Role of Self-Compassion on College Students’ Social Self-Evaluations and Affect Across Two Domains

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ABSTRACT. Students regularly engage in self-evaluations by comparing their performance to their peers’ performance (Strickhouser & Zell, 2015), which may influence their feelings about themselves and willingness to persist in college. Because failure is a natural component of learning, it is important to examine how to promote students’ development when performance is weak relative to their peers. The current study examined if self-compassion moderates the impact of social comparisons on students’ self-evaluations and affect across two domains relevant to college life: academic and interpersonal competence. Students (N = 245) completed a test of academic or interpersonal skills and then received either no feedback or false feedback reporting their performance as below average, average, or above average relative to peers. Participants then completed measures of self-evaluation, affect, and self-compassion. In the academic, F(4,103) = 9.20, p < .001, R² = .26, p < .001, and interpersonal, F(4,105) = 14.88, p < .001, R² = .36, p < .001, domains, participants reported more negative affect (but not self-evaluations) when performance was below average compared to average, above average, or when no feedback was given. Self-compassion was associated with more positive affect, βs > .25, p < .001, and less negative affect, βs < -.28, p < .001, in both domains, with the impact of self-compassion in the interpersonal domain particularly important for positive affect, F(7, 102) = 13.74, ΔR² = .15, p < .001, when performance was average or above average. Increasing students’ self-compassion shows potential for shaping their reactions to social comparisons.

In the United States, undergraduate enrollment in degree-granting institutions increased 31% from 2000 to 2014, and of the 17.3 million students beginning the journey to earning a bachelor’s degree in 2014, only about 60% will persist to finish within 6 years (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2017). Students’ persistence (or lack thereof) in college may be due to their ability to adapt to rigorous academic expectations and new social responsibilities (Jackson, Pancer, Pratt, & Hunsberger, 2000). Many students are ill-prepared for the academic and social challenges that the college environment provides, and they may rely on their peers for feedback about their own ability to succeed. That is, students’ persistence in college may be, in part,
attributable to their evaluation of their abilities, behaviors, and skills relative to their peers.

When students evaluate themselves relative to their peers, they engage in social comparisons (Alicke, Zell, & Guenther, 2013; Festinger, 1954). Because college is a time for individuals to learn from their failures as well as successes, it is important to study the impact of social comparisons on students, as well as the factors that may foster student success even in the face of failure. The current study examined the impact of peer comparisons on students’ self-evaluations and affective reactions across two important domains relevant to college life: academic and interpersonal competence. The current study also examined if self-compassion moderates the influence of students’ self-evaluations and affective reactions following peer comparisons in each domain.

**Social Comparisons**

In response to perceiving potential differences in one’s abilities, behaviors, or skills relative to peers, individuals often engage in social comparisons as a means of self-evaluation (Alicke et al., 2013; Festinger, 1954). According to social comparison theory, people are innately motivated to evaluate themselves relative to others (Festinger, 1954). Social comparisons, which may occur in many different domains (e.g., school, work, hobbies), typically happen in an upward (i.e., comparing oneself to higher achieving others) or downward (i.e., comparing oneself to lower achieving others) manner and involve individuals evaluating their abilities relative to another person’s abilities in the same domain. Through comparisons with others, individuals learn about themselves—their opinions, their emotions, their abilities, and their personality or social traits—and come to feel positively or negatively about themselves as a result (Thornton & Arrowood, 1966). In fact, tests of social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) revealed that upward social comparisons often decrease individuals’ subjective well-being, whereas downward social comparisons often increase individuals’ subjective well-being (Wheeler & Miyake, 1992). Because people are thought to compare themselves with others when they acquire information about others that is relevant to the self (Mussweiler, Rüter & Epstude, 2006), social comparisons may occur regularly in university settings as students are routinely exposed to, can obtain, or easily recall information about others’ performance relative to their own (Lee, 2014). One way in which university students regularly engage in social comparisons is through peer comparisons of academic performance.

**Social comparisons in the academic domain.**

Students’ academic self-comparisons to higher achieving peers (i.e., upward social comparisons) tend to leave them feeling dejected rather than inspired. For example, Buunk, Kuyper, and van der Zee (2005) demonstrated that students report experiencing more negative affect following reflection on situations in which they were outperformed by their peers (e.g., “How often did you receive a lower grade than the classmate with whom you compared yourself?”), rather than when they outperformed their peers (e.g., “How often did you receive a higher grade than the classmate with whom you compared yourself?”). Further, Buunk et al. (2005) demonstrated that students’ negative affective reactions to being outperformed by their peers were heightened when they identified with (i.e., frequently interacted with) the targets of their peer comparisons. Buunk et al. revealed that social comparisons to peers influences college students’ emotional reactions, which may impact their academic self-evaluations and desire to persist in college.

Evaluating university students’ academic skills and abilities is a ubiquitous component of higher education, especially because regular evaluations of students’ academic skills occur within the classroom (e.g., individual graded assignments, overall course grades) and across departments, colleges, or universities (e.g., GPA). Because university students regularly receive feedback about their academic skills and abilities, opportunities for academic social comparisons during college are pervasive. Such frequent academic social comparisons are likely to influence students’ self-evaluations and affective reactions.

For example, Strickhouser and Zell (2015) demonstrated the impact of academic social comparison on individuals’ self-evaluations and affective reactions by providing students false feedback on a test of their quantitative or verbal reasoning. Students learned that their quantitative or verbal reasoning skills were below average, average, or above average relative to their peers. Participants reported experiencing more negative self-evaluations and affective reactions when they believed that they ranked below their peers than when they ranked above their peers. Strickhouser and Zell’s research demonstrated that students’ emotions and their self-evaluations are (at least briefly) impacted by social comparisons in the academic domain.
Negative outcomes associated with students’ academic social comparisons to high achieving peers are not particularly novel. Specifically, Möller and Köller (2001) demonstrated that students report lower levels of satisfaction with their academic (i.e., math) abilities when they believe their performance is below average, rather than above average, relative to their peers. The findings by Strickhouser and Zell (2015) and Möller and Köller (2001) are consistent with dozens of educational and social psychological studies reporting the negative impact of social comparisons on self-evaluations following perceived poor performance relative to peers (Fiske, 2011; Krueger, 2000). Despite the large body of research on social comparisons in the academic domain, researchers have yet to fully examine the effects of social comparisons in other domains of importance to college students—especially the interpersonal (or social) domain.

Social comparisons in the interpersonal domain. The college experience includes both academic (intellectual) and interpersonal (social) pursuits. Results from the 2011 Pew Research Center poll suggest that 47% of the American public believes that the purpose of college is to teach work-related skills and knowledge. On the other hand, another 39% believe that college is an opportunity to grow personally and socially. Because college life offers a multitude of opportunities for students to grow both intellectually and personally, it is important to examine the impact of social comparisons in both the academic and interpersonal domains.

Of the limited existing research that has examined social comparisons in the interpersonal domain, results are strikingly similar to those found in the academic domain. For example, de Vries and Kühne (2015) examined the impact of social comparisons on individuals’ self-perceptions using social media. Just as social comparisons in academic settings create references for intellectual comparisons, comparisons to others via social media websites create the potential for social comparisons about social competence. In their study, de Vries and Kühne asked university students to complete measures assessing the frequency and duration of their Facebook use and the importance of Facebook in their lives. Participants then completed questionnaires assessing the frequency and intensity of their beliefs that social media content makes them feel like others live a better life than they do, and also reported self-perceptions of their own social competence. Results revealed that increased Facebook use was associated with stronger beliefs that others live better lives and lower confidence in one’s own social competence. Consistent with findings in the academic domain, de Vries and Kühne’s (2015) results suggest that social comparisons in the social (i.e., interpersonal) domain impact self-evaluations, especially in reference to those perceived as superior to oneself.

Interestingly, individuals’ personal experiences with social comparisons on social media are consistent with experimental studies examining social comparison’s impact on self-evaluations via social media. Vogel, Rose, Roberts, and Eckles (2014) used manipulated online social media profiles depicting college students as either socially competent or incompetent, and after viewing one of the profiles, participants reported more negative self-evaluations when exposed to peers depicted as socially competent compared to socially incompetent. These findings suggest that social comparisons in the interpersonal domain are quite powerful because students’ self-evaluations were impacted by exposure to peers’ abilities even when the social comparison information was not explicitly stated (i.e., participants were not explicitly told that they ranked above or below their peers). It is clear that the academic and interpersonal domains are two important areas in which students learn about themselves, their abilities, and their skills relative to their peers. Given that students are frequently exposed to the failures and successes of their peers in a university setting, it is important to study the factors that promote students’ development (e.g., persistence), especially when their performance may be weak relative to their peers. One promising factor for promoting students’ positive self-evaluations following peer comparison is self-compassion.

Self-Compassion

Self-compassion involves being understanding and kind toward oneself, especially in negative situations (Neff, 2003). Rather than fixating on a perceived failure, individuals with high levels of self-compassion express kindness toward themselves by avoiding excessively harsh and critical judgments. When failure is experienced, self-compassion allows individuals to understand that the failure is an isolated event and part of their larger human experience (Neff, 2003). When examining the effects of self-compassion on college students’ self-feelings following recalled experiences of failure, Leary, Tate, Adams, Allen,
and Hancock (2007) asked students to recall the worst thing that had happened to them during the previous 4 days that was or was not their fault. Students then rated how the situations made them feel using 20 affect-relevant terms (e.g., sad, humiliated), as well as the degree to which they experienced self-compassionate thoughts and reactions while recalling the situations. Results revealed that higher self-compassion was associated with fewer negative self-feelings, regardless of whether the participant was at fault for the negative situation. The study demonstrated that self-compassion may serve as a buffer against students’ negative emotions following perceived failures.

The research by Leary et al. (2007) suggested that self-compassion is an important factor to examine when students experience failure. Additionally, Leary et al.’s research provided promise for examining if self-compassion can foster less negative (or more positive) self-evaluations and affective experiences among students whose academic or interpersonal performance in college is weak relative to their peers. Given that previous research has demonstrated that heightened self-compassion promotes greater levels of well-being among university-aged students (see Gunnell, Mosewich, McEwen, Eklund, & Crocker, 2017), such research has implications for the potential role of self-compassion in promoting persistence among students whose performance is poor relative to peers. However, to our knowledge, no existing research has examined the impact of self-compassion on students’ self-evaluations when they engage in social comparisons in the academic and interpersonal domains. The current study attempted to bridge this gap in the literature by examining if self-compassion moderates the effect of social comparisons on college students’ self-evaluations in the academic and interpersonal domains.

**CurrentStudy**

Extending previous research on social comparisons, the current study examined the impact of self-compassion on students’ self-evaluations and affective reactions following social comparisons in two domains important to college life: academics and interpersonal competence. It was hypothesized that, regardless of domain (i.e., academics or interpersonal), participants would report more negative self-evaluations and affective reactions following comparisons to peers believed to be more successful than less, or equally as, successful as themselves. It was also hypothesized that self-compassion would attenuate the negative impact of peer comparisons on students’ self-evaluations and affective reactions, and this would be especially true when students’ perceived their performance to be below average relative to their peers.

**Method**

**Participants**

Participants included 243 undergraduate students (80 men, 163 women), ranging in age from 17 to 39 (M = 19.68, SD = 1.67), from a private university in the Midwest. The majority of students were in their second (31.5%) or third (30.6%) year of college, with self-reported GPAs ranging from 1.90 to 4.00 (on a 4.00 scale; M = 3.25, SD = 0.53). All participants provided written informed consent prior to taking part in the study.

**Materials**

Descriptive statistics for, and correlation coefficients among, the measures reported below are provided in Table 1.

**Academic skills tests.** An 8-item test ostensibly assessed college students’ academic competence. The academic skills test assessed students’ knowledge in the areas of quantitative (4 items) and verbal (4 items) reasoning and was adapted from Strickhouser and Zell’s (2015) original 35-item Quantitative and Verbal Reasoning Tests. Participants read the relatively challenging quantitative or verbal reasoning items and were asked to select the correct answer from four or five response options. This test was not scored in the current study; the test served as the ruse for providing participants false feedback about their academic competence relative to their peers (see similar methodology by Strickhouser & Zell, 2015).

**Interpersonal skills test.** An 8-item test

**TABLE 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>α</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Positive Affect</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.38</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>3.49</td>
<td>1.27</td>
<td>.91</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Negative Affect</td>
<td>-.42</td>
<td>-.28</td>
<td>-.25</td>
<td>2.17</td>
<td>1.22</td>
<td>.92</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Self-Compassion</td>
<td>-.36</td>
<td>-.42</td>
<td>.95</td>
<td>.86</td>
<td>.87</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Academic Evaluation</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td>4.40</td>
<td>.81</td>
<td>.79</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Interpersonal Evaluation</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>3.64</td>
<td>1.28</td>
<td>.92</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Note: *p < .01, **p < .001.
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ostensibly measured college students’ interpersonal competence. The interpersonal competence test was adapted from Moscovitch, Rodebaugh, and Hesch’s (2012) Imagined Social Blunders Measure. The original Imagined Social Blunders measure assesses students’ social skills by posing eight brief scenarios. In the current study, four possible “solutions” to the social blunders were created as response options. Participants selected which of the four possible solutions they would use if they experienced each social blunder. Consistent with the academic skills test, the interpersonal skills test was not scored in the current study; the test served as the ruse for providing participants false feedback about their interpersonal competence relative to their peers.

**Peer comparison feedback.** Prompts, adapted from Strickhouser and Zell (2015), provided participants false feedback on either the academic or interpersonal competence tests. Specifically, participants learned that their academic or interpersonal competence was below average, average, or above average relative to 259 of their peers. Participants in the control group did not receive any peer comparison feedback.

**Academic self-evaluation.** Participants’ academic self-evaluations were measured using 10 items from Meagher (2012), and assessed participants’ confidence in their academic skills and abilities. Participants rated each item on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (very unlike me) to 7 (very like me). Scores were averaged after reverse-scoring the five negatively keyed items. Higher scores reflect more positive academic self-evaluations.

**Interpersonal self-evaluation.** The interpersonal self-evaluation measure consisted of eight items assessing participants’ confidence in their social skills (see Cambron, Acitelli, & Steinberg, 2010). Participants rated each item using a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (very unlike me) to 7 (very like me). Scores were averaged, with higher scores reflecting more positive interpersonal self-evaluations.

**Positive and negative affect.** Participants’ positive and negative affective reactions were measured using the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). The PANAS includes 20 emotions, half positive and half negative. Participants rated their experience of each emotion using a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (very slightly or not at all) to 7 (extremely). Scores for the 10 positive and 10 negative emotions were averaged, with higher scores reflecting more positive and more negative affect, respectively.

**Self-compassion.** Participants’ abilities to be sympathetic and understanding toward themselves instead of unkind and self-critical were measured using Neff’s (2003) 26-item self-compassion measure. Participants responded to the items using a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (almost never) to 7 (almost always). Scores on the items were averaged after reverse-scoring the 13 negatively keyed items. Higher scores reflect a higher degree of self-compassion.

**Procedure**

Xavier University IRB approval was obtained prior to conducting the present study. One female experimenter conducted the data collection sessions in computer-equipped classrooms on the university’s campus. At the beginning of each session, participants completed an informed consent document and were then randomly assigned to one of eight conditions reflecting whether they would complete an academic or interpersonal skills test and receive no, below average, average, or above average false peer comparison feedback. Subsequently, participants received a slip of paper containing a secure transfer protocol (https://) that directed them to a Qualtrics survey. Upon entering the secure transfer protocol into a web browser, participants completed either an academic or interpersonal competence test and then learned that, relative to their peers, their performance on the test was below average, average, or above average. In the control condition, no peer comparison feedback was provided. The use of Qualtrics, an online survey system, to administer the academic and interpersonal competence tests, as well as the false peer comparison feedback, increased the mundane realism of the study. Participants received what they perceived to be “real-time” feedback on their performance on the academic or interpersonal competence tests and, given that participants believed that their test score was compared to 259 of their “peers” who had ostensibly also completed the tests, the electronic “calculation” of their performance relative to their peers was likely perceived as realistic. After learning of their performance on the academic or interpersonal competence test relative to their peers, participants completed the self-evaluation measure relevant to the test they completed. Finally, participants were asked to complete the PANAS and self-compassion measures, followed by a demographic questionnaire that included a manipulation check item. After
participants completed these tasks, they were fully debriefed. At debriefing, participants were told that they were randomly assigned to complete a test of academic or interpersonal ability and then received false feedback reporting their performance as either below average, average, above average, or unknown relative to their peers. Participants were also informed that, in reality, their actual academic or interpersonal performance was not assessed and the feedback given was “fake.” After hearing the debriefing information, participants were asked to keep the purpose of the study confidential, asked if they had any questions, and thanked for their participation.

Results

Data from 25 (10.3%) participants who incorrectly answered a manipulation check item concerning what peer comparison feedback they received on the academic or interpersonal competence test (i.e., no feedback, below average, average, or above average relative to peers) were excluded from the analyses reported below. For the data analyzed below, in the academic and interpersonal domains, participants learned their skills were below average (\(n = 28; \ n = 28\)), average (\(n = 27; \ n = 33\)), above average (\(n = 33; \ n = 31\)), or unknown (\(n = 20; \ n = 18\)) relative to their peers, respectively.

To test the current study’s prediction that self-compassion would moderate the influence of peer comparison feedback on students’ self-evaluations and affective reactions following peer comparisons in the academic and interpersonal domains, hierarchical regression analyses were conducted. Separate regression analyses were conducted for students’ self-evaluations and (positive and negative) affective reactions in both the academic and interpersonal domains. Separate regression analyses were conducted for the domain of the competence test (i.e., academic or interpersonal) on self-evaluation and affective reactions because including domain as a between-subjects factor in the regression would lead to comparisons outside the scope of the current study (i.e., dimensional comparisons; see Strickhouser & Zell, 2015). In all the regressions reported below, the first step included dummy-coded scores for peer comparison feedback (i.e., no feedback, below average, average, above average) and standardized self-compassion scores. The second step of the regressions included the product terms carrying the interaction between peer comparison feedback and self-compassion.

Self-Evaluations

As seen in Table 2, peer comparison feedback was not significantly associated with students’ self-evaluations in either the academic or the interpersonal domains. However, the regression analyses revealed a unique main effect of self-compassion on students’ academic self-evaluations, but not interpersonal self-evaluations. Specifically, heightened self-compassion was associated with more positive self-evaluations in the academic (\(\beta = 0.34, \ t = 3.77, \ p < .001\)) but not interpersonal (\(\beta = 0.19, \ t = 1.72, \ p = .09\)) domain. The interaction between peer comparison feedback and self-compassion on students’ self-evaluations in the academic and interpersonal domains was not significant.

Affective Reactions

As described above, hierarchical regression analyses were used to examine if self-compassion moderates the influence of social comparison feedback on students’ affective reactions following peer comparison feedback in the academic and interpersonal domains. As seen in Table 3, the regression analyses revealed unique main effects of peer comparison feedback on students’ affective reactions. For ease of interpretability, the main effects of peer comparison feedback on participants’ affective reactions were probed using one-way Analyses of Variance, with self-compassion scores entered as a covariate. As seen in Table 4, when examining students’ affective reactions to peer comparison feedback, for both the academic and interpersonal domains, participants reported more negative affect when performance was perceived as below average.
compared to average, above average, or when no feedback was given. In contrast, participants reported experiencing more positive affect in the academic (but not the interpersonal) domain when performance was perceived to be above average compared to average, below average, or when no feedback was given.

The regression analyses also revealed unique main effects of self-compassion on participants’ positive and negative affective reactions in the academic and interpersonal domains (see Table 3). Specifically, heightened self-compassion was associated with more positive and less negative affect in both the academic and interpersonal domains. Finally, the regression analyses revealed a significant interaction between peer comparison feedback and self-compassion on participants’ positive affect in the interpersonal domain. As seen in Figure 1, as self-compassion increased, participants reported more positive affect, especially when they believed their performance was average (β = 1.14, t = 7.01, p < .001) or above average (β = 1.24, t = 5.38, p < .001) relative to their peers. However, self-compassion was unassociated with participants’ positive affect when their performance was perceived as below average (β = 0.45, t = 1.91, p = .06) or unknown (β = 0.20, t = 1.60, p = .11) relative to their peers.

**Discussion**

Extending previous research, the current study examined if self-compassion moderates the impact of social comparisons on college students’ self-evaluations and affective reactions in the academic and interpersonal domains. For both domains, participants reported more negative affect (but not more negative self-evaluations) when they believed their performance was below average compared to average, above average, or unknown, relative to their peers. Heightened self-compassion was uniquely associated with more positive and less negative affective responses (and lower academic self-evaluations) in both the academic and interpersonal domains. Further, self-compassion moderated the effect of social comparisons on students’ positive affective responses within the interpersonal domain. Specifically, self-compassion was especially impactful on students’ positive affective reactions when they received average or above average social comparison feedback about their interpersonal competence compared to when below average or no feedback was provided.
In general, the present findings yielded valuable information about the role of self-compassion on college students’ self-evaluations and affective reactions following peer comparison feedback, as well as questions that provide important directions for future research on the topic.

When participants learned that their academic or interpersonal skills were below average relative to their peers, they experienced more negative emotions, but not more negative self-evaluations. The students’ heightened negative affect following social comparison to better performing peers is consistent with research demonstrating that students experience heightened negative feelings when they believe they are outperformed by peers (Buunk et al., 2005). Although students in the current study experienced an immediate “sting” of negative emotion when their performance was believed to be poor (i.e., below average) compared to average, above average, or unknown relative to their peers, the effect of poor performance was insufficient to impact their self-evaluations. These findings suggest that students’ self-evaluations of their academic or interpersonal skills may be relatively stable and that a single instance of negative social comparison is insufficient to alter their self-evaluations. Such a suggestion, although inconsistent with research by Strickhouser and Zell (2015), is not unfounded, given that social psychologists have argued that individuals’ attitudes (toward themselves and others) are best predicted by examining an aggregate of situations and experiences, rather than isolated events (Rushton, Brainerd, & Pressley, 1983). Because university-aged students frequently confront instances of academic and interpersonal failure, future research should examine the extent to which repeated experiences of negative social comparisons affect individuals’ self-evaluations. Although such research possesses ethical challenges if pursued experimentally, retrospective self-reports and prospective longitudinal studies provide the means for researchers to determine how frequent or powerful (negative) social comparisons must be to affect individuals’ self-evaluations.

One of the primary purposes of the current study was to examine if self-compassion influences individuals’ self-evaluations and affective reactions following social comparisons in two domains. It was predicted that self-compassion would attenuate the potential negative impact of peer comparisons on students’ self-evaluations and affective reactions, and that this would be especially true when students perceived their performance as below average relative to their peers. Although not precisely as predicted, results revealed that heightened self-compassion predicted more positive affect in the interpersonal (but not the academic) domain, with the impact of self-compassion especially influential when performance relative to peers was perceived as average or above average (compared to below average or unknown). This pattern of results suggests that students’ abilities to hold sympathetic and understanding attitudes toward themselves (rather than unkind and self-critical attitudes) is particularly advantageous when they perform well (i.e., average or above average) relative to their peers. It is likely unsurprising that students who treat themselves with understanding and kindness feel better about themselves and their performance compared to students who treat themselves relatively critically and harshly. Such findings are consistent with research demonstrating that relatively high levels of self-compassion can heighten the impact of positive events and buffer individuals against the impact of negative events (Leary et al., 2007). Students with relatively high levels of self-compassion may understand that successes, like failures, are experienced by everyone, and therefore may not overvalue or undervalue their experiences relative to others. Possessing relatively high levels of self-compassion in higher education may allow individuals to experience successes and failures as part of the “learning journey” and, ultimately, help them to persist in college.

Unexpectedly, self-compassion did not influence participants’ self-evaluations or affective reactions when their academic or interpersonal skills were perceived as below average (or were unknown) relative to their peers. Although previous research has demonstrated that self-compassion is

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 4</th>
<th>Estimated Marginal Means (and Standard Errors) for Peer Comparison Feedback on Students’ Affective Reactions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Peer Comparison Feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Below Average</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Domain</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Affect</td>
<td>2.86 (0.22)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative Affect</td>
<td>3.16 (0.22)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interpersonal Domain</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Affect</td>
<td>3.52 (0.21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative Affect</td>
<td>2.75 (0.17)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Means in the same row with different superscripts differ at p < .05.
associated with fewer negative self-feelings following recollections of negative events (see Leary et al., 2007), levels of self-compassion in the current study did not affect individuals’ self-views or self-feelings following perceived failure. One explanation for these nonsignificant findings may be that students’ attributions of blame for poor performance was directed externally rather than internally (Shukla, 1994). Specifically, it is possible that students who learned that their academic or interpersonal skills were below average relative to their peers were more likely to make external attributions (e.g., blame the test or the researcher) rather than internal attributions (e.g., blame their own ability or effort). If students attributed poor performance to explanations external to themselves, heightened levels of self-compassion would be unnecessary because there would be no need to display kindness toward oneself or avoid excessive critical judgments for failure (Neff, 2003). Such a suggestion warrants an important direction for future research on social comparisons. Specifically, one fruitful direction for future research is examining if self-compassion is associated with less negative self-evaluations and affective reactions, following poor performance relative to peers, for students who tend to make internal attributions rather than external attributions for failure. For students who tend to blame themselves for poor (academic or interpersonal) performance, self-compassion may be an important variable predicting their willingness to overcome the challenges and persist in college.

Limitations and Future Directions
The present findings contributed to the understanding of social comparisons in two domains important to college life: academic and interpersonal. The current findings also contributed knowledge to the role of self-compassion on individuals’ affective reactions and self-evaluations following peer comparisons. Despite the value of the current work, the limitations provide important directions for future research.

Although the current study was designed to examine college students’ affective reactions and self-evaluations following peer comparison feedback within two distinct domains, utilizing separate self-evaluation measures for the academic and interpersonal domains prevented examining if social comparison feedback affects self-evaluations between domains. Specifically, because the self-evaluation measures were domain specific (i.e., academic or interpersonal), it was impossible to examine if social comparison in the academic domain influenced self-evaluations in the interpersonal domain. Such cross-domain comparisons are called dimensional comparisons and occur when individuals compare their ability in one domain to their ability in a second domain. Research on dimensional comparisons reveals that peer comparisons in one domain (e.g., verbal reasoning) influence individuals’ self-evaluations in a second domain (e.g., quantitative reasoning; Strickhouser & Zell, 2015). Consequently, future research examining college students’ perceptions of their academic and interpersonal performance relative to peers should examine if, for example, superior performance in one domain compensates for poor performance in another domain.

Although the current study revealed that, in both the academic and interpersonal domains, participants reported more negative affect (but not more negative self-evaluations) when performance was below average compared to average, above average, or when no feedback was given, it is unclear if participants truly believed the false peer comparison feedback. Given individuals’ tendencies to engage in self-serving ideations (Campbell & Sedikides, 1999), participants might have discredited or even rejected the feedback received on their performance. Although the pattern of results in the current study suggests that participants generally believed the feedback, future research should include a manipulation check. If the experimental realism of such future research is strong, inclusion of a manipulation check will provide support for studying social comparisons using false feedback.

Despite the value of studying social comparisons and self-compassion among college students, the current study involved a cross-sectional sample of students from a single university receiving a single incident of social comparison feedback. Further, despite being limited by its use of undergraduates completing self-report measures, this study made an important contribution to the research literature examining how self-compassion may influence individuals’ self-evaluations and affective responses following peer comparison feedback in two domains. Because students at all levels of educational attainment frequently confront instances of failure relative to peers, future research should examine the impact of academic and interpersonal social comparisons on individuals’ self-evaluations in elementary, middle, and high school. Such research may help to reveal the potential developmental impact of negative social comparisons on individuals’ persistence in higher education.
Conclusion

The current study meaningfully contributed to the literature on social comparisons by examining how self-compassion impacts individuals’ negative self-evaluations and affective reactions when performance is poor relative to others. Although there is much research yet to be conducted on the role of social comparisons in a university setting, the present data suggest that fostering self-compassion among college students may be a promising way to improve their experiences, thereby hopefully encouraging persistence in higher education.

References


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