The Role of Uniqueness Motivations in Social Comparison Processes

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This research takes a motivational perspective on social comparison processes to examine the moderating role of individuals’ need for uniqueness (NFU) in the extent to which they project their own appraisals of new products to others’ versus project others’ appraisals of such items to their own. The findings of three experiments demonstrate that while both high and low NFU individuals use their own appraisals to predict those of others, high NFU individuals are less likely than low NFU ones to base their own appraisals on estimates of others’. These findings are explained in terms of perceived threats to identity resulting from the reference point of social comparison processes.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Individuals often rely on their own product evaluations to estimate those of others. The implications of such projection processes, wherein the self serves as the standard of comparison, are well explored in extant consumer behavior literature (Ames and Iyengar 2005; Davis, Hoch, and Ragsdale 1986; Hoch 1987, 1988). Less understood, and relatively less examined, is the manner in which individuals incorporate others’ product preferences into their own via projection processes that consider others as the comparison referent. For example, consumers estimate the opinions of others to arrive at standards that they chose to comply with (e.g., refraining from purchasing an item they predict their friends will dislike in order to conform to the group) or ignore (e.g., selecting that same item in order to self-differentiate).

The desire to conform or differentiate varies based on an individual’s need for uniqueness (NFU), defined as the self-esteem driven need to maintain a sense of at least moderate distinctiveness within one’s social milieu (Snyder and Fromkin 1977). In the consumer domain, it has been demonstrated that high NFU individuals have stronger preferences for unique products relative to low NFU individuals (Ames and Iyengar 2005; Tian, Bearden, and Hunter 2001). More complex and less understood, however, is the role of NFU in people’s benchmarking of self-other preferences. Prior research has yielded contradictory results regarding the effect of NFU on social projection. On the one hand, research demonstrates that NFU moderates individuals’ projection of traits (Kernis 1984); on the other hand, it is perceived similarity, rather than NFU, that moderates the social projection of object preferences (Ames and Iyengar 2005).

The present research builds on theories of uniqueness (Snyder and Fromkin 1977; Tian et al. 2001), self-affirmation (Steele, 1988) and self-other asymmetry (Codol 1987; Hoorens 1995; Mussweiler 2001) to suggest that NFU-related motives are more likely to influence social comparison processes when individuals’ sense of self-distinctiveness is not affirmed. Prior research suggests that the reference point for projection is one factor likely to generate such a condition. When the self is the reference point in social comparisons, individuals exhibit a greater tendency to ascribe correspondence between information regarding the self and others than compared to instances in which others act as the standard of comparison (Codol 1987; Hoorens 1995; Mussweiler 2001; Srull and Gaelick 1983). This reference-point based asymmetry in social comparison processes has been attributed, in part, to the greater threat to one’s sense of distinctiveness posed by comparing oneself to others than by comparing others to oneself (Codol 1987). Such threats to uniqueness are, in turn, typically countered by self-affirmatory processes (Steele 1988; Steele, Spencer and Lynch 1993). Along these lines, research on self-serving social comparisons (Goethals, Messick and Allison 1991; Klein 2001) demonstrates that social comparison estimates tend to be more susceptible to self-enhancement motives when individuals rely on information about others to arrive at judgments about the self (i.e., others as the reference point), compared to instances where information about the self is used to estimate that of others (i.e., self as the reference point).

Based on this, our basic contention is that NFU-related motives are likely to influence social comparison processes when threats to self-perceptions are generated, as is the case when others, as opposed to the self, serve as the reference point for comparison. Thus, we predict that when the self is the reference point in social comparisons, individuals will project their own product appraisals to those of others, irrespective of their NFU level. When others serve as the reference point, however, we predict that NFU will moderate the projection of others’ product appraisals to own appraisals, such that low NFU individuals will project to a greater extent than will high NFU individuals. We investigated these predictions in three studies.

Study 1 exposed participants to an advertisement for a new product and varied the order of their object appraisals. Respondents stated their attitude towards the product either before (i.e., self as the reference point) or after (i.e., others as the reference point) predicting the preferences of others. Our results show that, across NFU level, individuals projected their product evaluations to others; if individuals disliked (liked) the product they estimated a lower (higher) market share. When others were the reference point, however, low NFU individuals projected their estimates of others’ product adoption onto their own preferences to a greater extent than did high NFU individuals.

Whereas study 1 asked participants to estimate others’ preferences, in study 2 participants were provided with information about the estimated adoption level of the new product. Results replicated those of study 1. Further, while low NFU individuals rated the product more positively when they were provided with a high (vs. low) adoption level estimation, high NFU individuals liked the new product better when the estimated adoption level was low (vs. high).

In study 3 we provided further evidence for our self-affirmatory account of social comparison processes by manipulating and measuring respondents’ perceived similarity to others. Specifically, we asked study participants to elaborate, between the tasks of stating their own attitudes and predicting others’ preferences, on the ways in which they are different from others. If non-motivational processes drive social comparisons, we would expect the salience of differentness from others to result in a failure to project across NFU level and in both reference point conditions. In line with our proposed account, however, the perceived similarity manipulation impacted social comparison processes differently based on the reference point of the social comparison (i.e., self or others). Specifically, when the self was the reference point both high and low NFU individuals used the differentness made salient by the manipulation to arrive at disparate estimates of adoption level (i.e., not projecting). When others served as the reference point, however, asking respondents to state their differences from others alleviated the reference point-induced threat to self-esteem for high NFU individuals, leading them to project. On the other hand, low NFU individuals, who are threatened by differentness from others, stated their closeness to others by projecting.

In summary, we demonstrate that while both high and low NFU individuals are likely to project their preferences for new products onto others, high NFU individuals are less likely than low NFU individuals to project their estimates of others’ preferences onto their own. Moreover, unlike self-anchored projection (Ames and Iyengar 2005), the bases for the moderating effect of NFU on others-anchored projection appear to be motivational; alleviating the projection-induced threat to the high NFU individuals’ self-image by having them deliberate on their differentness from others.
attenuates the moderating effect of NFU on the projection of product preferences.

References


