

# The Impact of Social Comparison Processes on Psychological Well-Being: How Social Media, Self-Evaluation, and Education Policies Affect the Mental Health of Gen-Z Students

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## Abstract

Students of the 21<sup>st</sup> century face more stresses and pressures than previous generations. Gen Z students are born to a highly globalized, technologically-driven, and social media dependent world. This has led to increased rates of mental health issues and negative impacts to self-esteem. This study uses a literature review to identify patterns and trends that emerge from social comparison processes. By understanding how social comparisons impact students' self-evaluation and overall well-being, policymakers, educators, and schools can be in a better position to introduce new strategies and procedures that seek to support the psychological well-being of their students.

**Keywords:** Social Comparison, Social Media, Well-Being, Generation Z.

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

In today's highly competitive world, students are under a lot of pressure to stand out amongst their peers and be seen as the most desirable candidates to university admissions officers and potential employers. This has led to an overachieving culture where individuals are pitted against one another to outperform their classmates (Laufenberg, 2020). Twenty-first century students face more stress than any other generation, according to a 2020 study by the American Psychological Association (APA) with many students worrying about their future and pandemic related uncertainties (Gander, 2020).

On top of the everyday stresses of adulthood, students today are facing the challenges of globalization, heightened competition for limited spaces in top schools and jobs, and a world reliant on social media culture. Before the pandemic, an article in *Times* magazine found that 90% of the Generation Z—those born between the 1990s to mid 2000s—are stressed out and feeling the associated physical and emotional symptoms of depression and anxiety (Ducharme, 2018). As a result, this generation is also more likely to report mental health problems compared to any other generations including Gen Xers—those born between mid1960s and early

1980s—and the millennial generation—those born between 1981-1996 (Bethune, 2019).

Being born into a technologically-reliant world, this generation of young people are also most tech savvy and are the heaviest users of social media since they were born into a world that was already using smartphones and the internet. Research from the Pew Research Center (2021) found that 90% of U.S. young adults between the ages of 18 to 29 use social media, the highest group amongst all demographics. Social media usage can have a negative impact on a person's well-being because it can lead to over consumption of information, and for young people, they can be more susceptible to what society tells them through their various social networking accounts (Nop, 2020). Social media culture itself also enables people to compare themselves to others more easily—otherwise known as social comparison—at the touch of a screen anywhere in the world at any time of day.

Social comparison is a process that can greatly impact perceptions of well-being for individuals of all age groups whether they are healthy or suffer from existing psychological conditions. Social comparison can lead to “upward identification,” which means that when individuals are in situations where they feel stress,

they will identify with other people that are doing better in an effort to maintain their well-being or self-esteem (Buunk & Dijkstra, 2017). Alternatively, social comparison can also lead to “downward identification,” and this occurs when individuals identify themselves with people doing worse off than themselves (Buunk & Dijkstra, 2017). By upward and downward comparisons, individuals can have their mood, self-esteem, and overall well-being affected.

When applied to young adults in a school setting, social comparison can have great impacts on how well a student performs or underperforms in their academic achievement. Academic social comparison involves comparing one’s own academic performance with that of their peers to evaluate learning level and ability (Tian *et al.*, 2017). One study of social comparison found that 95% of students made comparisons to their peers of the same gender and that after two years, the students who made more upward comparisons than downward comparisons experienced higher academic improvements (Pulford *et al.*, 2018).

### 1.1. Significance of the Problem

The problem of student well-being in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is significant because of the vast advances made to technology and education as well as the prominence of social media culture in the lives of young people today. Education has changed drastically over the past few years with more reliance on online and virtual classrooms. Social media is still relatively novel with new platforms introduced yearly like SnapChat and TikTok. The complexities of these platforms and how they impact the lives of users is still a question being studied by academics and professionals.

These variables have created a society where it has become easy and effortless to compare oneself to their peers, classmates, friends, neighbors, colleagues, and family members. These social comparisons can have positive or negative repercussions. In the educational context, they may increase motivation and academic performance, or they may discourage students and lead to underperformance. By understanding how social comparisons impact students’ self-evaluation and overall well-being, policymakers, educators, and schools can be in a better position to introduce new strategies and procedures that seek to support the psychological well-being of their students. Studies have shown that students with high self-confidence are motivated to act and pursue goals whereas those with low self-confidence are less driven to reach their academic goals and more likely to drop out of school (Pulford *et al.*, 2018).

### 1.2. Key Terminology

#### Social Comparison:

This is a normal behavior strategy that people use to better understand their status including their abilities, opinions, and emotions by comparing themselves to others (Nortje, 2021).

#### Generation Z or Gen Z:

This refers to a group of people born after 1996, which means by 2021 they are people aged between nine and 24. This generation is often synonymous with technology as they were the first generation born into a world with the internet and smartphones. According to the Pew Research Center, 1996 was a cut off year between Millennials and Gen Z because of the economic, political, and social factors that define the Millennials foundational years (Dimock, 2019).

#### Social Media:

This is sometimes synonymous with social networking sites (SNSs), but it refers to major applications that facilitate socialization between users (Aichner *et al.*, 2021). It includes user generated content such as blogs, podcasts, wikis, and SNSs like Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter (Nop, 2020).

#### Well-Being:

The CDC refers to well-being as the integration of mental health and physical health to promote disease prevention (CDC, 2018). It can also refer to feeling good, having positive emotions such as happiness, having a sense of purpose, having control over one’s life, and functioning well (Ruggeri *et al.*, 2020).

#### Psychological Well-Being:

This term is also used in the literature and it the most inclusive term that incorporates the previous definition of well-being as well as subjective well-being (SWB), which refers to how individuals evaluate their own lives and their own methods of self-appraisal (Diener *et al.*, 2017). Individuals engage in self appraisal through cognitive reflections or reflective appraisals of various domains such as work or school. It can also take the form of affect including emotions and moods.

#### Self-Evaluation:

This is a process of self-assessment where individuals become active in generating feedback for themselves in order to evaluate and gain more information about oneself (Nortje, 2021).

### 1.3. Theoretical Foundations

#### Social Comparison Theory

Social comparison theory was coined by Festinger in 1954, and it refers to “the process of thinking about information about one or more other people in relation to the self” (Gerber *et al.*, 2018, p. 177). The person making the comparison will look for similarities or differences between themselves and the target of the comparison. Within social comparison theory, there are four directions of comparisons— upward identification, downward identification, upward contrast, and downward contrast (Buunk & Dijkstra, 2017). Depending on which direction, the feelings derived from the social comparison may lead to positive or negative effects.

Within this theory, there is also the Selective Accessibility Model (SAM), which emphasizes assimilation. Under this theory, an individual might make a fast judgment of similarity to their target based on what information they have on hand, and then search for information that fits their hypothesis of similarity (Gerber *et al.*, 2017). When one compares themselves to others in this way, it is easy to find information that matches the hypotheses because self-concepts are complex, and people selectively access information about the target, which leads to assimilation. According to Gerber *et al.*, (2017), “If we have searched for information that we are similar to the standard, we are likely to assimilate our self-evaluation toward the target. If we have searched for information that we are dissimilar to the target, we are likely to contrast our self-evaluations away from the target” (p. 178).

### Self-Evaluation Maintenance Theory

Self-evaluation maintenance (SEM) theory is similar to social comparison theory, but it focuses mainly on self-esteem. It was developed by Tesser in 1988 to help predict people’s reactions and maintenance of self-esteem when they compared themselves to others in their social circle (Kamide & Dabo, 2009). This model depends on three key factors. First, it relies on whether the target of the social comparison is successful or not; secondly, it relies on whether the comparison dimension is self-reliant or self-defining; and third, it relies on how close the target is to the person making comparisons like whether they have a close or distant relationship (Kamide & Dabo, 2009).

#### 1.4. Problem Statement

The purpose of this research is to find ways that can help shape education policies to improve the psychological well-being of students in higher education institutions. To do this, this research aims to find out how social comparisons are linked to social media use and correlated to mental health issues. Mental health is a big concern for Gen Z, especially stress and the desire to overachieve in academics.

#### 1.5. Research Questions and Hypothesis

While there have been existing studies on social comparison theory and the impact of well-being in marriages and divorces, occupational burnout, and cancer patients, there is a gap in the literature on social comparison characteristics and self-evaluation on college aged students in the post-pandemic 21<sup>st</sup> century who have grown up in a digital world with social media. Particularly, there is less known about how social comparison and self-evaluation can contribute to overall mental and physical well-being, especially during a time when there has been a surge in mental health conditions.

This paper is guided by the following research questions:

##### **RQ 1:**

How does the social comparison of characteristics such as gender, socioeconomic status, and

majors impact college students’ self-evaluation and overall well-being?

##### **Hypothesis 1:**

College students who compare themselves in an upward direction to those who are better off will have higher self-evaluation if they are individuals who already possess high self-esteem but will have lower self-evaluation if they are individuals who already possess low self-esteem.

**RQ 2:** What is the impact of social media culture on social comparison?

##### **Hypothesis 2:**

College students who use more than one social media platform regularly will engage in higher social comparisons, and their self-evaluation will be determined by which direction (upward or downward) they engage in social comparison.

**RQ 3:** How can educational policies be adapted to maintain and improve students’ well-being in the future?

## CHAPTER II: METHOD

### 2.1. Research Design

To explore the impact of how social comparison processes and self-evaluation can impact student well-being, a review of the literature will be conducted. Maggio *et al.*, (2016) defines literature reviews as research that “provides context, informs methodology, maximizes innovation, avoids duplicative research, and ensures that professional standards are met” (p. 297). It allows the researcher to join the conversation on the topic. According to Pare & Kitsiou (2017), literature reviews are beneficial because science and academia is a cumulative endeavor, and literature reviews can assist not just in identifying what has been written on the topic but can reveal any patterns or trends in the research, which is the aim of this paper.

### 2.2. Data Collection

For this literature review, data has been collected from a variety of sources including scholarly, peer-reviewed sources retrieved from Google Scholar and the university’s online library database. The parameters for the search were English language publications between 2016 to 2021. Publications were not limited to the U.S. as studies conducted internationally were desirable to give context and provide more data to assess patterns and trends. When referencing theories or models, effort was taken to retrieve the original source of the theorist or writer who first coined the term as in the case of Buunk and Ybema’s (1997) identity contrast model and Wills’ (1987) downward comparison theory. Data was also collected from Google Search to look for resources from credible educational publications, governmental agencies such as the CDC or APA, and international bodies such as the World Health Organization.

## CHAPTER III: LITERATURE REVIEW

### 3.1. Social Comparison in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

Social comparison is a way for people to evaluate themselves by looking at others. Studies show that in times of uncertainty or when one has experienced negative feelings such as during a divorce or marital troubles, this leads to heightened social comparisons (Buunk & Dijkstra, 2017). The basis of this model is from evolutionary psychology and the fact that humans are social creatures who depend on others for support and for guidance on how to respond to situations that can be dangerous or threatening (1997). For instance, children go to their parents for guidance when they are met with new stimuli while adults find other peers or strangers when they are met with danger or threatening situations (Buunk and Ybema, 1997). The nature of social comparison processes is also dependent on an individual's well-being as well as their perception of well-being, which is why moments of stress can trigger a coping process (Buunk & Dijkstra, 2017).

An important aspect of this is through the "identity-contrast model," which was first developed by Buunk and Ybema (1997) and is the belief that in times of stress or uncertainty, it is human nature for people to compare themselves upwards or contrast themselves downwards. The identity-contrast model states that in stressful situations, individuals trigger a coping mechanism where they try to restore their self-esteem by looking upwards to identify with others that are better off. By finding similarities in themselves and in others who are doing better than they are, they elicit positive affect (Buunk & Ybema, 1997). According to Collins' construal theory, people engage in upward comparison to someone who is better off because when they find similarities, their own self-worth is elevated, which is why they avoid downward comparison to be avoid finding similarities to people whom they think are inferior to them; but high self-esteem and shared distinctiveness between the individual and the target are linked to upward assimilation (Gerber *et al.*, 2017).

In trying to identify with others that are doing better than themselves, they also look for instances to feel better off than others by contrasting themselves to those in the worst situations. This is referred to as downward comparison theory, and it was proposed by Wills in 1981. Wills (1981) states that when people want to restore low self-esteem or when their self-esteem is threatened, they will make comparisons in a downward direction. This theory states that people who naturally have low levels of self-esteem will gravitate towards comparing themselves to others that are worse off in order to feel better about themselves (Gerber *et al.*, 2017).

Furthermore, studies have shown that the degree of social comparison depends on the looseness or tightness of a country, culture, or situation. Baldwin & Mussweiler (2018) defines a tight culture as one where

the norms are clearly expressed and understood and deviation from the norm can result in punishment. A tight situation, on the other hand, occurs where there is a high level of behavioral restriction such as at doctor's office or library whereas a loose situation would resemble that of a nightclub or a person's backyard; tight countries also result in tight situations, and an example of a tight culture is China compared to a loose country like the U.S. (Baldwin & Mussweiler, 2018).

Baldwin & Mussweiler (2018) conducted a study using search data from Google on how social comparisons vary in tight-loose countries, as well as collectivist-individualist and found that in tight countries, individuals are more likely to pay attention to others and compare themselves to their peers through monitoring and reporting social behaviors. Self-monitoring can lead to mimic behaviors, and as such, these cultures have highly functional social comparison processes that help promote survival (Baldwin & Mussweiler, 2018). Making this distinction between cultures with varying degrees of tightness or looseness is important in this study because it can provide knowledge for students or educators who study in international schools or for higher institutions that accept a large number of foreign students each year into their campuses.

### 3.2. The Impact of Social Media on Mental Health and Self-Esteem

The children born to Generation Z are unique in that they are the first generation to be born in a world not knowing what it was like before smartphones or social media penetrated everyday life. In 2020, Americans were estimated to use SNSs for 82 minutes a day, which was an increase from 76 minutes a day in 2019 (Lee, 2020). Today, it would be hard to meet an American teenager who did not have a smartphone in their hands or shortcuts to numerous social media apps on their home screen. Especially since the pandemic, SNSs serve as a way to connect, socialize, and share with others who are known or unknown. The question of whether heavy social media use harms or hinders health is still investigated heavily today. However, studies have shown that using social media greatly contributes to social comparisons because it is related to the fear of missing out as well as to one's self perception of how they look, how socially accepted they are, and how much self-worth they possess (Lee, 2020).

A study by Jiang & Ngien (2020) used a cross-sectional online survey to find out whether Instagram use impacted social anxiety in the Singapore context. They found that while Instagram did not directly lead to higher levels of social anxiety, social comparison from Instagram use had a mediating effect on self-esteem. Their study had three important findings. First, heavier Instagram use was associated with higher rates of social comparison since Instagram is a photo and video-rich platform where users can curate their profiles and

selectively alter images for others to see. In addition, with hashtags, anyone can search up videos and photos to compare themselves and their lives with. Secondly, Jiang & Ngien (202) found that social comparison from Instagram usage increased social anxiety because users would judge and compare the appearance, popularity, and social skills of others, which can trigger psychological responses including negative emotions or poor psychological well-being. The third finding was that social comparison significantly decreased self-esteem in participants, which is caused when users look at an image or video and perceive they are different from the norms, which makes them evaluate themselves in a negative light resulting in lowered self-esteem (Jiang & Ngien, 2020). Thus, this study supports that theory that socially comparing oneself to others can lead to poorer self-evaluation, reduced self-esteem, and increased social anxiety.

Similarly, a study by Lee (2020) on 236 South Koreans found that social comparison had a negative association with psychological well-being leading to negative emotions and decreased perceived social support and self-esteem. Using online surveys and a 7-point Likert scale, Lee (2020) found that users tended to engage in upward social comparison when using SNSs, which led to negative emotions as the images depicted on their friends' profiles showed a life that was better than their own. Another aspect that led to negative emotions was lack of perceived social support, and Lee (2020) states that this is because people derive support from those who share similar backgrounds and experiences, so online profiles who are strikingly different from the user will not find similarities.

Furthermore, social comparisons on Facebook and Instagram, two of the most popular SNSs, found that, over time, upward social comparison is associated with lowered self-esteem and well-being for Facebook use while Instagram use is associated with a direct lowering of psychological well-being (Schmuck *et al.*, 2019). Schmuck *et al.*, (2019) examined the relationship between SNS, self-esteem, and upward social comparison using a two-wave panel survey across four months in Germany. This suggests that, as a popular social media app, Facebook use can lead to higher instances of negative self-perceptions.

### 3.3. The Impact of Social Comparison on Education and Academic Achievement

Being in a school environment is a natural setting for social comparison to occur. In a study by Pulford *et al.*, (2018) on 325 psychology students at a university in the U.K., the researchers used two questionnaires that they created themselves, one to measure academic confidence and one to measure social comparison. The results of their study showed that when students made upward social comparisons, their academic confidence decreased across several domains, but when they made fewer comparisons, their academic

confidence increased across several demands (Pulford *et al.*, 2018). The results showed that with fewer upward social comparisons being made, students had more confidence in fields of speaking, hard IT skills, and numeracy, and in students who made no comparisons, they had more confidence in their reading, writing, and time management (Pulford *et al.*, 2018).

The results of this study are similar to the findings by Muller-Kalthoff *et al.*, (2017) that looked at three domains— social comparison, temporal comparison, and dimensional comparison— in an academic context. While social comparisons involve students comparing their ability in one domain to another student, temporal comparison involves making comparison to their previous achievement and dimensional comparison involves making comparisons to their own achievement in another domain. Conducting three surveys on 11<sup>th</sup> grade students in Germany using made-up profiles of seven fictitious students, the researchers found that in all studies, self-concept—how one conceives themselves—was lower after upward comparisons but higher after downward comparisons (Muller-Kalthoff *et al.*, 2017). This supports Festinger's (1954, cited in Gerber *et al.*, 2018) social comparison theory and Buunk and Ybema's (1997) identity contrast model that states when people want to feel better about themselves, they look downwards to make comparison with others who are doing worse-off.

In addition, a study by Tian *et al.*, (2017) collected data from 883 Chinese students ages 12 and 13 in northern China to examine the mediating roles of social comparison directions on students' subjective well-being in an educational setting. In this study, SWB refers to students' affect and their self-satisfaction, which is made up of their own subjective and cognitive appraisal of their school life including their learning and their relationships with their teachers and peers. Using a multi-measure questionnaire, the researchers measured for "achievement goal orientation" to measure for "mastery goals, performance-approach goals, and performance-avoidance goals" (Tian *et al.*, 2017, p. 4). The results found that an upward direction social comparison resulted in the facilitation of the three achievement goal orientations. The researchers also found that mastery goals and performance-approach goals were positively correlated with SWB whereas performance-avoidance goals had a negative correlation with SWB. Thus, this study suggests that in China's tight-culture, an upward direction academic comparison can mediate positive achievement outcomes and SWB while a downward direction comparison can be linked to lower SWB in school. Again, this is important for policymakers in education when it comes to adapting curriculum and policies for international students of different cultural backgrounds.

However, Johnson (2018) looked at the impact of social comparison on the academic and career

aspirations of African Americans and found that this demographic lacks opportunities to self-evaluate themselves based on their peers due to the lack of African-Americans in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) related fields. Johnson (2018) argues that without more African-American in these roles, students who aspire to these positions lack a social model, which is described as a way that people learn by modeling themselves off the observation of others.

Social modelling requires goal-directed behavior, which implies that students who have a social model are better able to set goals for themselves and direct their behavior because they are motivated to follow in the path of the person who they are modeling (Johnson, 2018). For instance, if black student wants to be a scientist and they happen to have a black science teacher, through the social comparison process, they will adopt that teacher as a social model and try to find similarities between themselves and the teacher in order to motivate themselves to have the same accomplishments. Again, this study is significant because it can direct policies that will benefit marginalized ethnic communities who need more social models in the classroom. Since teachers often serve as great social models, having more black educators in the classroom especially in STEM fields can help motivate this often-disadvantaged demographic to improve both academically and in terms of well-being.

### 3.4. The Importance of Education Policy for Student Well-Being

University and college campuses can be a stressful, scary, and traumatizing time for students, but it can also be dangerous. In the U.K, 95 university students took their own lives in 2016 while one-third of students experienced a serious psychological issue that needed professional assistance (The British Psychological Society, 2019). Similarly, Browning *et al.*, (2021) classified university students as a vulnerable population who are experiencing elevated levels of depression, anxiety, eating disorders, and substance abuse at a higher rate than the general population. Statistics reveal that three out of 10 college students struggle with depression and one in four suffer from anxiety while one in 20 students have created a suicide plan in the last year (Higher Education Today, 2021). As such, the importance of effective education policies that recognize, address, and support the psychological well-being of students while fostering academic achievement is needed across all campuses in the country.

A study by Park *et al.*, (2020) found that the mental health needs of the college demographic are constantly shifting but understanding the boundary between mental illness and mental wellness as a collective effort is the first step. They also found that while support groups are helpful in supporting psychological well-being, the label of "support group" has a negative connotation because it makes a normal

process of support into a problematic issue regardless if the support is from friends, social media, or web-based groups (Park *et al.*, 2020).

According to a report by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2021), providing support for students to achieve psychological well-being does not imply that the student will never experience stressful or challenging periods, but that the institutions of higher education must share in the responsibility of minimizing their emotional discomfort by providing accessible on-campus treatment for all types of needs. The report says, "What higher education can do, with its focus on academic development and through its actions and policies, is inform lifelong behaviours, both healthy and risky, that can develop during this time" (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2021, p. 63). This involves making students aware of the health services, resources, and academic support available to them and provided with transparent information about costs, fees, and scopes of services. They must also design policies that take into account black, indigenous, and students of color.

## CHAPTER IV: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

While people compare themselves in nearly any context including in the workplace, sports games, gyms, malls, and social outings, one of the biggest environments for social comparison is the school. While there is a lot of research on social comparison processes, there is less written on how social media use impacts upward and downward comparisons and affects self-evaluation and well-being in 21<sup>st</sup> century students. This study addresses a gap in the literature by focusing not just on Gen Z students but also on how education policies can be adapted to incorporate global students who come from tight and loose culture (Baldwin & Mussweiler, 2018) or who have minimal social models (Johnson, 2018).

In most countries, children start school in their primary years and do not finish until high school, which means there are many foundational years working day-to-day alongside their peers. This creates a perfect environment for social comparisons since students see their peers every day and often sit next to the same group of pupils all year long. Since studies have shown that self-confidence and academic confidence have a strong impact on students' desire to learn in the present and in the future (Pulford *et al.*, 2018), finding ways to increase self-confidence for students should be the goal of parents, educators, and institutions. This is especially true if nations want to increase the number of students they have attending higher education.

Furthermore, how social comparison impacts well-being depends on the direction of the comparison and the interpretation of the comparison. First, direction

implies whether the individual was identifying themselves to others in an upward comparison to those who are well off or whether they are contrasting themselves to those who are worse off in a downward comparison (Buunk & Dijkstra, 2017). When identifying with others in an upward comparison, individuals look for traits or characteristics that are similar to the others they want to emulate, and this comparison helps them believe they can attain the same “better-offness” as the others who are doing well in life. In contrast, when individuals are contrasting themselves with a target that they deem is doing worse than themselves, they will look for differences between themselves and the others to distance themselves from them.

Secondly, these comparisons and contrasts often evoke feelings that improve their self-image, but they can also lower them as well. When comparing to others in an upward fashion and contrasting in a downward fashion, people often feel better about themselves. Similarly, when individuals contrast themselves in a downward fashion, they feel good about themselves, but they feel bad about themselves when they contrast themselves to others in an upward fashion (Buunk & Dijkstra, 2017). This latter contrast to people who are better off can lead to strong emotions like envy and jealousy. However, this also depends on the individual user. According to Jang *et al.*, (2016), people who have low self-esteem but engage in social comparison often have worse mental health and are more at risk of hurting their psychological well-being.

#### 4.1. Changes to Education Policy

In addition to current policies addressing ways to improve academic achievement, education policies need to support student psychological well-being and mental health. An effective student well-being policy is of extreme importance especially in a post-pandemic climate where students may be extra stressed and worried about their futures. A student well-being policy should give students a structured environment, a place to reduce loneliness and isolation, a chance to learn self-management strategies, an opportunity for personal and academic achievement, and knowledge on how to cope with mental health challenges (Inside Government, 2020).

## CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Comparing oneself to others is not necessarily a bad thing, as society often points out in the media with lessons teaching children to “be yourself” and “don’t compare yourself to others.” In fact, social comparison is part of human nature, which according to Festinger’s (1954) theory is a natural part to understanding and learning about oneself. In other words, how can people really appreciate who they are, what they have, or where they want to go if they cannot make meaning from it through comparison with others.

When Gen Z attend post-secondary school, they will arrive at campuses with smartphones in hand while taking snaps and videos of their college journey to post on their various social media accounts. Any achievement, whether minor and groundbreaking, will make its way onto students’ SNS platforms and be shared with the wider school community, so it is a critical time to help students find ways to cope with any negative effects that might emerge from social comparisons in the actual classroom, virtual classroom, or social media chat rooms.

While it might be impossible to separate social media usage with the student demographic, this does not mean that education policymakers and teachers cannot harness the technology, resources, and tools that they have to find ways that support psychological well-being while maintaining academic achievement in the student population. They can educate students on reducing their screen time or minimizing the need to compare themselves with others. Since Facebook users were more likely to engage in upward social comparison that led to lowered self-esteem and well-being over time compared to Instagram (Schmuck *et al.*, 2019), teachers and policymakers can educate students on the harms of this behavior.

Finally, there are various implications for studying the role of social comparison in the education setting. First, if students engage in upward comparisons to others in class, they may compare themselves to others performing better and be motivated to improve their own academic achievements. Also, if students compare themselves in a downward fashion to others in class, they can reinforce their self-image and self-esteem. This can be beneficial in schools, especially primary or secondary schools when deciding to place gifted students in a special class of other gifted students. Secondly, if students, and young people in general, are taught healthy ways to manage their social media usage and consumption, it can lead to healthy habits and patterns in a world increasingly becoming more technologically driven. If teachers incorporate these applications and technology into their classrooms and curriculums at a young age before children reach college years, then they can be proactive in introducing students to a world of safe social media usage that supports a healthy self-conception and self-evaluation.

Furthermore, this study found that when students made upwards social comparisons, oftentimes their academic confidence decreased but when students made minimal comparisons, their confidence increased across several domains (Pulford *et al.*, 2018), which suggests that students should reduce social comparison in either direction. Of course, this is situational depending on what culture the students come from. Students from America might not benefit psychological or academically from social comparisons but students from China see it as the norm and a key to their continued

survival (Baldwin & Mussweiler, 2018). Similarly, students of African American descent might do better in school if they have notable social models to try and identify with to increase motivation and career aspirations (Johnson, 2018).

There are limitations to this study. First, only English-based articles were chosen, which excludes potential articles from other countries that could contribute to this study. Secondly, the topic and date limitations from 2016 onwards might have limited the number of accessible articles especially since Covid-19 prevented more research from being conducted and published.

Lastly, there are recommendations for future research. This study focused exclusively on the social comparison of college students, but schooling and social media use starts a lot earlier nowadays. By the time Gen Z students reach college, they may have spent 10-12 years already going to school and using SNSs. Future research could focus on the impact of social comparison on the psychological well-being of younger students in their foundational years or even in high school where there are also added pressures and stresses. This research was also broad in that it sought research from various contexts and cultures to locate patterns and trends. Future research could narrow in on one specific place such as the U.S. or China or make a comparison between cultures. Finally, while this literature was informative, it would benefit from added quantitative or qualitative research. Future research could include using a survey, questionnaire, or group-based interviews of Gen Z students in college to find out what exactly they are looking at when they compare themselves to others. For instance, prospective students might be comparing their grades, their appearance, their social status, their wealth, or their respective schools.

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