The Role of Social Comparison For Maximizers and Satisficers: Wanting the Best Or Wanting to Be the Best

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Past work shows that maximizers, people who examine every possibility before determining the optimal choice, are more affected by social comparison information than satisficers. We examine whether this is because others provide information about the best option or because maximizers want to be the best in a social rivalry. Results from three studies examining preferences for absolute versus positional choices in private or public situations support the social rivalry explanation. Relative to satisficers, maximizers prefer higher absolute choices and lower positional standing only in private. In public, a greater percentage of maximizers prefer higher positional standing but lower objective quality than satisficers.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
The distinction between maximizing, attempting to examine every option before determining which choice is best, and satisficing, choosing the first option one comes across that meets a threshold of acceptability, was first posited by Herbert Simon in the 1950s. More recent work on the topic has led to the conceptualization of a maximization individual differences scale (Schwartz et al., 2002) as well as assessments of the impact of maximization behaviors on both objective and subjective outcomes (Schwartz et al., 2002; Iyengar, Wells, & Schwartz, 2006; Parker, Bruine de Bruin, & Fischhoff, 2007). The current paper seeks to further this literature by addressing a question that previous work has left open—the underlying motivation behind maximizing versus satisficing behavior.

Research on maximization behaviors has revealed that they tend to be highly correlated with a reliance on social comparison information (Parker, Bruine de Bruin, & Fischhoff, 2007). As Schwartz et al. (2002) point out, “whereas ‘good enough’ usually is judged in absolute terms, ‘the best possible’ may...require social comparison” (p. 1184). While social comparison can certainly be a useful, and even necessary, way to gain information about what choice is best, there is an alternate explanation for maximizers’ reliance on it. Instead of seeking social comparison information in an effort to discover the best choice in an objective sense, it is possible that maximizers are seeking social comparison information to ensure they are the best in a relative sense. In other words, instead of being motivated to find the absolute best, maximizers may be motivated to be the best in a social rivalry. The current studies seek to parse apart these two motivational possibilities by explicitly pitting them against each other in a series of experiments.

Across three studies, maximizers and satisficers were given a series of two hypothetical versions of the world (an absolute choice and a positional choice) and were asked which one they would prefer (adapted from Solnick & Hemenway, 1998). For example:

- You make $60,000 per year and nearly all of your coworkers make $80,000 (absolute).
- You make $50,000 per year and nearly all of your coworkers make $30,000 (positional).

In the first option, subjects have a higher yearly income than in the second option (an absolute best), but they are making less than those around them. In the second option, though subjects have a lower income in an absolute sense, they are making more than those around them (a positional best). Results from Study 1 showed, across a wide range of scenarios, that maximizers are more willing than satisficers to sacrifice objective superiority in order to be the best relative to others.

Studies 2 and 3 presented respondents with absolute or positional choices while also manipulating the public visibility of the choice outcome. If maximizers place more weight on social comparison as a way to determine what is the best, then the social visibility of the outcome should be irrelevant and they should choose the same option in public as in private. In contrast, if maximizers place more weight on social comparison for positional standing, then they should be more likely to choose positionally when others will know about the decision outcome, but may instead choose to maximize objective quality when the outcome is private.

Confirming predictions, Study 2 showed a significant Visibility X Maximization Score interaction, $\chi^2(1)=4.66, p<.05$. Overall, maximizers were more likely to choose the positional option when the outcome of the choice was publicly visible than when it was private and known only to the decision maker, while satisficers’ choices were unaffected by the visibility manipulation. Study 3 replicated this finding with products that were either naturally publicly visible (e.g., sunglass, car, cell phone) or naturally private (e.g., pajamas, ice maker, mattress).

The results from these three studies suggest that the motivations of maximizers are multi-faceted. While maximizers tend to make more positional choices than satisficers when their choices are publicly visible, this effect is not found when the outcome of the choice is private and known only to the decision maker. Future research should examine the individual factors of the maximization scale to ascertain whether there are “types” of maximizers who are more or less susceptible to the effects of public visibility. Overall, the current studies add complexity to the current literature on maximizing and decision making. Rather than focusing on the “best” option, three studies indicate that the motivation behind maximization behaviors can change across contexts. When social rivalry is salient, maximizers appear to be motivated to be the best in a relative sense. When social rivalry is not salient, maximizers appear to be motivated to choose the best an objective sense of the word.

REFERENCES