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I Run to Be Fit, You Run For Fame: Context Effects Affecting Self-Positivity in Judgments on Consumption Motives and Emotions

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Three field experiments demonstrate that judgments of own versus peers' consumption motives and emotions are subject to self-positivity reflecting socially desirable reporting. Changing the order of questions and the type of referent other changes the perceived similarity between the self and the other and attenuates self-positivity and socially desirable responding.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Many human judgments are comparative in nature (Mussweiler 2003). Consumers have been shown to judge themselves more positively (or less negatively) than others: a bias called self-positivity (Hoorens 1995; Pahl and Eiser 2005). These effects can represent true biases that people have about themselves that are self-enhancing or self-presentational tendencies in socially desirable reporting whereby they wish to appear better to others (Paulhus 2002).

Building on the context effects literature in survey responding (Schuman and Presser 1996), we examine the potentially debiasing effect of *question order* and *type of comparison other* on self-presentational responding. Differences in self/other-judgments depend on contextual factors such as question-order (Lin, Lin, and Raghbir 2004) and type of other (Pahl, Eiser, and White 2009; Perloff and Fetzer 1986). We predict and show that self-presentational responding extends to the domain of consumption motives (why one undertakes an experience) and emotions (how one feels about an experience), and can be attenuated using contextual manipulations (question order, type of other) that affect the degree of perceived self/other-similarity (Mussweiler 2003).

We study the experience of marathon participation. In 2011, over half a million runners participated in 720 marathons in the US alone.¹ In *study 1* (N=957), we asked runners to indicate why they and average other runners run, and the emotions they feel and they believe other average runners feel when thinking of the upcoming race. We manipulated the order of self and other. Motives for running were categorized as self-esteem- or fitness-related. Emotions were categorized as positive or negative. All scales were multi-item. Means are in the table.

A repeated-measures ANOVA with target (self vs. other) and motives (fitness vs. esteem) as within- and the order (self/other- vs. other/self-order) as a between-subjects factor yielded a three-way interaction ($F(1, 955) = 49.5, p < .001$). Runners believed that others are more likely to run for self-esteem reasons than they are, particularly when they responded about themselves first ($M_{\text{self}} = 2.8$ vs. $M_{\text{other}} = 3.9$) versus others first ($M_{\text{self}} = 3.0$ vs. $M_{\text{other}} = 3.6$; target x order: $F(1, 955) = 47.7, p < .001$). This was not true for fitness motives (target x order: $F(1, 955) = 3.1, p > .05$).

Runners also believed that others feel more negative ($M_{\text{self}} = 1.2$ vs. $M_{\text{other}} = 2.1, p < .001$) and less positive ($M_{\text{self}} = 4.5$ vs. $M_{\text{other}} = 4.0, p < .001$; target x emotions: $F(1, 955) = 766.0, p < .001$) about the race than they do irrespective of order of elicitation (three-way $F < 1$).

Following up on the order effect in motives, *study 2* (N=789) measured perceived self/other-similarity and to what extent the runners used themselves as a reference to make judgments about the average marathoner. Replicating study 1 results (three-way: $F(1, 787) = 16.8, p < .001$), runners thought they ran less for esteem than others, particularly when questioned about themselves first, with no effect for fitness motives. Runners also thought they felt more positive and less negative than other runners ($F(1, 787) = 423.1, p < .001$).

Extending study 1, in the self/other-condition, runners perceived themselves as less similar to the average runner ($M_{\text{self/other}} = -.10$ vs. $M_{\text{other/self}} = .21; F(1, 787) = 8.1, p < .01$) and used themselves less extensively as a standard to evaluate others ($M_{\text{self/other}} = 2.94$, vs. $M_{\text{other/}}$

$M_{\text{self}} = 3.40; F(1, 787) = 13.9, p < .001$) with perceived similarity mediating the effect of question order on self/other-differences in self-esteem motives (BCa 95% CI [-.09, -.02]).

To tease out whether these effects represent social desirability or self-positivity, in *study 3* (N=1095) we *manipulated* self/other-similarity between subjects (average, similar, inferior, superior others). If the effects are attenuated with similar others, these results would be consistent with a self-positivity interpretation (Perloff and Fetzer 1986, Raghbir and Menon, 1998), and if they are attenuated with a superior other, it is consistent with a social desirability interpretation as people would like to aspire to superior others. Other-similarity moderated the three-way interaction ($F(3, 1087) = 2.5, p = .06$). Separate analysis for each type of other showed that the 3-way interaction replicated for *average others* ($F(1, 271) = 5.5, p = .02, \eta_p^2 = .02$) and was of comparable magnitude for *inferior others* ($F(1, 271) = 5.7, p = .02, \eta_p^2 = .02$). Importantly, it was attenuated for *similar others* ($F(1, 279) = 2.0, p > .10$), and exacerbated for *superior others* ($F(1, 266) = 16.6, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .06$). This pattern suggests that the bias may be self-positivity rather than social desirability. For esteem motives, the target x order interaction was present for all targets. For fitness motives, the interaction was only significant for *superior others* ($F(1, 266) = 4.3, p = .04, \eta_p^2 = .02$). Put differently, respondents indicated that all others run more for self-esteem than they do, and superior runners also run less for fitness.

Type of other also moderated the target x emotions interaction ($F(3, 1087) = 50.3, p < .001$). Separate analysis for each type of other, showed that this interaction replicated for all targets ($F(1, 272)_{\text{average others}} = 189.6, F(1, 280)_{\text{similar others}} = 133.1, F(1, 272)_{\text{inferior others}} = 333.5, p < .001$ for all, η_p^2 s=.41, .32, and .55 respectively), but was of smaller magnitude for *superior others* ($F(1, 267) = 6.5, p = .01, \eta_p^2 = .02$). The interactions suggest that runners believe that they have less negative and more positive emotions than others. In all three studies we also found that the magnitude of the effect was greater for negative than for positive emotions.

Our findings contribute to the social-comparison and context effects literature by showing how contextual manipulations such as question-order and type of target can moderate self-presentational responses. The study uses the original domain of a new and emerging consumption experience field: marathon running. Future research should validate these effects in different consumption contexts not invoking ability, and further tease out the role of self-positivity versus social desirability in explaining why people believe they sign on for an activity for reasons different than others.

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1 <http://www.runningusa.org>

Table 1: Means, Relevant Interaction Effects, And Alphas Across Studies

Domain (<i>w</i>)		Motives (M)						Emotions (E)						
		Esteem Motives			Fitness Motives			Positive Emotions			Negative Emotions			
		S1	S2	S3	S1	S2	S3	S1	S2	S3	S1	S2	S3	
Alpha self-/other-rating (α)		.69/.68	.71/.73	.72/.71	.78/.77	.79/.78	.78/.81	.76/.76	.73/.70	.72/.78	.74/.74	.74/.73	.77/.79	
Cell means														
		Target (<i>w</i>)		Order (<i>b</i>)		Other (<i>b</i>)								
Self	Self/other average	2.8	2.9	2.6	3.8	3.9	3.5	4.5	4.4	4.3	1.2	1.3	1.3	
	similar	-	-	2.8	-	-	3.7	-	-	4.4	-	-	1.3	
	superior	-	-	2.8	-	-	3.9	-	-	4.3	-	-	1.4	
	inferior	-	-	2.7	-	-	3.6	-	-	4.4	-	-	1.2	
	Other/self average	3.0	2.8	2.8	3.5	3.6	3.4	4.5	4.4	4.4	1.2	1.3	1.3	
	similar	-	-	2.8	-	-	3.5	-	-	4.3	-	-	1.3	
	superior	-	-	3.0	-	-	3.7	-	-	4.3	-	-	1.5	
	inferior	-	-	3.0	-	-	3.5	-	-	4.5	-	-	1.4	
	Other	Self/other average	3.9	4.0	3.8	3.9	3.9	3.7	4.0	4.1	4.0	2.1	2.1	2.1
		similar	-	-	3.8	-	-	4.0	-	-	4.2	-	-	2.1
		superior	-	-	4.4	-	-	3.1	-	-	4.3	-	-	1.8
		inferior	-	-	3.9	-	-	3.7	-	-	3.7	-	-	2.4
Other/self average		3.6	3.5	3.5	3.8	3.7	3.6	4.1	4.1	4.0	2.1	2.2	2.3	
similar		-	-	3.4	-	-	3.7	-	-	4.0	-	-	2.0	
superior		-	-	4.1	-	-	3.3	-	-	4.4	-	-	1.8	
inferior		-	-	3.6	-	-	3.4	-	-	3.7	-	-	2.7	
ANOVAs ($F(\eta_p^2)$)														
		Motives (M)						Emotions (E)						
(only relevant higher order effects)		S1	S2	S3	S1	S2	S3	S1	S2	S3	S1	S2	S3	
Target x M/E x Order x Other		-	-	2.5 [†] (.01)	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	<1 (<.01)	
Target x M/E x Other		-	-	↓	-	-	50.3*** (.12)	-	-	-	-	-	↓	
Target x M/E x Order (average)		49.5*** (.05)	16.8*** (.02)	5.5* (.02)	<1 (<.01)	1.5 (<.01)	↓	766.0*** (.45)	423.1*** (.35)	189.6*** (.41)	↓	↓	↓	
Target x M/E x Order (similar)		↓	↓	2.0 (.01)	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	
Target x M/E x Order (superior)		↓	↓	16.6*** (.06)	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	
Target x M/E x Order (inferior)		↓	↓	5.7* (.02)	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	
Target x M/E (average)		↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	
Target x M/E (similar)		↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	
Target x M/E (superior)		↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	
Target x M/E (inferior)		↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	
Target x Order (average/esteem)		47.7*** (.05)	23.6*** (.03)	9.3** (.03)	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	
Target x Order (average/fitness)		3.1 [†] (<.01)	<1 (<.01)	<1 (<.01)	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	

NOTE.—*Motives* were measured using four items for fitness motives (i.e., control weight, improve health, stay physically attractive, become physically fit) and four items for esteem motives (i.e., getting recognition, improving self-esteem, competing with others, adding life meaning) using 7-point scales (0=completely unimportant, 6=very important) derived from the Motivations of Marathoners Scales (Masters, Ogles, and Jolton 1993). *Emotions* were measured using five positive items (confident, joyful, optimistic, hopeful, calm) and five negative items (worried, anxious, uncomfortable, hopeless, tense) using a 7-point scale (0=not at all, 6=very strongly) derived from inventories on anticipatory emotions (Baumgartner, Pieters, and Bagozzi 2008; Leone, Perugini, and Bagozzi 2005) and prospective achievement emotions (Pekrun 2006). Items were counterbalanced.

S1, S2, S3 indicate studies 1, 2, 3; *w* denotes within-subjects factors; *b* denotes between-subjects factors.

[†]*p* < .10. * *p* < .05. ** *p* < .01. *** *p* < .001.

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