Comparing Applicants and Oranges:
Social Comparison Theory, College Pressure, and College Admissions TikTok

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Introduction

Every year, a new class of bright-eyed high school students are tasked with determining the institution where they'll spend the next two to four years. It's a daunting process, especially given the amount seemingly riding on it. In the latter half of 2022, I underwent my own journey through the college admissions process, just like many of my peers; I toured colleges, crafted my personal statement essay and college-specific supplemental writing samples, compiled and entered my extracurriculars into the Common Application, and more. I was deeply immersed in the College Admissions Machine, a system which, through colleges and universities, admissions counseling services, corporations, and different media, pushes the importance of attending college as a crucial step for life success. Searching for a distraction from the stress surrounding the process, I turned to TikTok, a video-based social media platform, for some mindless entertainment. It wouldn't be long before I was introduced to an ever-growing collection of videos pertaining to college admissions, which I will henceforth refer to colloquially as "College Admissions TikTok." Here, I saw a community of both current applicants, all going through the same struggles I was, past applicants, and college "counselors" (both professional and recreational) all exchanging information about their own experiences, academic stats, and mostly well-intentioned advice for how to navigate the admissions system. However, I frequently observed that this community was not always promoting positive mentalities among its participants; instead, it left me and others feeling anxious, pessimistic, and inadequate.

In this paper, I will begin by first discussing Leon Festinger's social comparison theory and various perspectives on the effects of directional social comparison. I will then examine the pressures of the college admissions process and the ways in which it affects students, in addition to the academic conversation surrounding social media platforms and the roles they play in self-esteem and social comparison. Lastly, I will show how social comparison theory manifests in college admissions-related videos and comment sections on TikTok and argue its status as a natural consequence of the larger toxic competitive mindset affecting students in the college admissions process.

Theoretical Foundations

In 1954, social psychologist Leon Festinger published the seminal paper "A Theory of Social Comparison Processes," in which he presents a series of hypotheses and experiments to

support what we now understand as Social Comparison Theory. Festinger (1954) observed that, due to a natural human drive to evaluate one's own abilities, humans seek out others to compare themselves to when there is no objective measurement tool. This foundation was then expanded upon with the discovery of three distinct types of social comparison: upward, downward, and lateral. The three are defined as the comparison of oneself to someone viewed as better off, worse off, and similar to oneself, respectively (Rahimi et. al, 2017). While downward social comparisons are generally understood to be carried out with the intention of boosting one's self-esteem or acting as a reassurance tool, opinions on the purpose of upward social comparisons are more mixed. On one hand, studies such as Morse and Gergen (1970) posit that upward social comparisons result in decreased self-esteem. This seems to make sense; it seems reasonable that one might feel worse about themselves if, for example, their friend earned a higher grade on an important test than they did. However, this perspective is not without opposition. Studies like Rahimi et. al (2017) argue that upward social comparisons can actually be a positive self-regulation strategy; in researching the emotions and job satisfaction of teachers who applied the three types of directional social comparisons, the authors found that teachers who utilized these upward comparisons reported less burnout and quitting sentiments. However, while adults have the capacity to engage in healthy, positive upward social comparisons, I believe that adolescents are more likely to interpret these comparisons in a way that leads to low self-esteem.

When it comes to college admissions, competition and comparison are everything. After all, the chief factor that decides a student's admission into any school is how they compare to the rest of the applicant pool in a given year. Through my experience with the college admissions process, the pressure of coming out of the process "successful" (a subjective conclusion) is extremely high; getting rejected from your dream school could feel like your life is ruined. Students who intend on applying to college are faced with a lot of pressure from their community (including parents, family members, and other persons of authority) to attend a good school. Kovacs (2008) examines the ways in which these community members imprint expectations and college-related pressures on high-school students. Through research and experience working as a private school college counselor, Kovacs coined the term, "Expectation Continuum," consisting of covert and overt messages expressed by authority figures in relation to college expectations that become increasingly more emotionally charged throughout time. As humans are greatly influenced by their environment (especially in regards to those they respect), these messages have the potential to greatly influence students' opinions on the importance of college, including the general expectation to attend, importance of getting into a specific school, and more. This may have especially harmful effects when students internalize messages coming from (albeit likely well-meaning) family members with high expectations. Homan et. al (2022) also further this discussion of the impacts of societal and authority-applied pressures, analyzing the extent of the pressures placed on students to attend college, as opposed to a trade school or other options. The authors found that many students decided to attend college because it was the socially acceptable action (i.e., what they felt they were expected to do), not due to any practical reasoning or intended career path. These combinations of environmental pressures would be heavy for any person, but especially for adolescents. Kovacs (2008) discusses that parts of the brain most sensitive to feedback are not fully developed at the age that one receives these expectation-loaded messages; therefore, I argue that, due to the nature of the timeline of human brain development, teenagers are likely uniquely more prone to influence and internalization of these external pressures than those older than them.

The overall impact of social media on adolescents is the source of mixed academic discussion. On the impacts of social media on life satisfaction, Orben et. al (2019) found that social media use was, "not, in and of itself, a strong predictor of life satisfaction across the adolescent population" (p. 10226). While the study seems thorough in its research and well-intentioned, I believe its conclusion is misguided; the effects of social media on self-esteem are seemingly presented as overall neutral. While this may be statistically accurate, its presentation seems to be misaligned with other research on the topic; in other studies, social media is argued to have distinct positive and negative effects. Weinstein (2018) asserts that the influence of social media is expressed more accurately as a "see-saw," a combination of both positive and negative components in different categories, like social browsing and self-expression, that contribute to the overall effect on one's well-being (p. 3617-3618). This idea of a see-saw can be extrapolated to the effects of social media outlined in Akram and Kumar (2017), which lists genre-specific positive and negative examples. In the same way that a see-saw becomes unbalanced when there is more weight placed on one side, the negative effects of social media in fields like education vastly outweigh the positive.

Social media platforms are designed in a way that allows users to control and curate their online appearance and, by extension, how they wish to be perceived by others. Reflexively, however, when users consume content created by other people, they are viewing the user's curated online persona (i.e., what they want the world to see). In contrast to the physical world and our daily in-person interactions, where we are limited to interacting with only those who are in close proximity, social media platforms contain an incomprehensibly large pool of users around the world to interact with and compare themselves to. Teenagers now spend an average of 4.8 hours per day on various social media apps, a number which has gone up since previous years (Rothwell, 2023, p. 7). Increasing social media usage is also leading users to make more comparisons between themselves and others; Vogel et. al (2014) found that those who used platforms like Facebook more frequently engaged in more social comparisons, the majority of which were upward social comparisons. As previously discussed, these upward social comparisons have the potential to be either positive or negative. Depending on the environment and context, upward comparisons can have the potential to lead to either motivation to improve oneself to closer resemble the comparison target (meaning, what one compares oneself to) or feel worse about oneself and lead to decreased self-esteem. In the setting of social media, upward social comparison frequently manifests as the latter. Rüther et. al (2023) found that, when social media users were exposed to social media influencers on photo and video sharing platforms like Instagram, they experienced lower self-esteem when engaging in upward social comparisons. When people consume content on social media, particularly created by those they do not know and perceive as better-off in some regard, and engage in upward social comparisons, their experiences are often not positive and constructive, an outcome previously discussed. Instead, these comparisons leave the user feeling worse about themselves.

College Admissions TikTok

Comparison in the college admissions process is not new. Students have historically compared their test scores with publicly available information from previous years released by universities with the statistics of their accepted students pool. However, the creation of the internet and social media have given students the ability to compare so much more than just SATs.

Platforms like TikTok allow for conversation about extracurriculars, GPAs, personal statements, and supplemental essays between an incredibly large pool of current and former applicants; whereas 20 years ago, students could only compare themselves to those near them, now they can compare with the world. Students hope that, by comparing with others, they can somehow gauge their chances of getting in. However, it's impossible to truly quantify or deduce what is an ultimately subjective decision; *New Yorker* columnist Jay Caspian Kang calls it "more or less left up to God," saying that this attempt serves more as a coping mechanism than anywhere near an accurate approximation (Kang, 2023, par. 6).

College Admissions TikTok does not exist as a well-defined community; as with many sects of TikTok, genres of video are established by similar content and similar use of hashtags. In an attempt to view a tangible and representative sample of College Admissions TikToks, I chose to look at TikToks posted with the hashtag "#collegeadmissions." To get an accurate understanding of college admissions discourse, I decided to analyze the first 20 posts that appeared under "#collegeadmissions" and comments posted under them, specifically looking for signs of users engaging in social comparison, the direction of their comparisons, and the overall tone of the message (as an indicator for mood and self-esteem). As it would be unrealistic and unnecessary to record and sort through all comments on every one of the posts, I recorded the top five comments on the premise that the most-liked comments would likely be representative of the overall commenter sentiment.

Analysis

Of the twenty videos I viewed and analyzed under "#collegeadmissions," 50% (10) of them contained comments that engaged in some form of social comparison. Out of these ten videos, all of them contained comments that engaged in upward social comparisons in particular, most often comparing their own applications to the ones being presented in the video.

One video from @limmytalks, a TikTok creator who records himself discussing viewer-submitted college applications, presents what he semi-sarcastically refers to as an "average application" (Kim, 2023). While the student is labeled "average," it becomes apparent early on that this is likely not the case. In the comment section, user @frayyexx (2023) writes, "they are a national level impact with extracurriculars, but still get rejected from 'mid' uni's? What am I gonna do with none." This commenter demonstrates an upward social comparison, with the applicant as the comparison target; they refer to the student as having had a "national level impact with extracurriculars," demonstrating their perception of the applicant as better than themself, at least in regard to their accomplishments. When the commenter rhetorically asks what they're going to do without similarly impactful extracurriculars, they also exemplify the low self-esteem that is often correlated with upward social comparisons; they feel pessimistic and defeated. Other commenters make similar comparisons and express similar sentiments; another user writes, "Ok so obviously there's no way im getting into college because the [extracurriculars] I have are like 4 clubs and an internship" (@_sarakaplan, 2023). This user also engages in an upward comparison, comparing their "4 clubs and an internship" to the high achievements of the applicant. Their self-esteem as a result of this comparison manifests in their declaration that "obviously there's no way [they're] getting into college," concluding that, if the applicant featured in the video was rejected from many schools, they certainly wouldn't be accepted into any schools.

Another video, this time from TikTok user @tineocollegeprep, a creator who also works in the college admissions advising industry, covers the left side of the video with an example of data from a college student's application; this includes the student's GPA, SAT scores, race, extracurriculars, and essay topics. On the right side, Tineo displays the student's college decision results (their acceptances, waitlists, and rejections) (Tineo, 2023). A somber song, Mitski's "My Love Mine All Mine," plays underneath the video. In the comment section, user @ketchuphater9 (2023) writes, "so i have no chance is what ur saying." This commenter engages in an upward social comparison with the applicant presented in the video; it is implied that the commenter perceives the applicant as better off in regards to the competitiveness of their application. Moreover, the commenter appears to express a similar sense of defeatism as an extension of this comparison. The applicant featured in the video was rejected from 18 out of the 26 schools they applied to (Timeo, 2023); as the commenter believes the applicant was more accomplished than them but only got accepted into a select amount of schools, they deduce that they must have "no chance" of getting into the schools they want. A similar sentiment is expressed under a different video from TikTok user @limmytalks, where he presents the application of an obviously high-achieving student with a satirical tone, sarcastically commenting that their impressive achievements were "not anything particularly special" (Lim, 2023). In the comment section, one TikTok user writes, "If that's average then I'm basically nothing" (@_min_min_, 2023). This comment reveals an upward social comparison from the commenter towards the applicant, and, much like prior comments discussed, operates on the premise that the applicant is a stronger candidate than the commenter. This leads to a decrease in self-esteem, demonstrated by how the commenter labels themself as "basically nothing" in comparison.

Discussion

Deeply rooted in a lot of online discussions surrounding college applications and admissions is a sense of disillusionment with the realities of the process and college decisions. This feeling is not by any means limited to the examples I have previously analyzed; comments like those presented before, which exude frustration, hopelessness, and defeat, are found all over social media. Almost all of the comments I cited in this paper had hundreds, if not thousands, of likes from users who likely empathized with the perspective of the commenter. This sentiment is partially based in reality; in the past couple of years, colleges have reported decreasing acceptance rates, with schools like Harvard and Columbia announcing their lowest acceptance rates in their century-spanning histories (Picchi, 2022). Students are aware that it is harder than ever to get into a "good" college, which compounds onto the already existing environmental pressure.

As discussed earlier in the paper, the pressure from a student's environment to attend a "good" college or university often becomes internalized. All the pressure to achieve and do well enough to come out successful is especially difficult to manage when there's no way to really know what "enough" is. If universities advertised that they would admit all students who received, for example, a 1300 on the SAT, then social comparison would likely be much less deeply interwoven into the college admissions experience. However, as this is not the case, the college admissions process becomes incredibly competitive. The age of social media has allowed us to share information with an incredibly large audience at a rate never before possible. But, it has also led to the exacerbation of the competition and comparison between students that were already rampant in participants of the college admissions process.

I have witnessed, however, what I believe to be a community heading towards an encouraging change. In my search through #collegeadmissions, I came across a surprising number of videos that had optimistic messages; one video from TikTok user @masoncohen09 (2022) reminded viewers that "[t]here will be (a lot) of disappointments" in the college admissions process, but "[h]ard work pays off." This marks a shift from the almost exclusively comparative and toxic videos being recommended to me by the TikTok algorithm just one year ago. There seems to be a rising movement of positive college admissions-related content that seeks to encourage self-improvement and hard work while distancing itself from the comparison-based content of its predecessors. I believe this will be greatly beneficial to current and future generations of high school upperclassmen going through the process. The competition that is intrinsic to the college admissions process isn't going anywhere, at least not anytime soon; eradicating it would require restructuring the entire way we think about college admissions. Besides, a little competition isn't always unhealthy. However, reducing content that exacerbates this mentality is certainly a good place to start.

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