

The Comparative Mind: A Review of Social Comparison's Role in the Formation of Life Satisfaction

Hadi FayeghMoradiha¹, Mehdi FayeghMoradiha²

¹Department of Management, Malayer Branch, Islamic Azad University, Hamadan, Iran

²Department of Management, Central Tehran Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran

Abstract

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Background: Life satisfaction, a core evaluative component of subjective well-being, is inherently relative. Social comparison theory posits that individuals determine their own social and personal worth based on how they stack up against others. Despite six decades of research, a comprehensive synthesis of how different comparison processes, moderators, and modern digital contexts shape global life judgments is needed.

Objective: This review aims to systematically synthesize theoretical and empirical evidence on the role of social comparison in life satisfaction formation, identify key mechanisms and moderators, and highlight gaps for future research.

Methods: A narrative review methodology was employed. Scholarly databases (PubMed, PsycINFO, Web of Science) were searched for English-language articles and key texts from 1954 to 2025. Search terms included "social comparison," "life satisfaction," "subjective well-being," "reference group," and related constructs. Theoretical frameworks, landmark studies, and recent empirical findings were integrated.

Results: The review confirms social comparison as a fundamental, dual-pathway mechanism. Upward comparisons typically reduce life satisfaction through contrast effects but can increase it via inspiration (assimilation). Downward comparisons generally enhance satisfaction through contrast but can induce fear. Impact is moderated by individual differences (e.g., Neuroticism, Social Comparison Orientation), target similarity, and cultural context. The pervasive influence of social media, characterized by curated upward comparisons, is strongly associated with diminished life satisfaction.

Conclusion: Life satisfaction is profoundly constructed through comparative evaluation. The effect direction hinges on cognitive processes (assimilation/contrast), target selection, and dispositional traits. In the digital age, understanding and mitigating the negative impacts of maladaptive comparison, while harnessing its potential for motivation, is a critical public health concern. Future research must employ longitudinal designs and explore intervention strategies.

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Introduction

The universal human pursuit of happiness and fulfillment finds one of its most robust scientific expressions in the concept of life satisfaction. Defined as a global, cognitive judgment of the quality of one's life as a whole, life satisfaction represents the evaluative

cornerstone of subjective well-being [1]. For decades, researchers have sought to identify its determinants, moving beyond objective socio-economic indicators to uncover the powerful role of psychological processes. Among these, social comparison—the act of evaluating oneself against others—emerges not as a peripheral

Correspondence:

Hadi FayeghMoradiha

E-mail: hadi.fayegh2017@gmail.com



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influence, but as a fundamental, architectonic force in shaping how individuals appraise their own lives [2,3].

The theoretical bedrock was laid by Festinger's Social Comparison Theory (1954), which posited that in the absence of objective standards, people are driven to compare themselves with similar others to accurately evaluate their opinions and abilities [4]. This foundational insight has since undergone significant elaboration. Critical developments, such as Wills' theory of downward comparison for self-enhancement [5] and the more nuanced cognitive models of assimilation and contrast [6], have revealed that comparisons serve multifaceted motives beyond mere self-evaluation, including self-improvement and the maintenance of self-esteem [7]. Consequently, the seemingly simple act of "looking at others" is now understood as a complex psychological event with profound consequences for personal well-being.

The question of how social comparison informs life satisfaction is therefore paramount. Empirical evidence paints a complex picture: while comparing oneself to less fortunate others often boosts satisfaction, and comparing to those better off often diminishes it, these effects are not universal [8,9]. The rise of digital technology, particularly social networking sites (SNS), has injected new urgency into this inquiry. These platforms have created an unprecedented, omnipresent arena for social comparison, where curated displays of others' success, happiness, and luxury are constantly available [10,11]. This environment may systematically bias comparisons upward, posing a novel challenge to life satisfaction on a societal scale [12,13].

Despite a rich and evolving literature, a cohesive, contemporary synthesis is lacking. Research is often siloed, examining specific moderators (e.g., personality), contexts (e.g., social media), or comparison directions in isolation. This fragmentation obscures a holistic understanding of the comparative mechanisms that construct life satisfaction. This review aims to address this gap by providing a systematic, integrative analysis. We seek to: 1) consolidate the key theoretical frameworks linking social comparison to life satisfaction; 2) elucidate the psychological mechanisms (contrast vs. assimilation) and critical moderators (individual, social, cultural) that determine comparison outcomes; 3) examine the transformative impact of digital social environments; and 4) identify critical gaps in the literature to guide a future research agenda aimed at fostering adaptive comparison processes.

Methods

This article employs a narrative systematic review methodology to integrate and critically appraise the extant literature. A systematic search was conducted in

PubMed, PsycINFO, and Web of Science databases for peer-reviewed journal articles, reviews, and meta-analyses published between 1954 (the year of Festinger's original theory) and October 2025. Search strings combined key terms: ("social comparison" OR "downward comparison" OR "upward comparison" OR "reference group*") AND ("life satisfaction" OR "subjective well-being" OR "happiness" OR "self-esteem"). The search was limited to English-language publications. Snowballing from reference lists of key papers supplemented the database search.

Inclusion criteria focused on empirical studies and theoretical papers explicitly examining the relationship between social comparison processes and evaluative well-being outcomes, particularly life satisfaction. Studies focusing solely on affect (mood) or domain-specific satisfaction (e.g., body image) without a global measure were excluded unless they provided crucial theoretical insight. The identified literature was thematically analyzed to construct a coherent narrative around established theories, consistent findings, moderating variables, and emerging contexts like social media.

Results

Foundational Theories and Dual-Pathway Models

The relationship between social comparison and life satisfaction is governed by two primary cognitive operations: contrast and assimilation. The classic Upward/Downward Comparison Theory [5] posits that comparing with those worse off (downward) enhances well-being via contrast, while comparing with those better off (upward) diminishes it. However, this is not absolute. The Assimilation-Contrast Model [6] clarifies that focusing on similarities with a superior other (assimilation) can lead to positive self-evaluation and inspiration ("I am like them, so I can achieve that too"), potentially boosting future-oriented satisfaction. Conversely, focusing on differences (contrast) yields negative outcomes ("I am not like them, so I am inadequate") [14].

Empirical support is robust. Downward contrast consistently correlates with higher life satisfaction and self-esteem, particularly following threats [15,16]. Upward contrast is linked to envy, resentment, and lower life satisfaction [17]. The assimilation path is more fragile; successful upward assimilation requires perceived attainability and relevance [18].

Critical Moderators of Comparison Effects

Individual Differences: Social Comparison Orientation (SCO), the stable tendency to compare oneself with others, is a key moderator. High SCO individuals engage in comparisons more frequently and are more affected

by them, exhibiting greater volatility in life satisfaction [19]. Neuroticism predisposes individuals to negative emotional reactivity, amplifying the detrimental effects of upward contrast [20]. Conversely, self-esteem acts as a buffer, with high self-esteem individuals more likely to engage in self-protective downward comparisons or dismiss unfavorable upward comparisons [21]. Cultural context also shapes comparison norms. Individualistic cultures may foster more competitive upward comparisons for self-evaluation, while collectivistic cultures might emphasize downward or lateral comparisons to maintain group harmony [22,23].

Target Characteristics: The impact of a comparison is strongest when the target is perceived as similar on related attributes (the "similarity hypothesis") [4,24]. Comparisons with close friends or colleagues have a more powerful effect on life satisfaction than comparisons with distant celebrities [25]. Furthermore, comparisons with the "past self" are a critical intra-personal reference point, where perceived improvement enhances life satisfaction [26].

The Digital Revolution: Social Media as a Comparison Arena

The rise of Social Networking Sites (SNS) represents a paradigm shift, creating an environment of pervasive, passive, and often upward social comparison [10]. SNS profiles are curated "highlight reels," presenting a biased sample of others' positive experiences [27]. Passive consumption (browsing without direct interaction) is strongly and consistently associated with increased upward contrast, envy, and decreased life satisfaction [28,29]. A meta-analysis confirmed a significant negative correlation between social media use and subjective well-being, with social comparison identified as a primary mediator [30]. The constant accessibility of comparison targets disrupts the natural limits that once existed, potentially leading to chronic dissatisfaction [31].

Economic Comparisons and Societal Inequality

The relative income hypothesis argues that life satisfaction depends more on one's income rank within a chosen reference group (e.g., peers, nation) than on absolute income [32]. Perceptions of economic inequality can trigger widespread upward social comparison, lowering average national life satisfaction even amidst overall economic growth [33,34]. The "tunnel effect" [35] suggests that initially, seeing others' success (upward comparison) can raise hopes (assimilation), but if mobility seems blocked, it turns to frustration (contrast).

Discussion

This systematic review consolidates compelling evidence that life satisfaction is not an absolute state derived from a sum of life conditions, but a dynamic, socially-constructed judgment. The central thesis, supported across decades of research, is that we understand the quality of our lives through a perpetual process of benchmarking against real or imagined others [3,36]. The most significant advancement in this field has been the move from viewing comparison as having a fixed valence (upward=bad, downward=good) to understanding its duality. The Assimilation-Contrast Model [6] provides the crucial explanatory framework: the cognitive focus on similarity or difference determines whether a comparison motivates or demoralizes, comforts or threatens. This explains why the same social media post can inspire one user while plunging another into envy [37].

The discussion must contend with several profound implications. First, the identification of pervasive maladaptive comparison strategies, particularly the ruminative upward contrast endemic to passive social media consumption, represents a significant modern public health concern [30,38]. The architecture of many SNSs exploits our natural comparison tendencies, potentially creating a population-level drag on subjective well-being [12]. This challenges simplistic narratives about technology and connectivity, pointing instead to a need for digital literacy and ethical design that mitigates these harmful effects [39,40].

Second, the review highlights the critical role of moderators. The finding that individuals high in Social Comparison Orientation (SCO) and Neuroticism are particularly vulnerable suggests avenues for targeted psychological intervention [19,20]. Cognitive-behavioral therapies (CBT) could explicitly target maladaptive comparative schemas, helping individuals reframe comparisons or disengage from them [41]. Furthermore, cultivating gratitude, which can be conceptualized as a form of constructive, generalized downward comparison, has shown efficacy in boosting life satisfaction and may serve as a protective practice [42,43].

A major theoretical implication is the need to further integrate social comparison models with other well-being frameworks. For instance, Self-Determination Theory (SDT) posits that well-being stems from fulfilling needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness [44]. Chronic upward contrast likely thwarts feelings of competence and can distort relatedness into competitive social ranking. Future models should explicitly link comparison processes to these basic psychological needs.

Finally, the societal and economic dimensions cannot be ignored. The robust link between income inequality

and lower aggregate life satisfaction, mediated by intensified social comparison [33,34], suggests that social policy matters for psychological well-being. Policies that reduce extreme disparities or increase perceptions of fairness and social mobility may improve national well-being not just by raising absolute standards, but by softening the negative psychological impact of relative deprivation [45].

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Despite a rich literature, significant gaps remain:

- 1. Longitudinal & Dynamic Studies:** The field is dominated by cross-sectional designs. Research using Ecological Momentary Assessment (EMA) and longitudinal panels is crucial to model the causal, reciprocal relationships between comparison events, mood, and long-term life satisfaction judgments [46,47].
- 2. Neurobiological Correlates:** Social neuroscience is beginning to map the brain systems involved in comparative evaluation (e.g., ventral striatum for reward comparison, anterior cingulate for conflict) [48,49]. This line of inquiry could identify biomarkers for vulnerability to negative comparison effects.
- 3. Developmental Trajectories:** How do comparison processes and their impact evolve from adolescence, where identity is forming, through late adulthood, where goals may shift towards integrity? A lifespan perspective is largely absent [50].
- 4. Cross-Cultural and Macro-Social Work:** While cultural differences are acknowledged, more research is needed on how national narratives, media systems, and institutional structures cultivate distinct "comparison cultures" [23,51].
- 5. Intervention Efficacy:** There is a pressing need for rigorously designed randomized controlled trials (RCTs) to test the efficacy of interventions—from school-based programs to digital well-being tools—aimed at fostering healthier comparison habits [40,52].

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Conclusion

In conclusion, social comparison is an inescapable and foundational process in the construction of life satisfaction. This review demonstrates that its role is not merely influential but constitutive; we understand "how good our life is" through a perpetual dialogue with the perceived lives of others. The modern digital landscape has amplified the reach, frequency, and potential psychological harm of these comparisons. The path forward requires a multi-pronged approach: advancing theory that integrates comparison with broader motivational systems, designing technologies that promote connection over comparison, developing clinical and educational tools to build psychological resilience, and considering the well-being impacts of economic and social policies. Understanding and wisely navigating the "comparative mind" is, therefore, essential for fostering individual and collective well-being in the 21st century.

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The authors contributed to the data analysis. Drafting, revising and approving the article, responsible for all aspects of this work.

Conflict of Interest

None

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