Being kind to ourselves: Self-compassion, coping, and consumption

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A B S T R A C T

Most consumer research on coping builds from the notion of pursuing self-esteem. However, recent psychological research emphasizes the pursuit of self-compassion as a healthier goal versus the pursuit of self-esteem within coping strategies. Only a minority of consumer research studies discuss self-compassion in relation to coping. Yet, these more recent consumer studies firstly, do not explore the different coping strategies linked to self-compassion even though psychological research suggests that self-compassion involves different components. Secondly, these recent consumer studies do not explore the role of socio-temporal comparisons in self-compassionate coping even though psychological research relates socio-temporal comparisons to self-compassion. This phenomenological study of downwardly mobile consumers identifies different coping strategies that reflect a pursuit of self-compassion and highlights how coping strategies, with a focus on self-compassion, relate to socio-temporal comparisons. The study contrasts and maps consumers' coping strategies in their pursuit of self-esteem and self-compassion. The study contributes to an understanding of consumer coping.

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Most consumer research on coping centers around the notion of protecting, restoring, or bolstering self-esteem (e.g., Burroughs & Rindfleisch, 1997; Elliott, 1995; Hamilton, 2012; Hamilton & Catterall, 2008; Henry & Caldwell, 2006; Hill & Stamey, 1990; Sivanathan & Pettit, 2010; Viswanathan, Rosa, & Harris, 2005). However, despite the benefits of self-esteem, recent psychological research highlights the self-defeating costs associated with the pursuit of self-esteem such as contingencies of self-worth and rather emphasizes the pursuit of self-compassion as a healthier alternative to the pursuit of self-esteem in coping strategies (e.g., Leary, Tate, Adams, Batts Allen, & Hancock, 2007; Neff, Kirkpatrick, & Rude, 2007). Self-esteem refers to a self-attitude in which self-worth is conditional on (perceived) personal competence, performance, and attainment of desired states and ideals. Self-compassion, in contrast, refers to a self-attitude that is non-judgmental toward one's inadequacies and failures and in which self-worth is unconditional (e.g., Crocker & Wolfe, 2001; Leary et al., 2007; Neff et al., 2007). Because self-esteem incorporates conditional self-worth, it is non-protective against self-deficits (i.e., discrepancies between how one wants to view oneself and how one currently views oneself). However, self-compassion, incorporating unconditional self-worth, entails compassion for one's self in instances of perceived inadequacy or failure. Self-compassion therefore represents a healthier form of self-acceptance and plays an important role in how people cope

with problems. Self-compassion is associated with greater emotional balance than self-esteem (e.g., Leary et al., 2007). Nevertheless, consumer research on coping largely neglects the notion of self-compassion. Only a minority of consumer research studies discuss self-compassion and self-acceptance (i.e., Bahl & Milne, 2010; Kim & Gal, 2014). However, these recent studies do not explore firstly, the different coping strategies specifically related to self-compassion and secondly, the role of socio-temporal comparisons (i.e., the individual's comparisons of himself/herself with others as well as with his/her own past and his/her desired and undesired selves) in self-compassionate coping. The next sections deal with the literature about self-compassion and socio-temporal comparisons as the theoretical framework for the study. The Greek context is then outlined for the phenomenological interviews with downwardly mobile consumers coping with financial difficulties.

1. Consumer coping

The majority of consumer research on coping centers around the notion of pursuing self-esteem (often without providing a definition of self-esteem). For instance, Hamilton (2012) and Hamilton and Catterall (2008) discuss how coping successes can be important sources of self-esteem for lone poor mothers in an era of stigmatization of welfare mothers or single mothers on benefits. Viswanathan et al. (2005) explore illiterate consumers' coping that aims to protect their self-esteem in marketplace encounters. Likewise, previous research highlights compensatory consumption as a coping strategy that enhances self-esteem. Individuals consume products that symbolically

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compensate for self-deficits in a pursuit of self-esteem (e.g., Gao, Wheeler, & Shiv, 2009; Kim & Gal, 2014; Woodruffe, 1997; Yurchisin, Yan, Watchravesringkan, & Chen, 2006); or use self-gifts as messages to and from themselves that can be elevating, protective, or therapeutic to self-esteem (e.g., Mick & DeMoss, 1990). This work is in line with Wicklund and Gollwitzer (1982)'s symbolic self-completion theory, which suggests that individuals with low self-esteem achieve a more complete sense of self-identity with the acquisition of material objects. Burroughs and Rindfleisch (1997), for example, examine how children coping with parental divorce and family stress try to enhance their self-esteem via materialism. Similarly, Sivanathan and Pettit (2010) discuss how low-income consumers' lowered self-esteem drives their willingness to spend on high-status goods. In contrast, Elliott (1995) suggests disengaging from, avoiding, and resisting consumer culture as a coping strategy of the long-term unemployed who try to construct self-definitions outside the culture of consumption, bolstering the value of voluntary simplicity to preserve their self-esteem. Hill and Stamey (1990) suggest distancing as a coping strategy of homeless individuals who try to restore their self-esteem by keeping distance from their more dependent peers. Previous research also discusses fantasy as a way poorer individuals cope with conditions that erode their self-esteem (Hill, 1991; Hill & Stephens, 1997). Avoiding and shifting responsibility for negative outcomes has also been discussed as an avoidance strategy that protects the self-esteem (Viswanathan et al., 2005). Such other-blame or external locus of control to protect self-esteem has been associated with the coping strategy of confrontation (Henry & Caldwell, 2006; Yi & Baumgartner, 2004).

Unlike the series of papers above which identify the variety of coping strategies linked to self-esteem as the goal pursuit, only one consumer research study directly discusses the notion of self-compassion. Bahl and Milne (2010) see self-compassion as one of the ways consumers deal with identity tensions and inconsistent consumption preferences. Bahl and Milne (2010) refer to consumers' compassionate inner dialogs that are not judgmental but rather show understanding and kindness towards the self. Closely allied to self-compassion, Kim and Gal (2014) explore the concept of self-acceptance which they define as the detachment of one's self-worth from one's self-assessment. Kim and Gal (2014) discuss how self-acceptance can lead to adaptive consumption (that intends to help the individual improve in the area of deficit), while the pursuit of self-esteem can lead to compensatory consumption (to symbolically compensate for perceived self-deficits in abilities, traits, and status). Kim and Gal (2014) question whether engaging in compensatory consumption in order to pursue self-esteem and to avoid threatening information about the self can offer a defense against self-threats (especially in the face of chronic or recurrent threats); they question whether it gives consumers the chance to directly face the self-deficit and they warn against the long-term harm that compensatory consumption can lead to in pursuit of self-esteem. However, these two recent consumer studies firstly, do not explore different coping strategies of self-compassion—as an alternative to linking coping strategies to the pursuit of self-esteem-even though psychological research suggests that self-compassion involves different (though interrelated) components (see Table 1) and potentially offers a greater sense of well-being within coping strategies. Secondly, these two recent consumer studies do not explore the role of socio-temporal comparisons in self-compassionate coping even though recent psychological research relates such comparisons to self-compassion.

Table 1
Components of self-compassion and self-esteem.

Self-compassion	Common humanity	Mindfulness		Self-kindness
Self-esteem	Isolation	Avoidance	Over-identification	Self-criticism

2. Components of self-compassion

Firstly, self-compassion involves self-kindness rather than harsh self-criticism when encountering pain and personal shortcomings. Individuals are kind to themselves and view their worth as unconditional even after failure (Leary et al., 2007). Secondly, self-compassion encompasses the concept of common humanity that involves acknowledging suffering and personal failure as part of the shared human experience rather than isolating oneself. Thirdly, self-compassion involves mindfulness as a way of resisting two opposing drives associated with the pursuit of self-esteem (i.e., over-identification and avoidance); and represents the middle ground between them (see Table 1). Over-identification involves ruminating on one's own limitations and magnifies the significance of failures. Avoidance of painful emotions intensifies them in the long-term (Neff & Vonk, 2009). Mindfulness involves taking a balanced approach to one's negative emotions so that the individual neither exaggerates nor suppresses or denies his/her feelings. In mindfulness, individuals observe their negative thoughts and emotions with open-mindedness and a lack of judgment (thus avoiding over-identification, rumination, and avoidance) (Brown & Ryan, 2003).

3. Social and temporal comparisons

Psychological research relates social comparisons (e.g., Festinger, 1954; Wood, 1989) to the notion of self-esteem (e.g., Aspinwall & Taylor, 1993; Collins, 1996; Crocker, Thompson, McGraw, & Ingerman, 1987; Taylor & Lobel, 1989) and more recently to the notion of self-compassion (Breines & Chen, 2012; Laithwaite et al., 2009). Even though some scholars argue about a negative relationship (e.g., Leary et al., 2007; Neff, 2003) between social comparison and self-compassion, other scholars suggest a positive relationship (e.g., Breines & Chen, 2012; Laithwaite et al., 2009). However, consumer research studies focus only on the role of self-esteem within social comparisons (e.g., Ackerman, MacInnis, & Folkes, 2000; Gulas & McKeage, 2000; Richins, 1991; Smeesters, Mussweiler, & Mandel, 2010) and do not explore the role of self-compassion within social comparison. Consumers' standards of comparison can be generated in a variety of different ways. For instance, points of comparison can also arise from prior lifestyles and past selves as well from desired and undesired selves (Banister & Hogg, 2001; Hill, 1991; Markus & Nurius, 1986; Schouten, 1991). Low-income consumers, for example, compare their economic standing to that of others or to their own economic standing earlier in time (Gulas & McKeage, 2000; Sharma & Alter, 2012). Prior consumer literature relates such temporal comparisons to self-esteem (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Schouten, 1991) and neglects the role of self-compassion within temporal comparisons. However, both social and temporal comparisons can relate to self-compassion. Therefore, this study on downwardly mobile Greek consumers investigates socio-temporal comparisons and self-compassionate coping strategies in order to add to the understanding of consumer coping.

4. The Greek context

Since the 1960s, Greek society has undergone a process of urbanization, industrialization, and modernization. European Union (EU) integration and transnational influences—due to global exposure to mass media, tourism, and cultural exchanges—have facilitated this process (Georgas, 1989; Kouremenos & Avlonitis, 1995). Reflecting the rise of a consumer culture, store displays, mass media, and advertising provided exaggerated consumption images and expanded consumers' ability to use goods to make social comparisons. Greater discretionary income and access to consumer credit had encouraged the democratization of consumer aspirations and desire. However, Greece has proved to be particularly vulnerable to the global recession and unable to handle the inherited debt. As a member of the EU, Greece asked for support