



Feeling inferior, showing off: The effect of nonmaterial social comparisons on conspicuous consumption

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ABSTRACT

While previous research has shown that consumers strive to keep up their consumption with those who own superior possessions by purchasing conspicuously displayed products (i.e., “keeping-up-with-the-Joneses” effect), little attention has been paid to how nonmaterial comparisons might affect their subsequent preferences and spending propensities. This research examines *whether* and *when* social comparisons that occur in prior, consumption unrelated domains will influence consumers' conspicuous consumption behaviors. Building upon social comparison theory and the compensatory consumption literature, the authors propose that inferiority experienced in threatening nonmaterial social comparison situations motivates consumers to restore their sense of superiority in the material domain by engaging in conspicuous consumption. However, this depends on whether the comparison target is in a competitive or cooperative relationship with the self and whether consumers have a clear and well-articulated self-concept. Results across four studies confirm these hypotheses. Theoretical contributions and marketing implications are discussed.

1. Introduction

Imagine Lisa, an undergraduate student who is competitive with her classmate, Monica. One day, both Lisa and Monica receive their grades on an important test. It turns out that Monica has performed better than Lisa. How might this unfavorable social comparison experience in academics affect Lisa's purchase behavior?

A large body of research has addressed the “keeping-up-with-the-Joneses” effect in which consumers compare what they have to what others have, realize they are worse off and strive to reduce the possession gap by acquiring conspicuously displayed products (e.g., Christen & Morgan, 2005; Frank, 1985; Gurzki & Woisetschlager, 2017; Kastanakis & Balabanis, 2014; Kaus, 2013). However, while much of this research has focused on the motivating role of material comparisons in driving conspicuous consumption, little attention has been paid to the potential influence of social comparisons that occur in non-material domains as in the opening example.

The current research suggests Lisa's subsequent purchasing behavior might be affected by the comparison experience with Monica. In social comparison contexts, comparing the self to superior targets results in feelings of inferiority (Corcoran, Crusius, & Mussweiler, 2011; Festinger, 1954). As striving for superiority is a central human

motivation (Adler, 1927; Festinger, 1954), consumers attempt to cope with that inferiority and restore their sense of superiority. In the consumption sphere, the superiority goal can be achieved by acquiring and/or by displaying costly material possessions (Shrum et al., 2013; Veblen, 1899/1994). Therefore, this research proposes that comparisons with superior targets will result in conspicuous consumption, even if the comparisons occur in domains that are unrelated to consumption. Consistent with this prediction, we show that consumers are more willing to spend money on conspicuous products after making upward comparisons (i.e., comparing to superior targets) than after making downward comparisons (i.e., comparing to inferior targets) or no comparison.

This research contributes to our understanding of the relationship between social comparison and conspicuous consumption by not only examining *whether* non-material social comparison will affect conspicuous consumption, but also by investigating *when* it occurs. Specifically, two potential boundary conditions are explored. We propose that the effect of upward comparison on conspicuous consumption depends on whether consumers are in a competitive or cooperative relationship with the comparison target (Colpaert, Muller, Fayant, & Butera, 2015), as well as on how well consumers' self-beliefs are articulated and integrated (self-concept clarity; Campbell et al., 1996).

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The rest of the manuscript is organized as follows. First, we review research on social comparison and compensatory consumption. Then, we test the main hypotheses across four studies. Finally, we conclude with a discussion on the theoretical and practical implications.

2. Conceptual background

2.1. Social comparison and its impact on the self

Consumers obtain knowledge about the self by comparing their thoughts, feelings and performances to others (Festinger, 1954). The information about what others can and cannot do, or what others have and have not achieved, or what characteristics others do or do not possess, is often used to evaluate oneself (Corcoran et al., 2011). Based on the relative position between the self and the comparison target, social comparisons can be categorized into upward comparisons, in which consumers compare themselves to a better-off or superior target (s), and downward comparisons, in which consumers compare themselves to a worse-off or inferior target(s) (Festinger, 1954).

Prior research has examined the influence of social comparisons on consumers' feelings about themselves. Although some studies show that consumers might also feel inspired by superior targets (e.g., Lockwood & Kunda, 1997), feelings of inferiority and threat are still strong reactions to upward social comparisons (Gilbert, Giesler, & Morris, 1995; Muller & Fayant, 2010). For example, Morse and Gergen (1970) demonstrate that comparisons to a person with socially desirable characteristics (e.g., well-groomed and confident) decreased consumers' self-evaluations. While much research exists on the influence of social comparison on the self, much less is known about the subsequent behavioral outcomes (Johnson, 2012). This research extends the social comparison literature by investigating its impact on consumption decisions and its boundary conditions.

2.2. Compensatory consumption theory

Compensatory consumption refers to “the desire for, acquisition, or use of products to respond to a psychological need or deficit” (Rucker & Galinsky, 2013, p.207). The theoretical root of compensatory consumption is based on the notion of possessions as part of the extended self (Belk, 1988). As documented in considerable literature, the possessions that consumers own are a major contributor to and a reflection of their identities (Belk, 1988; Elbedweihy, Jayawardhena, Elsharnouby, & Elsharnouby, 2016; Sheth, Newman, & Gross, 1991; Shrum et al., 2013; Solomon, 1983). Thus, consumers strive to construct or maintain their identities through the acquisition and use of products and brands that are perceived to provide desirable symbolic values (Shrum et al., 2013). Therefore, when confronted with threats to important identities, consumers are likely to address the threat by emphasizing the symbols that could signal their mastery in the threatened domain (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1981). For example, Wicklund and Gollwitzer (1981) show that MBA students who lack objective indicators of success (e.g., a high GPA, multiple job offers), are more inclined to display symbolic possessions (e.g., expensive watches and briefcases) to affirm their success.

More recently, research has found that consumers rely on consumption as a tool to ward off psychological threats (for reviews, see Lee & Shrum, 2013; Rucker & Galinsky, 2013). For example, Rucker and Galinsky (2008) show that consumers who experience a powerless state are more inclined to acquire status goods in an attempt to re-establish power. Mead, Baumeister, Stillman, Rawn, and Vohs (2011) show that social exclusion motivates consumers to reconnect with others by purchasing products that could signal group membership. However, the previous literature has left a gap in our understanding of how social comparisons might drive compensatory consumption behaviors and what factors affect this process. The current research empirically examines the effect of non-consumption social comparison on

conspicuous consumption, as well as its boundary conditions.

2.3. Social comparison and conspicuous consumption

Conspicuous consumption refers to the acquisition and display of possessions with the intention of signaling wealth and social status (Veblen, 1899/1994). In his classic treatise, “The Theory of the Leisure Class”, Veblen (1899/1994) argues that wealthy people often consume highly conspicuous products and services to fulfill the desire of enhancing status. However, research has shown that consumers from the bottom of the income distribution are more likely to engage in conspicuous consumption (Banerjee & Duflo, 2007; Charles & Roussanov, 2009; Kaus, 2013). Charles and Roussanov (2009) find that economically disadvantaged Americans spend a larger proportion of their income on conspicuously displayed goods (e.g., clothing, jewelry, and cars).

A common explanation for this pattern is the motivation of “keeping-up-with-the-Joneses” (Christen & Morgan, 2005; Frank, 1985). Specifically, consumers with lower levels of possessions make comparisons with well-off consumers, realize the possession gap between them, and restore their superiority by attaining and publicly displaying the same level of possessions as those who are better off. In support of this account, psychological research shows that the desirable goods that another person possesses triggers an impulsive tendency to acquire those goods (Crusius & Mussweiler, 2012) and elicits a greater willingness to pay for those goods (Van de Ven, Zeelenberg, & Pieters, 2011).

While these demonstrations have primarily focused on how social comparisons that occur in material domain affect consumer behaviors, a recent study by Zheng, Baskin, and Peng (2018) shows that non-material comparisons also have an effect on people's materialistic tendency. The present research extends this research by examining the spillover effect of incidental social comparison experiences that are unrelated to material consumption on subsequent conspicuous consumption decisions. Specifically, we propose that consumers tend to feel inferior after making comparisons to those who possess advantages over them in life (Corcoran et al., 2011; Festinger, 1954). As inferiority is an aversive psychological state (Adler, 1927), consumers are motivated to alleviate it and restore a sense of superiority. In a consumer context, the superiority goal can be achieved by acquiring and/or displaying costly material possessions (Lee & Shrum, 2012). Therefore, we propose that threatening upward social comparisons that are unrelated to consumption will motivate consumers to restore superiority by engaging in conspicuous consumption.

H1. Consumers who make upward social comparisons will be more likely to engage in conspicuous consumption than those who make downward social comparisons and those who do not make any social comparisons.

H2. Desire to restore superiority mediates the effect of social comparison on conspicuous consumption.

2.4. The moderating role of relationship orientation

Consumers might either compete or cooperate with their comparison target. For example, a football player might compete with another player when they are on different teams, and cooperate with the same player when they become part of the same team. This relationship orientation determines the effect of social comparison on the self (Colpaert et al., 2015).

According to the Inclusion/Exclusion Model (Schwarz & Bless, 2007), information's influence depends on whether it is used as a standard against which a target is evaluated or is included in the representation of the evaluation target. In social comparison contexts, people tend to feel negatively about themselves if they take the superior

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