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Influence of Atypical Choices by Dissociative and Aspirational Reference Groups on Preferences of Consumers Varying on Social Comparison Proneness

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ABSTRACT

Using Festinger and Tesser’s work on social comparison as the theoretical framework, this study investigates how consumer spending is influenced by atypical spending in comparative reference groups. Specifically, two experiments examine how and why consumers, who exhibit either high or low tendencies to compare themselves with others, will alter their spending when they observe their aspirational (i.e., more affluent) and dissociative (i.e., less affluent) reference groups spending money in ways that are atypical. To test the strength of the influence of these comparisons, participants are asked to make consumer decisions with regard to public products (those used in front of others) and private products (those used in relative isolation). These experiments reveal that neither low nor high SCOs can be socially influenced to change their spending on private products. When purchasing public products, however, high SCOs will increase their spending if they discover that the dissociative group is spending more than expected, but they will not alter such spending if they find that the aspirational group is spending less than expected. In contrast, low SCOs will not alter their spending on public products when making downward comparisons and will increase such spending when making upward comparisons.

INTRODUCTION

Consumers who are interested in purchasing a car will typically gather information by reading about different types of cars. They may also ask neighbors and coworkers about their cars in order to find out how satisfied they are with their purchases. At times, this latter type of investigation may lead the consumer to find that the manager, who makes much more money, is driving a smaller, less expensive car than the secretary, who earns much less. How will these discoveries influence the consumer’s choice? Will the consumer follow the manager or the coworker, and why? Alternatively, if the product was an item used in private such as a stereo, would such atypical spending on the part of the manager and the secretary affect the consumer’s decision?

Forbes Magazine recently reported on a study conducted on 2,400 of the richest families in America. They found that 77% of those surveyed shop at discount stores like Wal-Mart and buy in bulk (Peck, 2010). Driving through a Wal-Mart parking lot, luxury cars may be found, however, it may not always be the wealthy families driving these cars. At times, we may find it is the lower middle class owning the luxury vehicles.
This research aims to examine how atypical consumer spending of reference groups affects consumer choices. As a consumer, I have to ask myself if I will buy a more expensive car than my current car because I see the secretary driving a better car or if I will buy a cheaper car than my current car because I see my boss driving a cheaper car than mine. Specifically, explored is how upward and downward comparisons influence consumer spending when the reference groups with whom one compares oneself are found to be spending in ways that are contrary to one's expectations. The investigation is important for at least three reasons. First, our studies fill an important gap in the social comparison literature. While prior research in consumer behavior has highlighted the reasons for and outcomes of social comparisons with typical behavior of reference groups (see Zemborain and Johar, 2007; White and Dahl, 2007; Berger and Heath, 2007; Smeesters and Mandel, 2006; Bearden and Rose, 1990), this research investigates the effects of the atypical behavior of reference groups. Second, and as stated above this atypical behavior is becoming more prevalent in society, and therefore the cause and effects of such behavior needs to be studied. Finally, prior research in social psychology has highlighted the negative consequences of social comparisons, i.e. threat, lower self esteem, etc. (see Buunk et al., 1990; Gilbert, Giesler and Morris, 1995; Collins, 1996; Mussweiler, Gabriel and Bodenhauen, 2000; Van Boven, Loewenstein and Dunning, 2005). In contrast, this project is more focused on identifying and understanding if the influence of atypical spending of others can lead to any positive effects, such as increased self esteem or improved product choice.

CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND:

Why Consumers Compare Themselves with Other Consumers

Social psychologists have investigated why consumers compare themselves with others (Festinger, 1954; Smith and Sachs, 1997; Aspinwall and Taylor, 1997; Collins, 1996; Gibbons and Buunk, 1999; Taylor, Wayment and Carillo, 1995; Tesser, 1988). This work gives the current study its primary conceptual foundation. In 1954, Festinger published his theory of the social comparison process. This was the first time that a researcher described social comparison as a process that is used by us all. Festinger argued that everyone has the desire to compare his or her ideas, abilities and possessions with those of others. Therefore, even though some may claim that they do not engage in social comparison, research has proven otherwise (Brickman and Bulman, 1977; Helgeson and Taylor, 1993; Wood, 1996).

The most common reasons for making comparisons are (1) self-evaluation, (2) self-improvement, (3) enhancement, and (4) the need to express individuality. Self-evaluation is the need to see where we stand compared to others (“Is the choice of my car better or worse compared to my neighbors?”). Self-improvement is the need to become better (“What car should I buy in order to be deemed as successful as my boss?”). Enhancement is the need to improve one's self-image, originating when the consumer's self-esteem is low (“My car is better than the secretary's”). Individuality is the need to be different from everyone else (“I don’t want to drive the same type of car as everyone else; I want to be different.”). An in-depth look at these four motivations for comparison is necessary as they form this study's basis for evaluating the kinds of comparisons we will see consumers make in the two studies that follow in the next section of this paper.
a. Enhancement
Research on enhancement was added to the social comparison literature in 1977 by Suls and Miller. Self-enhancement is a type of motivation that works to make people feel good about themselves and to maintain self-esteem. This motive becomes especially prominent in situations of threat, failure or blows to one's self-esteem (Sedikides and Strube, 1995). The need for enhancement can be an outcome of a negative self-evaluation (Tesser, 1988), or it can come from a naturally low self-view (Gibbons and Buunk, 1999). For example, Wood (1996) shows when patients are diagnosed with breast cancer (negative self-evaluation), they look to compare themselves to someone with a worse case than their own to feel better about their situation (enhancement). Research suggests that the need for self-enhancement can affect the amount and direction of comparison as well as its impact (Suls and Miller, 1977). A downward comparison will be made when enhancement is needed (Wood, 1996). For example, a person who would like a new car but cannot afford it will make comparisons with people who have inferior cars. A person whose goal is enhancement will use social comparisons to prove to herself that she is valuable. Wills (1991) expanded on this point by arguing that individuals who feel negatively about themselves will make themselves feel better by comparing themselves with those who are worse off than they are. In other words, they compare downward.

While prior research has focused on the dissociative group members’ performance as inferior relative to the target person, what happens if the dissociative group is (atypically) spending more than expected? Will it result in decreased self-esteem? Alternatively, will it prompt the consumer to spend more than current (and dissociative group) spending to maintain self-esteem?

b. Self-Improvement
Improvement is an important goal for most people. Self-improvement is different from enhancement in that the major goal of self-enhancement is to increase self-esteem. While self-improvement will likely also increase self-esteem, the definitive goal of improvement is to develop one's abilities or improve the quality of products one buys. Those who compare to improve already have a high level of self-esteem. Brickman and Bulman (1977) discuss self-improvement as one reason for comparison. They argue that by comparing with others, individuals can learn more about their own abilities and then use that information to improve. However, their study found that improvement only happens when comparisons are made with the aspirational group, i.e., when upward comparisons are made. For example, in the movie “Barbershop,” the main character keeps a picture of Oprah’s guesthouse as a motivator to improve his life. Comparison with an aspirational group member enables an individual to achieve a sense of how much room for improvement is there.

Upward comparisons provide an interest in achievement or self-improvement (Major, Testa, and Bylsma, 1991; Taylor and Lobel, 1989; Wheele, 1966). For example, dieters sometimes post pictures of thinner people on the refrigerator. These upward comparisons remind the dieter of his or her own weight, provide a goal for use in guiding eating behavior, and offer the inspiration needed to meet that goal (Helgeson and Taylor, 1993; Wood, 1989). Upward comparisons are used to improve one's abilities and/or the quality of one's possessions. When the expectation is confirmed that there is something to be learned about the product from the aspirational group, the information can be used to improve the type of product owned. Going back to the person
interested in buying a car, this person will be interested in what the boss is driving in order to copy the boss’s choice as well as possible, and to feel that she has become more successful (self improvement).

Marketing research on self-improvement found that consumers emulate the behavior of others if they want to be seen as a part of that group (White and Dahl, 2007). From the consumer’s viewpoint, this would be an upward comparison. For example, a consumer who wants to be seen as “a busy mother type,” will compare herself with mothers she knows who are busy to see what type of car they drive. She may end up buying a minivan or SUV to fit into this group.

While prior research has focused on the aspirational reference group spending more than the target consumer does, this research examines what happens when the aspirational group spends less than the target consumer does. Will it result in status quo spending (which is greater than the aspirational group), or will it result in decreased spending to mimic the choice of the aspirational group and achieve self improvement by economizing in contrast to increased spending? I believe the answers to these and related questions for self-enhancement are partly influenced (moderated) by individual differences in social comparison, which we discuss next.

**Individual Differences in Social Comparison**

In the 1990s, researchers began to study the individual differences that affect social comparison (Gilbert, Geisler, and Morris, 1995; Bendura and Jourdan, 1991; Taylor, Buunk and Aspinwall, 1990). This stream of research has suggested that certain types of people may be more prone to engage in social comparison than others. Gibbons and Buunk (1999) created the Iowa-Netherlands Comparison Orientation Measure (INCOM), which measures the likelihood that an individual will make comparisons. From this measure, Gibbons and Buunk found that there are typically two types of people, those who tend to make comparisons frequently (high social comparison orientation, hereafter referred to as high SCO), and those who rarely make comparisons (low social comparison orientation, hereafter referred to as low SCO). The high SCOs are characterized by their low self-esteem and are more likely to make downward comparisons. The way others see them is important to them. Their behavior reflects their low self-esteem. High SCOs are always questioning their abilities and are easily threatened by others (Wills, 1981; 1991) therefore using downward comparisons for enhancement.

Low SCOs have a high level of self-certainty and are more individualistic and more likely to make upward comparisons (Gibbons and Buunk, 1999). Low SCOs are not easily influenced by others, so they make comparisons only to improve their abilities or the quality of the products they use, or to express their individuality. Marketing literature has found that some people value their individuality so much that, when making comparisons, they will go out of their way to choose options that have not been chosen by others (Berger and Heath, 2007). This need for individuality may cause low SCOs to increase spending in the public product category.

**Hypotheses**

**Behavior of High SCOs**
H1a: Atypical high spending by the dissociative reference group will influence high SCO consumers to (a) increase spending from their current level for public products, but (b) not change their spending from their current level for private products.

H1b: Atypical low spending of the aspirational reference group will not make high SCOs change their spending from their current level on either public or private products.

**Behavior of Low SCOs**

H2a: Atypical high spending of the dissociative reference group will not lead low SCOs to increase their spending from their current level in either public or private products.

H2b: Atypical low spending of the aspirational reference group will influence low SCO consumers to (a) increase spending from their current level for public products, but (b) not change their spending from their current level for private products.

**STUDY 1: HIGH AND LOW SCO SPENDING ON PUBLIC AND PRIVATE PRODUCTS**

The purpose of the first study was to investigate how individuals’ preference would be influenced by the atypical behavior of reference groups during social comparisons. Specifically, this study examined how atypical upward and downward comparisons affect purchasing decisions and whether the type of product and the social comparison orientation of the consumer moderate that decision. This study tested hypothesis H1 and H2. Data was collected via an online survey on the campus of a large public university in the northeast. One hundred twenty-three undergraduate students from this university participated in return for course extra credit. Participants were sent an e-mail with one of four links to a website containing the survey.

**Method**

_Design and Participants._ Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions of a 2 (comparison type: upward/downward) x 2 (product type: public/private) between subjects design. Consumers’ comparison orientation was measured using the Iowa-Netherlands Comparison Orientation Measure (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999). This is an 11-item scale that measures a person’s tendency to compare themselves to others. Reliability of this scale was high with a Cronbach’s alpha of .78. A median split (Median = 4.54) was used to differentiate between high SCO and Low SCO. The public product used in this study was an automobile and the private product was a stereo. Products were selected based on the judgment of the researcher. Automobiles are seen and noticed daily by others while stereo systems are left in the home and not seen outside the home.

_Procedure._ Each participant was randomly assigned to one of the four experimental conditions. Participants were provided a scenario in which they were asked to imagine that they had graduated, obtained employment, and needed to replace their current car or stereo which was given to them by their parents. The car (public product) that the subject currently owned was in the mid-price range (tier 4, on a 7-point price tier, similar to Chevy Impala, Toyota Camry, or Volkswagen Passat). In the upward comparison scenario, the aspirational group members own products one tier below (tier 3) the price tier of the subject’s car and in the downward comparison the dissociative group members’ own products one tier above (tier 5) the price tier of the subject’s car. Participants were also told that they were able to afford products up to the
highest tier and were then asked to imagine themselves in one of the two versions of the following scenario:

“As you were pondering the idea of a new car, you drove through an upscale (downscale) neighborhood during a weekend. The homes in this neighborhood were all much bigger (smaller) than your home and built with the highest (lowest) quality materials. The yards were all professionally landscaped (unkempt) and you could tell that these homes belonged to people that earned much more (less) than you.

For cars in the upward comparison situation:

“Instead of seeing cars in higher price tiers, you noticed that most of the cars in the driveways were 4 door sedans such as Toyota Matrix, Chevy Malibu, and Volkswagen Jetta. These cars generally cost in the range of $18,000 to $21,000. You currently drive an eight year old car, whose current value for a new make is between $22,000-25,000”.

For cars in the downward comparison situation:

“Instead of seeing cars in lower price tiers, you noticed that most of the cars in the driveways were 4 door sedans such as Volkswagen EOS, Toyota Solara, or Chevy Monte Carlo. These cars generally cost in the range of $26,000 to $29,000. You currently drive an eight year old car, whose current value for a new make is between $22,000-25,000”.

Participants in the stereo (private product) condition were told that they were volunteering for a local school board where they had to go to different neighborhoods and ask questions of the homeowners. This explained to the subject why they were to enter the homes and see the stereos. Please see appendix 1 for the complete private product scenario.

After reading the scenario, participants were asked a series of manipulation check questions, followed by their rating on the key dependent variable. Next, participants were asked their view of the social status of the product on a 7-point scale (1 = “strongly disagree” to 7 = “strongly agree”): “I believe a car is just a mode of transportation.” This was used as a covariate. Lastly, the Iowa-Netherlands Comparison Orientation Measure was applied.

Dependent Variable. Purchase decisions were measured on a seven-point scale (1 = list of least expensive products, 7 = list of most expensive products). Participants were asked: “Please choose the set of cars (stereos) you are most likely to buy.” Cars were categorized from subcompact to luxury, with prices ranging from $10,000 to $37,000. Cars were chosen based on classification and price. A different model of Chevy or Buick, Toyota and Volkswagen were given in each category so that brand preference would not influence the price tier of their chosen car. A similar classification system was used for the stereo. Stereo categories ranged from desktop to executive with Sony, JVC and Bose used in each category. Prices ranged from $100 to $4,000 (see appendix 2 for full sets of options for the dependent variable). The participant’s current product was placed at the mid level (4), while the aspirational group’s products were in the third level and the dissociative group’s products were in the fifth level.

Manipulation Checks
Comparison Type. The comparison type manipulation was assessed by two items on the reference group identity: “Compared to what you earn, the people in this neighborhood earn:” (1 = “Much Less”, 7 = “Much More”) and “The people in this neighborhood are:” (1 = “very poor”, 7 = “very rich”). These items were combined to create the comparison type scale. Reliability was high with a Cronbach’s alpha of .79. Participants in the upward comparison group rated people in the neighborhood as “better off” than participants in the downward comparison group (MUp = 5.01 vs. MDown = 3.18; F (1, 122) = 57.63, p < .001).

Product Type: The product type manipulation was assessed using two 7-point items: “The car (stereo) you drive (use) allows you to send a signal to others” and “People see the car (stereo) you drive (use)” (1 = “Strongly Disagree”, 7 = “Strongly Agree”). High reliability (Cronbach’s alpha = .73) allowed the combination of the two items into one scale. Participants rated the car (more than the stereo) as something that is seen being used by others (Mcar = 4.52 vs. Mstereo = 3.21; F(1,122) = 8.69 p < .05).

Orientation Type: As stated above, participants were assessed as being high or low on the social comparison orientation scale using the 11-item Iowa-Netherlands Comparison Orientation Measure (INCOM). Some of these items were: “I always pay a lot of attention to how I do things compared with how others do things” or “If I want to find out how well I have done something, I compare what I have done with how others have done” (1 = “Strongly Disagree”, 7 = “Strongly Agree”). Individual scores were then averaged over the 11 items (see appendix 3 for all INCOM items). Reliability of this scale was high with a Cronbach’s alpha of .78 and the overall mean was 4.5. A median split (4.54) was used to separate individuals with low tendencies to compare (MLOC = 3.81) from individuals with high tendencies to compare (MHSCCO = 4.96, t(123) = 7.29, p < .01). This resulted in 61 lower-INCOM individuals and 62 higher-INCOM individuals with high tendencies.1

Results
I analyzed participants’ choice/preference using a 2(comparison type) x 2(product type) x 2(comparison orientation) between subject ANOVA. The findings show that there is a significant main effect with product type (F(1,123) = 4.91, p < .05), and a two way interaction between product type and comparison orientation (F(1,123) = 4.32 , p < .05). However, these effects were qualified by a significant three way interaction between product type x social comparison orientation x comparison type, F(1,123) = 5.0, p < .03.

Data in the downward comparison condition was analyzed first to test hypotheses H1a and H2a. H1a posited that high SCOs would increase spending on public products when they saw the atypical spending of the dissociative group. Analyses revealed that SCOs increased spending or preferred/chose the cars 1.4 tiers above what they own currently (Mcar = 5.4 vs. 4.0, t(15) = 3.9, p < .01). This brings the high SCOs spending up to just above the dissociative group. However,

1 In finding the significant three way interactions, I kept the comparison orientation scale as a continuous variable. The median split was used to classify participants into the two categories of high and low.
high SCO spending on private products did not change from the current level (M_{\text{stereo}} = 4.7 vs. 4.0, t(17) = 2.0, p = .06, n.s.) Hence, H1a is supported.

Hypothesis H2a predicted that low SCOs would not change their spending when making downward comparisons. Analysis of the data found that low SCOs spend the same as they currently own on both products (M_{\text{car}} = 4.5 vs 4.0, t(12) = 1.4, ns and. M_{\text{stereo}} = 4.6 vs. 4.0; t(12) = .29, ns). As hypothesized in H2a, the low SCO participants are not affected by the dissociative group’s unexpected spending.

Next, analysis of the data in the upward comparison condition was run to test H1b and H2b. H1b posited that high SCOs would not increase spending on public or private products when making upward comparisons. The results show that when making upward comparisons, the high SCO participants spent the same amount on public products as they currently own (M_{\text{car}} = 4.53 vs. 4.0; t(15) = 1.4, ns). However, we did not find this to be true in the private product category (M_{\text{stereo}} = 4.88 vs. 4.0; t(17) = 3.9, p < .01); thus H1b is supported in the public product category but not supported in the private product category. This was tested again in study 2 to see if high SCOs would continue to increase spending on private products in upward comparison situations.

Hypothesis H2b predicted that low SCOs would increase spending on public but not private products when making upward comparisons with an atypical aspirational group. Analyses revealed that low SCO participants changed their spending on public products when they were making upward comparisons. When finding the aspirational group is spending less than expected, low SCOs prefer cars about 1.4 tiers above what they currently own (M_{\text{car}} = 5.38 vs. 4.0, t(21) = 6.1, p < .01). This preference did not occur on the private product (M_{\text{stereo}} = 4.20 vs. 4.0, t(15) = 0.9, ns). Thus, in the upward comparison situation, the low SCOs increased their spending on public products, but not on private products. This supports hypothesis 2b.

Discussion
In summary, findings of this study yield several important insights. First, the downward comparison prompts high SCOs to increase their spending on public products but not on private products when they find that the dissociative group is spending more than what they are expected to spend. The former can be explained by Tesser’s self-maintenance theory (1988). Specifically, high SCOs feel threatened when they learn that the dissociative group has spent more than expected; they feel that they must do something to maintain their self-esteem. Therefore, they spend more in the public product category to demonstrate to others that they are indeed better than the dissociative group.

Second, the finding that high SCOs do not change their spending in the upward comparison situation where the aspirational group spends less than what they are expected to spend, might be because high SCOs get a boost to their self-esteem when they find that they were spending more money than their supposedly “better off” counterparts. When the aspirational group spends less than expected, the high SCOs feel better about what they have; therefore, they do not need to alter their spending. I investigate this possible explanation in Study 3.

Third, the upward comparison prompts low SCOs to spend more on public products than private products when they find that the aspirational group is spending less than what they are expected
to spend. This is possibly because the low SCOs find they cannot learn anything from the aspirational group and so they disregard the information they receive from the aspirational group and increase spending to improve to the level of the traditional aspiration group. They do this only on the public product to show the aspirational group what they should be spending or that the low SCO is now part of the aspirational group. They do not increase their spending on private products because they know that the aspirational group will not be aware of the low SCOs' private product purchase and, therefore, that the low SCOs will not be able to demonstrate inclusion in this group when purchasing private products. In essence, the low SCOs are maintaining their goal of improvement and becoming part of the traditional aspirational group. This explanation needs to be further tested.

STUDY 2: REPLICATE OF STUDY 1
This second study was conducted in an effort to replicate the findings of the first study using a different set of product categories; to employ stronger check items; and to determine if the findings regarding the high SCOs’ increased preference on private products in the atypical downward comparison situation were an anomaly. Again, data was collected via an online survey from 163 undergraduate students of a large public university in the northeast.

Method
Design and Participants. Following an identical procedure to the one used in Study 1, students were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions of a 2 (comparison type: upward/downward) x 2 (product type: public/private) between subjects design. Consumer’s comparison orientation was measured using the Iowa-Netherlands Comparison Orientation Measure (Gibbons and Buunk 1999). As stated above, study 2 employed a different set of public (mp3 player) and private (printer) products. These products were chosen based on usage, whether used in public or private, according to the researcher's judgment. Students often have their mp3 players when working out at the gym or walking to classes, while the printer is something they keep in their room, so it is not seen being used.

Results
As in Study 1, a 2 (comparison type: upward/downward) x 2 (product type: public/private) x 2 (comparison orientation: high/low) design was employed to analyze the data. Analysis revealed a significant main effect of product type (F = 11.92, p < .05) and a two-way interaction between comparison type and comparison orientation (F = 3.52, p < .05). However, these effects were qualified by a three way interaction between product type x social comparison orientation x comparison type (F(1,163) = 4.86, p < .05).

Planned comparisons to test the hypotheses were run. Hypothesis H1a predicted that high SCOs would increase their spending when making an atypical downward comparison for public products. Analyses revealed high SCOs were likely to increase spending from what they currently own on public products when making downward comparisons (Mpub = 5.08 vs. Current = 4.0, t(21) = 3.31, p < .01). The spending on the private product was not significantly different from what they currently own (Mpriv = 4.17 vs. 4.0, t(20) = .3, ns). Thus, H1a was supported.
Next, H1b stated that high SCOs would not change their spending in the atypical upward comparison condition. Analyses found high SCOs did not change their spending on either product type (Mpub = 4.40, t(21) = 1.7, ns and. Mpriv = 4.23, t(20) = 0.13, ns). This supports H1b.

Results of hypotheses H2a and H2b, which deal with low SCO participants are discussed next. H2a predicted that low SCOs would not change their preference of either type of product when making downward comparisons. Analyses revealed that low SCOs did not change their preference compared to their current ownership on either product type when forced to make downward comparisons (Mpub = 4.41 vs. 4.0, t(22) = 1.5, ns and Mpriv = 4.54 vs. 4.0, t(20) = 1.7, ns). This finding supports H2a.

Finally, H2b stated that low SCOs would increase spending on public products when comparing upwards with the atypical aspirational group. My analyses revealed that participants with low comparison orientation scores increased their spending on public products when making upward comparisons (Mpub = 4.82 vs. 4.0, t(22) = 3.3, p < .01), but did not alter their preference on the private product (Mpriv = 3.82 vs. 4.0, t(20) = .75, ns). This supports hypothesis H2b.

Discussion
This study replicated the key findings of the first study: 1) high SCOs increase their preference on public products when making downward comparisons. This is perhaps due to the threat they feel when they find that the dissociative group is spending more than what the high SCOs currently own. This possible explanation will be investigated further in Study 3.

Study 2 findings also confirmed the Study 1 finding that low SCOs increase preference when they find they have better products than the aspirational group. It is possible that this low SCO group may not trust the atypical actions of the aspirational group and may choose to improve their situation by increasing preference from current ownership. That is, the low SCOs maintained their goal to improve by ignoring the aspirational group. Second, the low SCOs may like the feeling of superiority and decide to choose better public products to show the aspirational group that they are indeed superior. When asked if they desire to be better than the people in this neighborhood (the aspirational group), the low SCOs were more likely to want this than the high SCOs (M_{LSCO} = 4.57 vs. M_{HSCO} = 3.61, t(84) = 1.97, p < .05). Third, another explanation could be that the low SCOs dislike the aspirational group for their atypical behavior and decide to choose better public products to show the aspirational group their dislike. These possible explanations need to be further investigated.

In conclusion, the results of Study 2 are consistent with those in Study 1. The only difference is that the Study 1 findings of high SCOs increasing their preference on private products when making upward comparisons were not replicated in Study 2. The findings of Study 1 might be, then, an anomaly. The next study will test the threat explanation of high SCOs increasing spending on public products after making downward comparisons with a dissociative group that is engaged in atypical spending.

GENERAL DISCUSSION
This research has investigated how consumers, varying in their tendency to compare themselves to others, react to the atypical behavior of their reference groups. In three studies, several questions have been answered. How will high SCOs react when they compare down to increase self esteem and find the dissociative group with relatively better products? In studies 1 and 2, analysis revealed that high SCOs react by increasing spending on public products but not on private products. Conversely, how will high SCOs react when they compare up and find that the aspirational group possesses relatively inferior products? Findings show that the high SCOs did not increase spending in this situation, neither on public, nor on private products. This finding makes sense as the high SCOs are usually trying to increase self-esteem and this atypical upward comparison gives them an automatic boost of self-esteem.

Studies 1 and 2 also answered the question: “How will low SCOs react to the atypical behavior of the aspirational group?” Analysis revealed that low SCOs increase spending when they find the aspirational group to be using products that are not up to expectation. Low SCOs compare to improve. Why then, do the low SCOs increase spending when making comparisons with the aspirational group and finding an atypical spending pattern? Speculations have been made however, further investigation is needed.

This research has shed new light on how consumers might alter their spending habits in surprising ways when they observe consumers from aspirational and dissociative reference groups spending in ways that run counter to expectation, i.e., in atypical ways. Prior research has demonstrated that all consumers compare themselves with others (even those who might protest that they do not), that there are particular reasons for why and how particular types of consumers compare themselves with others, and that, as this study has confirmed, such comparisons do not always result in the outcomes one might expect. This research is relevant as we hear more and more that dissociative group members are going into debt to keep up with their neighbors; high SCOs can learn from this and spend accordingly. We also hear that aspirational group members reduce their expenses in times of recession, so low SCOs can improve their financial situation by paying attention to the aspirational group.

REFERENCES


**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Magdoleen Ierlan, Ph.D. received her doctorate from Binghamton University and is currently Assistant Professor and Program Director of Marketing at the Madden School of Business at LeMoyne College, Syracuse, NY.