Self-Compassion, Social Comparison and Coping Strategies: the Case of Downwardly Mobile Consumers

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Most consumer research on coping is based on the notion of pursuing self-esteem but recent psychological research emphasises the pursuit of self-compassion as healthier to the self-esteem pursuit. This phenomenological study on downwardly mobile consumers identifies different coping strategies of self-compassion and the role of social comparisons in self-compassionate coping.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Most consumer research on coping is based on the notion of protecting, restoring or bolstering self-esteem (e.g., Adkins & Ozanne, 2005; Elliott, 1995; Hamilton, 2012; Hamilton & Catterall, 2008; Henry & Caldwell, 2006; Hill & Stamey, 1990; Sivanathan & Pettit, 2010). However, recent psychological research emphasizes the pursuit of self-compassion as a healthier alternative to the pursuit of self-esteem (e.g., Leary et al., 2007; Neff et al., 2007). While self-esteem refers to a self-attitude in which self-worth is conditional on (perceived) own competence, performance and attainment of desired outcomes and ideals, self-compassion refers to a self-attitude that is non-judgmental toward one’s inadequacies and failures and in which self-worth is unconditional (e.g., Crocker & Wolfe, 2001; Leary et al., 2007; Neff et al., 2007). Self-compassion is associated with greater emotional balance than self-esteem. Nevertheless, consumer research on coping has largely neglected the notion of self-compassion. Only a minority of consumer research studies have recently discussed self-compassion and self-acceptance (i.e. Bahl & Milne, 2010; Kim & Gal, 2014 respectively) but did not explore differently coping strategies of self-compassion and secondly the role of social comparisons in self-compassionate coping.

More specifically, consumer research has not explored different self-compassionate coping strategies even though psychological research suggests that self-compassion involves different (though interrelated) components which are: 1) self-kindness rather than harsh self-criticism when encountering pain and personal shortcomings, 2) common humanity i.e. acknowledging suffering and personal failure as part of the shared human experience rather than isolating oneself, 3) mindfulness i.e. taking a balanced approach to one’s negative emotions so that feelings are neither exaggerated nor suppressed/denied (e.g., Leary et al., 2007; Neff, 2003).

Moreover, psychological research relates social comparisons (Festinger, 1954; Wood, 1989; Collin, 1996; Suls, Martin, & Wheel er 2002; Buunk, & Gibbons, 2007) to the notion of self-esteem (e.g., Aspinwall & Taylor, 1993; Collin, 1996; Crocker et al., 1987; Taylor & Lobel, 1989) and more recently to the notion of self-compassion (e.g., Breines & Chen, 2012). However, consumer research studies on social comparisons have focused only on the role of self-esteem (e.g., Ackerman, Maclnnis, & Folkes, 2000; Gulas & McKeage, 2000; Smeesters, Mussweiler, & Mandel, 2010; Richins, 1991) and did not explore the role of self-compassion within social comparison.

Therefore, this phenomenological study on Greek downwardly mobile consumers coping with financial difficulties and consumption restrictions considered social comparisons and self-compassionate coping strategies in order to add to our understanding of consumer coping. Phenomenological interviewing (Kvale 1983; Thompson et al., 1989) was used and a phenomenological-hermeneutical analysis (Thompson et al., 1989) was followed using a back-and-forth, part-to-whole interpretation mode.

Our informants experienced significant income reductions, job loss or job insecurity and uncertainty regarding delayed salary payments. Informants often had difficulty making ends meet and several undertook low-paid jobs to avoid complete unemployment. They adopted the following coping strategies that were colored by a self-attitude of self-compassion and were highly related to social comparisons:

1) Common humanity: social emotional support and console the self by engaging in similar or downward comparisons
Previous research had examined poor consumers’ feelings of alienation within an affluent consumer culture (e.g., Crockett, Grier, & Williams, 2003; Elliott, 1995; Hill & Stamey, 1990; Hill & Stephens, 1997). However, our informants did not feel different, alienated or discriminated against within their recessionary environment. Reflecting the concept of ‘common humanity’, informants acknowledged suffering and personal failure as part of a shared experience. They engaged in emotional support with similar others and in comparisons with similar or “worse-off’ others or with their own past ‘disadvantaged’ self in order to console themselves (and one another) for their lifestyle and consumption changes.

2) Balancing external locus of control (downward and similar comparisons) and internal locus of control (upward comparisons):
In line with the concept of ‘mindfulness’, participants often engaged in both an external and an internal locus of control, which helped in taking a balanced approach to their feelings, so that their feelings were neither exaggerated nor denied. Over-identifying with either an external or an internal locus of control can involve rumi-nating and can magnify a sense of failure while avoiding thoughts and feelings (relevant to either an internal or an external locus of control) can intensify them in the long-term. Engaging in both an external locus of control (and similar or downward comparisons) and an internal locus of control (and upward comparisons), participants often tried to balance perceptions of responsibility for their financial circumstances and to regulate their feelings.

3) Market avoidance (avoiding upward comparisons) and extensive market search (engaging in similar comparisons):
By avoiding the market of desired goods, participants tried to avoid negative feelings which involved the risk of their suppressed feelings getting intensified in the long run. By engaging in extensive market search for essential and needed goods, participants aimed to find better value-for-money goods but they also run the risk of engaging in rumination and exaggeration on their limitations. Participants’ engagement in these two contrastive strategies helped them in taking a middle ground between over-identification with and avoidance of negative feelings, in line with the concept of ‘mindfulness’.

4) Self-kind enjoyment and escapism (mainly upward comparisons)
Reflecting attempts at self-kindness, informants valued possessions, products and activities that enabled leisure-based enjoyment and art-related escapism. In disengaging temporarily from their stresses (e.g., Hamilton & Wagner, 2011; Henry & Caldwell, 2006), participants often valued art that enabled them to identify with or to be inspired by stories of ‘superior’ others who have the capacity to succeed in difficult conditions.

Therefore, this paper adds to our understanding of consumers’ self-compassion by identifying how consumers’ self-compassion...
Advances in Consumer Research (Volume 43) / 589
(Bahl & Milne, 2010) involves particular combinations of social comparisons (e.g., Festinger, 1954; Wood, 1989; Richins, 1991) and coping strategies (e.g., Folkman et al., 1986) extending work on consumer coping that was largely based on the notion of pursuing self-esteem (e.g., Elliott, 1995; Hamilton & Catterall, 2008; Hill & Stamey, 1990). It identifies different coping strategies of self-compassion and highlights the importance of social comparisons as resources in self-compassionate coping.

REFERENCES