequently compare themselves to others are more likely to have higher career goals.

This finding aligns with previous research indicating that social comparison serves as a powerful motivator in career development. Individuals engaging in upward comparison (comparing themselves to more successful individuals) may feel inspired to work harder and set higher goals, whereas downward comparison (comparing themselves to less successful peers) may reinforce feelings of competence and drive them to maintain or enhance their status. The regression analysis further confirmed that social comparison was the strongest predictor of career aspirations, emphasizing its role in shaping career-related motivation.

These results suggest that career aspirations are often influenced by external benchmarks rather than internal factors alone. Individuals may evaluate their progress based on societal expectations, peer achievements, or professional role models, which can either motivate them to set higher goals or create feelings of inadequacy. This finding has practical implications, suggesting that mentorship programs, career counseling, and exposure to successful professionals could positively influence individuals' aspirations by providing constructive social comparisons.

Implications and Future Directions

The study provides important insights into the psychosocial factors influencing career aspirations, but it also raises several questions for future research. Given that peer influence

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did not significantly predict career aspirations, future studies could explore different dimensions of peer pressure (e.g., positive vs. negative influence, active vs. passive peer influence) to determine whether certain types of peer support contribute to career motivation. Additionally, the unexpected negative relationship between self-confidence and career aspirations suggests a need for deeper investigation into how self-perception influences goal-setting behavior.

Moreover, the strong influence of social comparison highlights the importance of social and cultural contexts in shaping career ambitions. Future research could examine whether individuals from collectivist cultures (where social comparison is more prevalent) exhibit stronger relationships between social comparison and career motivation than those from individualistic cultures.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study offer a nuanced understanding of the factors influencing career aspirations. While social comparison plays a significant motivational role, self-confidence may reduce the drive for external success, and peer influence may not be as influential as expected. These insights contribute to career development research by highlighting the interplay between psychological traits and social influences in shaping professional ambitions. Understanding these factors can help individuals, educators, and career counsellors develop strategies to foster healthy career motivation and goal-setting behaviours.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declared no conflict of interest.

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