

SOCIAL COMPARISON THEORY

Authored by
mohammad looti

October 14, 2025

RECOMMENDED CITATION

mohammad looti (2025). *SOCIAL COMPARISON THEORY*. PSYCHOLOGICAL SCALES.
Retrieved from <https://scales.arabpsychology.com/?p=48405>

SOCIAL COMPARISON THEORY

Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Social Psychology; Motivation Theory

Proponents: Leon Festinger (Original Proponent); Thomas Wills; Jerry Suls

1. Core Principles

Social Comparison Theory (SCT) is a highly influential framework in social psychology, first systematically articulated by **Leon Festinger** in 1954. The central tenet of the theory is that human beings possess a fundamental drive to evaluate their own opinions, attitudes, and abilities. When objective, non-social means of assessment are unavailable or ambiguous--for instance, when one cannot determine their true talent level solely through internal reflection or standardized measures--individuals resort to comparing themselves with others. This relational process of self-assessment is not merely passive observation; it is an active, often subconscious, mechanism essential for establishing a stable and coherent self-concept within a social environment. The theory proposes that the evaluation of the self is inextricably linked to the evaluation of others, creating a continuous feedback loop that governs much of social interaction and group formation.

The motivation driving this comparison is multifaceted, aiming initially at **accuracy**. Festinger argued that people seek accurate self-evaluations to ensure their skills and opinions are aligned with reality, thereby enabling effective navigation of the environment and successful achievement of goals. For instance, a student wants to know if their study habits are sufficient, and the most accessible way to gauge this is by comparing their grades and effort levels to those of their peers. This need for comparison is hypothesized to be stronger in novel or uncertain situations where internal standards are lacking. Critically, the theory suggests that this self-evaluation process leads to pressure toward **uniformity** within groups; if a person's opinions or abilities diverge significantly from their comparison group, they will experience discomfort, motivating them either to change their own standing or to attempt to change the standing of the comparison target, or ultimately, to abandon that comparison group entirely.

While the initial formulation focused heavily on the cognitive drive for accuracy, subsequent refinements have expanded the scope to include powerful motivational factors, namely **self-enhancement** and **self-improvement**. Modern SCT recognizes that individuals often strategically select comparison targets not just to know the truth, but specifically to feel better about themselves (self-enhancement, often achieved through downward comparison) or to inspire aspirational change (self-improvement, often achieved through upward comparison). Thus, the selection of the comparison standard is not random but is dictated by the specific psychological goal the individual is attempting to achieve in that moment, whether it is increasing self-esteem or accurately benchmarking performance.

2. Historical Development

Social Comparison Theory originated during a pivotal era in post-war social psychology, characterized by a focus on cognitive dissonance and group dynamics. Festinger's 1954 article, "A Theory of Social Comparison Processes," was a landmark publication that synthesized observations about how people anchor their self-perceptions. Prior to this, psychological understanding of self-evaluation often relied solely on internal, stable traits or objective outcomes. Festinger introduced the necessary social dimension, arguing that many human attributes, especially opinions and subjective abilities, exist only in relation to a social standard. His initial work focused primarily on the conditions under which comparison occurs, emphasizing the role of non-social uncertainty as the catalyst for seeking social data.

The foundational stage of SCT established the key principle that individuals prefer to compare themselves with people who are **similar** to them on relevant attributes (the similarity hypothesis). The rationale was simple: comparing a novice swimmer to an Olympic champion provides little useful information for the novice's actual ability level, rendering the comparison irrelevant for accurate self-evaluation. However, comparing the novice to others who have similar training backgrounds yields a much more meaningful and informative result. This similarity requirement became a major focus of early experimental research, exploring dimensions such as race, gender, socio-economic status, and educational background as moderators for comparison selection.

The theory underwent significant expansion in the 1970s and 1980s, largely driven by the work of Thomas Wills. Wills challenged the strict cognitive focus on accuracy, proposing the concept of **Downward Social Comparison Theory** (1981). This revision acknowledged that individuals often choose to compare themselves to those who are less fortunate, less competent, or worse off, specifically when their self-esteem is threatened or they are coping with a negative event (e.g., illness or failure). This introduced a crucial motivational element: comparison is often employed for **self-protection** and **mood elevation**, not just objective assessment. Concurrently, researchers like Jerry Suls focused on the concept of upward comparison as a motivator for improvement, cementing the modern view that comparison is a dynamic process utilized for multiple, often competing, psychological ends.

3. Key Concepts and Components

The modern understanding of Social Comparison Theory relies on three primary directional components that describe the nature and purpose of the comparison undertaken by the individual. These directions fundamentally alter the psychological outcome of the comparison process.

Upward Social Comparison (USC): This occurs when an individual compares themselves to someone they perceive as superior, better, or more accomplished than themselves in a specific domain. USC is typically driven by the motive for **self-improvement** or aspiration. While upward

comparisons can be highly motivating, providing a benchmark for success and inspiring greater effort, they often carry the risk of negative psychological consequences. If the comparison target is perceived as too distant or unattainable, USC can lead to feelings of inadequacy, jealousy, reduced self-esteem, and lowered satisfaction with one's current state. The interpretation of the upward comparison target--whether they are viewed as inspiring or demoralizing--often depends on the individual's perceived control over the attribute being compared.

Downward Social Comparison (DSC): This involves comparing oneself to someone perceived as inferior, less competent, or worse off. DSC is predominantly motivated by the need for **self-enhancement** and **self-protection**. By focusing on others who are faring less well, individuals can feel better about their own situation, boosting subjective well-being and maintaining or restoring threatened self-esteem. This mechanism is particularly evident in coping strategies, where individuals facing health crises or personal failures often seek out stories or examples of people whose circumstances are demonstrably worse than their own to achieve psychological comfort. While effective for immediate mood repair, excessive reliance on DSC can potentially limit realistic self-improvement goals.

The Similarity Hypothesis: As proposed by Festinger, this concept suggests that for the purpose of achieving accurate self-evaluation, individuals will seek out comparison targets who are similar to themselves on characteristics related to the dimension being evaluated. Similarity provides a stable and relevant yardstick. However, subsequent research has refined this idea, recognizing that similarity might be forgone if the motive is purely inspirational (leading to upward comparison regardless of current similarity) or purely defensive (leading to downward comparison regardless of similarity). Furthermore, people often engage in comparisons with dissimilar others when proximity or salience dictates the comparison, such as seeing a highly successful celebrity on television, even though that comparison may be less informative and more emotionally charged.

4. Functions and Motives

Beyond the simple act of relative assessment, social comparison serves several critical psychological functions that help individuals maintain psychological equilibrium and adapt to their social roles. These functions often operate simultaneously, though one may dominate depending on the situational context.

The first and original function is **Self-Evaluation** (Accuracy). This is the cognitive need to know where one stands. When people are uncertain about their skill level or the correctness of their opinions, they use social data to achieve stability. This function is vital for decision-making, such as deciding whether to attempt a difficult task or join a specific social group. Accurate self-evaluation prevents overestimation of abilities (which leads to failure) or underestimation (which limits potential). Festinger emphasized that the greatest utility of SCT is predicting the degree of success

or failure one might expect in future endeavors based on current comparative standing.

The second key function is **Self-Enhancement** and Self-Protection. Driven by the desire to maintain a positive self-image, this function often manifests through the strategic use of downward comparison. In moments of failure, threat, or high stress, the primary goal shifts from accuracy to comfort. Research shows that individuals strategically recall or seek out examples of people who are doing worse than them to protect their sense of worth. This function is highly adaptive, serving as a buffer against anxiety and depression, especially in response to uncontrollable negative life events. For instance, cancer patients often compare themselves to others battling more aggressive forms of the disease to maintain hope and psychological resilience.

The third function is **Self-Improvement** (Aspiration). This function is mediated by upward comparison. When individuals are focused on personal growth or achieving long-term goals, they utilize superior comparison targets as models. Observing the successful strategies, efforts, and outcomes of highly competent individuals provides a roadmap for personal development. This comparison is most effective when the target is seen as attainable, yet significantly better, creating a motivational flow state where the individual is challenged but not overwhelmed. Conversely, when USC is interpreted as a threat rather than an inspiration, it ceases to fulfill the self-improvement function and can instead trigger debilitating social distress.

5. Applications and Examples

Social Comparison Theory has profound implications across numerous domains, from clinical psychology and organizational behavior to the study of consumer habits and modern media consumption. In the academic setting, students frequently engage in comparisons regarding grades, extracurricular achievements, and social standing. Upward comparison with high-performing peers can stimulate greater effort and competitive drive, but if the comparison leads to perceived insurmountable gaps, it can result in academic burnout or withdrawal. Downward comparison, such as comparing one's struggles to those of a student who has dropped out, can provide temporary comfort and increase satisfaction with one's own perseverance.

A powerful modern application of SCT centers on **social media usage**. Platforms like Instagram and Facebook are essentially comparison machines, providing individuals with highly curated, often idealized, upward comparison targets. Passive consumption of social media feeds typically exposes users only to the "highlight reels" of others' lives (career successes, perfect vacations, idealized physical appearance), generating pervasive upward social comparison stress. Studies have consistently linked high levels of passive social media engagement to increased feelings of envy, body dissatisfaction, and symptoms of depression, precisely because these platforms violate Festinger's similarity principle by forcing comparison with unattainable, often manufactured, ideals.

In the workplace, SCT dictates how employees perceive fairness and compensation. Equity

Theory, which often overlaps with SCT, suggests that workers compare their inputs (effort, time, skill) and outcomes (salary, recognition) with those of their peers. If an individual perceives that they are giving more input but receiving comparable or less outcome than their comparison target (a state of negative inequity), job satisfaction plummets, and negative behaviors (like reduced effort or resentment) often follow. Conversely, if an employee perceives that they are receiving more than their comparison target (positive inequity), they may justify this difference by increasing their own perceived inputs or choosing a different, less fortunate, comparison target.

6. Criticisms and Limitations

Despite its wide acceptance, Social Comparison Theory faces several theoretical and methodological criticisms. One primary limitation concerns the difficulty in precisely predicting **target selection**. While the theory posits motives (accuracy, enhancement, improvement), individuals often engage in comparisons that seem to contradict these motives, choosing targets that are neither similar nor beneficial. Critics argue that the theory sometimes functions more as a post-hoc explanation for observed behavior rather than a reliable predictor of future comparison choices, which are often influenced by immediate environmental salience (who is present or visible) rather than careful, strategic selection.

Furthermore, Festinger's original framework struggled to account for the impact of individual differences and cultural variations. Cultural psychology has highlighted that the intensity and direction of comparison are highly dependent on the cultural context. In **individualistic cultures** (like the U.S.), comparisons tend to be competitive and focused on personal achievement and status, often leading to strong emotional reactions to upward comparisons. Conversely, in **collectivistic cultures** (like many East Asian societies), comparison may be more focused on maintaining group harmony or assessing one's contribution to the collective, making group-level comparison a more salient factor than individual comparison.

A significant challenge also lies in distinguishing between **comparison orientation** as a stable personality trait versus comparison as a situational state. Some individuals inherently possess a high social comparison orientation (HCO), meaning they are generally highly attentive to and concerned with what others are doing, regardless of the situation. For these individuals, comparisons are unavoidable and often automatic, leading to greater vulnerability to negative self-evaluations. The original SCT did not fully address the role of stable individual differences in determining the frequency, intensity, and impact of comparison behaviors, treating the comparison drive as uniformly strong across all individuals under conditions of uncertainty.

Further Reading

[Leon Festinger - Wikipedia](#)

[Social Comparison Theory - Wikipedia](#)

[Social Comparison Theory: Definition and Key Concepts - Simply Psychology](#)

ARABPSYCHOLOGY.COM