



# The Impact of Social Comparison on Academic Motivation Among University Students

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| ARTICLE DETAILS                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | ABSTRACT                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
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| <b>History</b><br><b>Revised format:</b><br>Jan, 2024<br><b>Available Online:</b><br>Mar, 2024<br><br><b>Keywords</b><br>social comparison, academic motivation, university students, upward comparison, academic self-concept, self-determination, peer influence, higher education | <p>Social comparison is a common psychological process through which university students evaluate their academic abilities, achievements, and progress by comparing themselves with their peers. Such comparisons may occur in classrooms, examination results, group projects, university ranking systems, and online learning environments. This conceptual article examines the influence of upward, downward, and lateral social comparison on the academic motivation of university students. Drawing on social comparison theory, self-determination theory, and achievement-goal perspectives, the article argues that social comparison has a dual effect. Constructive comparison with slightly higher-performing peers may strengthen goal setting, effort, academic engagement, and self-regulated learning. In contrast, threatening upward comparison may lower academic self-concept, increase stress and anxiety, and promote avoidance, disengagement, or excessive competition. Downward comparison may temporarily strengthen confidence but may also encourage complacency when students no longer perceive a need for improvement. The effects of comparison depend on students' self-esteem, perceived competence, goal orientation, similarity to the comparison target, institutional climate, and interpretation of academic feedback. In the Pakistani higher-education context, competitive examinations, employment uncertainty, family expectations, public displays of grades, and social-media exposure may intensify comparison processes. The article recommends mastery-focused assessment, private and developmental feedback, peer mentoring, counselling support, and self-referenced progress monitoring. Universities should not attempt to eliminate comparison completely; instead, they should structure academic environments in ways that transform comparison into realistic inspiration, cooperative learning, and personal development.</p> |

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**Introduction:**

Academic motivation refers to the psychological forces that initiate, direct, and sustain students' engagement in educational activities. Motivated university students are generally more willing to attend classes, complete assignments, persist through difficulties, seek feedback, and regulate their learning. Academic motivation is not determined exclusively by individual interests or abilities. It is continuously shaped by the social and institutional environment in which students study. One particularly influential social process is comparison with others. Festinger's social comparison theory proposes that individuals evaluate their opinions and abilities by comparing themselves with other people, especially when objective standards are uncertain. University students commonly judge their intelligence, competence, and future potential by comparing grades, presentations, internships, scholarships, research publications, and employment opportunities with those of their classmates. Individual differences also exist: some students demonstrate a stronger general tendency to compare themselves with others than do their peers. Social comparison may be upward, downward, or lateral. Upward comparison occurs when students compare themselves with someone perceived as academically superior. Downward comparison involves comparison with a lower-performing peer, whereas lateral comparison involves a person whose performance is relatively similar. These forms of comparison do not produce identical consequences. A high-achieving peer may serve as an attainable role model, but the same peer may also be perceived as evidence of one's inadequacy. Self-determination theory further distinguishes between autonomous and controlled forms of motivation. Autonomous motivation develops when students experience choice, personal meaning, competence, and supportive relationships. Controlled motivation is driven more strongly by pressure, rewards, competition, guilt, or fear of failure. Social comparison may therefore increase the amount of academic effort while simultaneously reducing the quality of students' motivation when effort is driven mainly by external pressure. The present article is a conceptual review of the relationship between social comparison and academic motivation among university students. It examines theoretical foundations, constructive and harmful pathways, moderating factors, the relevance of comparison within Pakistani universities, and practical implications for educators and institutions.

**Theoretical Foundations of Social Comparison and Motivation:**

Social comparison theory explains that students use the performance of others as a reference point for understanding their own abilities. In higher education, grades and academic rankings provide formal comparative information, while classroom discussions, peer conversations, social-media posts, and learning-management dashboards create informal comparison opportunities. Students are particularly likely to compare themselves with peers who are visible, similar, socially close, or relevant to their academic goals. Friends, study partners, popular classmates, scholarship recipients, and students pursuing similar careers may become influential comparison targets. Research on academic self-concept indicates that the general achievement level of the surrounding class can shape how students interpret their own competence, even when their actual performance remains unchanged. Social comparison influences academic motivation through three interconnected mechanisms. First, it provides information about standards. A student who observes an effective classmate may learn what level of performance is achievable. Second, comparison produces emotional reactions such as admiration, hope, pride, envy, anxiety, shame, or relief. Third, comparison changes students' beliefs about competence and control. When students believe that the performance gap can be reduced through effort and strategy, comparison is more likely to motivate them. When the gap appears permanent or unfair, the same comparison may produce helplessness. Achievement-goal theory also helps explain these outcomes. Students with mastery-oriented goals seek to develop knowledge and improve personal competence. They are more likely to use successful classmates as sources of information. Students dominated by performance goals may concentrate on demonstrating superiority or avoiding evidence that they are less capable than others. For these students, public rankings and competitive

assessments may intensify anxiety and defensive behaviour. Research related to the big-fish-little-pond effect suggests that competitive environments can influence both academic self-beliefs and achievement goals.

**Constructive Effects of Social Comparison on Academic Motivation:**

Upward social comparison can positively influence motivation when the comparison target is perceived as similar and the superior performance appears attainable. A student may observe that a classmate earns high grades by following a structured study schedule, participating in class, consulting instructors, and practising past examination questions. Rather than merely feeling inferior, the student may adopt these strategies and establish clearer academic goals. Slight upward comparison is often more productive than comparison with an exceptionally advanced student. When the performance difference is moderate, students can imagine reaching the target through increased effort. Carefully designed peer-comparison feedback in higher education has been found to increase extrinsic motivation and academic achievement when students are compared with peers having similar target grades. Comparison may also strengthen self-regulated learning. Students can use peer performance to assess whether their current strategies are effective, identify weaknesses, adjust study time, and monitor progress. In this form, comparison operates as informational feedback rather than a judgment of personal worth. Learning dashboards and progress reports may be beneficial when they present comparison data privately and connect it with specific recommendations for improvement. Constructive social comparison can additionally create academic role models. High-performing peers may make educational success appear realistic and socially relevant. Students who identify with successful peers may experience hope and inspiration rather than envy. Such identification is especially valuable for first-generation university students who may have limited access to professional or academic role models outside the institution. Downward comparison may also produce certain motivational benefits. A student who performs better than expected relative to classmates may experience increased confidence and reduced fear of failure. This reassurance can be useful following a difficult semester or an unsuccessful assessment. However, the motivational benefit is usually strongest when renewed confidence is directed toward continued improvement rather than superiority over others.

**Negative Effects of Excessive or Threatening Comparison:**

Upward comparison becomes harmful when students interpret higher-performing peers as evidence that they are unintelligent, incapable, or unlikely to succeed. Instead of asking how the peer achieved success, the student may conclude that the difference reflects fixed ability, social privilege, unfair access to resources, or permanent personal deficiency. Threatening comparison can reduce academic self-concept and perceived competence. A student may have objectively strong grades but still consider their performance inadequate when surrounded by exceptionally high-achieving classmates. Research examining peer effects has found that the average achievement level of the class can negatively influence students' academic self-concept. Emotional responses play an important role in this process. Envy may encourage additional effort when it is accompanied by admiration and perceived control. In contrast, malicious envy, shame, hopelessness, and resentment may produce withdrawal or attempts to undermine others. Evidence from university students indicates that emotions arising from grade comparison influence their willingness to continue investing effort, and these effects vary according to students' relative academic position. Frequent upward comparison may also contribute to perceived stress and excessive academic competition. Students may extend study hours, sacrifice sleep, enrol in unnecessary courses, or pursue credentials primarily to avoid falling behind their peers. Recent research has associated upward comparison with intensive and potentially unhealthy academic involvement through reduced self-esteem and increased perceived stress. Downward comparison also has limitations. Although it may temporarily strengthen self-esteem, repeated focus on lower-performing peers can produce complacency. Students may lower their standards or avoid challenging tasks because their primary goal becomes maintaining superiority rather than developing competence. Digital

platforms expand these risks. Students are regularly exposed to carefully selected announcements of scholarships, academic awards, publications, internships, and international admissions. Because failure, uncertainty, and ordinary progress are less frequently shared, online comparison targets may present unrealistic standards. Students may mistakenly compare their complete academic experience with the public highlights of others.

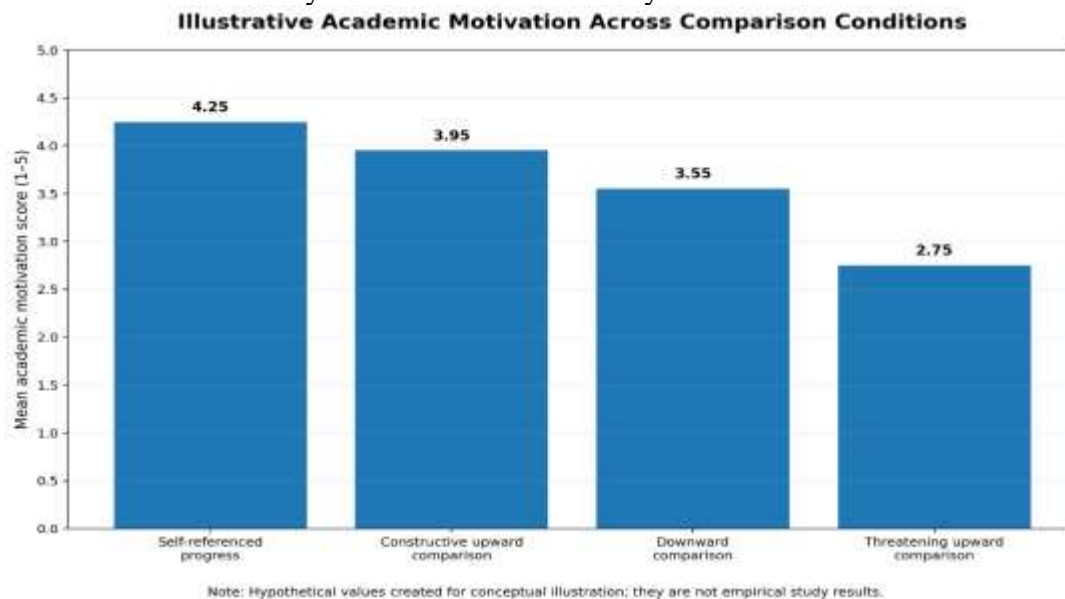
### **Moderating Factors and the Pakistani University Context:**

The impact of comparison depends on several personal and contextual factors. Self-esteem is particularly important. Students with stable self-esteem are more likely to interpret peer success as useful information, while students with fragile self-esteem may experience the same success as a threat. Academic self-efficacy, growth mindset, emotional regulation, socioeconomic background, and previous achievement can similarly influence comparison outcomes. The perceived similarity and attainability of the target also matter. Comparison with a peer from the same programme and academic level may be more informative than comparison with an internationally recognised scholar. However, similarity can also increase emotional threat because the success of a close peer may appear more directly relevant to one's own standing. Institutional climate shapes whether comparison becomes cooperative or destructive. Public grade announcements, forced ranking, limited scholarships, and grading curves communicate that one student's achievement may reduce opportunities for others. In contrast, formative assessment, collaborative projects, peer tutoring, and criterion-referenced grading encourage students to view improvement as compatible with the success of classmates. The Pakistani higher-education environment provides a particularly important context for this issue. University students may face family expectations, financial limitations, competitive public-service examinations, limited employment opportunities, and pressure to obtain scholarships or international admissions. These factors can make peer achievement appear closely connected with economic security and family status. A study of graduate-level students from public universities in southern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa found generally high levels of academic motivation and self-esteem and reported a positive relationship between several dimensions of motivation and self-esteem. The findings demonstrate the importance of examining motivation within Pakistan's specific social, economic, and institutional circumstances. Comparison may be particularly difficult for students from rural areas, low-income families, Urdu-medium institutions, or under-resourced schools who enter universities alongside peers with greater English-language proficiency, digital access, and prior academic exposure. Universities should recognise that apparently equal comparison standards may conceal unequal educational opportunities. Gender expectations may also affect comparison patterns, although Pakistani evidence indicates that male and female graduate students may report similar overall levels of academic motivation and self-esteem in some settings. Broader investigation is required across provinces, disciplines, public and private universities, and online programmes.

### **Educational Implications and Recommended Interventions:**

Universities should manage social comparison rather than attempting to eliminate it. Comparison is a natural part of academic life, but institutional practices can determine whether it functions as developmental information or psychological pressure. First, instructors should emphasise mastery and personal progress. Feedback should compare a student's current performance with their previous work and clearly identify achievable next steps. Self-referenced progress protects students from interpreting every grade as a statement about their relative intelligence. Second, comparative feedback should remain private. Public rankings, visible grade lists, and humiliating comments can damage perceived competence and classroom belonging. When class averages are provided, they should be accompanied by explanations of assessment criteria and opportunities for improvement. Third, universities should develop structured peer-mentoring programmes. Successful senior students can share study strategies, academic mistakes, and realistic accounts of their development. Role models become more motivating when students can observe the effort

and setbacks behind their success. Fourth, cooperative learning should be balanced with individual accountability. Group projects, study circles, and peer tutoring allow students to benefit from stronger classmates without framing every interaction as competition. Cooperative environments can transform upward comparison into identification and knowledge exchange. Fifth, university counselling centres should address comparison-related anxiety, perfectionism, fear of failure, and social-media pressure. Students can be taught to identify comparison triggers, question unrealistic interpretations, practise self-compassion, and redirect attention toward controllable learning behaviours. Finally, learning dashboards and digital performance systems should be designed ethically. Slight upward comparisons may support effort, but comparison targets should be relevant, attainable, and accompanied by strategy-based feedback. Institutions should avoid interfaces that display leaderboards without considering their effects on lower-performing or psychologically vulnerable students. Evidence from learning-analytics research suggests that comparison is most useful when it is theoretically informed and deliberately structured.



### Summary:

Social comparison is a significant but complex influence on the academic motivation of university students. Upward comparison can inspire students when successful peers are viewed as attainable models and their strategies can be observed and adopted. It can also weaken motivation when the achievement gap appears permanent, unfair, or personally threatening. Downward comparison may restore confidence but can encourage complacency, while lateral comparison can provide realistic information about progress. The motivational consequences of comparison are mediated by academic self-concept, self-esteem, perceived competence, emotional reactions, and beliefs about whether improvement is possible. They are further shaped by assessment systems, classroom climate, social-media exposure, family expectations, and access to educational resources. Universities should therefore reduce humiliating and excessively competitive comparison while promoting self-referenced improvement, mastery goals, private feedback, mentoring, and cooperative learning. In Pakistan, future empirical studies should investigate differences across provinces, disciplines, socioeconomic groups, university sectors, and gender. Longitudinal and experimental research would be especially useful for determining how offline and online comparison influence intrinsic motivation, controlled motivation, engagement, anxiety, academic achievement, and student well-being over time.

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