Special Session Summary  Aif I Could Be Like That.@: the Not-So-Harmful Effects of Social Comparisons on Consumers

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SESSION OVERVIEW

First proposed by Festinger (1954), social comparison theory suggests that people have a drive to evaluate their own abilities, and that they satisfy this drive by comparing themselves to others. Much of the existing social comparison research has examined the harmful effects of exposure to thin, beautiful models on female consumers. In contrast, this session presented recent findings suggesting that social comparisons may not always be harmful to consumers, and in some cases may even inspire consumers.

“Idealized Images, Self-Perceptions and Behaviors of Young Women: Explanation via the Third-Person Effect Model”
Fang Wan, Vanderbilt University
William D. Wells, University of Minnesota
Ronald Faber, University of Minnesota

Although research has found that idealized images in media and advertising affect body image and induce eating disorders, knowledge about the manner in which these images operate is incomplete. This study proposed the third person effect as an alternative model of addressing the underlying mechanisms of how idealized images in advertising exert influence on young female consumers. Survey findings suggest that body enhancement behavior is partially driven by perceptions of the reactions of male “others”—most men, male friends or romantic partners. Depth interview data helped explain this conclusion and reveal the complexity of the processes. These findings suggest that the mechanisms through which idealized images affect perceptions, attitudes and behavior are more complex than previously thought.

“Effects of Exposure to Thin Media Images: Evidence of Self-Enhancement Among Restrained Eaters”
Jennifer S. Mills, York University
Janet Polivy, University of Toronto
C. Peter Herman, University of Toronto
Marika Tiggemann, Flinders University

The effects of viewing media-portrayed idealized body images on eating, self-perception, and mood among young women were examined. Study 1 found that dieters rated their ideal and current body sizes as smaller and ate more following exposure to such images. Study 2 found that strengthening thinness attainability beliefs further enhanced the apparent “thin fantasy” demonstrated by dieters following exposure to idealized body images. Study 3 found that when explicit demand characteristics were present, participants reported feeling worse following exposure to thin models. The complexities of the media’s role in body dissatisfaction and dieting behavior are discussed.

“Comparisons with the Good Life: Images of Success and the Preference for Luxury Products”
Naomi Mandel, Arizona State University
Petia K. Petrova, Arizona State University
Robert B. Cialdini, Arizona State University

Television shows and magazines have increasingly portrayed “the good life” in America, where everyone is wealthy and successful. This research examines whether a social comparison activated by a news article can impact a consumer’s desire for luxury products. Experiment 1 confirmed that exposure to a successful comparison target increased preference for brands such as Lexus and Rolex, but only when both the target and the subject had the same college major. Experiments 2 and 3 examined mediators of these interactive effects, and found that preferences were driven by the impact of such depictions of successes or failures on participants’ expected future incomes.