

Social Comparison and Performance Satisfaction in Competitive School Sports: A Qualitative Study of Benchmark Formation Among Secondary School Students

Author: Akshita Mogha

Institution: Sardar Patel Vidyalaya, Delhi, India

Mentor: Purba Sen

Abstract

This qualitative study examines how secondary school students construct standards of acceptable performance during competitive school sports and how those standards influence post-event satisfaction. Drawing on Festinger's social comparison theory, achievement goal theory, goal-setting theory, and self-determination theory, the paper investigates whether students evaluate athletic performance through objective measures alone or through socially available comparison points. Primary data were collected through structured post-event interviews and field observations during a school sports meet in New Delhi. The sample included 20 students between approximately 10 and 16 years of age who participated in sprint and 1500-metre track events across gender and age-height groups. Thematic analysis identified four recurring patterns: the use of nearby competitors as immediate benchmarks, downward comparison as a protective strategy, stronger qualification-oriented dissatisfaction among high-performing or leadership-driven participants, and the importance of encouragement and personal goals in sustaining effort. The study proposes the term Adjacent Competitor Effect to describe the tendency of athletes to define satisfaction by reference to the runner immediately ahead of or behind them, rather than by stopwatch time or absolute rank alone. Findings suggest that school sport is a psychologically rich setting in which students negotiate competence, motivation, self-protection, and aspiration in real time. The paper concludes that educators and coaches should balance healthy competition with mastery-based reflection, helping students use comparison constructively without allowing it to narrow their sense of achievement.

Keywords: social comparison theory, school sports, performance satisfaction, achievement motivation, qualitative research, adolescent psychology, competitive behaviour

Introduction

Competition is one of the most visible features of school life. Students compete for grades, positions, recognition, team selection, prizes, and approval from peers and teachers. In sports, this competition becomes especially immediate because performance is public, embodied, and often ranked in real time. A runner knows who is ahead, who is behind, whether the finish line is near, and whether the crowd is watching. Unlike many academic tasks, where feedback may arrive days later, a race offers continuous social information. The athlete's body is moving, but

the mind is also evaluating: Am I fast enough? Am I falling behind? Is the person near me catching up? Have I done enough?

The present study begins from a simple but psychologically important observation: students do not always judge performance by objective measures alone. A stopwatch time, finishing position, or qualification status matters, but it is rarely the whole story. A student who finishes third may feel disappointed because she wanted to overtake the person directly ahead of her. Another student who does not qualify may still feel satisfied because he finished ahead of a close peer. A runner who leads comfortably may ignore adjacent competitors and measure success only by qualification or future leadership goals. These differences suggest that satisfaction is not merely a numerical reaction to performance; it is a socially constructed interpretation of what performance means.

This paper explores how students construct what may be called a threshold of mediocrity or an enough standard in competitive school sports. Mediocrity is used here not as an insult but as a psychological category: the point at which a participant decides that performance is acceptable, safe, disappointing, or worthy of pride. Such thresholds are not fixed. They change according to the participant's goal, the event context, the visibility of competitors, the expectations of the house or team, and the student's own self-concept. In one context, finishing the race may be enough; in another, only qualification may count as success.

The central research question guiding this study is: Do individuals perform better while competing with others, or are they more satisfied on their own? The question deliberately links performance and satisfaction because the two are often assumed to move together, even though student experiences suggest otherwise. Competition may push students to run faster, maintain pace, or avoid falling behind, but it may also create dissatisfaction when the comparison point is just out of reach. Conversely, performing independently may reduce pressure and increase self-satisfaction, but it may also remove an external stimulus that drives effort.

The study's working hypothesis is that individuals set their standards of mediocrity through social comparison, adjusting their benchmarks based on the performance of those around them. To investigate this hypothesis, the paper analyses structured interviews with 20 students who participated in a school sports meet in New Delhi. The events included girls' and boys' 200/400-metre races and 1500-metre races across age-height groups. The study is qualitative and exploratory, focusing on the meanings students attached to their performance rather than on statistical proof of causation.

The contribution of this paper is threefold. First, it applies social comparison theory to a naturalistic school sports setting where comparison is immediate and visible. Second, it develops the concept of the Adjacent Competitor Effect to describe how nearby competitors become psychologically powerful reference points. Third, it argues that school-based competition can be both motivational and limiting, depending on whether students use comparison to set aspirational goals, protect self-esteem, or define themselves as successful only through external rank.

Literature Review

Social comparison theory provides the primary theoretical foundation for this study. Festinger (1954) argued that individuals possess a drive to evaluate their opinions and abilities, especially when objective standards are absent or unclear. In a sports race, an objective standard does exist in the form of time, rank, or qualification. However, the student's lived experience of the race may still depend heavily on social comparison because those objective standards are not always personally meaningful in the moment. A student may not know the exact qualifying time while running, but she can see the runner ahead of her. The visible competitor becomes a convenient and emotionally charged benchmark.

Later work on social comparison expanded Festinger's original theory by emphasising that comparison is not only informational but also self-evaluative and emotional. Wood (1989) showed that people compare themselves with others in ways that influence self-perception, self-esteem, and motivation. Upward comparison, or comparison with someone perceived as better, can inspire improvement but can also produce frustration. Downward comparison, or comparison with someone perceived as worse off, may protect self-esteem but can also reduce aspiration. These dynamics are particularly relevant in school sports because the comparison target is not abstract; it is another student running nearby, often from the same school community.

The study also draws on achievement goal theory. Nicholls (1984) distinguished between different ways individuals define ability. In a task-oriented or mastery-oriented frame, competence is understood through effort, improvement, and personal progress. In an ego-oriented or performance-oriented frame, competence is judged by outperforming others. Ames (1992) further argued that educational environments can make certain goal structures more salient. Competitive sports meets often foreground ego-oriented goals because they rank students, award points, and publicly identify winners. Yet students may still hold mastery goals, such as finishing a difficult race, completing all laps, or improving personal endurance.

Dweck's (1986) work on motivational processes also helps explain why students respond differently to similar outcomes. Students who see ability as something that can be developed may respond to disappointment by identifying strategies for improvement. Students who interpret failure as evidence of fixed ability may feel more threatened by not qualifying or falling behind. Although this study did not directly measure mindset, the interviews suggest that some participants interpreted the race as a learning or endurance challenge, while others interpreted it primarily as a test of status and selection.

Goal-setting theory is another relevant framework. Locke and Latham (2002) demonstrated that specific and challenging goals can improve motivation and performance, particularly when individuals are committed to those goals and receive feedback. In the present context, goals varied across students. Some aimed to qualify for points, some aimed to finish, some aimed to stay ahead of a specific runner, and some connected current performance to future leadership opportunities such as captaincy. These goals shaped satisfaction. A student who aimed merely to

finish could feel proud after completing the race, while a student aiming to qualify could feel dissatisfied despite performing strongly relative to others.

Self-determination theory adds a further layer by distinguishing motivation that is autonomous from motivation that is controlled by external pressure. Deci and Ryan (2000) argued that human motivation is shaped by the needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. School sports can support these needs when students feel capable, encouraged, and personally invested. However, competitive environments can also intensify external pressure if students feel valued only for ranking or qualification. The interviews show both sides: some students were motivated by house points and recognition, while others drew strength from encouragement, personal pride, or the desire to complete what they had started.

The concept of satisficing, introduced by Simon (1956), is useful for understanding why some participants appeared to seek an acceptable rather than optimal outcome. Satisficing refers to choosing an option that is good enough under conditions of limited information, limited energy, or bounded rationality. In a race, students may not calculate optimal performance precisely. Instead, they may use simple cues: stay ahead of one person, do not come last, complete the event, or maintain a respectable position. This does not mean the student lacks ambition. Rather, it shows that individuals often create psychologically manageable goals within demanding environments.

In adolescent contexts, social evaluation carries particular significance because peer recognition and self-concept are still developing. Sports meets are public performances, and the social meaning of success or failure may matter as much as the physical result. This makes school sports a valuable site for studying how young people handle comparison, ambition, disappointment, and self-protection. The literature suggests that competition can motivate effort, but it also warns that excessive emphasis on normative ranking may narrow students' understanding of success. The present study therefore asks not only whether competition improves performance, but how competition alters the meaning of performance.

Methodology

This study used a qualitative observational design supported by structured post-event interviews. A qualitative approach was chosen because the research question concerns perception, motivation, and satisfaction rather than measurable athletic performance alone. The purpose was not to determine who ran fastest, but to understand how students interpreted their own performance and how comparison shaped those interpretations. Qualitative methods are appropriate when a researcher seeks to explore lived experience, subjective meaning, and patterns in participants' explanations.

The research was conducted during a school sports meet at a school in New Delhi. Participants were secondary school students competing in track events for house points. The events observed included girls' 200/400-metre races, boys' 200/400-metre races, girls' 1500-metre race, and boys'

1500-metre race. Students belonged to different age-height groups, labelled in the school context from Group A to Group E, with Group A representing the youngest and shortest students and later groups representing older and taller students. The approximate age range was 10 to 16 years.

The sample consisted of 20 student participants. The available field notes recorded responses across four event clusters: girls' sprint events in Groups A and B, girls' sprint events in Groups D and E, girls' 1500-metre event in Group D, and boys' events in Groups D and E. Participants were selected because they had just completed or attempted the relevant event and could immediately describe what they felt, what they aimed to achieve, and whether they noticed other competitors during the race. The sample was therefore purposive rather than random.

Data were gathered through a structured interview schedule. Each participant was asked the same core questions: How are you feeling? Why are you feeling so? Does that mean you have achieved your aim? What was your aim? Why did you choose this as your goal? Did you notice who was in front of you or behind you while competing? If you did, what were you more focused on? These questions were designed to move from emotional reaction to goal identification and finally to social comparison. They also allowed students to reveal whether satisfaction came from personal completion, qualification, rank, house contribution, or relative positioning.

Observation supplemented the interviews. During the sports meet, attention was paid to the race structure, visible competitive positioning, whether students ran alone or alongside others, and whether participants appeared to respond to nearby competitors. This observational layer helped interpret interview responses. For example, when a student reported wanting to overtake the runner ahead, that statement could be understood in the context of a race where adjacent competitors were clearly visible.

Ethical care was taken in the handling of participant information. Students were informed that their responses would be used for a research study, and consent was taken before interviews. Names were not recorded in the final analysis, and participants are referred to only by event, group, or anonymised descriptors. Because the study involved minors in a school context, anonymity and non-identification were especially important. The paper avoids quoting identifiable personal information and presents results in aggregate or anonymised form.

The data were analysed thematically. The first stage involved reading the interview notes and organising responses according to event category, satisfaction level, stated goal, and comparison focus. The second stage involved identifying recurring patterns, including contentment after completion, dissatisfaction after non-qualification, attention to competitors ahead or behind, desire to avoid falling behind, and pride connected to self-improvement or encouragement. The third stage involved linking these patterns to theoretical concepts from social comparison, achievement motivation, goal-setting, and self-determination theory.

The study has limitations that are important to acknowledge. The sample size is small, the data come from one school, and the interviews were conducted in a highly specific event setting. The study also does not include precise timings, physiological markers, or long-term follow-up. As a result, the findings should not be treated as statistically generalisable. Instead, the value of the study lies in its close qualitative account of how students create and adjust performance benchmarks during a natural competitive event.

Table 1. *Overview of Participants and Event Clusters*

Event cluster	Participants	Key context
Girls 400m/200m, Groups A and B	5	Younger participants; focus on qualification, house points, and adjacent runners.
Girls 400m/200m, Groups D and E	2	Older participants; disappointment about non-qualification but some satisfaction from local comparison.
Girls 1500m, Group D	5	Endurance event; completion, physical limits, encouragement, and lap awareness were important.
Boys events, Groups D and E	4	Older participants; strong qualification orientation and future leadership goals.
Additional interviewed participants across event	4	Included in total field sample and used to identify recurring comparison patterns.
Total	20	Secondary school students at a school sports meet in New Delhi.

Results

The results show that students' satisfaction was shaped by a combination of outcome, comparison, and goal type. Objective outcomes such as qualifying or not qualifying mattered, but they did not fully explain emotional responses. Students frequently interpreted their performance in relation to adjacent competitors, house expectations, personal goals, and perceived physical limits. This section presents the findings by event cluster and then identifies cross-cutting themes.

In the girls' 400/200-metre races for Groups A and B, three out of five participants reported being content with their performance, one felt neutral, and one was not content. The students in leading positions did not report strong concern about adjacent competitors. Their satisfaction appeared to come from having performed well enough to qualify, gain points, or feel appreciated. By contrast, students with runners immediately ahead or behind them were more likely to focus on

staying ahead or attempting to cross the person in front. This suggests that comparison became more salient when rank was uncertain or contested.

In the girls' sprint events for Groups D and E, two participants were interviewed. Both expressed disappointment about not qualifying for their houses. However, one participant reported being content with finishing ahead of the person competing near her. This response is especially significant because it separates official outcome from psychological satisfaction. The student did not meet the formal qualification benchmark, but she did meet a local comparison benchmark. The second participant referred to rigorous training, suggesting that disappointment may also have been intensified by prior investment and expectation.

In the girls' 1500-metre race for Group D, five participants were recorded. Two did not complete the race, while three completed the full course. Only one gained qualification. Those who did not complete the race described physical inability, dizziness, and tiredness, but they also expressed a desire to complete the course. This indicates that not finishing was not simply a matter of low motivation. Rather, students negotiated between physical limits and personal aspiration. Among those who completed the event, satisfaction varied. The participant in third place was dissatisfied because she wanted to cross the person in front of her. The participant in second place described pride in completing the race because she had not expected to do so. The participant who qualified credited a friend's encouragement and also drew motivation from knowing that she was ahead of some runners by one or two laps.

In the boys' events for Groups D and E, four participants were interviewed. All four expressed dissatisfaction with their performance because they did not qualify. This pattern suggests a stronger qualification-oriented standard among these participants. One participant who ran alone connected his motivation to future captaincy and leadership, indicating that his current performance was evaluated through longer-term aspirations. Two leading participants reported that they were not worried about adjacent runners, while one participant stated that he was running at the same speed as another student and pushed himself to avoid falling behind. Again, comparison was strongest where the competitor was near enough to function as a direct benchmark.

Across the data, the most important pattern was the role of the nearby competitor. Students rarely described comparison in broad or abstract terms. They did not say only that they wanted to be the best in the school or beat everyone. More often, they referred to the person immediately ahead, behind, or beside them. This supports the proposed Adjacent Competitor Effect: in a competitive event, the most psychologically powerful comparison target may be the competitor who is physically close and visibly relevant in the moment.

A second pattern was the difference between qualification goals and completion goals. Participants who defined success as qualification were more likely to express dissatisfaction if they failed to meet that formal benchmark. Participants who defined success as completion, effort, or unexpected endurance were more likely to report pride even without winning. This

distinction supports achievement goal theory, which suggests that different definitions of competence produce different emotional responses.

A third pattern was downward comparison as a self-protective strategy. Some students appeared to derive satisfaction from not being last, staying ahead of one competitor, or being ahead by laps. This did not necessarily mean they lacked motivation. Rather, downward comparison helped them maintain a sense of competence in a public competitive setting. For adolescents, avoiding embarrassment may be psychologically important, especially when performance is visible to peers.

A fourth pattern was the limited role of objective measurement in participants' immediate accounts. Stopwatch time was not central in most responses. Students talked more about qualification, position, effort, physical feeling, house points, encouragement, and nearby competitors. This finding does not mean that objective performance is irrelevant. It means that students translated objective performance into personal meaning through social and motivational frames.

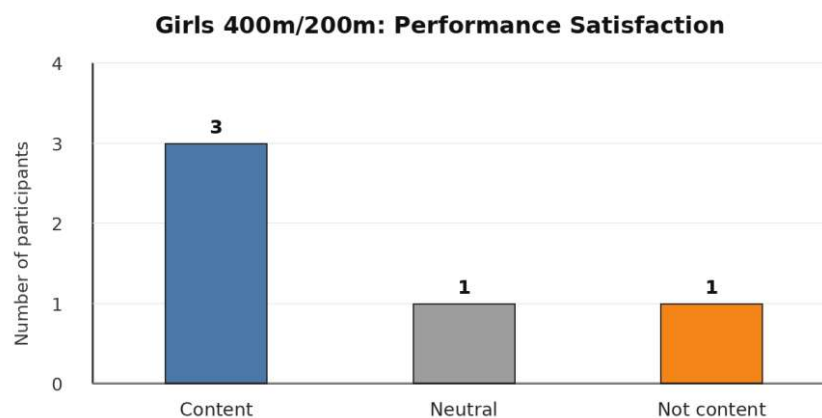


Figure 1: Satisfaction levels in girls' 400m/200m races, Groups A and B.

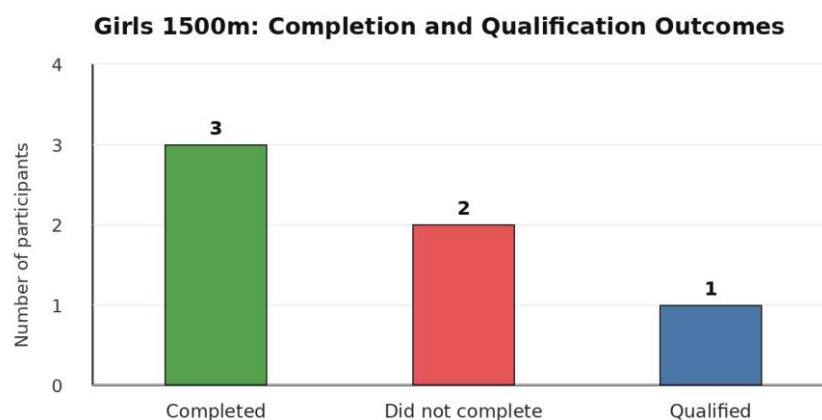


Figure 2: Completion and qualification outcomes in the girls' 1500m race, Group D.

Table 2. *Summary of Performance Perceptions and Comparison Patterns*

Event cluster	Performance perception	Social comparison impact	Motivational factors
Girls 400m/200m, Groups A and B	3/5 content, 1/5 neutral, 1/5 not content.	Leaders showed lower concern with nearby competitors; middle runners focused on staying ahead or overtaking.	Qualification, house points, self-appreciation, and external recognition.
Girls 400m/200m, Groups D and E	Both disappointed by not qualifying; one still content with finishing ahead of a direct competitor.	Strong local comparison despite formal non-qualification.	Training effort, house contribution, and peer positioning.
Girls 1500m, Group D	2/5 did not complete; 3/5 completed; 1/5 qualified.	Third-place runner dissatisfied due to the competitor ahead; qualified runner drew strength from being ahead by laps.	Physical endurance, completion goal, peer encouragement, and qualification.
Boys events, Groups D and E	All four interviewed participants dissatisfied due to lack of qualification.	Leading runners ignored adjacent competitors; one runner pushed to avoid falling behind a same-pace peer.	Qualification, captaincy aspiration, leadership credentials, and competitive positioning.

Table 3. *Main Themes Identified Through Thematic Analysis*

Theme	Description	Illustrative evidence from field notes
Adjacent Competitor Effect	Nearby competitors became immediate benchmarks for satisfaction.	Participants focused on the runner directly ahead, behind, or beside them.
Protective downward comparison	Students used lower-ranked competitors to maintain psychological safety.	Some satisfaction came from staying ahead, not being last, or being laps ahead.
Qualification-oriented dissatisfaction	Formal selection or house-point criteria shaped disappointment.	Several older participants were dissatisfied mainly because they did not qualify.
Mastery and completion satisfaction	Some students valued finishing, effort, and unexpected endurance.	A 1500m participant felt proud because she completed a race she had not expected to finish.
Social encouragement	Peer support increased motivation during demanding moments.	One qualifying runner credited a friend's encouragement as crucial.

Discussion

The findings support the hypothesis that students set standards of mediocrity through social comparison and adjust their benchmarks according to the performance of those around them. However, the study also shows that social comparison does not operate in a single uniform way. For some students, comparison raised aspiration; for others, it protected self-esteem; for still others, it became irrelevant because their standard was qualification, leadership, or personal completion.

The Adjacent Competitor Effect is the central conceptual contribution of this paper. In the observed races, students did not evaluate themselves only against the official winner or the formal qualifying time. Instead, the competitor immediately ahead or behind often became the practical measure of success. This effect may occur because adjacent competitors are visible, emotionally immediate, and actionable. A student cannot easily change the entire race outcome in the final stretch, but she can try to overtake one runner or prevent one runner from passing her. The nearby competitor therefore turns a large competitive field into a manageable personal contest.

This effect also helps explain why performance satisfaction may diverge from official results. A student who fails to qualify may still feel satisfied if she wins the local contest against a nearby competitor. Conversely, a student who performs well objectively may feel dissatisfied if she fails to overtake the person she had privately selected as her benchmark. In this sense, the student's mental race may differ from the official race. The official race measures rank and time; the mental race measures whether the student met the comparison target that became meaningful during performance.

The findings also reveal the protective function of mediocrity thresholds. The term mediocrity can sound negative, but in this study, it refers to a psychological safety line. Students may define acceptable performance as finishing, not being last, staying ahead of a peer, or gaining house points. Such thresholds can protect students from the emotional cost of public failure. They allow a participant to say, in effect, I did enough to preserve competence. This is consistent with the idea of satisficing: under pressure, people often settle on a good-enough benchmark that reduces uncertainty and emotional risk.

At the same time, the mediocrity threshold can limit aspiration if it becomes too comfortable. If a student repeatedly defines success only as staying above the lowest position, comparison may prevent growth. The educational challenge is therefore not to remove comparison entirely, but to help students interpret it constructively. Coaches and teachers can ask students to reflect on personal improvement, pacing strategy, endurance, effort, and learning, rather than focusing only on rank. Such reflection can shift the meaning of competition from ego protection to mastery development.

The gendered patterns in the field notes should be interpreted cautiously because the sample is small. The data suggests that some girls described performance in broader terms such as self-appreciation, completion, encouragement, and house contribution, while some boys, especially older participants, expressed stronger qualification-based dissatisfaction. However, it would be inappropriate to generalise strongly from this limited sample. The more reliable interpretation is that performance standards vary according to goal structure, prior training, perceived role, and social expectations. Future studies with larger samples could examine whether gender, age, event type, or competitive experience significantly influences comparison patterns.

The study also complicates the question of whether individuals perform better while competing with others or are more satisfied on their own. Competition appears to increase effort when the comparison target is close and achievable. The student running at the same speed as another participant pushed himself to avoid falling behind. The student aware of being a lap or two ahead found additional strength in that knowledge. These cases suggest that competition can activate motivation. However, satisfaction may be higher when students are able to define success through personal goals rather than constant comparison. The participant who completed the 1500 metres and felt proud because she had not expected to finish illustrates this point.

The results are therefore best understood as a tension between performance activation and satisfaction stability. Competition can activate effort by creating urgency, visibility, and immediate feedback. Yet satisfaction becomes unstable when the benchmark keeps shifting to the next visible competitor. A student may begin with the goal of finishing, then become dissatisfied because someone ahead was not overtaken. This shifting benchmark is psychologically powerful but potentially exhausting. It may help students improve, but it can also make them feel that no performance is enough.

For school environments, the implication is that competitive events should be paired with reflective coaching. Students should be encouraged to set layered goals: an outcome goal, such as qualification; a process goal, such as maintaining pace; and a personal goal, such as completing the race or improving from a previous performance. Layered goals reduce the risk that satisfaction depends entirely on rank. They also allow students to learn from competition without making self-worth dependent on beating others.

The findings also have implications beyond sports. Similar comparison processes may occur in academics, music, debating, leadership selection, and college admissions. Students often do not evaluate themselves against objective criteria alone; they evaluate themselves against the person sitting next to them, the classmate who scored slightly higher, or the peer who gained recognition. The Adjacent Competitor Effect may therefore be a broader adolescent phenomenon in which nearby peers become disproportionately influential benchmarks for self-evaluation.

Conclusion

This study examined how secondary school students construct standards of acceptable performance during competitive school sports. Based on structured interviews and observations with 20 students at a school sports meet in New Delhi, the paper found that satisfaction was shaped not only by objective outcomes but also by social comparison, goal type, and perceived effort. The results support the hypothesis that students adjust their benchmarks according to the performance of those around them.

The proposed Adjacent Competitor Effect captures one of the study's clearest insights: students often measure their performance against the competitor immediately ahead, behind, or beside them. This comparison target becomes emotionally powerful because it is visible, relevant, and reachable. It can motivate effort, but it can also create dissatisfaction when students define success narrowly as overtaking one person or avoiding being overtaken.

The study also shows that mediocrity thresholds can serve both protective and limiting functions. They protect students by creating manageable standards in high-pressure public settings, but they may limit growth if students use downward comparison to avoid challenge. Educators and coaches should therefore help students develop healthier evaluative habits. Competition should not be removed from school life, but it should be framed through personal growth, process goals, resilience, and reflection.

The paper concludes that students perform and evaluate themselves within a social field. Their sense of achievement is shaped by what they see, who they compare themselves with, and what they believe counts as enough. Understanding these processes can help schools design competitive experiences that build motivation without damaging self-worth.

Limitations and Scope for Future Research

The study is exploratory and has several limitations. The sample size was small, and all participants came from one school context. The research relied on immediate post-event interviews, which captured fresh emotional responses but may also have reflected temporary excitement, disappointment, or fatigue. The study did not collect stopwatch timings, prior athletic records, or follow-up data. It also did not systematically compare gender, age, training experience, or event type through statistical analysis.

Future research could expand the sample across multiple schools and sports, include both qualitative interviews and quantitative performance data, and examine whether adjacent comparison affects actual performance times. Longitudinal research could also explore whether students who rely heavily on downward comparison develop lower aspiration over time, or whether they use such comparison only temporarily as a coping strategy. Another useful direction would be to study how coaches' language before and after events shapes whether students adopt mastery goals or purely rank-based goals.

Despite these limitations, the study offers a useful starting point for understanding how adolescents evaluate performance in visible competitive settings. Its central value lies in showing that student satisfaction is not a simple reflection of winning or losing. It is created through the interaction of comparison, aspiration, self-protection, encouragement, and personal meaning.

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