

The Role of Social Comparison in Shaping Self-Esteem and Marital Adjustment Among Dual-Income Couples

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Abstract

The present study investigated the relationship among relationship social comparison, relationship-contingent self-esteem, and marital adjustment among dual-income couples in Pakistan. As the number of dual-income families continues to increase, understanding the psychological factors influencing marital relationships has become increasingly important. The study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional correlational research design to examine the associations among the study variables. A total of 100 married individuals (39 males and 61 females) from dual-income families residing in Sialkot and surrounding areas of Pakistan participated in the study. Participants were recruited using purposive and convenience sampling techniques. Data were collected using the Relationship Social Comparison Scale (RSCS), Relationship-Contingent Self-Esteem Scale (RCSES), and the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS). Statistical analyses, including descriptive statistics, Pearson product-moment correlation, and multiple regression analysis, were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics Version 25. The findings revealed a significant positive relationship between relationship social comparison and relationship-contingent self-esteem ($r = .218, p < .05$). Relationship-contingent self-esteem was also positively associated with marital adjustment ($r = .205, p < .05$). Furthermore, relationship social comparison demonstrated a strong positive relationship with marital adjustment ($r = .710, p < .01$). Multiple regression analysis indicated that relationship social comparison significantly predicted marital adjustment ($\beta = .963, p < .001$), whereas relationship-contingent self-esteem did not emerge as a significant independent predictor after controlling for relationship social comparison ($\beta = .082, p = .262$). The findings suggest that, within the collectivistic cultural context of Pakistan, relationship social comparison may function as an adaptive process that promotes marital adjustment rather than undermining relationship quality. The study contributes to the literature on relationship psychology by providing empirical evidence regarding the psychological dynamics of dual-income couples and offers practical implications for marriage counselors, psychologists, and family therapists working to strengthen marital relationships.

Keywords: Relationship Social Comparison, Relationship-Contingent Self-Esteem, Marital Adjustment, Dual-Income Couples, Marriage, Pakistan.

Introduction

Marriage is one of the most significant social institutions and serves as the foundation of family life across cultures. In contemporary societies, rapid economic development, increased educational opportunities, and changing gender roles have substantially transformed traditional

family structures. One of the most notable changes has been the increasing participation of women in the workforce, leading to the emergence of dual-income or dual-earner families. In these families, both spouses contribute financially to household income while simultaneously sharing domestic and family responsibilities. Although dual-income arrangements provide financial security, improved living standards, and greater career opportunities, they also introduce unique interpersonal, psychological, and relational challenges that influence marital functioning and individual well-being. Globally, the proportion of dual-income couples has increased considerably during the past three decades. Economic demands, rising living costs, greater educational attainment among women, and evolving social norms have encouraged both partners to participate in paid employment. In Pakistan, this trend has become increasingly evident, particularly in urban areas where women actively contribute to household income while simultaneously fulfilling traditional family responsibilities. Despite these positive developments, Pakistani dual-income couples frequently experience role conflicts, work–family imbalance, increased occupational stress, and changing expectations regarding marital roles. These challenges may influence psychological well-being and the quality of marital relationships. Within marital relationships, partners continuously evaluate themselves and their contributions. These evaluations often occur through the process of social comparison, whereby individuals compare their abilities, achievements, appearance, income, occupational success, parenting skills, and interpersonal relationships with others. According to Festinger's (1954) Social Comparison Theory, individuals possess an inherent drive to evaluate themselves by comparing their opinions and abilities with those of other people, particularly when objective standards are unavailable. Such comparisons influence emotional experiences, behavioral responses, and self-perceptions. In dual-income marriages, opportunities for social comparison are particularly prominent. Husbands and wives may compare their salaries, professional achievements, promotions, educational qualifications, household responsibilities, parenting roles, and work-life balance with each other or with other couples. These comparisons may motivate personal growth and relationship improvement when interpreted positively. Conversely, unfavorable or unrealistic comparisons may generate dissatisfaction, jealousy, competition, emotional distress, and marital conflict. Recent research indicates that excessive upward social comparison is associated with reduced psychological well-being, lower relationship satisfaction, and increased emotional distress, whereas balanced comparison may facilitate motivation and adaptive coping. Another important psychological construct influencing marital relationships is self-esteem. Self-esteem refers to an individual's overall evaluation of personal worth, competence, and self-acceptance. Rosenberg (1965) conceptualized self-esteem as a relatively stable attitude reflecting positive or negative feelings toward oneself. Individuals possessing higher self-esteem generally demonstrate greater emotional stability, effective coping strategies, stronger interpersonal relationships, and healthier communication patterns. Conversely, individuals with lower self-esteem often experience insecurity, self-doubt, relationship anxiety, and greater sensitivity to criticism. Self-esteem has consistently been recognized as an important determinant of marital quality. Individuals with healthy self-esteem tend to communicate more openly, resolve conflicts more effectively, and maintain greater relationship satisfaction than those experiencing negative self-evaluations. Contemporary psychological research further suggests that self-esteem functions as a protective factor against marital stress by promoting emotional resilience, trust, and constructive conflict resolution. Consequently, understanding the relationship between self-esteem and marital adjustment remains essential for promoting healthy family functioning among dual-income couples. Marital adjustment represents another central construct in relationship research. Spanier (1976) defined marital adjustment as the extent to which spouses successfully adapt to each other by maintaining agreement, emotional intimacy, effective communication, conflict management, and shared satisfaction within marriage. Well-adjusted couples demonstrate

mutual respect, emotional support, cooperative decision-making, and effective problem-solving skills. Poor marital adjustment, however, is characterized by frequent conflicts, dissatisfaction, emotional withdrawal, reduced intimacy, and instability. For dual-income couples, marital adjustment may become particularly challenging because both partners must simultaneously manage occupational demands and family responsibilities. Balancing professional commitments with household obligations often requires effective communication, flexibility, cooperation, and mutual support. When these adaptive processes are inadequate, occupational stress may spill over into family life, negatively affecting marital satisfaction and psychological well-being. Previous studies have reported that work-family conflict, unequal distribution of domestic responsibilities, occupational stress, and ineffective communication significantly reduce marital adjustment among employed couples. The interaction among social comparison, self-esteem, and marital adjustment represents an important yet relatively underexplored area within relationship psychology. Social comparison influences how individuals evaluate their competence, achievements, and relationship quality, which subsequently affects self-esteem. Self-esteem, in turn, influences communication patterns, emotional regulation, trust, and conflict resolution, thereby contributing to marital adjustment. Accordingly, these constructs are theoretically interconnected and collectively shape relationship quality among married couples. Although extensive international research has examined these variables independently, relatively few studies have investigated their combined relationships among Pakistani dual-income couples. Pakistan presents a unique sociocultural context characterized by collectivistic family values, traditional gender expectations, religious influences, and rapidly changing occupational roles for women. These contextual factors may influence how spouses engage in social comparison, develop self-esteem, and adjust within marriage. Consequently, findings from Western societies cannot be generalized directly to Pakistani families without empirical investigation. The present study seeks to address this gap by examining the relationships among social comparison, self-esteem, and marital adjustment among dual-income couples in Pakistan. Understanding these psychological processes may provide valuable evidence for psychologists, marriage counselors, family therapists, policymakers, and educational institutions in designing interventions aimed at strengthening marital relationships and promoting psychological well-being among employed couples. The findings of this study are expected to contribute to relationship psychology by expanding empirical knowledge regarding the psychological mechanisms underlying marital adjustment within dual-income families. Furthermore, the study may assist clinicians and family counsellors in developing culturally appropriate counselling strategies that promote healthy communication, positive self-esteem, adaptive social comparison, and stronger marital relationships among working couples in Pakistan.

Literature Review

Social comparison is a fundamental psychological process through which individuals evaluate their opinions, abilities, achievements, and personal characteristics by comparing themselves with others. Festinger (1954) proposed Social Comparison Theory, arguing that individuals engage in comparison particularly when objective standards for self-evaluation are unavailable. These comparisons help individuals evaluate their competencies, regulate their behavior, and establish personal goals. Festinger further suggested that individuals generally compare themselves with others who are similar in age, occupation, socioeconomic status, or other relevant characteristics because such comparisons provide more meaningful information. Contemporary research has expanded this theory by distinguishing between upward and downward social comparison. Upward comparison occurs when individuals compare themselves with those perceived as superior, whereas downward comparison involves comparisons with individuals perceived as less successful (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007; Gerber et al., 2018). Upward comparison may motivate self-

improvement and achievement; however, persistent unfavorable comparisons may reduce self-esteem, increase psychological distress, and lower subjective well-being (Vogel et al., 2014; Liu et al., 2023). Conversely, downward comparison often promotes positive self-evaluation by reinforcing feelings of competence and personal achievement (Wills, 1981; Gerber et al., 2018). Within marital relationships, social comparison extends beyond comparisons with strangers or colleagues. Husbands and wives frequently compare their educational attainment, occupational success, financial contributions, parenting responsibilities, household duties, and relationship quality. Because spouses represent highly relevant comparison targets, these evaluations substantially influence marital satisfaction and relationship stability (Overall et al., 2022; Joel et al., 2020). Excessive comparison may weaken an individual's sense of self and contribute to dissatisfaction by creating unrealistic expectations regarding marital roles and achievements (Overall et al., 2022). Among dual-income couples, opportunities for social comparison are particularly common because both spouses participate in paid employment. Differences in salary, career advancement, promotions, occupational recognition, and work–family balance frequently shape perceptions of fairness and equity within marriage (Shockley et al., 2021). Constructive comparison may encourage mutual support, collaboration, and personal growth, whereas chronic unfavorable comparison may generate competition, resentment, emotional exhaustion, and marital conflict (Shockley et al., 2021; Allen et al., 2023).

Dual Income Couples

The increasing participation of women in higher education and the labor force has contributed to the rapid growth of dual-income families worldwide. In dual-income households, both spouses contribute financially while simultaneously managing household and family responsibilities. Although this arrangement enhances economic stability, career development, and family income, it also introduces significant challenges associated with balancing occupational and domestic roles (Shockley et al., 2021). Recent evidence suggests that successful dual-income couples rely on effective communication, flexible role sharing, collaborative decision-making, organizational support, and equitable distribution of household responsibilities (Allen et al., 2023; Shockley et al., 2021). Conversely, unequal domestic labor, work–family conflict, occupational stress, and role overload negatively affect relationship quality, psychological well-being, and marital adjustment (Allen et al., 2023). Within Pakistani society, dual-income couples experience additional sociocultural challenges because traditional gender-role expectations continue to assign women primary responsibility for household management despite their participation in paid employment. Consequently, employed women frequently experience greater work–family conflict, emotional exhaustion, and role overload than their spouses. These contextual factors make Pakistan a particularly important setting for investigating the relationships among social comparison, self-esteem, and marital adjustment among dual-income couples (Ahmad & Khan, 2021; Riaz et al., 2023).

Self-Esteem

Self-esteem refers to an individual's overall evaluation of personal worth and competence. Rosenberg (1965) conceptualized self-esteem as a relatively stable attitude toward oneself that reflects feelings of self-respect and self-acceptance. Individuals with high self-esteem generally perceive themselves as capable, valuable, and worthy of respect, whereas those with low self-esteem often experience insecurity, self-doubt, and heightened sensitivity to criticism (Orth & Robins, 2022). Self-esteem has consistently been recognized as an important psychological resource that promotes emotional well-being, resilience, effective coping, and healthy interpersonal relationships (Orth & Robins, 2022). Individuals possessing higher self-esteem demonstrate greater confidence in social interactions, better emotional regulation, stronger

communication skills, and more adaptive coping strategies during interpersonal conflicts (Orth et al., 2018). Within marital relationships, higher self-esteem contributes to trust, intimacy, forgiveness, emotional security, and constructive conflict resolution, thereby enhancing relationship satisfaction and long-term marital stability (Murray et al., 2000; Orth & Robins, 2022). Research further suggests that self-esteem develops through continuous interaction between personal experiences and social evaluation. Positive feedback, occupational success, supportive family relationships, and satisfying marriages strengthen self-esteem, whereas repeated criticism, social rejection, and unfavorable comparisons undermine positive self-evaluation (Leary & Baumeister, 2000; Orth & Robins, 2022). Consequently, self-esteem serves as an important mediator linking social experiences with psychological adjustment and relationship functioning.

Marital Adjustment

Marital adjustment refers to the degree to which spouses successfully adapt to one another while maintaining satisfaction, emotional intimacy, effective communication, mutual understanding, and cooperative problem-solving. Spanier (1976) described marital adjustment as a multidimensional construct encompassing consensus, cohesion, affectional expression, and overall relationship satisfaction. Well-adjusted couples typically demonstrate flexibility, emotional support, mutual respect, effective communication, and shared commitment toward family goals (Falcke et al., 2020). Recent literature emphasizes that marital adjustment is influenced by psychological, social, occupational, and contextual factors. Effective communication, empathy, equitable distribution of household responsibilities, and mutual emotional support strengthen marital adjustment, whereas occupational stress, financial strain, ineffective communication, and unresolved conflicts contribute to marital dissatisfaction (Falcke et al., 2020; Pietromonaco & Overall, 2022). Contemporary systematic reviews further indicate that marital adjustment results from the interaction of psychological, biological, and environmental influences rather than any single determinant (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2022).

Social Comparison and Self-Esteem

The relationship between social comparison and self-esteem has received substantial empirical attention. Festinger (1954) argued that comparison processes directly influence self-evaluations because individuals judge their competence relative to others. Upward comparison frequently decreases self-esteem when individuals perceive themselves as falling short of comparison standards. Conversely, adaptive comparison may promote motivation, self-improvement, and resilience. Recent empirical evidence continues to support this relationship, demonstrating that repeated exposure to upward comparison opportunities predicts lower self-esteem, diminished psychological well-being, and increased emotional distress. These findings suggest that healthy comparison strategies may protect self-esteem, whereas excessive comparison may undermine psychological functioning.

Self-Esteem and Marital Adjustment

Self-esteem contributes substantially to marital adjustment because it influences communication, trust, emotional security, and conflict management. Individuals with positive self-esteem generally exhibit greater confidence in expressing emotions, resolving disagreements, and maintaining satisfying intimate relationships. Lower self-esteem, however, has been associated with insecurity, jealousy, defensive behavior, and greater relationship distress. Research among working couples suggests that psychological resources, including self-esteem, buffer the negative effects of occupational stress and work–family conflict on marital functioning. Individuals

possessing stronger self-esteem demonstrate greater resilience when balancing professional and family responsibilities.

Social Comparison and Marital Adjustment

Social comparison also influences marital adjustment through its effects on relationship expectations and perceived fairness. Individuals who continually compare their marriages with idealized portrayals of other couples may become dissatisfied despite objectively healthy relationships. Recent family research demonstrates that excessive comparison weakens one's sense of self and reduces relationship satisfaction, whereas maintaining a stable self-concept promotes healthier intimate relationships. Within dual-income marriages, comparisons involving income, occupational status, domestic responsibilities, and career advancement may influence perceptions of equity. When spouses perceive these differences as unfair, marital conflict and dissatisfaction are more likely to occur. Although previous research has independently examined social comparison, self-esteem, and marital adjustment, relatively few studies have investigated their combined relationships among Pakistani dual-income couples. Most available evidence originates from Western societies characterized by individualistic cultural values and different gender-role expectations. Limited empirical attention has been given to how collectivistic family systems, cultural norms, and occupational demands jointly influence these psychological constructs in Pakistan. Therefore, the present study addresses an important gap by examining the interrelationships among social comparison, self-esteem, and marital adjustment within Pakistani dual-income couples. The findings are expected to contribute to relationship psychology while providing culturally relevant evidence for counsellors, psychologists, family therapists, and policymakers working to strengthen marital relationships among employed couples.

Methodology

Research Design

The present study employed a **quantitative, cross-sectional research design** to investigate the relationships among **social comparison, relationship-contingent self-esteem, and marital adjustment** among dual-income couples. A quantitative approach was considered appropriate because it allows the objective measurement of psychological constructs using standardized instruments and facilitates statistical analysis of relationships among variables. The cross-sectional design involved collecting data at a single point in time, making it suitable for examining the associations among the study variables without manipulating them.

Participants

The sample consisted of **100 married individuals** from dual-income families residing in Pakistan. Participants included **39 males (39%)** and **61 females (61%)**, recruited through purposive and convenience sampling techniques. Most participants belonged to **urban and semi-urban areas of Sialkot and surrounding districts**. The age of participants ranged from **21 to 60 years**, with the majority (54%) falling within the **21–30 years** age group. Participants represented different educational and occupational backgrounds while fulfilling the inclusion criterion of being married and employed along with their spouses.

Measures

Relationship Social Comparison Scale (RSCS)

Social comparison was assessed using the **Relationship Social Comparison Scale (RSCS)**. The instrument measures individuals' tendency to compare their relationships with those of other couples. Higher scores indicate greater engagement in relationship-based social comparison.

Relationship-Contingent Self-Esteem Scale (RCSES)

Relationship-contingent self-esteem was measured using the **Relationship-Contingent Self-Esteem Scale (RCSES)**. The scale assesses the extent to which an individual's self-worth depends on the quality and outcomes of their intimate relationship. Higher scores indicate greater relationship-dependent self-esteem.

Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS)

Marital adjustment was measured using the **Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS; Spanier, 1976)**. The DAS evaluates relationship quality across domains including consensus, cohesion, satisfaction, and affectional expression. Higher scores represent better marital adjustment.

Procedure

Prior to data collection, ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional authority. Participants were approached through workplaces, educational institutions, and community settings. They were informed about the objectives of the study, and written informed consent was obtained before participation. Participants were assured that their responses would remain anonymous and confidential and that participation was entirely voluntary. The questionnaires were administered individually, requiring approximately **15–20 minutes** to complete. Following data collection, responses were coded and entered into **IBM SPSS Statistics Version 25** for analysis. Descriptive statistics, Pearson product–moment correlation, and multiple regression analyses were conducted to examine the study objectives.

Results

Table 1.1 Descriptive Statistics of Demographic Characteristics (N = 100)

Variable	Category	Mean	SD	Variance
Age	21–30, 31–40, 41–60	1.78	0.69	0.48
Gender	Male, Female	1.61	0.49	0.24
Number of Siblings	—	3.58	2.05	4.20
Residency	Urban, Rural	1.46	0.64	0.41
Religion	Islam, Other	1.08	0.27	0.07

Table 1.1 presents the descriptive characteristics of the participants. The majority of respondents (54%) were between 21 and 30 years of age. The sample comprised 39 males (39%) and 61 females (61%). Most participants (61%) resided in urban areas, while 94% identified as Muslims. Participants reported an average of 3.58 siblings (SD = 2.05), indicating moderate family size within the study sample.

Table 2.1 Descriptive Statistics and Pearson Product–Moment Correlations among Study Variables (N = 100)

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3
1. Relationship Social Comparison (RSCS)	61.64	14.38	—		
2. Relationship-Contingent Self-Esteem (RCSES)	38.15	5.79	.218*	—	
3. Dyadic Adjustment (DAS)	101.51	10.27	.710**	.205*	—

Note. $p < .05$. $p < .01$.

Table 2.1 presents the descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation coefficients for the study variables. The results revealed a significant positive relationship between relationship social

comparison and relationship-contingent self-esteem ($r = .218, p < .05$), indicating that individuals reporting greater social comparison also tended to report higher relationship-based self-esteem. Relationship-contingent self-esteem was also positively associated with dyadic adjustment ($r = .205, p < .05$), suggesting that higher levels of relationship-based self-esteem were linked with better marital adjustment. The strongest relationship was observed between relationship social comparison and dyadic adjustment ($r = .710, p < .01$), indicating a strong positive association between these variables among dual-income couples.

Table 3.1 Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Dyadic Adjustment (N = 100)

Predictor	B	SE B	β	t	p
Constant	-41.77	11.22	—	-3.72	< .001***
Relationship Social Comparison	0.972	0.102	.963	9.55	< .001***
Relationship-Contingent Self-Esteem	0.203	0.180	.082	1.12	.262

Note. Dependent Variable = **Dyadic Adjustment (DAS)**. B = Unstandardized coefficient; SE = Standard Error; β = Standardized coefficient. $p < .001$.

Table 3.1 explores A multiple regression analysis was conducted to determine whether relationship social comparison and relationship-contingent self-esteem significantly predicted dyadic adjustment among dual-income couples.

The findings indicated that relationship social comparison emerged as a significant positive predictor of dyadic adjustment ($\beta = .963, t = 9.55, p < .001$), suggesting that higher levels of relationship social comparison were associated with higher levels of marital adjustment.

In contrast, relationship-contingent self-esteem did not significantly predict dyadic adjustment ($\beta = .082, t = 1.12, p = .262$) after controlling for relationship social comparison.

Overall, the findings suggest that relationship social comparison is a stronger predictor of marital adjustment than relationship-contingent self-esteem among dual-income couples.

Discussion

The present study examined the relationships among relationship social comparison, relationship-contingent self-esteem, and marital adjustment among dual-income couples in Pakistan. The findings revealed that relationship social comparison was positively associated with relationship-contingent self-esteem and marital adjustment. Furthermore, relationship social comparison significantly predicted marital adjustment, whereas relationship-contingent self-esteem did not independently predict marital adjustment after controlling for social comparison. The first finding demonstrated a significant positive relationship between relationship social comparison and relationship-contingent self-esteem. This finding partially supports Festinger's (1954) Social Comparison Theory, which proposes that individuals evaluate themselves by comparing their abilities, achievements, and relationships with others. Although social comparison is frequently associated with lower self-esteem, the present findings suggest that, within Pakistani dual-income couples, comparison may function as a constructive mechanism that encourages self-evaluation and personal growth. This finding is consistent with Buunk and Gibbons (2007), who reported that upward social comparison may motivate individuals toward self-improvement when comparisons are interpreted positively rather than competitively. Similarly, Gerber et al. (2018) concluded in their meta-analysis that the psychological outcomes of social comparison depend largely on the individual's interpretation and coping strategies rather than comparison itself. The findings also align with recent research by Allen et al. (2023), who suggested that employed couples frequently compare career achievements, financial contributions, and work-family

responsibilities, and that these comparisons may promote collaboration and mutual support when both partners perceive fairness within the relationship. Within the collectivistic culture of Pakistan, social comparison may encourage couples to improve communication, strengthen cooperation, and fulfill shared family responsibilities rather than fostering competition. The second finding indicated a significant positive relationship between relationship-contingent self-esteem and marital adjustment. This result is consistent with the work of Murray et al. (2000), who demonstrated that individuals with higher self-esteem experience greater relationship security, intimacy, and emotional stability, which contribute to healthier marital relationships. Likewise, Orth and Robins (2022) reported that individuals with positive self-esteem generally demonstrate more effective emotional regulation, stronger interpersonal relationships, and better psychological adjustment. These characteristics facilitate constructive communication, conflict resolution, and mutual understanding between spouses, ultimately improving marital adjustment. The present findings also support the conceptualization of marital adjustment proposed by Spanier (1976), who emphasized that effective communication, emotional intimacy, and mutual satisfaction are central components of successful marriages. Couples possessing stronger relationship-based self-esteem are likely to perceive greater emotional support and appreciation from their partners, thereby enhancing marital harmony. A particularly important finding of the present study was that relationship social comparison significantly predicted marital adjustment, whereas relationship-contingent self-esteem did not remain a significant independent predictor after controlling for social comparison. This suggests that comparison processes may exert a stronger influence on marital functioning than relationship-based self-esteem alone. Similar findings have been reported by Shockley et al. (2021), who observed that among dual-income couples, perceptions of fairness regarding financial contributions, occupational success, and household responsibilities were stronger determinants of relationship quality than individual psychological characteristics. Likewise, Pietromonaco and Overall (2022) argued that relationship functioning is shaped primarily by interpersonal processes, communication patterns, and shared experiences rather than by individual personality traits alone. The findings of the present study differ from several Western studies reporting that excessive social comparison often reduces relationship satisfaction and psychological well-being. For example, Vogel et al. (2014) found that persistent upward comparison negatively affected self-esteem and interpersonal satisfaction. Similarly, Overall et al. (2022) suggested that unrealistic comparison with other couples may increase dissatisfaction and marital conflict. The discrepancy between these findings and the present study may be explained by cultural differences. Pakistani society is predominantly collectivistic, emphasizing interdependence, family cohesion, and mutual support. Consequently, relationship comparisons may be interpreted as opportunities for self-improvement and relationship enhancement rather than sources of competition and dissatisfaction. From a national perspective, the present findings are consistent with Pakistani research indicating that mutual understanding, family support, and effective communication significantly contribute to marital satisfaction among employed couples (Riaz et al., 2023; Ahmad & Khan, 2021). Pakistani dual-income couples often navigate both occupational and family responsibilities simultaneously, making relationship cooperation and shared decision-making essential for successful marital adjustment. Constructive comparison may therefore encourage couples to strengthen these adaptive behaviors. Overall, the present study contributes to the growing literature on relationship psychology by demonstrating that relationship social comparison is not necessarily detrimental. Instead, within the cultural context of Pakistani dual-income couples, it may function as an adaptive psychological process that promotes relationship awareness, encourages constructive behavioral change, and enhances marital adjustment. The findings further emphasize that cultural context plays a significant role in determining whether social comparison produces beneficial or harmful outcomes within intimate relationships.

Conclusion

The present study investigated the relationships among relationship social comparison, relationship-contingent self-esteem, and marital adjustment among dual-income couples in Pakistan. The findings revealed that relationship social comparison was positively associated with both relationship-contingent self-esteem and marital adjustment. Moreover, relationship social comparison emerged as a significant predictor of marital adjustment, whereas relationship-contingent self-esteem did not independently predict marital adjustment after controlling for social comparison. These findings suggest that constructive comparison processes may strengthen marital relationships by encouraging greater relationship awareness, communication, and mutual support. The study provides valuable evidence regarding the psychological factors that contribute to healthy marital functioning among dual-income couples within the Pakistani cultural context.

Implications

Practical Implications

The findings of the present study have important implications for psychologists, marriage counselors, family therapists, and policymakers. Since relationship social comparison demonstrated a positive association with marital adjustment, counselors may help couples distinguish between constructive social comparisons, which promote relationship growth, and destructive comparisons, which generate dissatisfaction and conflict. Counseling interventions may focus on developing healthy communication, emotional support, relationship appreciation, and realistic marital expectations. The positive association between relationship-contingent self-esteem and marital adjustment also highlights the importance of strengthening individuals' self-worth within intimate relationships. Marriage enrichment programs may incorporate interventions designed to improve emotional security, mutual respect, and positive relationship experiences. Furthermore, organizations employing dual-income couples may benefit from implementing workplace wellness initiatives that address work–family balance, stress management, flexible working arrangements, and employee mental health, thereby indirectly promoting healthier family relationships.

Theoretical Implications

The present study extends Festinger's Social Comparison Theory (1954) by demonstrating that relationship-based social comparison may serve an adaptive rather than exclusively negative function within collectivistic cultures. The findings also contribute to relationship psychology by illustrating that relationship-contingent self-esteem and social comparison jointly influence marital adjustment among dual-income couples. Additionally, the study provides empirical evidence from Pakistan, thereby addressing the limited literature available on psychological processes influencing marital relationships within South Asian cultural settings.

Limitations

Despite its contributions, the present study has several limitations.

- First, the sample consisted of only 100 dual-income couples recruited primarily from Sialkot and surrounding districts, which limits the generalizability of the findings to other regions of Pakistan.
- Second, the study employed a cross-sectional correlational design, preventing causal inferences regarding the relationships among the study variables.
- Third, data were collected exclusively through self-report questionnaires, making the findings susceptible to social desirability bias and common method variance.

- Fourth, the study focused solely on dual-income couples and therefore did not permit comparisons with single-income families or unemployed spouses.
- Finally, several potentially influential variables, including communication patterns, work–family conflict, financial stress, personality characteristics, cultural expectations, and emotional intelligence, were not included in the analysis. These factors may further explain variations in marital adjustment and should be considered in future investigations.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and limitations of the present study, several recommendations are proposed for future research. Future studies should recruit larger and more diverse samples from different provinces and cultural settings across Pakistan to improve the generalizability of the findings. Longitudinal research designs are recommended to examine causal relationships among relationship social comparison, relationship-contingent self-esteem, and marital adjustment over time. Researchers are also encouraged to employ mixed-method approaches, combining quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews to obtain a deeper understanding of couples' lived experiences and relationship dynamics. Future investigations should examine additional psychological and contextual variables, including communication styles, emotional intelligence, work–family conflict, financial stress, personality traits, social support, and gender-role attitudes, to develop a more comprehensive model of marital adjustment. Comparative studies involving dual-income and single-income couples, as well as cross-cultural investigations, would further enhance understanding of marital relationships and contribute to the development of culturally appropriate counseling and family intervention programs.

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