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Beyond Peer Comparison: Social Contexts, Labels and Identity Development in Adolescence

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Abstract: Adolescence is a critical period for identity formation, self-worth, and the development of future goals, yet adolescents' self-perceptions are shaped within complex social environments. This exploratory study examined the question: How do peer comparison, social environments, and labels influence adolescents' self-perception, self-worth, identity, and ambitions? Data were collected through an anonymous cross-sectional Google Forms survey using convenience sam-pling. The final sample included 51 participants across multiple age and educational groups, with most respondents aged 16–17 and enrolled in 11th–12th grade. Survey items used a five-point Likert scale and assessed peer comparison, social environments, self-worth, labels, and goals or ambitions. Descriptive analyses indicated that adolescents frequently reported feeling more authentic and confident in some social environments than others. Peer comparison was common, but comparison was not generally endorsed as positive motivation. Many participants reported that academic or social labels influenced self-perception and behavior, and achievement appeared closely connected to self-worth for many respondents. Ambitions were often described as socially influenced, although participants were less likely to report lowering goals because of comparison. Overall, the study suggests that adolescent identity is shaped not by peer compar-ison alone, but through the interaction of comparison, social environments, labels, achievement expectations, and self-worth. Findings are descriptive rather than causal, but they contribute an integrated exploratory perspective on adolescents' lived social experiences.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is widely understood as a critical developmental period in which young people begin to consolidate a more complex sense of self, clarify personal values, and imagine possible futures. During this stage, identity is not merely a private psychological achievement; it develops through ongoing interaction with social expectations, peer relationships, academic demands, and cultural ideas about success. Erikson (1968) described adolescence as a period in which the central psychosocial task involves negotiating identity and role confusion, while Marcia (1966) further emphasized the importance of exploration and commitment in identity development. These perspectives remain influential because they frame adolescence as a time when questions such as "Who am I?", "How do others see me?", and "What kind of person do I want to become?" become especially salient. Self-concept, self-worth, and ambition are therefore closely connected: adolescents are not only evaluating who they are in the present, but also constructing ideas about who they may become.

The social nature of adolescent development makes peer relationships especially important. Compared with childhood, adolescence is marked by greater orientation toward peers, increased concern with social belonging, and heightened sensitivity to social evaluation. Reviews of ado-lescent development consistently identify peer relations, self-development, and social context as central domains of psychological change during this period (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). Peer groups provide adolescents with feedback about competence, attractiveness, popularity, intelli-gence, personality, and social acceptability. This feedback can support belonging and confidence, but it can also intensify self-consciousness and pressure to conform. As adolescents move across different social settings—classrooms, friendship groups, online spaces, families, and extracurric-ular environments—they may encounter different expectations for how they should behave and what traits should be valued. Consequently, adolescent self-perception may become particularly responsive to social context.

Social comparison is one mechanism through which peer environments may shape self-perception. Festinger's (1954) theory of social comparison proposed that individuals evaluate their abilities and opinions partly by comparing themselves with others, especially when ob-jective standards are unclear. For adolescents, such comparisons may be especially frequent because school and peer environments often make achievement, appearance, popularity, and talent highly visible. Comparison can have multiple psychological meanings. It may motivate effort when others' success feels attainable, but it may also produce discouragement, envy, self-doubt, or a sense of inadequacy when the comparison standard feels threatening or unreachable. In contemporary

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adolescent life, social media may further increase exposure to curated images of success, popularity, and achievement, although the present study does not treat social media as the sole source of comparison. Rather, comparison is understood as one part of a broader social environment in which adolescents continually interpret their own worth and future possibilities in relation to others.

Labels are another important social influence on adolescent identity. Academic and social labels such as "smart," "average," "quiet," "popular," "talented," or "difficult" may appear informal, but they can become psychologically meaningful when repeated by peers, teachers, family members, or institutions. Labeling theory has long emphasized that social categories do not merely describe individuals; they can influence how individuals are perceived and how they come to understand themselves (Becker, 1963). Related research on expectancy effects suggests that others' expectations can shape opportunities, feedback, and behavior in ways that may become self-reinforcing (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). In educational and social contexts, labels may therefore affect adolescents not only through external treatment, but also through internalization. A young person who is repeatedly described in a particular way may begin to interpret experiences through that label or behave in ways that fit it. This possibility is especially relevant during adolescence, when identity remains under active construction.

Competitive environments may intensify these processes by making status, performance, and comparison more visible. In schools and peer groups where achievement is strongly emphasized, adolescents may learn to evaluate themselves through grades, awards, popularity, leadership roles, or other markers of success. This is relevant to research on self-worth because self-esteem is not always experienced as stable or unconditional. Rosenberg's (1965) work on adolescent self-image helped establish self-esteem as a central construct in understanding young people's psychological adjustment, while later theory on contingencies of self-worth argued that self-esteem may depend on success or validation in particular domains (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001). When adolescents base self-worth on achievement or approval, social comparison may become more emotionally consequential. Success may temporarily strengthen confidence, whereas per-ceived failure or unfavorable comparison may undermine it.

Ambition is also shaped within this social context. Adolescents' goals are often discussed as evidence of motivation, but ambitions may reflect both internal interests and external expecta-tions. Self-determination theory distinguishes between more autonomous forms of motivation, which are experienced as personally meaningful, and more controlled forms of motivation, which are driven by pressure, approval, or external reward (Deci & Ryan, 2000). This distinction is im-portant because two adolescents may appear equally ambitious while differing in whether their goals feel genuinely self-chosen. Peer comparison and competitive environments may encourage high aspirations, but they may also make it difficult for adolescents to distinguish between what they truly value and what they feel expected to pursue. Thus, the relationship between com-parison and ambition should not be reduced to a simple question of whether comparison raises or lowers goals. It may instead influence the meaning, ownership, and emotional cost of those goals.

Although existing psychological literature has examined adolescent identity, social compari-son, self-worth, peer influence, and motivation, these constructs are often studied separately or within narrowly defined frameworks. Research on social comparison, for example, may focus on self-esteem or performance outcomes, while research on identity may emphasize exploration and commitment without always examining everyday labels, competitive settings, and ambition together. Similarly, studies of academic motivation may consider achievement goals without fully addressing how adolescents interpret those goals in relation to peer evaluation and social identity. This creates a gap in understanding how adolescents experience these influences as interconnected parts of daily life. A young person's self-perception may be shaped simultane-ously by comparison with peers, the environment in which that comparison occurs, the labels attached to them, and the ambitions they feel encouraged or pressured to pursue.

The present study addresses this gap by examining peer comparison, social environments, labels, self-worth, identity, and ambition within a single exploratory survey framework. Rather than treating comparison as an isolated psychological process, the study approaches adolescent identity as socially situated and context-dependent. This integrated approach is valuable be-cause it reflects the complexity of adolescents' lived experiences: young people do not encounter comparison, labels, and expectations in separate psychological compartments, but as overlap-ping features of school, friendship, family, and online environments. By examining these factors together, the study aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how adolescents negotiate self-perception and future aspirations within socially evaluative contexts.

The guiding research question is: How do peer comparison, social environments, and labels influence adolescents' self-perception, self-worth, identity, and ambitions? The objectives of the study are to describe the extent to which adolescents report peer comparison, context-dependent confidence and self-presentation, label internalization, achievement-linked self-worth, and socially influenced ambition; to identify major patterns in these experiences; and to interpret these patterns in relation to established psychological theory while avoiding causal claims that cannot be supported by cross-sectional survey data.

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II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on adolescent identity development has moved beyond early stage-based accounts to-ward more dynamic models that examine how commitments, exploration, and social feedback change across time. Longitudinal work suggests that identity development is neither a sudden crisis nor a simple linear movement from uncertainty to resolution. Meeus (2011), reviewing longitudinal research from 2000 to 2010, concluded that adolescent identity formation often shows considerable stability alongside gradual developmental change, and that exploration does not always precede commitment in a uniform sequence. This finding complicates the common assumption that adolescents first freely explore alternatives and then form stable commitments. Instead, many young people appear to revise, strengthen, or question commitments within existing social roles and expectations. More recent reviews similarly emphasize that identity develops through both long-term developmental processes and shorter-term experiences of in-teraction, transition, and self-reflection (Branje et al., 2021). These findings are important for the present study because they suggest that adolescents' self-understanding should be examined not only as an internal developmental process, but also as something shaped by repeated social experiences in everyday environments.

Empirical studies of identity also indicate that adolescents' self-concepts are multidimen-sional. Young people may feel confident in one domain while uncertain in another, or may experience different versions of themselves across family, school, peer, and online settings. Har-ter's work on adolescent self-concept and self-worth has been especially influential in showing that global self-worth is related to perceived competence and social approval across multiple domains rather than to a single evaluation of the self (Harter, 1999). This multidimensionality is useful because it prevents overly broad claims about adolescent identity. A student may, for example, feel academically capable but socially insecure, or socially accepted in one peer group but constrained in another. Existing research therefore supports the need to examine identity as a situated construct, while also revealing a limitation in much survey-based work: when iden-tity is measured through broad scales alone, the contextual variability of self-perception may be difficult to capture.

Peer comparison is one of the most studied mechanisms through which adolescents evaluate themselves, yet empirical findings suggest that its effects are not uniform. Wood's (1989) review argued that social comparison serves multiple goals, including self-evaluation, self-improvement, and self-enhancement, and that comparisons may be sought voluntarily or imposed by the so-cial environment. This distinction is particularly relevant in adolescence, where comparison is often embedded in school structures, rankings, grades, appearance norms, peer popularity, and visible markers of achievement. Research on social comparison has generally found that upward comparisons can inspire improvement when the target seems attainable, but can undermine con-fidence when the target highlights perceived inadequacy. Downward comparisons may protect self-esteem in some contexts, but they may also reinforce insecurity or competitiveness. Thus, the literature does not support a simple conclusion that comparison is inherently harmful or beneficial.

Digital environments have added complexity to this literature. Reviews of adolescent online communication suggest that online spaces can provide opportunities for self-disclosure, iden-tity exploration, and peer connection, while also increasing exposure to peer evaluation and managed self-presentation (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). Social networking contexts may make comparison more frequent because adolescents are exposed to curated images of others' achieve-ments, friendships, appearance, and lifestyles. However, the research remains mixed. Some studies emphasize risks for self-esteem and well-being, while others note that online interaction can strengthen friendship quality and belonging under certain conditions. This inconsistency suggests that the psychological meaning of comparison depends on context, individual vulner-ability, perceived attainability, and the domain being compared. For the present study, this literature supports examining comparison alongside social environment rather than treating it as an isolated variable.

Social environments also shape how authentic adolescents feel able to be. Research on adolescent peer relationships has long shown that intimacy, acceptance, and belonging become increasingly important during adolescence (Buhrmester, 1990). Supportive friendships can allow self-disclosure and exploration, whereas evaluative or exclusionary environments may encourage impression management and concealment. The concept of authenticity is relevant here because adolescents often navigate multiple audiences: close friends, classmates, teachers, parents, and online peers may each invite or constrain different forms of self-expression. Empirical work on online and offline self-presentation indicates that adolescents may use different environments to test identities, manage impressions, and seek validation (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). Yet the literature has not always connected authenticity directly to ambition, self-worth, and labels. Studies may examine belonging or self-presentation separately from academic pressure, leaving less clear how adolescents experience these influences together.

The literature on labels, expectations, and self-fulfilling prophecy provides another frame-work for understanding adolescent identity formation. Becker's (1963) labeling theory originated in sociology and deviance research, but its broader insight is relevant to developmental psychol-ogy: categories applied by others can influence how individuals are treated and how they under-stand themselves. In educational psychology, Rosenthal and Jacobson's (1968) work on teacher expectations suggested that adult beliefs about students can shape educational outcomes, al-though later research

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has debated the size, consistency, and mechanisms of such expectancy effects. Jussim and Harber (2005), reviewing teacher expectations and self-fulfilling prophecies, argued that expectation effects are real but often smaller and more conditional than popular interpretations imply. This more cautious view is important because it prevents determinis-tic claims that labels automatically create outcomes. Labels may matter most when they are repeated, institutionally reinforced, emotionally salient, or aligned with existing inequalities.

Related research on stereotype threat further demonstrates that identity-relevant labels can affect performance and self-evaluation under specific conditions. Steele and Aronson (1995) showed that awareness of negative stereotypes can impair performance when individuals fear confirming a stereotype about their group. Later intervention work, such as values affirmation studies, suggested that reducing psychological threat can improve academic outcomes for some students (Cohen et al., 2006). However, stereotype threat research has also faced debates about replication, effect sizes, and boundary conditions. For the present study, the key implication is not that every label produces measurable performance change, but that labels and expec-tations can become psychologically consequential when they shape how adolescents interpret ability, belonging, and evaluation. This literature supports examining labels as part of identity development while maintaining caution about causal claims.

Self-worth research further clarifies why comparison and labels may be emotionally signif-icant. Rosenberg's (1965) foundational work established self-esteem as a major construct in adolescent psychology, but later research has distinguished between global self-esteem and con-tingent self-worth. Crocker and Wolfe (2001) argued that self-worth may depend on success or approval in specific domains, such as academics, appearance, relationships, or moral virtue. This framework is especially relevant for adolescents in competitive settings because achievement may become more than a measure of performance; it may become a basis for personal value. When self-worth is contingent on achievement, failure or unfavorable comparison may threaten the self rather than simply indicate a need for improvement. Empirical research has linked contingent self-worth to vulnerability, defensiveness, and fluctuating self-esteem, although the strength of these patterns varies by domain and individual context.

Achievement pressure is also connected to broader motivational beliefs. Eccles and Wigfield (2002) reviewed research showing that adolescents' motivation depends not only on expectancy for success, but also on subjective task value, perceived competence, goals, and social influences. Their expectancy-value framework helps explain why ambition cannot be understood simply as the presence of high goals. Adolescents are more likely to pursue goals when they believe they can succeed and when the goals hold personal or social value. Yet these values are themselves shaped by family, school, peer groups, and cultural expectations. Dweck and Leggett's (1988) social-cognitive model similarly suggests that beliefs about ability influence how students respond to challenge: those who view ability as fixed may interpret difficulty as evidence of inadequacy, whereas those who view ability as malleable may respond with persistence. Together, these theories indicate that achievement environments can either support growth or intensify threat depending on the meanings adolescents attach to success and failure.

Research on intrinsic and extrinsic motivation adds another layer to the study of ambition. Ryan and Deci (2000) distinguished intrinsic motivation, which involves engaging in an activity because it is interesting or satisfying, from extrinsic motivation, which involves pursuing out-comes such as approval, status, reward, or avoidance of criticism. Self-determination theory further proposes that motivation is more adaptive when it supports autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000). This distinction is important because adolescents may report ambitious goals that appear positive on the surface while experiencing those goals as externally controlled. Conversely, externally shaped goals are not necessarily harmful; adolescents often internalize family or cultural values in meaningful ways. The key issue is whether goals are experienced as personally endorsed or as imposed. Existing motivation research therefore in-forms the present study by suggesting that ambition should be examined in relation to perceived ownership, social expectations, and self-worth.

Across these areas of research, several points of agreement emerge. First, adolescent identity is socially embedded and develops through interaction with peers, institutions, and expecta-tions. Second, comparison is psychologically complex: it may motivate, threaten, or clarify self-understanding depending on context. Third, labels and expectations can influence identity and behavior, but their effects are conditional rather than automatic. Fourth, achievement and ambition are closely tied to self-worth when success becomes a marker of personal value. At the same time, the literature contains important limitations. Many studies examine one construct at a time, such as comparison, self-esteem, academic motivation, or peer belonging, without fully considering how adolescents experience these influences simultaneously. Some research relies on broad psychological scales that may not capture everyday experiences of shifting authenticity across groups. Other work focuses on academic outcomes while paying less attention to whether adolescents experience their ambitions as self-directed or externally shaped.

The current study is needed because it brings these related but often separated constructs into a single exploratory framework. By examining peer comparison, social environments, labels, self-worth, and ambition together, the study responds to a gap between theoretical models and adolescents' lived social experiences. It does not aim to establish causal pathways or test a

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comprehensive developmental model. Instead, it seeks to describe patterns in how adolescents report navigating comparison, authenticity, labels, achievement pressure, and goal formation in everyday life. This descriptive integration is valuable because it can clarify which experiences appear most salient to participants and can inform later research using larger samples, validated measures, interviews, or longitudinal designs.

III. METHODOLOGY

➢ *Research Design*

This study used a quantitative, exploratory, cross-sectional survey design. The purpose of the design was to describe adolescents' self-reported experiences of peer comparison, social environments, labels, self-worth, and ambition at a single point in time. Because the study was cross-sectional and non-experimental, it was not designed to establish causal relationships among variables. Instead, the analysis focused on identifying descriptive patterns in partici-pants' responses and interpreting those patterns cautiously in relation to relevant psychological literature.

The study formed part of a broader independent student-led psychology project on ado-lescent identity and social experience. Within that broader project, the present paper focuses specifically on the anonymous survey component. The survey approach was appropriate for the aims of the study because it allowed responses to be collected from adolescents across different age groups and educational levels while maintaining participant anonymity.

➢ *Participants*

The final dataset contained responses from 51 participants. Participants represented several age groups: 6 participants were aged 10–13 years (11.8%), 9 were aged 13–15 years (17.6%), 27 were aged 16–17 years (52.9%), and 9 were aged 18 or above (17.6%). Although the study primarily focused on adolescent experiences, the inclusion of a small number of participants aged 18 or above provided additional perspectives from individuals close to or just beyond late adolescence.

Participants also represented a range of educational levels. Twenty-nine participants were in 11th–12th grade (56.9%), 6 were in 9th–10th grade (11.8%), 7 were in middle school or 6th–8th grade (13.7%), and 9 selected "Other" (17.6%). Participants were also asked to describe their school or social environment. Twenty-seven participants described their environment as highly competitive (52.9%), 15 described it as moderately competitive (29.4%), 8 described it as mixed or dependent on the situation (15.7%), and 1 described it as mostly relaxed (2.0%). These demographic and contextual responses were used to summarize the sample and to provide context for interpreting the descriptive findings.

➢ *Sampling Method*

Participants were recruited through convenience sampling. The survey was shared through social media platforms and personal networks, and individuals who received the survey link could choose whether to participate. Participation was voluntary, and no incentives were offered.

This sampling approach was practical for an independent student-led project and allowed data to be collected from a range of respondents within accessible networks.

However, convenience sampling also limits the generalizability of the findings. The sample cannot be assumed to represent all adolescents, and participants may have differed from non-participants in their interest in psychology, willingness to reflect on social experiences, or access to the survey link. For this reason, the findings are presented as exploratory and descriptive rather than as representative estimates of adolescent experiences more broadly.

➢ *Survey Instrument*

Data were collected using an anonymous Google Forms questionnaire. The questionnaire in-cluded demographic questions and a series of Likert-scale statements designed to examine ado-lescents' experiences of comparison, social context, self-perception, labels, and ambition. Par-ticipants responded to the main survey statements using a five-point Likert scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, and 5 = Strongly Agree.

The survey contained five main content domains. The peer comparison domain included items assessing the frequency of comparison with people of the same age, the effect of others' success on confidence, unwanted comparison thoughts, whether comparison was experienced as positively motivating, and whether social media increased comparison. The social environments domain included items assessing whether participants behaved differently depending on who they were around, whether some environments increased confidence, whether they hid parts of their personality in certain settings, whether they felt more like themselves around some groups than others, and whether they felt pressure to present a particular version of themselves socially.

The self-perception and self-worth domain included items assessing whether confidence changed depending on performance compared with others, whether validation from others affected self-perception, whether participants felt "good enough" regardless of how others were doing, and whether they tied self-worth to achievement or success. The labels and identity domain included items asking whether participants had been labeled academically or socially, whether those la-bels influenced how they saw themselves, and whether they sometimes behaved according to labels associated with them. The goals and ambitions domain included items assessing whether people around participants influenced the goals they set, whether participants had changed or

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lowered goals because of comparison, and whether they struggled to determine whether their ambitions were genuinely their own or influenced by external expectations.

The instrument was designed specifically for this project and was not a standardized psycho-logical scale. Therefore, the results should be interpreted as responses to project-specific survey items rather than as clinical or psychometric measures of identity, self-esteem, motivation, or social comparison orientation.

➢ *Procedure*

The survey was administered online through Google Forms. Participants accessed the question-naire through a shared link and completed it independently. Before responding, participants were informed that participation was voluntary, that responses would remain anonymous and confidential, and that there were no right or wrong answers. The survey was designed to en-courage honest and reflective responses about everyday social and psychological experiences.

After data collection, responses were exported from Google Forms into an Excel spreadsheet for analysis. The dataset used in this paper consisted of the complete survey response file uploaded for the project. No identifying information was used in the analysis. Responses were reviewed and summarized according to the demographic variables and Likert-scale items included in the questionnaire.

➢ *Data Analysis*

The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. For demographic items, frequencies and percentages were calculated for age group, grade level, and perceived school or social environ-ment. For each Likert-scale survey item, response frequencies and percentages were calculated across the five response categories. Combined agreement percentages were also calculated by grouping Agree and Strongly Agree responses, while disagreement percentages were calculated by grouping Disagree and Strongly Disagree responses. Mean Likert scores were calculated for individual survey items to provide a general indication of response direction.

Descriptive summaries were also organized by the five survey domains: peer comparison, social environments, self-perception and self-worth, labels and identity, and goals and ambi-tions. Where useful, selected descriptive comparisons were examined between participants who described their environments as highly competitive and those who selected other environment categories. These subgroup comparisons were used only to identify possible patterns in the dataset; they were not treated as inferential statistical tests. Given the exploratory design, small sample size, and convenience sampling method, no causal conclusions or population-level claims were made.

➢ *Ethical Considerations*

Several ethical considerations guided the survey process. Participation was voluntary, and par-ticipants could choose whether or not to complete the questionnaire. Responses were collected anonymously through Google Forms, and no personally identifying information was used in the analysis. Participants were informed that their responses would remain confidential and that there were no right or wrong answers. Because the survey asked about potentially personal experiences related to comparison, confidence, self-worth, labels, and ambition, anonymity was important for reducing pressure and encouraging honest responses.

As an independent student-led project, the study should be understood as exploratory rather than as a formal clinical or diagnostic assessment. The survey did not involve intervention, de-ception, or collection of sensitive identifying information. The findings are reported in aggregate form only, protecting individual participants from being identifiable in the presentation of re-sults.

IV. RESULTS

➢ *Participant Characteristics*

The final sample consisted of 51 participants. As shown in Table 1, the largest age group was 16–17 years, with 27 participants (52.9%). Nine participants were aged 13–15 years (17.6%), 9 were aged 18 or above (17.6%), and 6 were aged 10–13 years (11.8%). In terms of educational level, 29 participants were in 11th–12th grade (56.9%), 7 were in middle school or 6th–8th grade (13.7%), 6 were in 9th–10th grade (11.8%), and 9 selected “Other” (17.6%).

Participants also reported the perceived competitiveness of their school or social environ-ments. Twenty-seven participants (52.9%) described their environment as highly competitive, 15 (29.4%) described it as moderately competitive, 8 (15.7%) described it as mixed or depen-dent on the situation, and 1 (2.0%) described it as mostly relaxed. Overall, most participants therefore reported environments that were at least moderately competitive. These participant characteristics are summarized in Table 1.

➢ *Context-Dependent Identity and Authenticity*

The strongest response pattern in the dataset concerned variation in identity expression and confidence across social environments. As shown in Table 2 and Figure 1, 45 participants (88.2%) agreed or strongly agreed that they feel more “myself” around some groups than others, with a mean Likert score of 4.31. This was the highest mean score and the highest agreement percentage among all survey items. Similarly, 42 participants (82.4%) agreed or strongly agreed that some environments make them feel more confident than others, with a mean score of 4.00.

Related items showed a similar pattern. Thirty-three participants (64.7%) agreed or strongly agreed that they

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behave differently depending on the people they are around, with a mean score of 3.78. Thirty-two participants (62.7%) agreed or strongly agreed that they hide parts of their personality in certain social settings, with a mean score of 3.69. A smaller but still substantial proportion, 28 participants (54.9%), agreed or strongly agreed that they feel pressure to present a certain version of themselves socially, with a mean score of 3.45. Across these items, agreement percentages ranged from 54.9% to 88.2%, indicating that context-dependent self-presentation and variation in felt authenticity were among the most consistently endorsed themes in the survey.

➢ *Peer Comparison and Social Evaluation*

Peer comparison was also commonly reported. Thirty-four participants (66.7%) agreed or strongly agreed that they frequently compare themselves to people their age, with a mean score of 3.73. Twenty-eight participants (54.9%) agreed or strongly agreed that they often think about how they compare to others even when they do not want to, with a mean score of 3.24. These results are presented in Table 2 and summarized visually in Figure 2.

Responses were more mixed for items concerning the effects and sources of comparison. Twenty-four participants (47.1%) agreed or strongly agreed that seeing others succeed affects how confident they feel about themselves, while 12 (23.5%) selected Neutral and 15 (29.4%) disagreed or strongly disagreed. The mean score for this item was 3.10. The item concerning social media showed the same combined agreement percentage: 24 participants (47.1%) agreed or strongly agreed that social media increases comparison for them, while 10 (19.6%) selected Neutral and 17 (33.3%) disagreed or strongly disagreed. The mean score was 3.33.

The item on positive motivation showed a different response distribution. Fifteen partici-pants (29.4%) agreed or strongly agreed that comparison motivates them positively, 15 (29.4%) selected Neutral, and 21 (41.2%) disagreed or strongly disagreed. This item had a mean score of 2.69, which was lower than the mean scores for the other peer-comparison items. Thus, while peer comparison itself was frequently endorsed, positive motivation from comparison was less frequently endorsed than the presence of comparison.

➢ *Labels and Identity Formation*

Items concerning labels showed relatively high levels of agreement across the sample. Thirty-four participants (66.7%) agreed or strongly agreed that they had been labeled in certain ways academically or socially, such as smart, average, quiet, or talented. The mean score for this item was 3.84. Thirty-two participants (62.7%) agreed or strongly agreed that these labels had influenced the way they see themselves, with a mean score of 3.57. Twenty-nine participants (56.9%) agreed or strongly agreed that they sometimes behave according to the labels people associate with them, with a mean score of 3.27.

Neutral and disagreement responses were also present but were less common for the first two label items. For the item asking whether participants had been labeled academically or socially, 13 participants (25.5%) selected Neutral and 4 (7.8%) disagreed or strongly disagreed. For the item asking whether labels influenced self-perception, 10 participants (19.6%) selected Neutral and 9 (17.6%) disagreed or strongly disagreed. The item on behaving according to labels showed a wider spread: 7 participants (13.7%) selected Neutral and 15 (29.4%) disagreed or strongly disagreed. These distributions are reported in Table 2 and represented in Figure 3.

➢ *Self-Worth, Achievement, and Validation*

Responses concerning self-worth showed the clearest agreement on achievement-linked self-evaluation. Thirty-two participants (62.7%) agreed or strongly agreed that they tie their self-worth to achievement or success, with a mean score of 3.63. Twenty-six participants (51.0%) agreed or strongly agreed that their confidence changes depending on how they perform com-pared with others, with a mean score of 3.41. For this item, 12 participants (23.5%) selected Neutral and 13 (25.5%) disagreed or strongly disagreed.

The item concerning validation from others showed a more mixed distribution. Twenty-two participants (43.1%) agreed or strongly agreed that validation from others affects how they see themselves, 13 (25.5%) selected Neutral, and 16 (31.4%) disagreed or strongly disagreed. The mean score was 3.06. Responses were also divided for the reverse-valenced item assess-ing whether participants feel "good enough" regardless of how others around them are doing. Twenty participants (39.2%) agreed or strongly agreed, 12 (23.5%) selected Neutral, and 19 (37.3%) disagreed or strongly disagreed. The mean score for this item was 3.02. These results indicate that achievement-related self-worth was more strongly endorsed than general indepen-dence from others' performance or validation.

➢ *Goals, Ambition, and External Influence*

The goals and ambition items showed moderate endorsement of external influence, alongside lower endorsement of changed or lowered goals. Twenty-seven participants (52.9%) agreed or strongly agreed that the people around them influence the goals or ambitions they set for themselves, with a mean score of 3.27. Twenty-six participants (51.0%) agreed or strongly agreed that they sometimes struggle to tell whether their ambitions are genuinely theirs or influenced by external expectations, with a mean score of 3.29. For this latter item, 9 participants (17.6%) selected Neutral and 16 (31.4%) disagreed or strongly disagreed.

In contrast, fewer participants reported that comparison had led them to change or lower their goals. Thirteen participants (25.5%) agreed or strongly agreed with this item, 10 (19.6%) selected Neutral, and 28 (54.9%) disagreed or strongly disagreed. This item had a mean score of 2.49, the lowest mean score among all survey items. As shown in Figure 4, the ambition-related

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findings therefore showed a distinction between perceived influence on goals and reported lowering of goals.

- *Exploratory Pattern: Competitive vs. Less Competitive Environ-Ments*

An exploratory descriptive comparison was conducted between participants who described their environments as highly competitive (n = 27) and participants who selected all other environment categories combined (n = 24). These comparisons are reported descriptively in Table 3 and should not be interpreted as inferential tests.

Participants in highly competitive environments showed higher agreement on several peer comparison and self-evaluation items. For frequent comparison with people their age, 20 of 27 participants in highly competitive environments (74.1%; M = 4.00) agreed or strongly agreed, compared with 14 of 24 participants in other environments (58.3%; M = 3.42). For unwanted comparison thoughts, 18 participants in highly competitive environments (66.7%; M = 3.59) agreed or strongly agreed, compared with 10 participants in other environments (41.7%; M = 2.83). For social media increasing comparison, 17 participants in highly competitive environ-ments (63.0%; M = 3.67) agreed or strongly agreed, compared with 7 participants in other environments (29.2%; M = 2.96).

Differences were also observed in self-worth and ambition-related items. Nineteen partic-ipants in highly competitive environments (70.4%; M = 3.81) agreed or strongly agreed that their confidence changes depending on how they perform compared with others, compared with 7 participants in other environments (29.2%; M = 2.96). Eighteen participants in highly com-petitive environments (66.7%; M = 3.70) agreed or strongly agreed that they tie self-worth to achievement or success, compared with 14 participants in other environments (58.3%; M = 3.54). For the item on goals or ambitions being influenced by people around them, 18 participants in highly competitive environments (66.7%; M = 3.67) agreed or strongly agreed, compared with 9 participants in other environments (37.5%; M = 2.83). For uncertainty about whether am-bitions were genuinely their own or externally influenced, 17 participants in highly competitive environments (63.0%; M = 3.59) agreed or strongly agreed, compared with 9 participants in other environments (37.5%; M = 2.96).

The context-dependent identity items were highly endorsed across both groups. For feeling more "myself" around some groups than others, agreement was 88.9% among participants in highly competitive environments and 87.5% among participants in other environments. Simi-larly, agreement that some environments make participants feel more confident was 81.5% in highly competitive environments and 83.3% in other environments. These descriptive patterns suggest that context-dependent identity and confidence were common across environment cat-egories, while several comparison, self-worth, and ambition items showed higher endorsement among participants who described their environments as highly competitive.

V. DISCUSSIONS

- *Identity as Socially Responsive*

The strongest pattern in the present study was that adolescents reported feeling more authentic and confident in some environments than in others. Interpreted cautiously, this finding sup-ports the idea that adolescent identity is context-dependent rather than fixed across all social settings. Participants' responses suggest that self-perception may shift depending on the peer group, school context, or social environment in which adolescents find themselves. Because this was a cross-sectional, convenience-sampled survey, these findings cannot show that partic-ular environments caused changes in identity or confidence. They do, however, indicate that context-dependent self-experience was highly salient in participants' reports.

This pattern is consistent with major theories of adolescent identity development. Erikson (1968) described adolescence as a period in which young people negotiate identity and role confusion, while Marcia (1966) emphasized exploration and commitment as central identity processes. The present findings suggest that such exploration may occur not only through explicit reflection on future roles, but also through everyday experiences of moving across social settings. Adolescents may learn which aspects of themselves feel accepted, valued, hidden, or judged in different groups. In this sense, identity formation may involve ongoing social testing as well as internal self-reflection.

Harter's (1999) multidimensional view of adolescent self-concept also helps interpret the findings. Adolescents may feel competent in one domain and uncertain in another, or authen-tic with one group and guarded with another. The present study's emphasis on authenticity and self-presentation aligns with this view. Feeling different across contexts should not auto-matically be interpreted as instability or inauthenticity; it may reflect adolescents' attempts to integrate multiple roles and expectations. Research on adolescent peer relationships further suggests that belonging, intimacy, and acceptance become increasingly important during this period (Buhrmester, 1990). The findings therefore support a relational view of identity in which adolescents negotiate versions of the self across environments shaped by belonging and social evaluation.

- *Peer Comparison as an Ambivalent Psychological Process*

Peer comparison was common in the sample, but participants did not generally present compari-son as strongly positive or motivating. This pattern suggests that comparison is best understood as ambivalent. It may provide information about ability, status, or achievement, while also creat-ing pressure, self-doubt, or unwanted

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self-evaluation. This interpretation fits Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory, which proposes that individuals evaluate themselves partly by com-paring their abilities and opinions with those of others, especially when objective standards are unclear.

Adolescence may intensify comparison because peer standing, academic performance, ap-pearance, and social success often become more visible and emotionally significant. However, comparison does not have a single psychological meaning. Upward comparison may inspire effort when another person's success appears attainable, but it may threaten confidence when it high-lights perceived inadequacy. Downward comparison may protect self-esteem temporarily, yet it may also reinforce competitive self-evaluation. Wood's (1989) review similarly emphasized that comparison can serve self-evaluation, self-improvement, and self-enhancement functions. The present study is consistent with this broader view because participants frequently reported comparison, but fewer described it as positively motivating.

Social media should be understood as a possible amplifier of comparison rather than as its sole cause. Some participants reported that social media increased comparison, but endorsement was not universal. This is consistent with research suggesting that digital environments can heighten exposure to curated images of peers' achievements, appearance, and social lives, while also providing opportunities for connection and identity exploration (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). The findings therefore suggest that comparison may operate across both online and offline contexts. The important point is not that comparison is always harmful, but that adolescents may experience it as psychologically mixed: informative in some situations, threatening in others, and sometimes difficult to disengage from.

- *Labels as Internalized Social Feedback*

A further pattern was that many participants reported being labeled academically or socially and believed that these labels influenced how they viewed themselves. This finding can be interpreted through labeling theory, which suggests that social categories can shape not only how individuals are perceived by others, but also how they come to understand themselves (Becker, 1963). In adolescent contexts, labels such as "smart," "quiet," "average," or "talented" may become meaningful because they are attached to valued domains of identity, including intelligence, personality, popularity, and competence.

The findings also connect to expectancy effects and self-fulfilling prophecy. Rosenthal and Jacobson's (1968) work suggested that expectations can influence student outcomes through changes in feedback and treatment. However, later reviews caution that expectancy effects are conditional and often smaller than popular interpretations imply (Jussim & Harber, 2005). This caution is essential here. The present study does not show that labels caused changes in identity or behavior. It shows only that participants reported labels as relevant to self-perception and, for some, to behavior.

Labels may become psychologically meaningful when they are repeated, reinforced by peers or adults, or linked to opportunities and expectations. An adolescent labeled as academically gifted may internalize both confidence and pressure, while an adolescent labeled as quiet may come to expect social invisibility or restraint. Yet labels do not inevitably determine identity. Adolescents may resist, reinterpret, or outgrow them. The present findings therefore suggest that labels should be understood as possible identity-shaping feedback, not as fixed determinants of development.

- *Achievement, Self-Worth, and Ambition*

The findings concerning self-worth suggest that achievement was an important basis of self-evaluation for many participants. This aligns with research distinguishing global self-esteem from contingent self-worth. Rosenberg's (1965) work established self-esteem as central to ado-lescent self-image, while Crocker and Wolfe (2001) argued that self-worth may depend on success or approval in particular domains. When self-worth is contingent on achievement, performance may become more than evidence of skill; it may become evidence of personal value.

This has implications for how adolescents experience ambition. Achievement goals may be personally meaningful, socially rewarded, or both. Eccles and Wigfield's (2002) expectancy-value framework suggests that motivation is shaped by perceived competence, task value, and social influences. Dweck and Leggett's (1988) work further suggests that beliefs about ability affect how students interpret challenge and failure. In achievement-oriented environments, adolescents who interpret performance as a measure of worth may experience comparison and setbacks as especially significant.

The ambition findings were especially nuanced. Participants more often reported that peo-ple around them influenced their goals, or that they sometimes questioned whether ambitions were genuinely their own, than that comparison had led them to lower their goals. This dis-tinction is psychologically important. It suggests that social influence may shape the owner-ship and meaning of ambition without necessarily reducing ambition. Deci and Ryan's (2000) self-determination theory is useful here because it distinguishes autonomous motivation from controlled motivation. Adolescents may pursue ambitious goals because they are personally valued, because they are externally rewarded, or because they feel expected. The present study cannot determine which form of motivation predominated, but it highlights the importance of asking whether adolescents experience their goals as self-directed or externally shaped.

- *The Role of Competitive Environments*

The exploratory subgroup findings suggested that participants who described their environments as highly competitive reported stronger comparison, greater

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confidence shifts based on perfor-mance, and greater uncertainty about ambition than participants in other environments. These observations should be treated as descriptive only. No inferential statistics were conducted, subgroup sizes were small, and the measure of competitiveness was based on participants' own perceptions. Therefore, the findings do not demonstrate that competitive environments caused these responses.

Nevertheless, the pattern is theoretically meaningful. Competitive environments may make comparison more visible through rankings, grades, achievements, or social status markers. They may also increase the salience of external expectations, making adolescents more likely to eval-uate themselves through performance or to question whether their ambitions are self-chosen. This interpretation is consistent with motivation theories emphasizing the role of social context in shaping perceived competence, value, and autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Eccles & Wig-field, 2002). However, alternative explanations remain possible. Adolescents who are already more comparison-oriented may perceive environments as more competitive, or both personal and environmental factors may interact.

It is also notable that context-dependent authenticity appeared common across environment categories. This suggests that feeling different across social contexts may be a broad adolescent experience, whereas achievement-linked self-worth and ambition uncertainty may be especially salient in perceived competitive settings. Future research with larger and more balanced samples would be needed to test this possibility.

➢ *Integrating the Findings*

Taken together, the findings suggest that adolescent identity cannot be explained by peer com-parison alone. Comparison was important, but it appeared within a broader social ecology that included social environments, labels, achievement expectations, self-worth, and ambition. The central interpretation of this study is that adolescents' self-perception develops through an ongoing negotiation between how they see themselves, how they believe others see them, what their environments reward, and what futures they feel encouraged to pursue.

These factors likely interact rather than operate independently. Social environments may determine which aspects of the self feel acceptable or risky to express. Labels may provide categories that adolescents internalize, resist, or enact. Achievement expectations may shape whether success becomes tied to self-worth. Peer comparison may make these standards visible by placing adolescents in relation to others. Ambition may then emerge as both a personal aspiration and a response to external expectations. This integrated account helps explain why the findings do not support a simple claim that comparison lowers ambition. Instead, comparison may coexist with continued ambition, achievement-linked self-worth, and uncertainty about whether goals are genuinely self-chosen.

The idea of negotiation is therefore central. Adolescents may negotiate between authenticity and acceptance, internal interests and external approval, labels received from others and identi-ties claimed for themselves, and ambition as personal meaning versus ambition as expectation. This negotiation may be a normal part of development, but it may become psychologically costly when comparison is unwanted, when labels feel restrictive, or when self-worth depends heavily on achievement. The findings therefore support a socially situated view of adolescent identity, drawing together Erikson's and Marcia's identity theories, Harter's self-concept research, Fes-tinger's comparison theory, Becker's labeling theory, and motivation theories by Deci and Ryan and Eccles and Wigfield.

This integrated interpretation is also useful because it preserves complexity in the data. Some participants appeared to experience strong social influence without reporting lowered goals, and context-dependent authenticity appeared broadly endorsed even outside highly competitive envi-ronments. These patterns suggest that adolescent development should not be reduced to a single risk pathway. Social environments may constrain adolescents in some ways while also providing belonging, feedback, motivation, and opportunities for exploration. A balanced interpretation therefore recognizes both vulnerability and agency: adolescents may be shaped by social ex-pectations, but they also actively interpret, manage, and respond to those expectations. This balance is especially important for avoiding deterministic conclusions from descriptive survey data.

➢ *Contribution of the Study*

The present study contributes to the literature by examining several related constructs together within one exploratory survey. Previous research has provided important insights into adolescent identity, social comparison, labeling, self-esteem, and motivation, but these topics are often studied separately. This study's contribution is its integrated perspective: it examines how adolescents report experiencing comparison, authenticity, labels, self-worth, and ambition as overlapping parts of social life.

This contribution must be understood within the study's limitations. The sample was small and convenience-sampled, the design was cross-sectional, and the survey instrument was devel-oped for this project rather than drawn from standardized scales. The findings therefore do not establish causal pathways, representative prevalence estimates, or definitive psychological mech-anisms. Their value is descriptive and hypothesis-generating. They suggest that future research should examine not only whether adolescents compare themselves with peers, but also how comparison interacts with labels, achievement pressure, authenticity, and perceived ownership of goals.

In conclusion, the findings suggest that adolescent identity and ambition are shaped through a complex social

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process. Adolescents appear to evaluate themselves not only through compar-ison with peers, but also through environments, labels, achievement expectations, and sources of validation. Comparison matters, but it is insufficient on its own. A fuller understanding of adolescent self-perception requires attention to the broader social ecology in which confi-dence, authenticity, self-worth, and ambition are continually negotiated. The following section considers the limitations that shape how far these conclusions can be taken.

VI. LIMITATIONS

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study. First, the sample size was relatively small, with 51 participants. Although this was sufficient for an exploratory descriptive survey, it limits statistical power and reduces the stability of subgroup comparisons. With a small sample, individual responses can noticeably affect percentages, especially when groups are divided by age, grade level, or perceived environment. As a result, the findings should be understood as preliminary patterns rather than as representative conclusions about adolescents more broadly.

Second, the study used convenience sampling through personal networks and social media. This recruitment method was practical for an independent student-led project, but it means that the sample is unlikely to represent the wider adolescent population. Participants who received and completed the survey may have differed from non-participants in their interest in psychology, willingness to reflect on identity, or personal experiences with comparison and social pressure. Because the sample was not randomly selected, the findings cannot be generalized confidently across different schools, cultures, socioeconomic backgrounds, or educational systems.

Third, the demographic distribution of the sample was uneven. More than half of the par-ticipants were aged 16–17, and more than half were in 11th–12th grade. Therefore, the findings may reflect the experiences of older adolescents more strongly than those of younger adoles-cents. The distribution of perceived environments was also uneven, with only one participant describing their environment as mostly relaxed. This makes it difficult to compare experiences across different environmental contexts, particularly between competitive and relaxed settings.

Fourth, the cross-sectional design limits interpretation. Because all responses were collected at a single point in time, the study cannot establish causal relationships or developmental changes over time. For example, the data cannot determine whether competitive environments increase comparison, whether comparison-oriented adolescents perceive their environments as more competitive, or whether both processes interact. Similarly, the findings cannot show whether labels shape self-perception over time or whether adolescents who already see themselves in particular ways are more likely to notice certain labels.

Fifth, the study relied on self-report methodology. Self-report is appropriate for examining subjective experiences such as confidence, authenticity, self-worth, and perceived ambition, but it is vulnerable to social desirability bias, response bias, and differences in item interpretation. Participants may have underreported experiences that felt uncomfortable or may have under-stood terms such as “comparison,” “labels,” or “ambitions” differently. Because the survey did not include follow-up interviews, the analysis could not explore the personal meanings behind participants’ responses.

Sixth, the survey instrument was developed specifically for this project and was not a stan-dardized or psychometrically validated psychological scale. Although the items reflected the study’s core themes, the instrument has not been tested for reliability, validity, or factor struc-ture. The results should therefore be interpreted as responses to project-specific survey items rather than as clinical or diagnostic measures of identity development, self-esteem, social com-parison orientation, or motivation.

Finally, the study relied primarily on descriptive statistics. Frequencies, percentages, and mean Likert scores were appropriate for the exploratory purpose of the project, but they do not indicate whether observed subgroup differences are statistically significant. The descriptive differences between participants in highly competitive environments and those in other envi-ronments should therefore be interpreted cautiously and treated as possible patterns for future investigation rather than as confirmed group differences.

Despite these limitations, the study provides meaningful exploratory insight. Exploratory re-search is valuable for identifying patterns, generating hypotheses, and informing future research. By examining peer comparison, social environments, labels, self-worth, and ambition together, this study offers a preliminary view of how adolescents may experience identity within a broader social context. Future studies can build on these findings using larger and more diverse samples, validated measures, qualitative interviews, and longitudinal designs.

VII. FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Future research could build on the present study by using a much larger and more diverse sam-ple. A broader sample would allow researchers to examine whether the patterns identified in this exploratory project appear across different adolescent populations or are specific to the current sample. Where possible, probability sampling methods would strengthen external validity by reducing selection bias and increasing confidence that findings reflect wider adolescent experi-ences. Future studies should also aim to include adolescents from different educational systems, geographic regions, socioeconomic

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backgrounds, and cultural contexts. Such comparisons would be especially valuable because experiences of comparison, labels, achievement pressure, and am-bition are likely to be shaped by school structures, cultural expectations, family values, and access to educational opportunities.

Longitudinal research would also be important for understanding how identity, peer compari-son, labels, self-worth, and ambition change over time. The present study captured participants' experiences at a single point, but adolescence is a developmental period marked by transition. Following adolescents across several months or years would allow researchers to examine whether comparison becomes more or less salient with age, whether labels have lasting effects on self-perception, and whether ambitions become more autonomous or more externally influenced over time. Longitudinal designs would also help clarify possible directional relationships among variables, although causal claims would still require careful methodological design.

Future research would be strengthened by incorporating validated psychological scales along-side project-specific items. Measures of self-esteem, social comparison orientation, contingent self-worth, identity development, and motivation would allow future findings to be compared more directly with established psychological literature. Validated instruments could also im-prove reliability and make it possible to test associations among constructs more rigorously. For example, future studies might examine whether social comparison orientation is associated with contingent academic self-worth, or whether autonomous motivation is related to greater confidence in personal ambitions.

A mixed-methods approach would also deepen understanding of adolescents' lived experi-ences. Quantitative surveys can identify broad patterns, but qualitative interviews or focus groups could explore how adolescents interpret comparison, what kinds of labels they receive, which environments feel most authentic, and how they decide whether ambitions are genuinely their own. Qualitative methods would be especially useful for understanding the emotional meaning of labels and the difference between ambition that feels personally meaningful and am-bition that feels externally imposed. Combining quantitative and qualitative data would provide a more complete account of adolescent identity development than either method alone.

Future studies should also investigate differences based on gender, age, school environment, academic pressure, and social media use. These factors may shape how adolescents experience comparison and self-worth. For instance, younger and older adolescents may differ in the sta-bility of identity commitments, while students in highly competitive schools may experience achievement-related self-worth differently from those in less competitive settings. Social media use should also be examined in greater detail, not simply as a general source of comparison but in relation to platform type, frequency of use, active versus passive engagement, and exposure to achievement- or appearance-focused content.

In addition to risk factors, future research should examine protective factors that may sup-port healthier identity development. Supportive friendships, family relationships, resilience, emotional intelligence, and healthy school climates may buffer adolescents from the negative effects of comparison, labels, and achievement pressure. Understanding these protective factors would be useful for designing school-based programs and workshops that promote self-awareness, balanced self-evaluation, and constructive peer comparison.

Because this research originated as part of an independent student psychology project, future work could also evaluate the psychology-based workshop developed alongside the project. This workshop could be studied as a possible intervention for improving adolescents' awareness of peer comparison, labels, confidence, self-worth, and identity. Future evaluations might use pre- and post-workshop surveys, participant reflections, focus groups, or follow-up assessments to examine whether the workshop helps adolescents develop healthier perspectives on comparison and ambition. Ultimately, future research in this area could contribute not only to psycholog-ical theory, but also to the creation of healthier educational and social environments in which adolescents can develop confidence, authenticity, and self-directed goals.

VIII. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to explore how peer comparison, social environments, and so-cial labels relate to adolescents' self-perception, self-worth, identity, and ambitions. Using an anonymous cross-sectional survey, the study examined adolescents' reported experiences across several interconnected domains: comparison with peers, confidence across social environments, internalization of labels, achievement-related self-worth, and the perceived influence of others on goals. The study was exploratory in design and was not intended to establish causal rela-tionships. Instead, it aimed to identify descriptive patterns that could contribute to a more integrated understanding of adolescent identity development.

The findings suggest that adolescents' identity and confidence are strongly shaped by social context. Participants frequently reported feeling more authentic and confident in some environ-ments than in others, indicating that self-perception may vary depending on peer groups and social settings. Peer comparison was also common, but it was not generally endorsed as a posi-tive motivational force. This distinction is important because it suggests that comparison may be a frequent part of adolescent self-evaluation without necessarily being experienced as helpful or encouraging. The findings also indicated that labels matter: many participants reported being labeled academically or socially and perceived those

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labels as influencing how they saw themselves or behaved. In addition, achievement and self-worth appeared closely connected for many participants, with several responses indicating that success, performance, and validation were relevant to confidence and self-evaluation. Finally, ambition appeared to be socially influ-enced without necessarily being reduced. Participants were more likely to report that others influenced their goals or that they questioned whether ambitions were genuinely their own than to report that comparison had caused them to lower their goals.

Taken together, these findings support the central argument of the paper: adolescent identity is not shaped by peer comparison alone. Rather, identity appears to develop through the interac-tion of peer comparison, social environments, labels, achievement expectations, and self-worth. Comparison may make differences between the self and others more visible, but the meaning of comparison depends on the broader social context in which it occurs. Labels may influence self-perception, but they are likely to matter most when reinforced by social environments and connected to valued domains such as intelligence, personality, or success. Ambition may re-main high even when it is shaped by external expectations, making it important to distinguish between the presence of goals and adolescents' sense of ownership over those goals.

This integrated perspective contributes to existing psychological literature by bringing to-gether constructs that are often examined separately. Theories of adolescent identity develop-ment, social comparison, labeling, contingent self-worth, and motivation each offer important insights, but adolescents encounter these processes simultaneously in everyday life. The present study therefore contributes a descriptive account of how these influences may overlap in ado-lescents' lived experiences. Its value lies not in providing definitive causal explanations, but in identifying patterns that can inform future research and encourage more holistic approaches to adolescent self-development.

At the same time, the conclusions must be interpreted within the study's methodological limits. The sample was small and convenience-sampled, the design was cross-sectional, and the survey instrument was developed specifically for this project rather than validated as a stan-dardized psychological scale. The findings therefore cannot be generalized to all adolescents and should not be interpreted as evidence that particular social environments, labels, or comparisons cause specific identity outcomes. They are best understood as exploratory descriptive insights that raise useful questions for future research.

Understanding adolescents' lived social experiences matters because identity development occurs within real social environments. Educators, parents, psychologists, and young people themselves benefit from recognizing that confidence, self-worth, and ambition are shaped not only by individual traits, but also by the contexts in which adolescents are evaluated, labeled, compared, and supported. Supporting adolescents therefore requires attention to the social conditions in which they form their sense of self. The broader implication of this study is that adolescents may be better able to develop authentic identities when their environments encourage reflection, belonging, and self-directed growth rather than identities driven primarily by comparison, labels, or external expectations.

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