



Informing Science: the International Journal of an Emerging Transdiscipline

An Official Publication
of the Informing Science Institute
InformingScience.org

Inform.nu

Volume 27, 2024

COUPLE SOCIAL COMPARISONS AND RELATIONSHIP QUALITY: A PATH ANALYSIS MODEL

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ABSTRACT

Aim/Purpose	This study offers an important contribution to the literature on couple social comparisons by showing how different aspects of comparisons are related to relationship quality.
Background	Making social comparisons is a daily tendency of human beings that does not only occur on an individual level but also in the context of romantic relationships. This phenomenon is widespread among couples, though partners differ in terms of their propensity to make couple social comparisons. The literature has shown that all these facets of couple social comparison play an important role in relationship functioning.
Methodology	In the current study of 104 young adults in a heterosexual relationship, we investigated the association of couple social comparison propensity, explicit couple social comparisons, and implicit couple social comparisons with couple relationship quality in terms of commitment and relationship satisfaction.
Contribution	So far, studies have not tested all these aspects in predicting partners' relationship quality.

Accepting Editor Francesco Tommasi | Received: February 6, 2024 | Revised: April 20, April 22, April 23, 2024 | Accepted: April 24, 2024.

Cite as: Petrilli, S., Parise, M., Ripamonti, S. C., & Donato, S. (2024). Couple social comparisons and relationship quality: A path analysis model. *Informing Science: The International Journal of an Emerging Transdiscipline*, 27, Article 3. <https://doi.org/10.28945/5281>

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Findings	Results showed that commitment was negatively predicted by relationship social comparison propensity and positively predicted by implicit couple social comparisons, while relationship satisfaction was positively predicted by both implicit and explicit couple social comparisons.
Recommendations for Practitioners	Our results have implications for couple interventions. In preventive interventions, sustaining a positive view of one's relationship may promote relationship satisfaction and commitment.
Future Research	Future research should adopt a dyadic design to investigate cross-partner associations.
Keywords	couple social comparison propensity, explicit couple social comparisons, implicit couple social comparisons, couple relationship quality, commitment, relationship satisfaction

INTRODUCTION

Social comparisons, namely all kinds of comparisons people make between themselves and those around them, have been extensively studied in the literature (Buunk et al., 1990; Lockwood & Kunda, 1997; Morry et al., 2019; Morry & Sucharyna, 2016; Mussweiler et al., 2004; Wayment & Campbell, 2000). These comparisons between self and others in a certain domain are made throughout everyday life (Surra & Milardo, 1991) and can have both negative and positive consequences on individuals' feelings, evaluations, and emotions (Buunk et al., 2001; Buunk & Ybema, 2003; Morry et al., 2019; Morry & Sucharyna, 2016).

Leon Festinger (1954), with his theory of social comparison, analyzed and explained the motivation behind these comparisons: individuals are more prone to compare themselves with others when they are insecure about their abilities, opinions, behaviors, and thoughts. Thus, social comparison, with those perceived to be either better or worse than themselves in a given field, is a way through which individuals evaluate themselves in order to reach a clearer self-concept (Butzer & Kuiper, 2006; Campbell et al., 1996) and to protect one's self-esteem (Butzer & Kuiper, 2006; Suls et al., 2002; Wheeler & Miyake, 1992).

In the context of romantic relationships, individuals tend to make social comparisons. Partners may compare themselves with each other (partners' social comparisons; Collins, 1996; Murray et al., 2005; Smith, 2000; Thai et al., 2016) or may compare one's couple with other couples (couple social comparisons; Broemer & Diehl, 2003; Morry & Sucharyna, 2016; Smith LeBeau & Buckingham, 2008; Wayment & Campbell, 2000).

In the present study, we especially focus on couple social comparisons that make an important contribution to the literature on couple social functioning by showing how different aspects of comparisons are related to relationship quality in terms of commitment and satisfaction (Sprecher, 2001). In addition, our study aims to explore these aspects in order to shed light on aspects of couple well-being and distress as a result of social comparisons and to enable health professionals to provide targeted interventions to improve the quality of life within relationships, to help couples increase their relational awareness, to manage social confrontation behavior more consciously, and to enact more functional relationship dynamics.

Like the role of social comparisons for individuals, making social comparisons between couples is a strategy for assessing one's couple qualities and functioning (Broemer & Diehl, 2003; Buunk & Ybema, 2003; Frye & Karney, 2002; Morry & Sucharyna, 2016, 2019; Smith LeBeau & Buckingham, 2008; Wayment & Campbell, 2000). Moreover, partners make social comparisons with other couples as a mechanism to protect their relationship. They often strategically choose the comparison target to preserve a favorable view of their couple (Dijkstra & Buunk, 2018; Frye & Karney, 2002; Morry &

Sucharyna, 2016; Wills, 1981). Given the important role that couple social comparisons play for partners, this phenomenon is widespread among couples, though partners differ in terms of their propensity to make couple social comparisons (Smith LeBeau & Buckingham, 2008).

Couple social comparisons are manifold: partners can make “upward” comparisons, comparing themselves to an ideal couple or a couple perceived to be better than their own in one or more areas, or “downward” comparisons with a couple perceived to be less successful or “worse” than their own (Rusbult et al., 2000; Thai et al., 2020). In addition, couples can use a yardstick to compare the “average” couple in the same or similar phase of life as their own. Most studies to date have focused on upward and downward comparisons, while less research has been devoted to examining the consequences of comparisons with the average couple (Broemer & Diehl, 2003; Reis et al., 2011). However, this latter kind of comparison may be particularly frequent in daily life. Its outcome can be more immediate and consequential, given that the yardstick is perceived as similar to one’s own couple. Similar to individual social comparisons, couple social comparisons may also be distinguished based on whether they are implicit or explicit (Gerber et al., 2018). Implicit couple social comparisons are indirect measures of couple social comparison. They are derived from measures of congruence/discrepancy between participants’ perception of their own couple and participants’ perception of the average couple (e.g., Manzi et al., 2015; Parise et al., 2020). Explicit couple social comparisons are directly assessed through partners’ perceptions of how their couple compares with the average couple (Broemer & Diehl, 2003; Morry & Sucharyna, 2019). Studies, however, did not test these two types of comparison together in order to disentangle their unique contribution to partners’ relational well-being. The present study focuses on partners’ propensity to make couple social comparisons and on implicit and explicit couple social comparisons with the average couple in the same phase of life.

The literature has documented associations between social comparisons variables and relationship quality (Morry & Sucharyna, 2019) in terms of satisfaction, i.e., an overall judgment of one’s relationship happiness (Bertoni et al., 2020), and commitment, i.e., a motivation to keep the relationship going over time, to make efforts to keep the bond strong (Schoebi et al., 2015). With regard to couple social comparison propensity, Smith LeBeau and Buckingham (2008) found that couples who were more likely to make social comparisons with other couples were characterized by lower levels of satisfaction and commitment, showing that the tendency to compare can be a maladaptive strategy that leads to discomfort in the couple. In a longitudinal study (Study 3) in the same paper written by Smith LeBeau and Buckingham, it was found that couples’ propensity to make social comparisons is significantly correlated with a decrease in satisfaction and that this relationship is mediated by the sense of uncertainty.

Other studies show how partners’ high propensity to make social comparisons with other couples leads to lower levels of relationship satisfaction and lower commitment because it increases insecurity both towards the partner and towards the resilience of one’s relationship (Hingorani & Pinkus, 2019; Morry & Sucharyna, 2019; Smith LeBeau & Buckingham, 2008) and leads to the perception of not living an authentic and lasting relationship (Ferreira et al., 2014).

Based on the studies in the literature, our first hypothesis of the study is as follows:

H1: Partners’ propensity to make couple social comparisons will be negatively associated with satisfaction and commitment.

With regard to implicit and explicit couple social comparisons, some literature has shown that perceiving one’s relationship in a favorable light is associated with higher relationship quality in terms of satisfaction and commitment (Barelids & Dijkstra, 2011; P. J. Miller et al., 2006; Ogolsky et al., 2017; Song et al., 2019). For instance, some studies (Hicks & McNulty, 2019; Martz et al., 1998; McNulty et al., 2013) showed how favorable implicit social comparisons were related to higher relationship quality in terms of commitment. Other studies have shown that the propensity to make implicit comparisons increases the perception of fewer marital problems (McNulty et al., 2013) and the more positive

formulation in the face of threats (Murray et al., 2005). Furthermore, people with a propensity for implicit comparisons enact more loving behaviors in daily life (LeBel & Campbell, 2013) and exhibit more constructive non-verbal communication in problem-solving situations (Faure et al., 2018), going on to increase couple satisfaction (Faure et al., 2018; Scinta & Gable, 2007), as well as subsequent intentions to remain in a relationship (LeBel & Campbell, 2013).

In line with the findings in the literature, the second hypothesis of our study is as follows:

H2: Implicit couple social comparisons are positively associated with relationship satisfaction and commitment.

With regard to explicit couple social comparison, research has shown that, when explicitly asked to compare their couples to another couple, partners reported higher satisfaction when the comparison was favorable for their own couple (Broemer & Diehl, 2003). This is because explicit comparisons are often shaped by biases that lead one to perceive one's relationship in a positive light, even when there are shortcomings or flaws (Fletcher & Kerr, 2010; Gagné & Lydon, 2004). This leads to a strengthening of the couple and a perception of satisfaction in continuing to invest in that bond (Broemer & Diehl, 2003).

Therefore, our third hypothesis is:

H3: Explicit couple social comparisons are positively associated with relationship satisfaction and commitment.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

The participants were 104 young adults (77.3% females) involved in a heterosexual couple relationship who completed an online questionnaire on couple relationship functioning. Participants were recruited through snowball sampling and social media and received a link to access the questionnaire, which remained valid for 30 days. Before filling in the questionnaire, they provided informed consent. They were not paid or rewarded for their participation. The completion of the questionnaire required about 30 minutes. The study protocol complied with the ethical guidelines of the American Psychological Association (2003).

The mean age was 25.19 ($SD = 3.03$); 94.7% of participants were cohabiting or dating, while only 5.3% were married. The mean relationship duration was 50.72 months ($SD = 52.38$). With regard to the socio-economic status, 74.7% of participants reported being able to make some savings at the end of the month, 22.7% to break even, and 2.6% to get into debt.

MEASURES

Couple social comparison propensity

We measured one's tendency to make a comparison with other couples with the Relationship Social Comparison Scale (Smith LeBeau & Buckingham, 2008). It comprises 24 items administered on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = never, 5 = always). An example is: "I compare how happy I am in my relationship to how happy I think others are in their relationships." The items were translated into Italian from the English version and then backtranslated by a bilingual professional translator. The results of CFAs supported the mono-factorial structure of the scale ($\chi^2(232) = 267.451, p = 0.055, CFI = 0.978, RMSEA = 0.039 [0.000 - 0.058]$), although some residuals were allowed to correlate. Reliability was good ($\omega = 0.95$). We computed a global index of relationship social comparison propensity by averaging the items. A higher score indicated a higher level of relationship-social comparison orientation.

Implicit couple social comparisons

We assessed implicit couple social comparisons with a scale including two parallel sets of 12 items (1 = completely disagree, 5 = completely agree), already developed and used in previous Italian studies (e.g., Manzi et al., 2015; Parise et al., 2020). In the first set, participants rated their own couple relationship (item example: “No matter what happens to us, things will work out for the best”). In the second set, participants rated the relationship of the average couple that was in their same life stage (item example: “No matter what happens to them, things will work out for the best”). The results of CFAs supported a mono-factorial structure of the scale ($\chi^2(46) = 56.834, p = 0.131, CFI = 0.984, RMSEA = 0.055 [0.000 - 0.097]$), although some residuals were allowed to correlate. Reliability was good ($\omega = 0.94$). We computed a global index of implicit couple social comparison by calculating the average of the discrepancy scores for each item pair (i.e., the rating of the own couple relationship minus the rating of the average couple relationship). Positive scores reflected implicit superiority over the average couple, zero scores reflected no differences in couple social comparison, while negative scores showed implicit inferiority.

Explicit couple social comparisons

We assessed explicit couple social comparisons with an ad hoc scale including 15 items in which participants had to describe how different aspects of relationship functioning (e.g., physical attraction, mutual trust, communication) characterized their relationship as compared with the average couple (1 = much less than the average couple, 9 = much more than the average couple). The results of CFAs supported a mono-factorial structure of the scale ($\chi^2(79) = 93.982, p = 0.120, CFI = 0.981, RMSEA = 0.047 [0.000 - 0.080]$), although some residuals allowed to correlate. Reliability was good ($\omega = 0.92$). We computed a global index of explicit couple social comparison by averaging the scores of the 15 items so that higher scores (>5) indicated explicit superiority over the average couple, while lower scores (<5) reflected explicit inferiority.

Commitment

We measured commitment with two items from the Commitment Level subscale of the Investment Model Scale (Rusbult et al., 1998) and six items from the Maintenance-Oriented Relationship Commitment Scale (Schoebi et al., 2015). These scales have been extensively used in their Italian version (e.g., Schoebi et al., 2015). The results of CFAs supported a mono-factorial structure of the scale ($\chi^2(19) = 23.139, p = 0.231, CFI = 0.983, RMSEA = 0.049 [0.000 - 0.109]$). Reliability was good ($\omega = 0.84$). Items were administered on an 8-point Likert scale (1 = completely disagree, 8 = completely agree). An item example is: “I am oriented toward the long-term future of my relationship.” We standardized the items and averaged them to an index. A higher score indicated a higher level of commitment.

Relationship satisfaction

We used the Quality of Marriage Index (Norton, 1983), a 6-item inventory measuring relationship satisfaction. The Italian version has been extensively used in several studies (e.g., Parise et al., 2019). The first five items (e.g., “The relationship with my partner makes me happy”) are on a 7-point scale (1 = completely disagree, 7 = completely agree), whereas the last item, measuring a global perception of relationship satisfaction, is on a 10-point scale (1 = very unhappy, 10 = very happy). The results of CFAs support the mono-factorial structure of the scale ($\chi^2(5) = 6.062, p = 0.300, CFI = 0.998, RMSEA = 0.048 [0.000 - 0.157]$), although some residuals were allowed to correlate. Reliability was good ($\omega = 0.92$). We standardized the items and averaged them to an index. A higher score indicated a higher level of relationship satisfaction.

DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

We tested our hypotheses with a path-analytical model using AMOS v.25 (Arbuckle, 2017) in which couple social comparison propensity, explicit couple social comparisons, and implicit couple social

comparisons were entered as predictors and commitment and relationship satisfaction as outcomes. Before testing our hypotheses, we conducted Harman’s single-factor test, described in Podsakoff et al. (2003), to check for possible common method bias. It was found that the first factor explained 24.938% of the covariance of the variables, less than the critical standard of 40%, indicating that there was no serious common method deviation in the data of the five scales. Table 1 shows the means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations for all variables.

Table 1. Correlations, means, and standard deviations of the variables of interest

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. CSCP	-				
2. ICSC	.11	-			
3. ECSC	-.10	.59***	-		
4. Commitment	-.14	.58***	.44***	-	
5. Rel. Satisfaction	-.08	.63***	.51***	.61***	-
<i>M</i>	2.41	1.07	7.56	6.77	.04
<i>SD</i>	.77	1.02	.99	.96	.90

Note. *N* = 104.****p* ≤ .001. CSCP = Couple social comparison propensity; ICSC = Implicit couple social comparison; ECSC = Explicit couple social comparison; Rel. Satisfaction = Relationship satisfaction.

In Figure 1, we present the standardized path coefficients. Since this is a fully saturated model without any degrees of freedom, it fits the data perfectly. Thus, the interest is in parameter estimates rather than model fit. Commitment was negatively predicted by relationship social comparison propensity ($\beta = -0.19, p = 0.026$) and positively predicted by implicit couple social comparisons ($\beta = 0.52, p < 0.001$), while relationship satisfaction was positively predicted by both implicit ($\beta = .47, p < .001$) and explicit couple social comparisons ($\beta = 0.22, p = 0.032$). In total, 38% of the variance in commitment and 40% in relationship satisfaction was explained by the variables in the model.

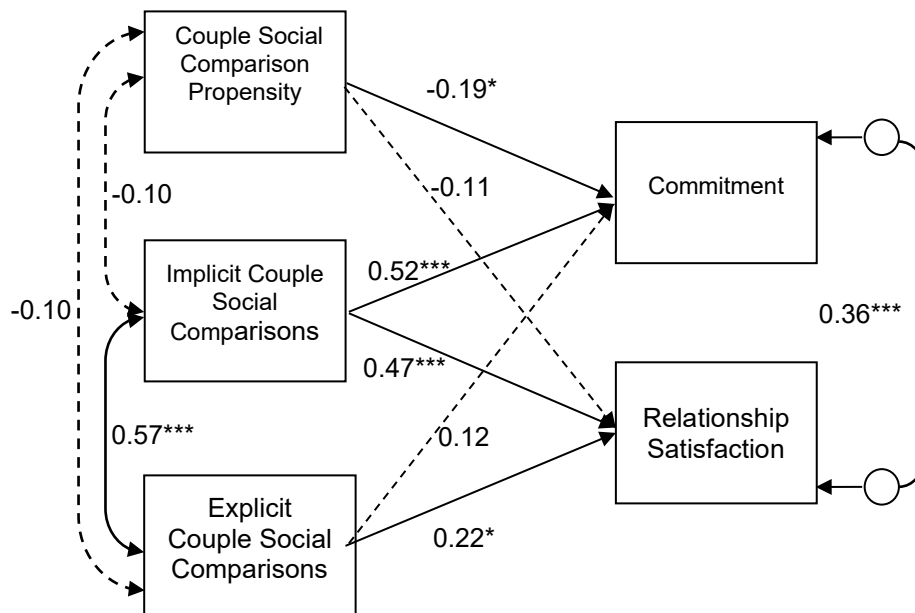


Figure 1. Empirical model
(path coefficients are standardized estimates, **p* < 0.05, ****p* ≤ 0.001)

DISCUSSION

In an effort to better understand the association between couple social comparisons and partners' relationship quality, the present study used data from 104 young adult individuals involved in a couple relationship to test a path analytical model examining the associations of couple social comparison propensity, explicit couple social comparisons, and implicit couple social comparisons with couple functioning, in terms of commitment and relationship satisfaction. With regard to the association between partners' propensity to make couple social comparisons and relationship quality, findings partially support our first hypothesis, in that partners' propensity to make couple social comparisons is negatively associated with commitment (but not with relationship satisfaction). Individuals more prone to comparing their couple and other couples may be particularly sensitive to relationship uncertainty and, therefore, be less able to make long-term investments in their relationship. Research on the propensity to make social comparisons at the individual level has linked such a tendency to individuals' lower self-esteem (Smith LeBeau & Buckingham, 2008; White et al., 2006), which is also a characteristic of relationship-insecure individuals (e.g., Foster et al., 2007). Research has shown that insecure individuals are less able to commit to their relationship as they are too dependent on the other (e.g., Feeney & Noller, 1990) and less prone to interpersonal trust (Han, 2017). In addition, individuals who are more prone to comparing their couple with that of other couples may be less committed to their own couple as they may be more exposed to and aware of potential relationship alternatives (e.g., Johnson & Rusbult, 1989; R. S. Miller, 1997). Contrary to our expectations, the present findings did not show a significant association between partners' propensity to make couple social comparisons and relationship satisfaction. It may be that both satisfied and unsatisfied partners engage in couple social comparisons for their esteem-boosting and/or validation consequences. Unsatisfied partners may tend to engage in couple social comparison to assess their couple relationship quality and to seek reassurance on the value of it. They, nonetheless, may also make comparisons to seek confirmation of their negative beliefs. Research has shown, for example, that depressed people tend to seek information that confirms their negative self-view (Giesler & Swann, 1999). Also, satisfied partners may tend to make couple social comparisons for similar reasons of enhancement or confirmation, though they are in the best position to make the most out of them: favorable social comparisons will confirm partners' already positive view of the relationship, thereby contributing to cement partners' satisfaction. Satisfied partners, moreover, may also be less threatened by unfavorable comparisons and use them as motivators for implementing relationship-improving strategies (McFarland et al., 2001; Morry & Sucharyna, 2016; Smith LeBeau & Buckingham, 2008).

Confirming our second and (partially) third hypotheses, implicit and explicit couple social comparisons were positively associated with relationship quality. In particular, favorable implicit and explicit couple social comparisons are a marker of good relationship quality in terms of relationship satisfaction. Implicit couple social comparisons are also associated with higher commitment. This finding is in line with research showing that comparing positively with other couples corroborates partners' relationship satisfaction (Broemer & Diehl, 2003) as well as their motivation to persist in the relationship (Martz et al., 1998). Interestingly, implicit couple social comparisons show stronger associations than explicit social comparisons.

The present findings should be tempered by the following limitations. First, a convenience sample may limit their generalizability to other populations. Second, the cross-sectional nature of our data prevents us from establishing causal relationships. Finally, data were collected from only one member of the couple. Future research should adopt a dyadic design to investigate cross-partner associations. Despite these limitations, these findings offer important contributions to the literature on couple social comparisons by showing how different aspects of comparisons are related to relationship quality. Our results have also been for couple-based interventions. In preventive interventions, sustaining a positive view of one's relationship may promote relationship satisfaction and commitment.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

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IMPLICATIONS

Based on the findings of the study on the association between social comparisons in couples and relationship quality, some relevant implications for clinical practice and preventive interventions emerge. For example, professionals in the clinical setting could develop targeted interventions with couples to explore and process the social comparison behaviors they engage in, being able to provide tools to manage it in a conscious and healthy way.

Moreover, since the couple is not an isolated monad but is embedded in both a social and relational context, social comparisons with other couples may be unavoidable and may impact on couple outcomes such as satisfaction and commitment or overall relational well-being. Therefore, it is important for mental health professionals to encourage their patients to reflect on their relationship and to reinforce its positive aspects, thus increasing their couple well-being.

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