IMPACT OF SOCIAL COMPARISONS ON MATERIAL SATISFACTION: THE ROLE OF SIMILARITY

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ABSTRACT

The impact of social comparison information on consumer satisfaction with material possessions was examined in an experiment. A 2 (dis/similarity of target) x 2 (up/downward comparison) design revealed that a similar comparison target had an inoculating effect on the subjects, whereby levels of satisfaction did not vary between upward and downward comparisons. But a dissimilar target led to greater satisfaction for downward and lower satisfaction for upward comparison. Results indicate that in the case of a similar/close comparison target, subjects had a greater tendency to identify and empathize with the target, which appears to be the mechanism for the inoculating effect. In the case of the dissimilar other, traditional social comparison predominates. Overall, there is strong evidence that our satisfaction with material possessions is affected by social comparisons.

INTRODUCTION

If John, who drives an old car, sees an elegant looking luxury car pass by, how would this alter John's feelings towards his car? Consider Jane, who has a clerical job. She visits an old friend after many years, and finds out that her friend lives in a posh neighborhood, owns two expensive cars and is leading a luxurious life. How is Jane likely to feel about her life and possessions? In both these cases, individuals have been exposed to social comparison information in a consumption context. When we are exposed to information about others' material possessions in our social environment, how does such social comparison information affect our attitudes towards or satisfaction with our material possessions?

Social comparison is a pervasive phenomenon (Wood 1989) that affects every aspect of our lives, including the domain of consumption activities, hence the common expression "keeping up with the Jones'." We live in a society were upward mobility is appreciated and material success applauded, whereby our status in society is often defined by what we own or do not own (cf. Hirschman and LaBarbera 1990; Richins and Dawson 1992). In such a consumption based society, we have many motives and opportunities to engage in social comparisons. What are the affective consequences of such social comparisons? Currently, the impact of social comparison information on consumer satisfaction at a product-specific level or, more generally, satisfaction with our material possessions has not been studied. This paper investigates this issue which is very pertinent to the study of consumer behavior.

BACKGROUND

According to the original social comparison theory (Festinger 1954), human beings have a drive to evaluate their opinions and abilities through comparisons with other people, especially in the absence of objective standards. In consumer contexts, objective standards for appropriate behaviors may often be lacking, making social comparisons commonplace. A social comparison occurs when an individual seeks (or is confronted with) information from the social environment, directly or indirectly, about his or her relative position (say, with respect to material possessions). A social comparison may be upward (meaning that the "other" person is better off than oneself on the comparison dimension) or downward (meaning that the "other" person is worse off than oneself).

In the realm of consumer behavior, it has been proposed that social comparisons may play an important role in shaping consumer judgements (Folkes and Kiesler 1991; Moschis 1976; Richins 1991). Social comparisons may be product-specific (as in John's case) or may be more global, involving a comparison of material possessions in general (as in Jane's case). It seems even images in advertisements can trigger social comparisons (cf. Richins 1991), thus making direct social interaction unnecessary for social comparisons to occur.

The present research focuses on overall satisfaction with material possessions, and examines how social comparison information

affects our thoughts and feelings towards our possessions. We live in a materialistic culture, where ownership and possession of goods often defines our status and position in the society (Hirschman and LaBarbera 1990; Richins and Dawson 1992). Materialism has been cited as a cause for lower life satisfaction (e.g., Belk 1985). The social comparison process may provide an explanation for the mechanism by which materialism lowers life satisfaction (e.g., Richins 1992; Richins and Rudmin 1994).

Even though there is evidence that distributive justice is related to material well-being (Alwin 1987), a direct investigation of how social comparison impacts our judgements of material satisfaction has not been carried out yet. Hence the construct of "satisfaction with possessions" and how it is influenced by social comparison information is the focus of this research.

Before examining the effects of social comparison on material satisfaction, let us pause for a moment to look at the effect of social comparisons in other domains. In the area of pay satisfaction, it has been reported that when deciding if they are being paid fairly, people consider not just the "absolute" amount of pay, but also the "relative" amount of pay, which is determined by engaging in social comparison with others in similar positions (Taylor and Vest 1992). Also in an employment related context, Laventhal (1980) had suggested that social comparisons may play a crucial role in the individual's perception of fairness within organizations. Equity theory, which has been used in explaining pay satisfaction (e.g., Jasso and Rossi 1977), does indeed use the social comparison process in a specific manner, where the comparison includes explicit assessment of inputs and outputs. Even in areas considered to be "private" domains, such as marital relationships, VanYperen and Buunk (1991) have documented that the social comparison process plays a significant role in determining marital satisfaction. Fox and Kahneman (1992) also found that social comparison was more related to global life satisfaction for private domains (such as love life and friends), where social information is scarce and is traditionally seen as unimportant. In summary, social comparisons not only are ubiquitous, but also significantly impact on satisfaction judgements in different domains. These findings provide a strong case for examining the impact of social comparison information in a consumer setting.

THE STUDY

The objectives of this study were twofold. Firstly, to examine the extent to which social comparisons affect satisfaction with material possessions. Secondly, to examine if the similarity of the comparison target to the individual (who is engaging in the comparison) moderates the effect of social comparison on satisfaction. Given the evidence that people generally prefer to make comparisons with similar others (see Wood 1989), it is logical to examine if social comparison information from different sources, varying in similarity, will impact differently on satisfaction judgements. A discussion of the independent variables and the hypotheses follows next.

Social Comparison Effect

The direction of social comparison (whether one seeks upward or downward comparisons) has been the topic of debate for a long time (e.g., Latané 1966; Wood, Taylor and Lichtman 1985). In proposing his theory of social comparisons, Festinger (1954) argued that individuals will generally have an "upward drive" for social comparisons, meaning that they will prefer to compare with someone slightly better off. In a society which values progress, upward mobility as well as materialism, such a proposition may have merit. Others have argued that individual motivation for seeking the comparison will dictate the direction of comparison. For instance, someone interested in reaching the next stage of the social class ladder (i.e., an emulator) may seek upward comparisons, and someone interested in self-esteem protection may seek downward comparisons (cf. Tesser and Campbell 1985).

In this study, it is not the motivation underlying the comparison direction, but the consequence of a forced upward or downward comparison that is of interest. Social comparisons in consumer settings can occur naturally through casual observation, without ever explicitly communicating with another person. For instance, in an office one is able to observe the clothes and

fashion-consciousness of one's colleagues. Social comparisons are also often thrust on unsuspecting individuals by the social environment (Wood 1989), giving the individual no choice but to engage in the comparison. Hence, examining the effects of such forced social comparisons is relevant in a consumer behavior context.

Will upward comparisons always lead to lower satisfaction and downward comparisons to higher satisfaction? The traditional view is that upward comparison (on any dimension such as performance in examination or status of material possessions owned) should be threatening and should lead to lower satisfaction (cf. Buunk et al. 1990). On the other hand, in a society where upward mobility and material success are valued, a downward comparison should be more gratifying and should lead to greater satisfaction with one's possessions. Hence, we can hypothesize as follows:

> **H1:** Consumer satisfaction will be influenced by social comparison information, such that downward social comparison information will lead to higher satisfaction and upward social comparison information will lead to lower satisfaction with material possessions.

Similarity Effect

Festinger (1954) proposed that there will be a propensity to engage in comparisons with similar, as opposed to dissimilar others, for a variety of reasons, including greater credibility or attractiveness of a similar source. Also, it has been argued that in the domain of consumption behavior, where preferences are subject to personal taste, the opinion of someone similar (who presumably shares common values, tastes, and beliefs), is more relevant (Goethals and Darley 1977). In one study, subjects who lost money on a stock market simulation game felt worse about themselves when they received help from a similar person (rather than a dissimilar person), even though the operationalization of similarity (attitude on several topics) was clearly unrelated to the comparison task (Nadler and Fisher 1976). Further evidence pertaining to the similarity effect comes from Brickman and Bulman (1977) who found that subjects felt more inferior when helped by a similar other than a dissimilar other.

While these results acknowledge the importance of similarity in social comparisons, there is less consensus on how to operationalize similarity. In previous research, similarity has often meant "similarity on the comparison dimension" (Wheeler, Koestner & Driver 1982; see also Wood 1989). This definition would suggest that when people engage in social comparisons of material possessions, they will choose to compare with someone who shares a "similarity in terms of material possessions." Since similarity is inferred based on the social comparison information, there is no clear distinction between social comparison information (upward or downward) and similarity.

Goethals and Darley (1977) provided an attributional analysis of social comparison, and argued that information on performance alone (on any comparison dimension) is not sufficient for making a valid inference about who is "better" or "worse." Additional information pertaining to what are known as "surrounding attributes" (information on background such as age, experience, gender etc.) not only indicates degree of similarity, but is often necessary to making a valid inference (Tesser 1986). In the same vein, knowledge about shared common values or orientation to life also contributes to perception of similarity (Moschis 1976).

When consumers engage in social comparisons, it is very likely that they take into account such "surrounding attributes" of the comparison target. In other words, mere knowledge that another person has better things may not have any effect without additional knowledge about this individual. Additional information on the comparison target's social class, age/gender or personal values can indicate if the comparison is meaningful or not (Miller 1982). For instance, a university professor is more likely to engage in social comparisons with someone who has similar employment or lives in the same suburb, as opposed to a famous movie star.

If similarity is operationalized in terms of such surrounding attributes, similarity and social comparison information (upward or downward) can be conceptually separated and treated as two independent factors. In this study, similarity has been operationalized using surrounding attributes

(e.g., shared values and hobbies, close friend versus acquaintance from the same neighborhood). Thus, the term "similarity" in this case refers not only to similarity in terms of surrounding attributes, but also to "psychological closeness."

In light of the above, how does the impact of social comparison information from a similar versus a dissimilar other differ? Social comparison information from a dissimilar comparison target, whether upward or downward, can be explained away due to the dissimilarity and can, hence, be discounted (Brickman and Bulman 1977). In other words, the social comparer's satisfaction should not be affected by a dissimilar comparison. When the comparison other is known to share the same values, beliefs, and preferences (i.e., is similar) it should be difficult to discount social comparison information emanating from such a source. Thus, the traditional social comparison effect (where upward/downward comparison leads to lower/higher satisfaction) should be observed when the comparison target is similar, but not when the target is dissimilar (see Figure 1a). Tesser's self-evaluation maintenance model (Tesser 1986) suggests that when engaging in social comparisons on self-relevant dimensions (such as comparisons on one's material possessions), individuals will attempt to improve their self-evaluation by contrasting their own performance to those of an inferior friend. Upward comparisons with a friend or close other will lead to more negative affect. On the other hand, social comparisons with a stranger (dissimilar other) on self-relevant dimensions would have a very marginal effect on self-evaluation or affect. Thus:

> **H2:** The difference in satisfaction levels of upward and downward comparisons will be greater when the comparison target is similar, rather than dissimilar.

If indeed a similar comparison target is more relevant, and people discount the dissimilar target as irrelevant, then this should be reflected in the extent to which a similar target makes individuals think about their own material possessions. In other words, a similar comparison target should make individuals think more about their possessions than a dissimilar target. Hence:

> **H3:** When the comparison other is similar, rather than dissimilar, individuals will think more about their own material possessions.

METHODOLOGY

Design

The experiment consisted of a 2 (similar or dissimilar) X 2 (upward or downward comparison) between-subjects design, wherein the degree of similarity of the comparison target and the direction of the social comparison were manipulated. The subjects were randomly assigned to one of the four treatment conditions.

Subjects

One hundred and thirty-six subjects participated voluntarily in the study. These consisted of students (42%) as well as non-students (58%), including staff and faculty, from an East Coast University. In the student group, a vast majority were employed mature students and many were taking part-time summer courses.

Procedure

Each subject received a booklet containing the stimulus and the dependent measures. Subjects were told in the cover page that they would read a one page scenario describing a high school reunion and would then be required to complete the following questionnaire. They were asked to not read ahead. All materials were collected from the subjects when completed. The students were asked to speculate as to the nature of the hypotheses being tested. The administration was done either in classroom groups for the students, or individually for the subjects from the university community. The task was completed in about 10 minutes. After the subjects finished the task, they were fully debriefed and thanked for their participation.

Stimulus

A scenario experiment was employed for ease of manipulation of the independent variables. The

scenario involved a high school reunion which the subject was to imagine s/he was attending. This context was selected as it should be involving and relevant to the subjects and it is a situation in which social comparison would naturally occur. Further, the participants in this study were old enough to make the high school reunion scenario meaningful. Both manipulations were embedded in the scenario. The first paragraph of the scenario described comparison target as either similar/close or dissimilar, and the second paragraph provided information on the social comparison dimension. The comparison target was called "Chris", which some subjects interpreted as male and others as female.

Manipulations

Similarity. First, both similar and dissimilar individuals were described as people that the subject knew back in high school, but the similar other was an ex-classmate who used to be a good friend (who had shared same hobbies, values, and had lives in the same area back in high school, had spent a lot of time together in high school), and the dissimilar other was merely an acquaintance in high school (who was never part of subject's social circle, came from different part of town, had different beliefs and interests back in high school).

Direction of Social Comparison. For the upward comparison, the target was described as "wearing stylishly tailored expensive clothes", "driving a convertible Mercedes", "has just returned from a month long vacation to the far-east", and "owns a large house in a upscale neighborhood." For the downward comparison, the comparison target was described as "wearing out of style and well-worn clothes", "taking a city bus", "has not had a vacation in years", and "lives in a rented apartment in a rough part of the town."

Measures

After reading the scenario, subjects were first asked to write down everything they would be thinking on their way home from the reunion. The rest of the questionnaire consisted of seven-point Likert scales. The main dependent variable of interest was overall satisfaction with material possessions. This was captured with two items ("I am satisfied with the things I own", "I am happy with things I own"). Impact of the social comparison (extent to which the reunion experience caused the subject to think about what s/he owned) was also measured. Manipulation check for *similarity* consisted of three items (e.g., "Chris and I are very much alike", "This person and I share many common values"). A single item measure was used as manipulation check for *direction of comparison* ("This person is doing better than I am"). A measure of "closeness" (perceived closeness to the target) and a measure of "threat" (perceived threat based on comparison) (Buunk et al. 1990) were also included.

Covariates

Attention to Social Comparison Information (ATSCI) (Bearden and Rose 1990), an individual difference variable that contributes to different levels of social comparison impact was measured. Since the subjects' economic condition in life might affect their reaction to the social comparison, household income and economic trend in the subjects' lives (improving or declining) were also measured.

RESULTS

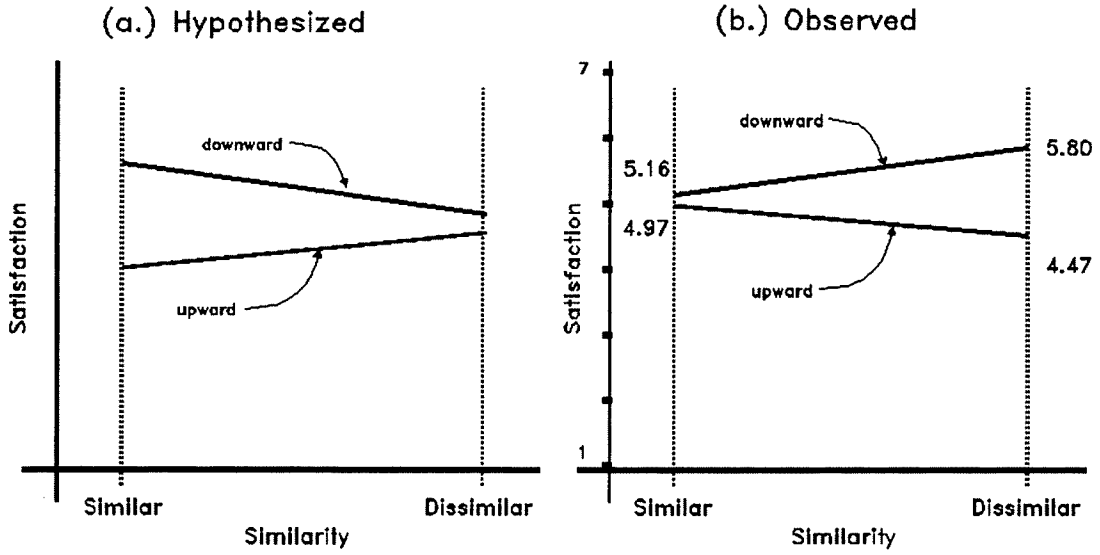
Sample Characteristics

The average age of the subjects was 31 years, with a standard deviation of 9 years. In terms of gender, 48% were male and the rest female. A wide range of socioeconomic status is also suggested by the distribution of household incomes, with the modal income being in the $40,000 - $50,000 range, with the distribution fairly even from the highest ($80,000 plus) to the lowest (less than $20,000) income categories.

Reliability of Measures

The Cronbach's alphas for the satisfaction and similarity measures were 0.79 and 0.93 respectively.

Figure 1
Effect of Similarity on Satisfaction



Manipulation Checks

T-tests revealed that the manipulations were effective. For the direction of comparison, the upward target [Mean=4.71] was seen as being more prosperous than the subjects, whereas downward target was not [Mean=2.06], with $t(134)=9.02$, $p<0.001$.

The similarity manipulation also had a significant effect [$t(133)=12.87$, $p<0.001$] on the average of three item measure of perceived similarity, with perceived similarity being higher for the similar target [Mean=5.13] as compared to the dissimilar target [Mean=2.29]. Since it could be argued that similarity might also have been inferred from the direction of the comparison (i.e., subjects may say they are more similar to the well-off person or the poor person described in the scenario), a t-test was conducted with perceived similarity as the dependent variable and the two comparison directions (upward/downward) as the groups. The comparison direction did not affect perception of similarity [$t(133)=.07$, ns], thus ensuring no contamination of the manipulations.

Hypotheses Tests

A two-way Analysis of Variance was conducted, with satisfaction as the dependent measure. The result indicated a main effect for direction of social comparison information [$F(1,133)=13.46$, $p<.001$] whereby upward comparison resulted in lower reported satisfaction.

As Figure 1b shows, while the direction of the effect is the same in the similar and dissimilar conditions, a significant two-way interaction between similarity and direction of social comparison was observed [$F(1,133)=7.69$, $p<0.01$]. It can be seen that the effect is the opposite of that proposed in hypothesis 2. For a similar comparison target there was no significant difference in the satisfaction levels for the upward [Mean=4.97] and downward [Mean=5.16] comparisons to dissimilar [$t(66)=0.66$, $p>.50$]. On the other hand, when the comparison was with a dissimilar target, upward comparison led to lower satisfaction [M=4.47] as compared to the downward [Mean=5.80] comparison, with $t(67)$, $p<.001$.

No difference was observed in the overall level of impact (extent to which the comparison

made them think about their possessions) for similar [Mean=5.38] and dissimilar targets [Mean=5.41], with t(134)=0.1, ns. Thus, hypothesis 3 was not supported. From the value of the two means, however, it is clear that the reunion scenario was realistic and made the subjects think a lot about their possessions. Also, neither of the covariates (economic trend and ATSCI) was significant.

Cognitive Responses

In order to untangle the interaction effect observed, the cognitive response data were analyzed. The procedure was as follows. The experimenters randomly selected five cases from each of the four treatment conditions and examined the cognitive responses. Four categories of thoughts were created: (i) thoughts favorable to the comparison target (e.g., praise, pride, inspiration, feeling of happiness, compassion), (ii) thoughts unfavorable to the comparison target (e.g., envy, put down or sarcasm, being threatened by the target), and (iii) other thoughts (e.g., mention of possessions with no reference to target, completely unrelated thoughts), and (iv) curiosity thoughts (expression of curiosity about the target's life). After the categories were established, two independent judges, blind to the hypotheses and the manipulations,coded the thoughts based on the category definitions provided to them. There was a 83.5% agreement (for a total of 133 thoughts) between the two judges. All disagreements were resolved through discussion between the judges, resulting in 100% agreement.

Based on the ANOVA results, the expectation was that the friendship, used to create similarity, may have inoculated the subjects from the effects of social comparison. In order for such a speculation to hold, one would have to observe more favorable thoughts towards the similar target as opposed to the dissimilar target. Further, one might also expect to see more unfavorable thoughts were directed at the dissimilar target, as opposed to the similar target.

Two separate chi-square tests were conducted for favorable and unfavorable thoughts, in each case comparing similar and dissimilar targets. For the favorable thoughts, there was strong support for the inoculation hypothesis, with $\chi^2(1) = 14.73$, $p < 0.005$. For the unfavorable thoughts there was a directional support (8 unfavorable thoughts directed to similar and 12 directed to dissimilar), but the difference was not statistically significant [$\chi^2(1) = 0.80$, $p > 0.10$].

Additional chi-square tests on the "other thoughts" [$\chi^2(1) = 1.45$, $p > 0.10$] and "curiosity thoughts" [$\chi^2(1) = 2.96$, $p > 0.10$] showed no difference between the similar and dissimilar comparison targets. Overall, the cognitive responses indicate that subjects were more likely to have thoughts favorable to the comparison target, when the target is seen as someone similar or close.

Additional Analysis

Subjects indicated that they felt closer to the similar target [Mean=5.38] as compared to the dissimilar target [Mean=1.79], with t(133)=15.79, $p < 0.001$. The closeness measure and the measures of perceived similarity were highly correlated, implying that closeness is part of perceived similarity (cf. Tesser 1980).

Subjects also felt more threatened after the comparison, in the case of a similar-downward comparison [Mean=3.03], but not in the dissimilar-downward comparison [Mean=1.17], with t(60)=2.14, p=0.03. This suggests that a similar other, who is not doing well in life, can induce fear as the individual sees a greater likelihood of being in that same unfortunate position.

DISCUSSION

The objective of this study was to demonstrate that social comparison information can indeed affect consumer satisfaction with material possessions. The result did strongly support this proposition. The similarity effect was hypothesized as an interaction with comparison direction. Contrary to expectation, a similar comparison target did not lead to different levels of satisfaction for upward and downward comparisons, whereas a dissimilar target did.

In the similarity condition, subjects displayed some degree of emotional attachment, as evident from the cognitive response data. The positive nature of thoughts in the similarity condition

appeared to reduce the effect of social comparison on the subjects. It seems that the comparison target has to be somewhat distant, yet relevant as a comparison target, in order for the social comparison effect to occur under upward and downward conditions.

Previous research using closeness to operationalize similarity, indicates that when the comparison is on a dimension that is important to the individual, as is the case in this study, an adverse comparison should cause more distress (Tesser 1986). For instance, studies on sibling rivalry indicate that superior performance of a close other can produce conflict (Tesser 1980). The results of the present study, however, suggest that closeness can actually inoculate the subjects against effects of social comparisons. Very recent work (Ybema and Buunk 1994) has identified a possible explanation for the inoculation effect, involving greater "identification" and "empathy" towards a close/similar other.

Recently, Ybema and Buunk (forthcoming) have suggested that individuals are more likely to identify with someone who is a friend or a close other, as compared to a stranger. Such identification would lead to a greater perceived probability of being in the same position as this close/similar other in future (Ybema and Buunk 1994). In addition to identification, friend/closeness/similarity is likely to trigger greater empathy toward the target (Ybema and Buunk 1994). "Subjects may be glad for their friends' success or pity their friends' failure," (Ybema and Buunk 1994, p2), rather than viewing the social comparison situation from a competitive perspective.

In the present study, subjects reported greater number of favorable thoughts for the similar condition than the dissimilar condition. Feelings of pride in the accomplishments of the target, praise for the comparison target, feelings of happiness, and feelings of compassion/pity towards the target were significantly more prevalent in the similar condition. In the dissimilar condition, while not significant, thoughts indicating envy, sarcasm or put down were more frequent. This pattern of cognitive responses suggests that subjects felt greater empathy or identification with a similar target. Thus, it seems, closeness or similarity can lead to greater identification or empathy, which in turn might inoculate the subjects from the effects social comparisons. In the case of a similar target, feelings of identification and empathy would prevent the development of feelings superiority or inferiority in the subject. On the other hand, for a dissimilar target, lack of empathy or identification facilitates the traditional mechanism of social comparison, whereby a downward comparison would generate feelings of superiority and vice-versa.

The limitations of this research include the fact that all the effects were studied in one social context. One would have to be cautious in generalizing these results to all contexts. In the study, mature students constituted the samples, thus lending validity to the findings. It has been suggested that comparison targets need only be imagined for the social comparison effect to occur. Hence, the use of a scenario may not be a cause for concern. Future research could, however, take place in more naturalistic settings.

Similarity has been operationalized in many different ways, ranging from simple non-distinctive characteristics (e.g., age) to more complex relationships (e.g., family ties). In this research similarity was based on friendship-ties and commonality of values. The results of the study indicated that a similar other was not seen as a competitor, whereas in past research similarity has been known to induce competitiveness (Tesser 1980). When does a similar other become a competitor? Do individuals use different types of closeness or similarity to achieve different goals? It seems that the effects of different dimensions closeness or similarity, and the circumstances under which each type of similarity will be effective in a social comparison is not clearly known.

While much of the previous research has used social comparison as a post-hoc explanation for reduced satisfaction, this study explicitly tests the relationship between social comparison and reduced material satisfaction. This work leads to several interesting avenues for future research. Two such areas are, (i) do different kinds of similarities (for instance, those with or without emotional ties) differ in their effect on satisfaction?, and (ii) when and how do individuals decrease the relevance of a comparison dimension? Other issues worth examining include, effect of

social comparisons on product and product-class specific (e.g., public versus private) satisfaction judgements, and cross-cultural studies examining social comparison effects on material satisfaction in materialistic versus non-materialistic cultures. A better understanding of the role of social comparison in consumer satisfaction formation process will eventually contribute to more effective marketing. Given the sparse research in social influences on consumer behavior, this appears to be a promising area for future research.

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