



## Emotional well-being: The role of social achievement goals and self-esteem

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### ABSTRACT

The current study examined how self-esteem and social achievement goals affect individuals' emotions independently and jointly using the data collected from 367 college students. Social development goals were related to positive emotions (i.e., love and joy). Social demonstration-avoid goals were related to maladaptive patterns (low levels of joy but high levels of fear, shame and sadness). Social demonstration-approach goals were positively associated with joy but had null relations with all other emotions. The results indicated that social development goals buffered students with low self-esteem against negative emotions and amplified the positive emotional experiences. In contrast, social demonstration-avoid goals were especially harmful for students with low self-esteem.

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### 1. Introduction

Positive affect is a major indicator of individuals' well being. Positive emotions are known to yield a constellation of positive outcomes, such as high resilience, broadened executive functioning capacities (e.g., attention and stamina), greater openness and creativity, and satisfying social interactions and relationships, as well as reduced mortality (see Chida & Steptoe, 2008 for a review).

Motivation is intricately related with emotion. While emotions are often precursors of motivational phenomena (e.g., Oatley, 1992), motivation also affects individuals' emotional experiences (Carver & Scheier, 1981). In the current study, we use a major motivation theory, achievement goal orientation theory, to explain emotion. Achievement goals provide qualitatively different frameworks to interpret achievement-related situations and events, and in turn, influence affective experiences in those situations. As in the academic domain, individuals approach social situations with different social achievement goal orientations (Ryan & Shim, 2006, 2008). For example, some may approach a social situation with a focus on developing social competence (i.e., improve one's

social skills, deepen one's relationships, get to know one's friends better, etc.) while others may approach the same situation with a focus on gaining social recognition or prestige. These social achievement goals are likely to affect how individuals interpret and react to social cues and interactions and in turn, are likely to differentially affect individuals' overall emotional well-being.

To date, little research has examined the relationship between social achievement goals and affective outcomes. However, existing few studies suggest social achievement goals are related to stress, loneliness, and depression (Kuroda & Sakurai, 2011; Mouratidis & Sideridis, 2009) and observable internalizing behaviors such as depressive and anxious behaviors implying internal affective states (Shim & Ryan, 2012). Prior research on social achievement goals and emotions tends to focus on a limited set of emotions such as anxiety and sadness. Following Diener, Smith, and Fujita (1995), we examined six distinct emotions (two positive and four negative), which are considered to represent emotions across different research programs. In addition, we included self-esteem in our investigation. In goal orientation theory literature, it has been widely accepted that the effects of some goals may vary depending on the individuals' perceptions of their ability in the domain under consideration (Ames & Archer, 1987; Elliott & Dweck, 1988). Nonetheless, empirical evidence supporting this premise has been rare in social achievement goal literature. Thus, we included self-esteem, which is not only a strong predictor of affect but also can serve as a potential moderator of the effects of social achievement goals (Shim & Ryan, 2012).

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### 1.1. Social achievement goals and emotions

While having satisfying and lasting social relationships (e.g., social acceptance, see Kirkpatrick, Waugh, Valencia, & Webster, 2002) is one of the key factors leading to positive emotional experiences such as happiness (Diener & Seligman, 2002), the nature of motivation that individuals pursue has also been related to affective outcomes (Ferssizidis et al., 2010). We propose that social achievement goals (Ryan & Shim, 2006, 2008) are likely to be linked to emotional well-being. Social achievement goals represent different orientations toward social competence, affecting individuals' approach, interpretation, and reaction to the events happening in the social world. Individuals with a *social development goal* focus on *developing* social competence and try to better understand their social partners and improve their social interaction skills. Individuals with a *social demonstration-approach goal* aim to *demonstrate* superior social competence by means of obtaining favorable status in the social hierarchy. While similarly concerned about others' judgment of one's social competence, individuals with a *social demonstration-avoid goal* strive to *avoid* rejection or negative judgment from others, rather than obtaining favorable judgment.

According to Carver and colleagues' (Carver, Lawrence, & Scheier, 1996, see also Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2002) control theory of self-regulation, progress toward a goal engenders positive emotions whereas delays and interruptions in the goal pursuit are likely to bring about negative emotions. Under social development goal framework, success means getting a deeper understanding of a friend and improving one's social skills and thus, goal attainment is under one's own control, generating a great sense of autonomy. In contrast, under social demonstration goal (both approach and avoid goals) framework, success or goal attainment is contingent on others' approval and judgment, resulting in a diminished sense of control and autonomy, which has been related to negative emotions (Mouratidis & Michou, 2011). According to this theoretical perspective, social development goals are likely to predict adaptive patterns of emotions (such as high positive and low negative emotions) while social demonstration-approach and -avoid goals are less likely to do so.

The control-value theory posits that high perception of control and subjectively construed value of the activities and outcomes are the key factors determining emotion (Pekrun, Elliot, & Maier, 2009). This theory produces similar predictions regarding the association between goals and emotion. A social development goal is likely to entail an intrinsic value of social interaction, as forming a meaningful social relationship (i.e., becoming a better friend and understanding their friends better) is the desired end state. In contrast, when social demonstration goals are pursued, the focus is not on the social partner but more on the impact that the interaction with the particular social partner may exert on one's status in the social terrain. That is, the value of social interaction depends on how effectively it serves as a means to protect one's position in the social world. Accordingly, social development goals are likely to be linked to more positive emotional experiences due to heightened intrinsic value attached to social interactions, as compared to social demonstration-approach and -avoid goals.

Even though social demonstration-approach and -avoid goals share some common characteristics, we expect that a social demonstration-avoid goal will be related to a worse profile of emotions than its approach counterpart. A social demonstration-avoid goal is an avoidance form in nature and thus undergirded by fear of rejection (Elliot, Gable, & Mapes, 2006). This avoidant nature makes individuals focus on potentially negative outcomes (e.g., being ridiculed, excluded, teased, and considered as 'nerd' or 'geek'), rather than anticipating or seeking positive outcomes (e.g., being liked, being popular). Concerns about future failure or possible negative

events evoke negative emotions, as suggested by the associations between this goal and depression (Kuroda & Sakurai, 2011) and internalizing behaviors (Shim & Ryan, 2012). Accordingly, we expect that this goal type will be negatively related to positive emotions but positively related to negative emotions.

A social demonstration-approach goal is a hybrid type goal, undergirded by both the desire to pursue social success and fear of rejection (Elliot et al., 2006). Therefore, it is not surprising that the nature and the consequences of this goal type have been ambiguous. In many studies, this goal has shown mostly null or very weak relationships with psychological well-being indicators (e.g., Horst, Finney, & Barron, 2007; Kuroda & Sakurai, 2011; Ryan & Shim, 2006). In other studies, social demonstration-approach goals were linked to adaptive outcomes. For example, social demonstration-approach goals were related to popular status among peers (Shim & Ryan, 2012), heightened social confidence (Ryan & Shim, 2008; Shim & Ryan, 2012), and lower anxious behaviors (Shim & Ryan, 2012).

However, this goal type has shown maladaptive patterns of relationships as well. A social demonstration-approach goal has been positively related to social worry (Ryan & Shim, 2006) and aggression (Shim & Ryan, 2012). Such negative outcomes may be related to the lack of perceived control over goal attainment. That is, attainment of favorable judgment from others or social prestige is only partially controllable by the individual – others' perceptions can be tenuous or unpredictable. Such a contingency may make individuals vulnerable and insecure, which in turn compromises emotional well-being (Erdley, Cain, Loomis, Dumas-Hines, & Dweck, 1997). Based on the observed mixed patterns in past research and the theoretical ambiguity of the nature of social demonstration-approach goals, we predict that social demonstration-approach goals will show null relationships with emotions.

### 1.2. The interplay between social achievement goals and self-esteem

Self-esteem refers to a person's overall evaluation of their self-worth (Rosenberg, 1965). Psychologically complex emotions that are tied to achievement (e.g., pride, shame) cannot be fully understood without taking into account the perception and evaluation of self (Brown & Marshall, 2001). Individuals with high self-esteem tend to report high positive affects while insecure individuals tend to report high negative affects (Watson & Clark, 1984). Self-esteem and emotions are likely to influence each other reciprocally but a recent meta-analysis (Sowislo & Orth, 2013) supports the vulnerability model (low self-esteem leads to high depression) over the scar model (high depression leads to low self-esteem).

In addition to the main effect on emotions, self-esteem may moderate the effects of social achievement goals. The desire to win over others and look capable might not be maladaptive as long as an individual has a good chance of obtaining such goals or possesses a positive view of one's competence. On the other side of the coin, this goal may be particularly harmful for individuals with low perceptions of competence, and when individuals encounter setbacks (Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Erdley et al., 1997; Grant & Dweck, 2003). In the current goal literature, this proposal has not been sufficiently tested empirically and the few studies that did yielded no consistent pattern, both in the academic (Harackiewicz, Barron, Tauer, Carter, & Elliot, 2000) and in the social domain (e.g., Shim & Ryan, 2012). However, given the strong association between self-esteem and the outcome variables of the current investigation (i.e., emotions), the moderation may be found in the present study.

To summarize, the current study examined the effects of social achievement goals and self-esteem on six emotions. We examined love, joy, fear, anger, shame, and sadness following the recommendation from Diener et al. (1995). Prior research has examined the relations between academic achievement goals and emotions but

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