

SOCIAL COMPARISON AND ACADEMIC BUOYANCY AMONG FRESHMEN IN ONE SELECTED PUBLIC UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

The study examined the relationship between social comparison and academic buoyancy among freshmen in one selected public university in Kenya. The study adopted cross-sectional survey research design. The social comparison and academic buoyancy scales were used to collect data. The sample size of the study consisted of 213 freshmen from one selected public university in the western part of Kenya. The data collected were analyzed using descriptive statistics, and inferential statistics, such as Pearson correlation coefficient and regression analysis statistical techniques. It was established, that there was a low positive ($r=0.187$, $n=213$, $p=0.006$) relationship between social comparison and academic buoyancy among the first year university students. The social comparison regression model was adequate to predict the level of academic buoyancy among first year university students, $[F(1, 211)=7.641$, $p=0.006$, accounting for 3.5 % ($R^2=0.035$)] of the variation in academic buoyancy levels. The study recommends that counseling staff at universities should develop specific orientation programmes to enhance the academic buoyancy of freshmen with inappropriate social comparisons. Future studies could also focus on institutional based factors, influencing academic buoyancy among freshmen at universities.

Keywords: social comparison, academic buoyancy, freshmen, public university.

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1. Introduction

Social comparison has dominated research in social psychology for decades. Social comparison behavior is a process, in which human beings set information on social entities in relation to other social entities [1]. The social comparison research was proposed by Leon Festinger in 1954 with assumptions that humans have an inherent desire to compare themselves with others and relate their own opinions and abilities to those of relevant peers, at times to those, perceived to be superior and in other instances to the individuals, perceived to be inferior [1]. Social comparison is important because it helps individuals to improve in their self-beliefs and assists to uplift the self-esteem of those who are low. There are two main types of social comparisons, namely the upward and downward aspects. According to [2], upward comparison occurs when people compare themselves to someone they perceive to be superior, whereas a downward comparison is defined by making a comparison with someone, perceived to be inferior. The more that an individual identifies with their upward comparison target, the greater the negative effect of the comparison, and on the other hand, the more that an individual identifies with their downward comparison target, the greater the positive effect of the comparison [3]. In addition, individuals can be motivated by downward comparisons, where comparisons are made with less competent individuals.

Social comparison is seen to have positive effects on efforts and learning outcomes among students. [4] argued that upward social comparison, comparing oneself with better performing others, could lead to either high or low academic performance. If upward social comparison led to more inspiring affects, there would be more effort as coping behavior, which in turn had a positive effect on academic performance. Moreover, [5] suggested that self-evaluations are increased by the existence of social comparison with superior in-group members. In addition, [6] introduced personal efficacy as the outcome of the interactions among personal factors, behaviors, social and environmental conditions. In addition, [7] showed that the positive effect of comparison choice only applied to students with a favorable comparative evaluation. In addition, [8] argue that students' interest in pursuing academic activities increased when they compared themselves with other stu-

dents who spent more time on studying. [9], reiterate that the positive feelings, following upward social comparison, can increase people's inspiration to improve.

One of the internal mechanisms that could be influenced by social comparison is academic buoyancy. Academic buoyancy was proposed by [10] to describe students' competence to respond effectively to daily setbacks, such as poor grades in examinations or pressuring deadlines. When students attain a high level of academic buoyancy and do not let negative academic experiences take control of their school lives, they cope more effectively with daily academic challenges. Therefore, students' academic buoyancy is an important factor to be considered, especially in normative educational settings where students should meet externally defined standards. Academic Buoyancy is a student's ability to cope with academic setbacks and challenges that generally occur in school life, such as poor grades, exam pressure, and difficulty in completing schoolwork [11]. These challenges arise alongside with the efforts students put in preparing their future career – in this case, to graduate and determine further education. Individual's buoyancy affects how they respond to the challenges, setbacks, difficulties, and pressures they encounter in academic settings; how eager individuals want to try to overcome them; as well as how diligent the individuals are to achieve the goals they have set [12]. Students who are not buoyant have more risk of experiencing greater difficulties in the pursuit of their career, especially problems, facing the future career. [13] adds that social comparison could be one of the critical factors, influencing one's academic buoyancy, depicting the capacity of students to be able to withstand challenges and academic setbacks.

1. 1. Social Comparison Theory

The Social Comparison Theory was proposed by Leon Festingerand, it argues that people have desires to know themselves. According to the theory, individuals have a basic need to maintain a stable and accurate self-view. Therefore, individuals seek informative feedback about their characteristics and abilities. Moreover, social comparison is mostly understood as a process, which is engaged to fulfill fundamental needs, such as self-evaluation, self-enhancement, and self-improvement [14].The theory postulates that there are upward and downward comparisons. [15] postulates that in downward comparisons, people seek such standards to boost their self-view with a favorable comparison. Not only social comparisons with other people, but also temporal comparisons with oneself in the past could serve such a purpose [16]. The theory also argues that downward comparisons have the potential to protect and enhance one's self-view, people with a threatened self-view [15]. Upward comparisons can motivate people and can provide information on how to make progress [17], and that people who are slightly better than oneself, especially, are selected as comparison standard for this purpose. Even though people might seek social comparisons with superior others to improve, upward comparisons could also be threatening to the self. In the same way in which downward comparisons might maintain or enhance one's positive self-view, upward comparisons might question this image [18]. The process of social comparison can be unintentional, depending on the context, and the extent, to which individuals compare themselves to others, varies from one individual to the next.

1. 2. Literature Review

Literature on social comparison and academic outcomes exists but very scanty studies are available on academic buoyancy. For example, [19] found that positive correlation occurred between social comparison and the achievement dimension. [2] study reported that as social comparison orientation increases, self-esteem, optimism, and positive affect decrease; depression, anxiety, social anxiety, neuroticism, and negative affect increase. In another study, [7] found that social comparison has a positive impact on the student's grades. [20] showed that there was a learning curve of balancing on an equilibrium board on how social comparison impacts exercise and learning. In addition, [21] reported that there is a negative reciprocal relationship: higher academic buoyancy predicted subsequent lower psychological risk, and higher psychological risk predicted lower subsequent academic buoyancy. [22] noted that buoyancy had a direct impact on low-level negative outcomes, whereas its role in more major outcomes, such as failing a subject, was mediated by academic resilience. [23] found that upward social comparison takes place when comparing oneself to

others, perceived as superior, and downward social comparison happens when comparing oneself to others, perceived as inferior. [21] found that control was important as a link between academic buoyancy and academic performance in the past and the future. [24] study showed that social comparison is a strong factor and can sway people to feel differently and to do things differently. In the classroom students probably feel the need to compete and be the best.

Moreover, [25] found a marginally significant effect of the interaction between academic buoyancy and academic adversity on subsequent academic adversity in a sample of secondary school students. [26] study reported that social comparison orientation had a positive effect on job-seeking stress of university students, revealing that students with a high level of social comparison orientation were more likely to experience job-seeking stress. [27] reported that academic buoyancy's significant association with academic performance was mediated by academic self-concept. [25] found that prior academic buoyancy significantly predicted lower subsequent academic adversity, but prior academic adversity did not significantly predict higher subsequent academic buoyancy. Interestingly, however, there was a marginal interaction effect, such that students who experienced academic adversity but who were also high in academic buoyancy were less likely to experience academic adversity one year later. [28] indicated that there are strong, clear associations between better academic performance and higher resiliency, mindfulness, self-compassion and consideration of future consequences, and negative associations to procrastination.

[29] reported that there was a positive significant relationship between downward comparison and the first two subscales of burnout: exhaustion and depersonalization. In addition, teachers' upward comparison tendency showed a positive effect on teachers' sense of instructional self-efficacy. [30] found that belongingness and downward social comparison were associated positively, and that making the downward social comparison on social media could evoke some positive emotions. [31] also found that young adults' relationships are mediated by social comparison orientation, which was, in turn, moderated by individuals' materialistic values. [32] study showed that social comparison orientation negatively influenced psychological well-being, and that, perceived social support had no mediation effect, self-esteem had a significant negative mediation effect, and perceived social support and self-esteem had a negative serial mediation effect. [33] study reported that upward social comparison did not moderate the relationship between time, spent on social media, and depression or self-esteem, and that downward social comparison, however, moderated the relationship between time, spent on social media, and levels of depression, however, no moderating effect was found for self-esteem.

Moreover, [34] study reported that upward social comparison evoked career frustration at both between- and within-person levels, while downward comparison decreased career frustration at a between-person level. [35] study showed that the scores of academic buoyancy and social comparison and participation were significantly higher among students, receiving guided discovery, than that of those, receiving traditional education. [36] study indicated that an ability to social comparison orientation was negatively and positively related to the psychological capital components. [37] study reported that obsessive thinking, deep thinking and social comparison had significant effects in predicting social media addiction. In another study, [38] reported that individuals tend to compare themselves with others, and this social comparison process can be made very easily and that downward and upward social comparison processes can regulate individuals' emotions. [39] reported that the influence of social comparison on self-esteem emergence is considerably low.

Similarly, [40] also indicated that upward comparison during the semester significantly predicted performance at the end of the semester. Downward comparison was related to coasting motivation and lower levels of performance, and that happiness decreased with upward and increased with downward comparison. [41] reported no benefits of upward comparisons on cognitive trust, and find no benefits of downward comparisons on affective trust. [42] study reported that negative feelings about the self may be motivating for students with weak social comparison orientation, as fitspiration may highlight a discrepancy between one's real and ideal self that does not prompt dejection or disengagement. However, negative feelings for prevention-focused students might not be as motivating because there are no salient negative models to avoid. [43] study reported that

when making upward comparisons, self-evaluation was greater in the self-irrelevant domain than in the self-relevant domain, while self-evaluation was greater in the self-relevant domain than in the self-irrelevant domain when making downward comparisons. [44] reported that upward comparisons caused more threats to self-esteem than downward comparisons in the high self-relevant domain, so making comparisons with superiors in an important domain would threaten self-esteem and thus produce lower self-evaluations.

Moreover, [45] showed that the positive learning effects of socio-cognitive conflicts were strengthened when there were upward-identifying comparisons. The study concluded that the social comparison is important to consider when designing socio-cognitive conflicts teamwork because of its constructive and destructive consequences. [46] study reported that social comparison was a significant factor in group polarization among teachers when making disciplinary decisions for students with behavior problems in Kenya. [47] study revealed evidence of existence of the influence of social comparisons on group polarization in decision making processes of school disciplinary panels, especially during disciplinary hearing meetings. Social comparisons among panel members during disciplinary hearings encouraged consensual information from other group members to validate disciplinary decisions.

In Kenya, the freshmen at universities strive to adjust to the new academic environment from secondary education and that several of them drop out for varied reasons, while others take more years to complete their education [48]. Therefore, the freshmen at universities in Kenya are facing adjustment challenges, which point to low academic buoyancy. In several public universities in Kenya, there are numerous cases, related to academic issues, such as missing transcripts, stray units, missing units, wrong grades and missing marks [49]. [50] study in Kenya reported that freshmen have problems of resilience and that this affects their performance at universities. Moreover, [51] reported that university life exposes students to transitional challenges in personal autonomy, social relationships, compatibility among roommates, feeding habits and adjustments to academic programmes and these challenges could affect their retention and stay at university. Moreover, [52] reported that the dropout rate for dental and medical school students in Nairobi University in Kenya was at 50 %, and this is attributed to lack of passion, dedication, right mind-set and wrong choices of career. Furthermore, [53] reported that first year university students are challenged by new learning, teaching and assessment and that they experience anxiety about course work and get disappointed by drop in grades after the first set of exams. The adjustment challenges point to low academic buoyancy among freshmen at universities. However, very scanty research has been done on the possible relationship between social comparison and academic buoyancy among freshmen at universities.

The present study

The study examined the relationship between social comparison and academic buoyancy among freshmen in one selected public university in Kenya.

Research Hypothesis

The following research hypothesis was tested:

H₀: *There is no significant relationship between social comparison and academic buoyancy among freshmen in one selected public university*

2. Materials and Methods

2. 1. Research Design

The study adopted cross-sectional survey research design. According to [54], in cross-sectional research data are collected once for each case at a single point in time. The design is particularly useful for studying the prevalence of a particular phenomenon, whether it is assumed to be the cause or the consequence, or both, in a defined population. The cross-sectional survey research design was appropriate for this study because it helped to assess the relationships between social comparison and academic buoyancy among freshmen in one selected public university at one point in time.

2. 2. Participants

This study was conducted between September and October 2021 and the sample size consisted of 213 freshmen from one selected public university in the western part of Kenya. The study

participants comprised 93 (43.7 %) males and 120 (56.3 %) females. The ages of first years ranged from 17 to 30 years, with a mean age of 19.5 years (SD=1.5). With regard to mode of study, a significant majority 190 (89.2 %) of the sampled first year university students were admitted to the university through Kenyan government, while only 23 (10.8 %) of them were on self-sponsored programme (SSP) arrangements.

2. 3. Research Tools

The social comparison and academic buoyancy scales were used to collect data from the first year's students. In the social comparison scale, adopted from [2], the information obtained was on the first year's students' ability to reflect about information or about another person or other people in kin to the self. Some of the items in the social comparison scale include; *"I often compare myself with others with respect to what I have accomplished in life"* and *"I always pay a lot of attention to how I do things compared with how others do things"* and *"If I want to find out how well I have done something, I compare what I have done with how others have done"*. The social comparison scale had an eleven-itemed rating scaled questionnaire, with items rated on a seven-point scale where 1 – *strongly disagree*, 2 – *disagree*, 3 – *somehow disagree*, 4 – *neither agree nor disagree*, 5 – *somehow agree*, 6 – *agree*, 7 – *strongly agree*.

The Academic Buoyancy Scale, adopted from [25], was used to measure academic buoyancy as respondent's ability to overcome setbacks and challenges that are typical of the ordinary course of their university academic life. The Academic Buoyancy Scale emphasized on the students' responses to everyday challenges that accentuates proactive rather than reactive approaches to academic adversity. The Academic Buoyancy Scale has four items and some of the items include; *"I do not let stress from studies put me down"*, and *"I think am good at dealing with pressures that come due to university work"*. The items are rated on a 1–7 scale where 1 – *strongly disagree*, 2 – *disagree*, 3 – *somehow disagree*, 4 – *neither agree nor disagree*, 5 – *somehow agree*, 6 – *agree*, 7 – *strongly agree*.

Reliability of questionnaires was ensured by using the Cronbach's alpha and a value of 0.865 and 0.845 was reported for both social comparison and academic buoyancy scales respectively. The scales had adequate internal consistency because, according to Taber, (2018), alpha values are described as excellent (0.93–0.94), strong (0.91–0.93), reliable (0.84–0.90), robust (0.81), fairly high (0.76–0.95), high (0.73–0.95), good (0.71–0.91), relatively high (0.70–0.77), and slightly low (0.68). The construct validity of both social comparison and academic buoyancy scales was tested by subjecting the survey data to suitability tests using the Kaiser-Meyer-Okin (KMO Index) and the Bartlett's Test of Sphericity [55]. It is evident, that the social comparison and academic buoyancy scales have KMO values above 0.5 and Bartlett's tests for Sphericity being highly significant ($p < 0.05$).

2. 4. Procedure

Permission to conduct this study was obtained from the Registrar Academic of the selected public university in Western Kenya. The researcher made appointments with the deans of schools at the selected university for data collection. On the day of data collection, the selected freshmen were assembled into the university hall, after which the purpose of the study was explained to them. Those who consented were given a copy of the consent forms, which they read through and signed. Thereafter, the questionnaires were administered to the selected first year students' participants to complete. Each student took an average of 45 minutes to complete the questionnaires, after which they were handed back to the researcher in preparation for analysis.

2. 5. Data analysis

Data from the questionnaires was entered into the computer, coded, cleaned in preparation for analysis. The quantitative data were analyzed with the help of Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25.0 for Windows. The data collected were analyzed using descriptive statistics, and inferential statistics, such as Pearson correlation coefficient and regression analysis statistical techniques. Pearson correlation was used to evaluate the linear relationship between two variables.

3. Results

3.1. Correlation Analysis between Social Comparison and Academic Buoyancy

To investigate the relationship between social comparison and academic buoyancy among the freshmen at university, the null hypothesis that “*there is no significant relationship between social comparison and academic buoyancy among freshmen at university.*” was tested. To do this, a Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient was computed, with scores on social comparison as independent variable and their academic buoyancy level as dependent variable. The scores of both the variables, which were collected in form of frequencies, were converted into continuous scaled data by computing mean responses per respondents, where high scale ratings implied high-social comparison and high academic buoyancy levels. The correlation analysis result is shown in SPSS output, as indicated in **Table 1**.

Table 1

Relationship between Social Comparison and Academic Buoyancy among the freshmen at university

Correlation between Social Comparison and Academic buoyancy	Academic Buoyancy
Pearson Correlation	0.187**
Social Comparison Sig. (2-tailed)	0.006
N	213

Note: – ** – correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

The finding in **Table 1** shows that there was a low positive ($r=0.187$, $n=213$, $p=0.006$) relationship between social comparison and academic buoyancy among the freshmen at university. The relationship was statistically significant; therefore, the hypothesis that, “*There is no significant relationship between social comparison and academic buoyancy among freshmen at university*” was rejected. It was therefore concluded, that there is indeed a statistical significant direct relationship between social comparison and academic buoyancy among the freshmen at university, with increase in social comparison, resulting into improvement in the levels of academic buoyancy among the freshmen at university. Therefore, it could be concluded, that social comparison orientation is directly correlated to academic buoyancy among the freshmen at university.

3.2. Regression Analysis of Social Comparison on Academic Buoyancy

To estimate the level of influence of social comparison on academic buoyancy, a coefficient of determination was computed. This was done using regression analysis and the results were as shown in **Table 2**.

Table 2

Model Summary on Regression Analysis of Influence of Social Comparison on Academic Buoyancy

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	0.187 ^a	0.035	0.030	1.15882

Note: ^a – Predictors: (Constant), Social Comparison

The model shows that social comparison accounted for 3.5 %, as signified by coefficient of .035, of the variation in academic buoyancy among the first year university students. Although this was a small effect on the dependent variable, the effect was statistically significant within a standard error of estimate of 1.16. However, to determine social comparison was a significant predictor of academic buoyancy, Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was computed as shown in **Table 3**.

From the results, presented in **Table 3**, it can be noted, that social comparison was a significant predictor of academic buoyancy [$F(1.211)=7.641$, $p=0.006$]. However, from the results, it is clear, that although social comparison has significant influence on academic buoyancy, the effect is small. In addition, **Table 4** shows the results of the regression model with respect to coefficient values.

Table 3
ANOVA –Influence of Social Comparison on Academic Buoyancy

	Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	10.261	1	10.261	7.641	0.006 ^b
	Residual	283.342	211	1.343		
	Total	293.603	212			

Note: ^b – Predictors: (Constant), Social Comparison

Table 4
Regression Model Summary on Influence of Social Comparison on Academic Buoyancy

	Model B	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	95.0 % Confidence Interval for B		Correlation
		Std. Error	Beta	–			Lower Bound	Upper Bound	
1	(Constant)	4.311	0.430	–	10.015	0.000	3.462	5.159	0.187
	Social Comparison	0.231	0.083	0.187	2.764	0.006	0.066	0.395	

The examination of the standardized coefficient values in **Table 4** demonstrates that an upswing in social comparison by one standard deviation would result into the improvement of academic buoyancy by 0.187 ($Beta=0.187$) standard deviations. In addition, the study explored part correlation coefficients, which indicate the contribution variable R-Squared. The results show that social comparison has a part correlation coefficient of .187. This demonstrates that social comparison uniquely explains about four percent (3.5 %) of the variance in academic buoyancy among the respondents. Nonetheless, it was concluded, that the social comparison regression model was adequate to predict the level of academic buoyancy among first year university students. This was confirmed by the fact that the model was statistically significant, $F(1,211)=7.641$, $p=0.006$, accounting for 3.5 % ($R^2=0.035$) of the variation in academic buoyancy levels.

4. Discussion

The study examined the relationship between social comparison and academic buoyancy among the freshmen at university. The study findings indicated that social comparison is significantly associated with academic buoyancy. Therefore, it could be concluded, that social comparison orientation is directly correlated to academic buoyancy among the first year university undergraduate students. This finding concurs with [2], which reported that as social comparison orientation increases self-esteem. Similarly, [7] found that social comparison has a positive impact on the student's grades. [20] showed that there was a learning curve of balancing on an equilibrium board on how social comparison impacts exercise and learning. However, [30] found that making the downward social comparison on social media could evoke some positive emotions. [32] study showed that social comparison orientation negatively influenced psychological well-being, and that, perceived social support had no mediation effect, self-esteem had a significant negative mediation effect, and perceived social support and self-esteem had a negative serial mediation effect. In agreement, [34] study reported that upward social comparison evoked career frustration at both between- and within-person levels, while downward comparison decreased career frustration at a between-person level. Moreover, [35] showed that the scores of academic buoyancy and social comparison and participation were significantly higher among students, receiving guided discovery than that of those, receiving traditional education. [36] study indicated that an ability to social comparison orientation was negatively and positively related to the psychological capital components. [38] reported that individuals tend to compare themselves with others, and this social comparison process can be made very easily and that downward and upward social comparison processes can regulate individuals' emotions. [39] reported that the social comparison scores of these students are high, thus, the higher the social comparison, the lower the self-esteem. [40] also indicated that upward comparison during the semester significantly predicted performance at the end of the semester. [42] study reported that negative feelings about the self may be motivating for students with weak social comparison orientation, as fitspiration may highlight a discrepancy be-

tween one's real and ideal self that does not prompt dejection or disengagement. However, [33] argued that upward social comparison did not moderate the relationship between time, spent on social media, and depression or self-esteem, and that downward social comparison however, moderated the relationship between time, spent on social media, and levels of depression, however, no moderating effect was found for self-esteem. Moreover, [41] reported no benefits of upward comparisons on cognitive trust, and found no benefits of downward comparisons on affective trust.

The study has one limitation in that it was quantitative in nature and it lacked in-depth qualitative aspect, which could have provided richer results. Therefore, for future studies, a mixed methods approach is suggested. Future studies could also focus on institutional based factors, influencing academic buoyancy among freshmen at universities.

The findings of the study have great implications to administrative staff and counselling staff at universities. The counseling staff at universities should develop specific orientation programmes to enhance the academic buoyancy of freshmen with inappropriate social comparisons. This is because inappropriate social comparisons affect the students' mental health. Moreover, the university administration should develop orientation programmes that address background conditions that affect academic buoyancy issues among students.

5. Conclusion

The study concludes that the social comparison regression model was adequate to predict the level of academic buoyancy among freshmen at university. The study also concludes that the social comparison regression model was adequate to predict the level of academic buoyancy among freshmen at university. There is a significant direct relationship between social comparison and academic buoyancy of freshmen at university, with increase in social comparison, resulting into improvement in the levels of academic buoyancy among freshmen at university. Therefore, social comparison is seen to be an important internal attribute of students because it affects their academic buoyancy, which eventually helps to determine the academic efforts that are put in school.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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