

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ENVY, MOTIVATION, SELF-COMPASSION
AND PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS AMONG EMPLOYEESFaiza Aftab^{*1}, Fatima Sadiq², Anosha Imran³, Laiba Waseem⁴, Mahrukh Bilal⁵^{*1}faiza.aftab@skt.umt.edu.pkDOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21805575>**Keywords**

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Abstract

Workplace social comparison has become increasingly salient in modern organizational environments where professional achievements, rewards, and recognition are highly visible among peers. The present study examined the relationships between envy, motivation, self-compassion, and psychological distress among employed adults in Pakistan. A total of 300 employees (150 males, 150 females) were recruited from public and private sector organizations through purposive sampling. Four standardized self-report measures were administered, and data were analyzed using Pearson correlation, independent samples t-test, one-way ANOVA, and hierarchical regression analysis. Mean scores for envy, motivation, self-compassion, and psychological distress were 32.36 ± 8.97 , 85.21 ± 18.04 , 38.39 ± 7.12 , and 47.44 ± 13.35 , respectively. Pearson's correlation analyses revealed significant positive relationships among all four variables ($r = .279$ to $.568$, $p < .01$), with envy demonstrating a moderate positive association with psychological distress ($r = .437$). T-test results indicated that male employees reported significantly higher motivation than females ($p = .041$, $d = 0.24$), and corporate sector employees scored significantly higher on envy, motivation, self-compassion, and psychological distress than those in other sectors. One-way ANOVA findings revealed that younger employees reported the highest psychological distress, while education level and residential area significantly influenced motivation and self-compassion. Hierarchical regression analysis indicated that demographic variables explained 12% of variance in psychological distress ($R^2 = .12$), envy added a further 13% ($R^2 = .25$; $\beta = .393$), and the inclusion of motivation and self-compassion raised total explained variance to 30% ($R^2 = .30$), with envy ($\beta = .315$) and self-compassion ($\beta = .208$) emerging as significant predictors, while motivation did not contribute independently. These findings highlight envy as a primary driver of psychological distress in Pakistani workplaces and underscore the need for psychologically safe and equitable organizational environments.

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary organizations function as increasingly competitive and socially networked environments in which employees' progress, rewards, and recognition are constantly evaluated against that of their peers (Duffy et al., 2021). As achievements become more visible through performance systems and workplace visibility, employees engage in frequent social comparison, a process capable of sharpening

motivation but also generating emotional strain when comparisons are perceived as unfavorable (Li et al., 2023).

One consequence of such comparison is envy, an unpleasant emotion arising when an individual perceives another as possessing a desired quality, achievement, or status (Smith & Kim, 2007). Contemporary research distinguishes benign envy, which motivates self-improvement and goal pursuit, from malicious

envy, characterized by hostility and a desire to see the advantage diminished (Van de Ven et al., 2009). This distinction has reframed envy from a purely destructive emotion into a construct with genuine motivational potential, contingent on how individuals appraise the attainability of others' success (Lange & Crusius, 2022).

Motivation, understood as the process that initiates, directs, and sustains goal-oriented behaviour, is closely intertwined with these comparative processes (Ryan & Deci, 2020). When colleagues' achievements are perceived as attainable, envy can drive persistence and self-improvement (Van de Ven et al., 2011); when they are perceived as unjust or out of reach, the same comparison can produce disengagement and reduced effort (Tai et al., 2022). Recent organizational research further suggests that fair reward systems and supportive leadership increase the likelihood that envy manifests as benign rather than malicious, shaping whether comparison strengthens or undermines workplace motivation (Li et al., 2023; Mao et al., 2023).

Self-compassion, comprising self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness has emerged as a psychological resource that shapes how individuals interpret unfavorable comparisons (Neff, 2003). Rather than responding to others' success with self-criticism, self-compassionate individuals tend to interpret setbacks and disadvantage with acceptance rather than judgment, which may buffer the emotional cost of envy and support sustained motivation rather than avoidance (Neff et al., 2022; Chen et al., 2022). Evidence also indicates that self-compassion reduces dependence on social comparison for self-worth, weakening the link between upward comparison and emotional distress (Gerber et al., 2018; Phillips & Hine, 2021).

When these regulatory resources are insufficient, unresolved comparison, unmet motivational needs, and repeated self-criticism can accumulate into psychological distress, a state of emotional suffering marked by anxiety, depressive symptoms, and impaired functioning. Chronic workplace comparison, excessive job demands, and limited coping resources have been consistently linked to elevated distress, burnout, and reduced well-being among

employees, a pattern that intensified further during and after the COVID-19 pandemic as workers faced heightened uncertainty and workload change (World Health Organization, 2022).

Within Pakistan's collectivistic and hierarchical organizational culture, family reputation, social standing, and interpersonal comparison carry particular psychological weight, which may intensify both the frequency and emotional cost of workplace envy relative to more individualistic settings. Economic uncertainty and limited advancement opportunities further heighten sensitivity to social comparison among Pakistani employees (Malik et al., 2022), while persistent stigma around mental health continues to discourage employees from acknowledging or addressing the resulting distress (Mirza & Jenkins, 2004). Despite these conditions, direct empirical research on envy within Pakistani organizations remains scarce, with most existing studies addressing related but distinct constructs such as workplace politics, incivility, and organizational justice rather than envy itself (Khan et al., 2023).

Taken together, envy, motivation, self-compassion, and psychological distress appear theoretically and empirically interconnected, yet the existing literature has largely examined these constructs in isolation or in limited pairwise combinations rather than as an integrated psychological system (Tai et al., 2022). This fragmentation is particularly evident in non-Western, collectivistic contexts, where cultural and religious values may alter how employees experience and regulate these processes.

Problem Statement

Despite growing international recognition of envy's dual motivational potential and self-compassion's protective role against psychological distress, limited research has examined these constructs together within a single organizational framework, and virtually none has done so within Pakistan's collectivistic workplace culture. This study addresses that gap by examining the interrelationships among envy, motivation, self-compassion, and psychological distress among Pakistani employees, and by testing whether self-compassion moderates the

pathway from workplace envy to psychological distress.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The present study employed a quantitative, correlational, cross-sectional design to examine the relationships between envy, motivation, self-compassion, and psychological distress among employed adults in Pakistan.

Population of the Study

The study population consisted of employed adults working in public and private sector organizations across Pakistan.

Sample of the Study

A total sample of 300 employed adults, 150 men and 150 women, was recruited from a range of public and private sector organizations across Pakistan.

Sampling Technique

Participants were selected through purposive sampling. Since no comprehensive list of all employed adults in Pakistan exists, probability-based sampling was not practical (Andrade, 2021). Participants were reached through in-person visits to workplaces, professional social media platforms, and an online Google Form.

Inclusion & Exclusion Criteria

Both employed males and females were the part of the study. Individuals who were unemployed at the time of the study, unable to read and understand English, unwilling to provide informed consent, or who had cognitive or physical difficulties that would prevent meaningful participation were excluded from the sample.

Instruments

Four standardized self-report scales were used to measure the study variables, together with a demographic questionnaire. All instruments were used in their full, original format, with permission obtained where required.

Benign and Malicious Envy Scale (BeMaS)

Envy was measured using the BeMaS (Lange & Crusius, 2015), a 10-item self-report scale that

measures benign and malicious envy as separate dispositions, with five items per subscale. Items are rated on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). The scale has demonstrated good internal consistency ($\alpha \approx .80$ per subscale).

Work Motivation Questionnaire (WMQ)

Work motivation was measured using the WMQ (Gagné et al., 2010), a 19-item scale grounded in Self-Determination Theory that assesses motivational regulation ranging from amotivation to intrinsic motivation. Items are rated on a 7-point scale from 1 (does not correspond at all) to 7 (corresponds exactly). Higher scores on the autonomous subscales reflect internally driven motivation, while higher scores on the controlled subscales reflect externally driven motivation. The WMQ has shown satisfactory reliability and validity in occupational settings.

Self-Compassion Scale – Short Form (SCS-SF)

Self-compassion was measured using the SCS-SF (Raes et al., 2011), a 12-item short version of Neff's (2003) original scale, covering self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness versus their corresponding negative poles. Participants respond on a 5-point scale from 1 (almost never) to 5 (almost always), and an overall score is computed as the mean of all items, with higher scores reflecting greater self-compassion. The scale shows strong internal consistency ($\alpha = .86$).

Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale – 21 (DASS-21)

Psychological distress was measured using the DASS-21 (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995), a 21-item instrument divided equally across three subscales: depression, anxiety, and stress (seven items each). Items are rated on a 4-point scale (0 = did not apply to me at all; 3 = applied to me very much or most of the time), based on the past week. Subscale scores are summed and multiplied by two to produce scores comparable with the full 42-item DASS. Reported Cronbach's alpha values are .94 for depression, .87 for anxiety, and .91 for stress.

Procedure

Data collection began only after formal approval was obtained from the university's review board, and an institutional permission letter was secured to approach organizations. At each site, participants were briefed about the study's purpose and procedures before any materials were distributed. Informed consent was then obtained from each participant, either in person

or through the online form, with assurance of confidentiality and the right to withdraw at any point without consequence. Following consent, participants completed a brief demographic sheet followed by the BeMaS, WMQ, SCS-SF, and DASS-21, in that order, with the researcher remaining available throughout to clarify items. Completion typically took between 15 and 20 minutes.

RESULTS**Table 1: Frequency and percentage of Demographic variables (N=300)**

Demographics Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>f</i>	%
Age	1.49	0.58		
18 - 25			165	55.0
26 - 44			122	40.7
45 - 59			13	4.3
Gender	1.50	0.50		
Male			150	50.0
Female			150	50.0
Organization Type	1.71	0.45		
Public			86	28.7
Private			214	71.3
Educational System	3.02	0.94		
Matric			23	7.7
Intermediate			36	12.0
Graduate			176	58.7
Undergraduate			42	14.0
Other			23	7.7
Family System	1.51	0.62		
Nuclear			167	55.7
Joint			113	37.7
Extended			20	6.7
Marital status	1.45	0.62		
Single			183	61.0
Married			104	34.7
Divorced			9	3.0
Widowed			4	1.3
Residential Area	1.87	0.87		
Urban			135	45.0
Rural			68	22.7
Town			97	32.3
Socioeconomic status	2.14	0.45		
Lower			12	4.0
Middle			235	78.3
Upper			53	17.7
Working Experience	1.86	0.999		
1-3 years			141	47.0
4-7 years			92	30.7
8-10 years			35	11.7
More than 10 years			32	10.7

Working Hours	2.09	0.67		
Less than 6 hours			54	18.0
6-8 hours			165	55.0
More than 10 hours			81	27.0
Income	1.99	1.08		
30,000-50,000			135	45.0
60,000-90,000			74	24.7
100,000-130,000			51	17.0
Above 150,000			40	13.3
Job sector	1.51	0.50		
Cooperate/ Business			147	49.0
Other			153	51.0

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics and Alpha Reliability Coefficient of scales (N=300)

Scales	M	SD	Range	Sk	Ku	α
BeMaS	32.36	8.97	42.00	-.17	-.73	.77
WMQ	85.21	18.04	126.00	-.73	1.44	.82
SCS-SF	38.39	7.12	45.00	-.08	.84	.71
DASS-21	47.44	13.35	56.00	-.01	-.80	.92

Note: Standard Error of Skewness= .141, Standard Error of kurtosis= .281, BeMaS = Benign and Malicious Envy Scale, WMQ =Work Motivation Questionnaire, SCS-SF= Self-Compassion Scale- short form, DASS-21 = Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale-21

Table 3: Correlation analysis among envy, motivation, self-compassion and psychological distress (N=300)

Variables	1	2	3	4
1 Envy	-	.519**	.279**	.437**
2 Motivation	-	-	.568**	.310**
3 Self-Compassion	-	-	-	.300**
4 Psychological Distress	-	-	-	-

Note: **. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Table 4: One way ANOVA for Age and Psychological distress (N=300)

Variable	Young Adults		Adults		Middle Adults		F	η^2
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD		
Psychological distress	49.09	13.24	45.92	13.27	40.77	12.62	3.74*	0.03

Note: * $p < .05$

Table 5: T-test analysis for Gender and Motivation (N=300)

Variables	Male		Female		t	df	p	Cohen's d
	M	SD	M	SD				
Motivation	87.33	16.38	83.08	19.38	2.05	298	.041	0.24

Table 6: T-test analysis of Organization type and Self-Compassion (N=300)

Variables	Public		Private		t	df	p	Cohen's d
	M	SD	M	SD				
Self-compassion	37.0	7.59	38.9	6.84	-2.16	298	.03	-0.26

Table 7: T-test analysis of job-sector and Envy, Motivation, Self-Compassion and Psychological Distress (N=300)

Variables	Corporate		Other		t	df	p	Cohen's d
	M	SD	M	SD				
Envy	34.61	8.88	30.2	8.53	4.39	298	.001	0.63
Motivation	87.73	18.24	82.78	17.56	2.39	298	.02	0.28
Self-Compassion	39.44	7.00	37.37	7.03	2.54	298	.01	0.3
Psychological Distress	50.44	13.07	44.57	13.01	3.895	298	.001	0.45

Table 8: One way ANOVA for Education level, Motivation and Self-compassion (N=300)

Variable	Motivation		Self-compassion		F	η^2
	M	SD	M	SD		
Matric	71.35	29.36	34.70	8.49		
Intermediate	82.64	19.52	35.86	7.60	4.35**	0.06
Undergraduate	87.18	15.96	39.16	6.71	3.70***	0.05
Graduate	86.57	15.54	38.33	6.65		
Other	85.53	15.19	40.17	7.00		

Table 9: One way ANOVA for Marital status, Envy and Motivation (N=300)

Variable	Single		Married		Divorced		Widowed		F	η^2
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD		
Envy	32.84	8.77	32.36	9.09	22.33	8.50	32.70	2.61	4.05**	0.04
Motivation	85.83	16.54	84.95	18.72	66.22	26.30	106.25	15.86	5.45***	0.05

Table 10: One way ANOVA for Residential area, Motivation and Self-Compassion (N=300)

Variable	Urban		Rural		Town		F	η^2
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD		
Motivation	86.66	14.78	87.60	16.15	81.51	22.48	3.12*	0.02
Self-Compassion	38.25	6.92	40.10	6.32	37.37	7.71	3.04*	0.02

Table 11: Hierarchical regression for Envy, Motivation and Self-compassion as predictors of Psychological Distress (N=300)

Predictors	B	SE	β	95.0% Interval for B	Confidence	R^2
				Lower	Upper	
				Bound	Bound	
Step I						.12

Age	-3.16	1.02	-.27	-5.18	-1.15	
Gender	1.03	1.61	.04	-2.14	4.20	
Organization type	-1.06	1.71	-.04	-4.43	2.32	
Educational level	.38	.86	.03	-1.32	2.08	
Family system	.68	1.28	.03	-1.84	3.20	
Marital Status	1.01	1.51	.05	-1.96	3.97	
Residential area	-.32	.94	-.02	-2.17	1.53	
Socioeconomic status	5.04	1.92	.17	1.26	8.83	
Working experience	.84	1.18	.06	-1.48	3.16	
Working hours	.97	1.26	.05	-1.52	3.45	
Income	-.18	.88	-.01	-1.91	1.55	
Job sector	-5.66	1.62	-.21	-8.85	-2.47	
Step II						.25
Age	-2.89	.94	-.24	-4.75	-1.03	
Gender	1.56	1.48	.06	-1.36	4.49	
Organization type	-.79	1.58	-.03	-3.90	2.31	
Educational level	.10	.80	.01	-1.46	1.67	
Family system	.10	1.18	.01	-2.23	2.42	
Marital Status	2.22	1.40	.10	-.54	4.97	
Residential area	-.64	.87	-.04	-2.34	1.07	
Socioeconomic status	3.82	1.78	.13	.32	7.32	
Working experience	.81	1.09	.06	-1.33	2.94	
Working hours	.25	1.17	.01	-2.05	2.55	
Income	.05	.81	.00	-1.54	1.65	
Job sector	-3.02	1.54	-.11	-6.04	.00	
Envy	.59	.08	.39	.43	.74	
Step III						.30
Age	-3.48	.93	-.29	-5.31	-1.65	
Gender	1.51	1.46	.06	-1.36	4.38	
Organization type	-1.27	1.55	-.04	-4.33	1.79	
Educational level	-.37	.79	-.03	-1.92	1.18	
Family system	.31	1.15	.02	-1.96	2.58	
Marital status	1.81	1.37	.09	-.88	4.51	
Residential area	-.33	.86	-.02	-2.02	1.36	
Socioeconomic status	3.66	1.73	.12	.25	7.07	
Working experience	1.40	1.08	.11	-.72	3.52	
Working hours	.29	1.14	.02	-1.95	2.54	
Income	.02	.79	.00	-1.54	1.57	
Job sector	-2.57	1.50	-.10	-5.53	.39	
Envy	.47	.09	.32	.29	.65	
Motivation	.03	.05	.04	-.08	.13	
Self-compassion	.39	.12	.21	.16	.62	

DISCUSSION

The present study examined how envy, work motivation, and self-compassion relate to psychological distress among employees in Pakistani organizations. All four variables were significantly correlated with one another, indicating that comparison, effort, self-regard,

and distress are closely linked in the workplace rather than operating independently.

Envy was positively associated with motivation ($r = .519$), suggesting that employees largely experienced benign rather than malicious envy, using colleagues' success as a benchmark that pushed effort upward instead of provoking

resentment (Van de Ven, 2022). In a collectivistic setting like Pakistan, where career progress reflects on family standing, this comparison-driven motivation is culturally coherent.

Motivation and self-compassion produced the strongest correlation overall ($r = .568$), consistent with Self-Determination Theory: self-compassion appears to reduce the ego-threat of failure, allowing employees to stay engaged rather than withdraw (Reb et al., 2023; Bashir et al., 2023).

Two results departed from expectation. Self-compassion was positively, not negatively, related to psychological distress ($r = .300$; $\beta = .208$ in regression), contrary to most existing literature (Neff, 2022; Saleem & Ahmad, 2022). This may reflect greater emotional self-awareness among self-compassionate employees, measurement issues with the common humanity subscale in collectivistic samples (Ali & Bhatti, 2022), or a shared underlying factor driving all four constructs upward together. Similarly, envy and self-compassion were weakly but positively correlated ($r = .279$) rather than negatively as hypothesized, suggesting self-compassion's protective effect against envy may not yet be strongly internalized in Pakistani workplace culture.

Envy emerged as the single strongest predictor of psychological distress ($r = .437$; $\beta = .315$ in the final model), consistent with Conservation of Resources theory (Hobfoll, 1989) and Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954): the ongoing effort of comparison depletes coping resources, an effect likely sharpened in Pakistan's hierarchical workplaces where advancement is not always merit-based (Saleem et al., 2022). This mirrors the classical Islamic description of hasad as a sickness of the heart producing grief and psychological strain.

Motivation also correlated positively with distress ($r = .310$) but lost significance once envy was controlled ($\beta = .036$, ns), suggesting this link was largely carried by motivation's overlap with envy. It is possible the motivation measure captured pressured, extrinsic striving rather than purely intrinsic drive, particularly among corporate-sector employees, who scored highest on both motivation and distress simultaneously.

Together, envy, self-compassion, motivation, and demographic variables accounted for 30% of variance in psychological distress, with envy alone contributing the largest share. Younger employees (20-25 years) and corporate-sector staff reported the highest distress, reflecting the pressures of early-career instability and Pakistan's competitive corporate environment. Overall, envy stands out as the central, most actionable driver of workplace psychological distress in this sample, while the assumed protective role of self-compassion appears more complicated within the Pakistani cultural context than existing literature suggests. Interventions emphasizing equity, transparency, and culturally grounded practices such as qana'at (contentment) may prove more effective than self-compassion training alone, at least until the construct is better validated for local use.

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