

Research Paper

The Role of Social Comparison Orientation in Shaping Self-Concept Clarity

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ABSTRACT

Social comparison orientation and self-concept clarity are two increasingly relevant psychological constructs in today's hyper-connected and socially competitive world. This study aims to understand the role of social comparison orientations in shaping an individual's self-concept clarity. It is hypothesized that individuals with higher levels of social comparison are more likely to have poor self-concept clarity. A total of 102 respondents across Karnataka participated. They completed the Iowa-Netherlands Comparison Orientation Scale and Self-Concept Clarity Scale. Data collection was conducted via offline methods and Google Forms, and statistical analyses include chi-square tests and Pearson's correlation were used. Results showed that the majority of the sample exhibited low social comparison orientation (87.3%), with only a small proportion reporting high levels (12.7%). A significant negative relationship was found between social comparison orientation and self-concept clarity, with ability comparison showing a stronger association than opinion comparison, indicating that greater tendencies toward social comparison are associated with lower levels of self-concept clarity. These findings highlight the psychological impact of comparative thinking on one's sense of self among young adults and underscore the need for interventions that promote stable self-concept development independent of social comparison.

Keywords: *Social Comparison Orientation, Self-Concept*

Social comparison orientation is a construct that represents the inclination of an individual to think about themselves in relation to others. Furthermore, it is a construct that represents the use of others' information as a way of defining one's own status. Social comparison orientation is a construct that is composed of two types of comparisons: ability comparison and opinion comparison (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007). The dispositional aspects of social comparison orientation, such as its association with self-esteem and neuroticism, have been investigated. Individuals scoring high on social comparison orientation reported more upward and downward comparisons, more positive affect following downward comparisons, and more negative affect following upward comparisons. It was concluded that individuals interpret social comparisons positively when they perceive the

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social climate as cooperative, and negatively when they are high in social comparison orientation (Buunk, Zurriaga, Peiró, Nauta, & Gosálvez, 2005). Study by Stapel & Blanton (2004) showed subliminal exposure to social comparison information affects self-evaluations more easily than it affects mood or evaluations of other people and that automatic comparisons are responsive to a person's perceptual needs, such that they only occur when people are uncertain about themselves.

Self-concept clarity is not simply having a clear sense of self; it reflects the degree to which self-beliefs are confidently held, stable over time, and free from internal contradiction (Campbell et al., 1996). Self-concept clarity encompasses four domains: cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and social domains (Campbell et al., 2003). The psychological aspects of self-concept clarity have been studied extensively, with individuals low in self-concept clarity being associated with high neuroticism, low self-esteem, low conscientiousness, chronic self-analysis, a ruminative form of self-focused attention, greater proneness to negative self-relevant information, and poor coping abilities in stressful situations, which may be attributed to adverse childhood experiences and unstable relational environments (Campbell et al., 1996). Studies (Lodi-Smith & Roberts, 2010; Niedenthal, Setterlund, & Wherry, 1992) reveal that self-concept clarity was positively related to age from young adulthood through middle age and negatively related to age in older adulthood.

Sample:

In the present study, 102 participants (69 female and 33 male) aged 18 and above. The participants are categorized based on their family type, birth order, relationship status and different educational background. The sampling method used is simple random sampling.

TOOLS EMPLOYED:

Iowa-Netherlands Comparison Orientation Scale (INCOM; Gibbons & Buunk, 1999): This self-reporting social comparison orientation scale consists of 11 items related to various aspects of social comparison. The participants rate each item on a 5-point Likert scale as either Disagree Strongly (1), Disagree (2), Neither Agree nor Disagree (3), Agree (4) and Agree Strongly (5). Items 6 and 10 are reverse scored. The scale differentiates between two dimensions of social comparison, namely, ability comparisons (Items 1–6) and opinion comparisons (Items 7–11). The minimum score that can be obtained by a participant is 11 and the maximum score is 55. Higher scores indicate a greater tendency to engage in social comparison, while lower scores indicate a lesser tendency to compare oneself with others. The INCOM scale is highly reliable. In internal consistency, the range of the coefficient alpha is from .78 to .84. The reliability under test retest conditions has also been demonstrated to be satisfactory across diverse cultural samples (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999).

Self-Concept Clarity Scale (SCC Scale; Campbell et. al, 1996) - This self-reporting self-concept clarity scale consists of 12 items designed to determine the extent to which self-beliefs are clearly and confidently defined, internally consistent, and stable. The participants rate each item on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5). The minimum score that can be obtained by a participant is 12 and the maximum score is 60. Higher scores indicate greater self-concept clarity, while lower scores indicate a less clearly and consistently defined sense of self. The Self-Concept Clarity Scale is highly reliable. In internal consistency, the average coefficient alpha was .86, with combined-sample corrected item-total correlations ranging from .35 to .66. The reliability under test-retest

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conditions was also found to be high, with test-retest correlations of .79 and .70 respectively, revealing high levels of temporal stability (Campbell et al., 1996).

Procedure:

The authors used social media platforms to share the google forms for collection of data from various regions of India. The candidate also collected responses from students of various institutions using google forms. Consent was obtained and the participants were assured that their responses would be kept confidential. A text message was attached with the Google forms, consisting of instructions and contact information to use in case of any confusion in the statements given in the scales. After completing the collection of data, it was transferred to the computer. The data were analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics included N, frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation. Inferential statistics comprised chi-square tests and Pearson's product-moment correlations. Table 1 presents the results of levels of social comparison orientation among the selected sample and Table 2 provides the results of Pearson's product moment correlations between dimensions of social comparison orientation and self-concept clarity, including total social comparison orientation scores.

Social comparison orientation and self-concept clarity have been studied in relation to various psychological outcomes such as well-being, depression, and self-esteem. However, the direct relationship between social comparison orientation and self-concept clarity as independent constructs has received limited empirical attention, particularly among young adult populations. The present study aims to address this gap by examining the relationship between social comparison orientation and self-concept clarity, thereby contributing to a more focused understanding of how comparative thinking shapes one's sense of self.

RESULTS:

Table 1: Results showing the levels of social comparison orientation.

Levels of SCO	Frequency	Percentage	Test statistics
Low social comparison orientation	89	87.3	$X^2 = 56.62$; $p = .001$
High social comparison orientation	13	12.7	

Results indicate that 12.7% of respondents had high social comparison orientation, while 87.3% exhibited low social comparison orientation. The findings suggest that the majority of the sample reported low levels of social comparison orientation. The chi-square test revealed a significant difference between the frequencies of the levels of social comparison orientation ($X^2 = 56.62$; $p = .001$), confirming that most of the participants had low social comparison orientation.

Table 2: Results of product moment correlations between the dimensions of social comparison orientation and self-concept clarity.

Variable 1 (dimensions of SCO)	Variable 2	Correlation co-efficient	P value
Ability comparison	Self-concept clarity	-.586	.001
Opinion comparison		-.222	.025
Social Comparison Orientation		-.490	.001

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Bivariate correlations revealed significant negative associations between the dimensions of social comparison orientation and self-concept clarity. Specifically, ability comparison was found to be significantly negatively correlated with self-concept clarity ($r = -.586$; $p = .001$), indicating that higher levels of ability comparison are associated with lower self-concept clarity. Similarly, opinion comparison also showed a significant negative correlation with self-concept clarity ($r = -.222$; $p = .025$). Furthermore, the overall social comparison orientation was significantly negatively correlated with self-concept clarity ($r = -.490$; $p = .001$). These findings suggest that greater tendencies toward social comparison are associated with lower levels of self-concept clarity among the participants.

DISCUSSION:

Major findings of the study

- 87.3% of respondents had low social comparison orientation while only 12.7% respondents had high social comparison orientation.
- Social comparison orientation was significantly negatively correlated with self-concept clarity. Indicating that higher the levels of social comparison orientation, lower will be the self-concept clarity.

The present study found that the majority of young adults exhibited low social comparison orientation, with only a small proportion showing high levels. This is consistent with Gibbons and Buunk (1999), who in their development of the social comparison orientation scale noted that individuals differ considerably in their tendency to compare themselves with others, and that not all people are equally inclined toward social comparison even when the opportunity is present.

The findings further revealed a significant negative relationship between social comparison orientation and self-concept clarity, with ability comparison showing a stronger association than opinion comparison. Campbell et al. (1996), who first conceptualized and measured self-concept clarity, established that individuals with a clearer and more stable self-concept are less likely to rely on external social information to define themselves — which supports the present finding that those who compare more tend to have a less coherent sense of self. Buunk et al. (2005) further observed that social comparisons, particularly those involving ability-related judgments, tend to generate uncertainty and self-doubt, which would naturally undermine the internal consistency of one's self-concept. Campbell et al. (2003) also noted that a poorly structured self-concept is associated with greater susceptibility to external social influences, suggesting that the relationship between social comparison and self-concept clarity may be bidirectional in nature.

It is found that social comparison orientation, across both its dimensions, has a significant influence on self-concept clarity among young adults. Individuals who frequently compare their abilities with others may struggle to maintain a stable and consistent sense of who they are, as their self-perception becomes contingent on shifting social standards. Stapel and Blanton (2004) noted that even subtle exposure to social comparison information can alter self-evaluations, highlighting how pervasive and automatic this process can be. Social environments, peer culture, self-image, and the opportunities available for self-reflection all contribute to the relationship between social comparison and self-concept clarity.

Future studies could explore whether social media usage moderates the relationship between social comparison orientation and self-concept clarity, given that digital platforms provide constant and unavoidable comparison cues for young adults. It would also be worthwhile to examine whether personality variables such as self-esteem and neuroticism influence the extent to which social comparison affects one's sense of self. Additionally, replicating the present study across different cultural contexts and occupational groups would help determine whether the findings are specific to the young adult population studied here or reflect a more universal pattern.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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