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경영학 석사학위 논문

Conspicuous Consumption
Through Brands Triggered By
Social Comparison Types

사회적 비교 집단에 의해 유발되는
과시적 소비 및 브랜드 선호

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Conspicuous Consumption Through Brands Triggered By Social Comparison Types

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Abstract

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Social comparison is an inevitable, ubiquitous psychological mechanism which is practiced both consciously and unconsciously in everyday life. In seeking to expand an understanding of this fundamental behavior and how it influences consumption decisions in individuals, this study mainly focuses on the relationship between social comparison and conspicuous consumption. Furthermore, this paper assesses on how different types of social comparison groups can distinctively affect conspicuous consumption and brand preference. Data was gathered via an experiment of undergraduate students after being unconsciously exposed to a fictitious protagonist (in-group vs. out-group) either triggering upward or downward comparison. The findings indicate that participants tend to prefer conspicuous goods over non-conspicuous goods after encountering an upward comparison compared with downward comparison for in-groups. By contrast, significant difference for conspicuous goods preference did not exist for out-group protagonists regardless of the direction. Furthermore, preference towards brand conformity exists for individuals exposed to the upward social comparison groups, and brand deviation for the downward social

comparison groups.

Keywords: Social comparison, conspicuous consumption, brand conformity, in-group vs. out-group

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1. Introduction

There's always going to be someone better than you.

— Lisa Simpson, THE SIMPSONS¹

Comparison is the thief of joy.

— Theodore Roosevelt

As the highly intelligent and philosophical Lisa Simpson, from the famous American family animated sitcom, The Simpsons, once quoted, you simply cannot be the best. American author, historian, and the 26th United States president, Theodore Roosevelt also cited that comparing oneself to others leads to unhappiness. Social comparisons, which are comparisons between others and the self, are an essential, ubiquitous psychological mechanism that influences behavior, judgments and motivations (Blanton, 2001; Collins, 1996; Mussweiler, 2003; Mussweiler & Strack, 2000; Wood, 1989). There are two types of social comparison; one is downward comparison, which is a defensive inclination when one compares their self to an inferior standard

¹ From THE SIMPSONS, 1993, Beverly Hills, CA: Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation. Copyright 1993.

which results to evaluating themselves to be better off, generating a positive feeling. In contrast, upward comparison is when one evaluates their self with a superior standard (Mussweiler, 2003). In accordance to previous studies, upward comparison might be reflected as a type of self-assessment and can be implied as an interest in self-improvement or achievement (Taylor & Lobel, 1989; Wheeler, 1966). However, on the other hand, some studies indicate that upward comparison leads to more direct, negative effects on mood and self-esteem (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & LaPrelle, 1985; Wilson & Benner, 1971; Morse & Gergen, 1970; Wills, 1981). Nonetheless, whatever the objectives or results are, it is indisputable that comparing oneself to others is a fundamental behavior that people engage in regularly. Furthermore, this has become more accessible due to the advent of social networking services, as people can compare themselves not only by meeting their friends directly, but also to their friends' best pictures, moments, successes, and etc., simply by logging on to their social network account.

As comparison is an inherent behavior of individuals, extensive research was conducted to analyze the effects and consequences of these comparisons. There is a well-known English idiom “Keeping up with the Joneses” which refer to the comparison to one’s neighbor as a standard for social class or the accumulation of material goods. This philosophy is widely

spread in many societies, and promotes conspicuous consumption (Gali, 1994). The term “Conspicuous Consumption” which was first defined by Thorstein Velben in 1899, is described as the acquirement of possessions to publicly display economic power to attain or maintain one’s social status. Accordingly, conspicuous goods differ from other goods as they not only satisfy material needs, but also appease social needs like fame and prestige (Belk, 1988; Grubb & Grathwohl, 1967). This is also consistent with Dusenberry’s assertion that an individual’s conspicuous consumption relies not only on the consuming behavior itself, but also on the consumption compared with others (1949). Everyone has a need to feel self-integrity and has the willingness to take action to feel better when this need is deprived (Sivanathan & Petit, 2010). In addition, to recover from lowered self-esteem or feelings of threat, individuals are willing to protect themselves through consumption, especially by a conspicuous type of consumption (Sivanathan & Petit, 2010). Accordingly, other studies identify that consumption can actually enhance feelings. For example, self-gifts can improve self-worth (Mick & Demoss, 1990) and purchasing luxury goods can elevate self-esteem and self-directed pleasure (Truong & McColl, 2011).

Correspondingly, people use conspicuous brands as a method of signaling to express their personality or status (Chao & Schor, 1998).

Building on to these previous studies, this paper shows that individuals will unconsciously compare themselves with others, and will develop distinct feelings depending on the type of social comparison. These feelings will generate differences in self-esteem level, which will eventually lead to an effort and action of enhancing their self-esteem by higher preference of conspicuous consumption. This research focuses on a very important issue as social comparison is an inevitable psychological behavior, which people participate regularly in their daily lives. However, in some cases, social comparison can activate negative feelings as lower self-esteem, dissatisfaction or even depressive symptoms, and eventually lead to unnecessary conspicuous consumption. Therefore, one must recognize these circumstances to maintain or elevate their subjective well-being level.

Although there is abundant research on conspicuous consumption and social comparison separately, there are none that links the self-esteem level that is triggered by social comparison types to conspicuous consumption. During the last decade, social comparison has become a more immense phenomenon due to the advance in social media technology, and much research has been conducted demonstrating the impact and consequences, especially the negative side, on individuals using social media (Chou & Edge, 2012; Feinstein, Herschenberg, Bhatia, Latack, Meuwly, & Davila, 2013; Buxmann & Krasnova, 2013). However, none of these studies leads to conspicuous

consumption. Conspicuous consumption may not always be a negative behavior, but there exists the possibility of it resulting to disastrous consequences. Therefore, it is essential that individuals recognize and obtain the ability to handle these circumstances, and do not participate in unnecessary conspicuous consumption, but rather judicious consumption decisions. Align with this cotemporary phenomenon, this paper demonstrates that different levels of self-esteem can be triggered depending on the type of the social comparison object, and may eventually result to conspicuous consumption.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Social Comparison Theory: The Ceaseless Cycle of Comparing Myself to Others

Social comparison theory which was first proposed by Leon Festinger, emphasized the desire of people to perceive themselves by comparing their fortunes, characteristics, and weaknesses to others (1954). Building on to this original theory, comprehensive research was conducted afterwards. One

approach by Taylor and Loble (1989) claims that people fulfill their need to improve by intentional comparisons with upward standards to obtain information on how to advance. The reason for these comparisons is to satisfy needs such as self-evaluation, self-improvement, and self-enhancement (Festinger, 1954; Taylor & Loble, 1989; Taylor, Wayment, & Carrillo, 1996; Wills, 1981). On the other hand, other studies show that comparisons are often performed spontaneously and without intention (Mussweiler & Epstude, 2009). This perspective explains diverse reasons for comparisons without self-enhancement needs. One explanation is that social comparisons allow people to process information more efficiently compared with absolute approaches (Mussweiler & Epstude, 2009). For example, it would be easier to convey your school's prestige by indicating the ranking of your school compared to other schools, rather than informing the number of papers your school has published last year. Another reason is that information regarding abilities, performance, characteristics, and etc. is usually defined in a relative manner (Huttenlocher & Higgins, 1971). For instance, if someone was to indicate that 10 year old Mike is tall, it would be compared to other 10 years old, and not with fully grown adults. These notions are proved by sufficient studies which explain that comparative information processing does hold valuable efficiency advantages (Macrae, Milne, & Bodenhausen, 1994).

Intentional or not, the direction of social comparison can result in different conclusions or effects. There are two types of directions in social comparison. One is downward social comparison, which usually elevates self-evaluations (Morse & Gergen, 1970; Wills, 1981), and people feel better about their situation or self as they look to another individual or group that is considered worse off compared with them (Gibbons, 1986). This type of comparison focuses on the positive effects of comparisons in increasing subjective well-being (Gibbons, 1986). On the other hand, perspectives contradict for the upward social comparison. One approach is that it provides a positive instance of the attribute under evaluation (Thornton & Arrowood, 1966), and an interest in self-improvement or achievement (Taylor & Lobel, 1989; Wheeler, 1966) which results to positive conclusions. Accordingly, it might produce inspiration and optimism (Taylor & Lobel, 1989), or reflection (Tesser, 1988). If people are motivated with the need for self-improvement, upward comparisons can inspire and provide information on advancing (Bandura, 1997). For example, dieters might post pictures of models on their refrigerator to generate an upward comparison to remind them of their own weight and might promote inspiration to meet their goal (Wood, 1989).

On the contrary, other research shows that upward comparison can lead to

negative effects on emotions and self-esteem (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & LaPrelle, 1985; Wilson & Benner, 1971; Morse & Gergen, 1970; Wills, 1981). For example, it can threaten oneself, as people tend to feel worse after comparing their performance with a superior standard than an inferior one (Gilbert, Giesler, & Morris, 1995; Morse & Gergen, 1970). In this situation, upward social comparison results to negative consequences such as lower self-esteem (Morse & Gergen, 1970), dissatisfaction (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985), deprivation and anger (Folger & Martin, 1986). If this is the case, these types of social comparison can even lead to serious depressive symptoms (Swallow & Kuiper, 1988). Specifically, Morse and Gergen (1970) present that self-esteem change is a major dependent variable in social comparison. Nonetheless, whatever the objectives or results are, it is indisputable that comparison is an inherent behavior of all individuals.

In conclusion, individuals will consciously and unconsciously compare themselves with others, and will develop different feelings, such as different levels of self-esteem. It is more likely that self-esteem will be lowered when individuals compare themselves with a similar other than a different other, as studies show that similarity on related attributes is more influential for the diagnosticity of comparison information (Goethals & Darley, 1977). In addition, Morse and Gergen (1970) show that the self-esteem change from

social comparison is heavily influenced by similarity and dissimilarity. Research also identifies that the intensity of competition is higher among people with similar performance levels and when the gap between competitors is smaller (Lehmann, 2001). To give an example, people are usually more aggressive and competitively provoked by their swimming classmates in the same level than an Olympic gold medal swimmer at an unattainable level. Thus, similarity in the comparison subject affects the individual at a stronger level, which will influence their self-esteem level more intensely.

Recently, social comparison and relative deprivation have become more accessible due to the advent of social networking services like Facebook, and people can compare themselves to their friends' best selves, best moments, best successes, and best pictures without even realizing it. Social media usage has dramatically increased with a growth of 800% in just eight years from 2005 (Oleski, 2013), and much research has been duly conducted towards the negative influences of social media, which can be depressive symptoms or unhappiness (Chou & Edge, 2012; Feinstein et al., 2013; Buxmann & Krasnova, 2013). Especially, Davila, Hershenberg, Feinstein, Gorman, Bhatia, and Starr, (2012) focus on "Facebook depression" which is largely linked with self-comparisons with Facebook friends who seem more

attractive, have more friends, or generally more successful. The authors explain that this type of self-comparison often leads to negative self-judgments. In specific, it is easy for Facebook friends to make an individual feel worse off by comparison, because it is more likely that people will post their “perfect” pictures among many “normal” pictures. Other studies have shown that Facebook users tend to perceive their Facebook friends as happier and living better lives, which can conclude to lower self-esteem (Davila et al., 2012; Chou & Edge, 2012). However, these comparisons are not for self-enhancement, but tend to be more unintendedly exercised. Moreover, social networking service “friends” are mostly real life friends with many similar attributes rather than hotshot celebrities who have less similarities. This may aggravate comparisons. Therefore, due to the surge in social networking, unconscious upward social comparison have been easier to encounter, whereas, as this type of interaction can be pretentious, it has become easier to position another to seem better off than reality.

Building up on these previous research, it can be asserted that if upward comparisons are actioned unintentionally or by chance, and not for self-enhancement, these will cause negative feelings and will eventually lead to lower self-esteem. Furthermore, an individual will be more strongly influenced by social comparison, when the comparison object has more

similar attributes than different ones.

H1a: A person's self-esteem level will decrease more when a person is unconsciously exposed to a similar another (in-group) who seems to be better off than a different another (out-group).

H1b: A person's self-esteem level will decrease more when a person is unconsciously exposed to a similar another (in-group) who seems to be worse off, than a different another (out-group).

H2a: A person's self-esteem level will decrease more when a person is unconsciously exposed to a better off another than a worse off another when they are both similar (in-group).

H2b: A person's self-esteem level will be similar regardless of direction (upward vs. downward) when a person is unconsciously exposed to a different another (out-group).

2.2 Conspicuous Consumption Theory: Showing How Great I am By My Conspicuous Goods

Conspicuous consumption was first introduced by Velben in 1899; he

emphasizes that this type of consumption was practiced by families of the upper class who applied their great wealth as a method of publicly manifesting their prestige and social power. Based on Velben's 100 year old theory, there has been abundant studies on conspicuous consumption. Bagwell and Bernheim (1996) show that people are willing to pay a premium price for a functionally equivalent product if they perceive it to be more prestigious, and the reason for this behavior is the desire to signal wealth. Other studies point out that individuals who engage in conspicuous consumption usually imitate people's consumption patterns of those directly above the social hierarchy (Erickson, 1996; Mason, 1998), who are the ones that are the most similar among the upper social class. Bearden and Etzel (1982) prove that since conspicuous consumption depends on others' willingness to grant it, these goods are more public than private products.

Conspicuous consumption is not only to consume and show status, but also for psychological needs. Every individual has a psychological need for self-integrity and is willing to put in effort if this need is feeling deprived (Sivanathan & Petit, 2010); this could be seen as a need for self-enhancement. In other words, to recover from lowered self-esteem or feelings of threat, individuals are willing to protect themselves by investing time, effort and participate in lavish spending. Sivanathan and Petit's study

explains that an individual's psychological needs for self-integrity can be a motivating force for consumption decisions, and specifically for conspicuous consumption decisions (2010). This paper shows that individuals consume status-infused products for reparative effects on their ego in situations when they feel self-threat or low self-esteem. Likewise, Truong and McColl (2011) show that consumers' intrinsic motivations for purchasing luxury goods are for superior quality and self-directed pleasure, while self-esteem is strongly related to self-directed pleasure. This study also shows that purchasing luxury goods do elevate self-esteem and self-directed pleasure (Truong & McColl, 2011). In line with this concept, Arndt, Solomon, Kasser, and Sheldon reveal that acquiring goods can help improve self-esteem by pleasing one's ego (2004). Organizing these previous studies, it can be asserted that when an individual feels lower self-esteem in some way, they will try to recover and put in effort to resilient to their normal condition, and one method to fulfil this will be by acquiring goods, especially conspicuous goods.

One of the most common explanations on the reason why conspicuous consumption occurs is that, individuals experience dissatisfaction from upward comparison, and they try to reduce this gap by the current level of possessions by increasing consumption – especially conspicuous

consumption (Dupor and Liu, 2003; Elster, 1991; Solnick & Hemeway, 1998). That is why people at the bottom of the income or material possession distribution spend more on conspicuous consumption (Bloch, Rao, & Desai, 2004; Duesenberry, 1949). Ordabayeva and Chandon (2011) prove that greater equality reduces conspicuous consumption when consumers focus on the narrower possession gap because it increases the position gains derived from more status-enhancing consumption. As indicated before, the level of self-esteem level can be more strongly influenced by social comparison on when the comparison object is similar. Accordingly, it can also be concluded that upward comparison towards more similar others can result to higher conspicuous consumption intention.

H3: People with lower self-esteem will prefer conspicuous goods to inconspicuous goods.

H4a: A person exposed to a similar another (in-group) who is doing better (upward comparison) will have a higher level of preference for conspicuous goods than a different another (out-group).

H4b: A person exposed to a similar another (in-group) who is doing worse (downward comparison) will have a higher level of preference for

conspicuous goods than a different another (out-group).

H5a: A person exposed to a better off another than a worse off another will have higher preference towards conspicuous consumption when they are both similar (in-group).

H5b: A person exposed to a different another (out-group) will have similar preference towards conspicuous goods regardless of the direction of the comparison.

One dimension on why individuals choose the products they choose is based on conformity and uniqueness. Previous research shows that individuals simultaneously need a sense of belonging and distinctiveness (Brewer, 1991). In economics, this concept can be explained as the bandwagon effect and the snob effect. The bandwagon effect is the tendency to follow the beliefs or actions of others because individuals directly prefer to conform than differ (Asch, 1955). If this is taken to the consumption perspective, the perceived popularity of a good may be effective on how it is viewed overall. For example, when a particular good becomes popular and everyone is purchasing it, people will tend to conform to the majority and purchase it also; this can explain fashion trends (Long & Fox, 2007). The

snob effect can be viewed as the exact opposite, as it is when the demand for a certain good is conversely related to the overall demand for that good (Libenstein, 1950). Specifically, when an item is less available, the higher the value is. Examples of these types of goods would be sports cars, limited editions, works of art, and etc. In addition, this propensity can be linked with self-esteem. Consumers might maintain and protect their self-esteem by distancing themselves from disliked products and brands, and this phenomenon can be highly influenced by reference groups (Shavitt, 1989). Banister and Hogg (2003) identify that all consumers refer to undesired products to maintain their self-esteem and conform to others at times. Based on these research, it can be concluded that individuals will tend to prefer the same brands as the comparison objects in upwards comparison to maintain their self-esteem or to fit in, but will prefer different brands in downward comparisons.

H6: People will prefer the same brands of those in the upward comparison, whereas, prefer different brands of those in the downward comparison.

All in all, this paper concentrates on how different types of social

comparisons based on the direction and similarity, will trigger different levels of self-esteem which will eventually lead to distinct preferences of conspicuous consumption and brands.

3. Method

To summarize, this paper hypothesizes that different types of social comparisons will trigger diverse levels of self-esteem, which will eventually lead to differences in conspicuous consumption preference. To test this concept, this experiment is composed of three sections. The first part is to unconsciously promote social comparison. The second part identifies the intention of conspicuous consumption and brand preference of each respondent. Finally, in the third part, respondents will complete a questionnaire towards their emotions, moods, self-esteem level, and other psychological factors, and this part will also check manipulation.

3.1 Participants

All the participants for this study were undergraduate students from three

different universities in South Korea. The participants were restricted to undergraduates attending four year universities to eliminate external factors as they might perceive “conspicuousness” differently, i.e. high salary workers might perceive a specific brand inconspicuous compared to undergraduate students, or compare themselves differently towards an identical scenario, i.e. some might identify themselves as “better off” compared to the same comparison target. The experiments were conducted before lectures of their major courses. A total number of 271 students participated in the experiment, however, 11 of the participants did not answer all of the questions in the surveys, 5 were foreigners who indicated they did not understand the instructions as they were in Korean, and 6 were not manipulated accurately. Thus, a total number of 249 respondents were analyzed in this paper. Among the analyzed participants, 114 were female, and the average age was 22.1. There were no significant differences in age, gender, university, and major.

3.2 Experiment Design & Procedure

This study is a simple 2 (upward comparison vs. downward comparison) X 2 (in-group comparison vs. out-group comparison) experimental design. In the first part of the experiment (Part A), participants will be advised to

complete a sentence puzzle for priming. There are four types of scenarios, which will either cause upward or downward social comparison and either in-group or out-group social comparison. In each scenario, there is a fictitious protagonist who is both personally and professionally better off or worse off; this will decide the direction of the social comparison (upward vs. downward). For example, being better off would be having good friends, receiving acknowledgement from superiors, being successful at work and such, whereas, worse off would be the opposite. Furthermore, this protagonist will either be a graduate of the same school of the respondents (in-group) or did not go to college at all and have no job or a graduate student from an Ivy League University working at a stock firm on Wall Street (out-group). Each respondent will be advised to complete a sentence puzzle where they would have to put each phrase in the correct order to make a full, accurate sentence. The context of these twelve sentences will be one of the stories of the fictitious protagonist. As the participants will be concentrating on the sentence puzzle rather than the context, they would unconsciously compare themselves. After they have finished the puzzle, they will go through two questionnaires. In the first questionnaire (Part B), respondents will choose one of two objects among twelve pairs that they prefer. Some objects are more conspicuous than the other, and some products differ in brands, where these brands were preferred by the fictitious

protagonist indicated in Part A (All four of the fictitious protagonists preferred the same brands). Lastly, the second questionnaire (Part C) checks mood, emotions, self-esteem level, how similar they think they are to the fictitious protagonist, how much better off they are compared to the protagonist, and etc. When the questionnaires are finished, they will be collected individually and respondents will receive a small piece of candy for participation.

3.3 Pre-test

Before the main study, seven individuals who do not differ from the respondents of the main test were interviewed. Each interview consisted about an hour, and were focused on a diverse basket of products. The collection had a variety of different types of objects ranging from beverages to accessories. Accordingly, different types of brands like automobile brands, milk brands, clothing brands, and such were discussed to capture which brands and products were considered as conspicuous. Based on these interviews, a strong grasp towards the conspicuous level of brands and products could be obtained, and the products that were to be inserted in Part B were concluded. In addition, these seven individuals were also asked the level of how much they felt being in the same group as the four fictitious

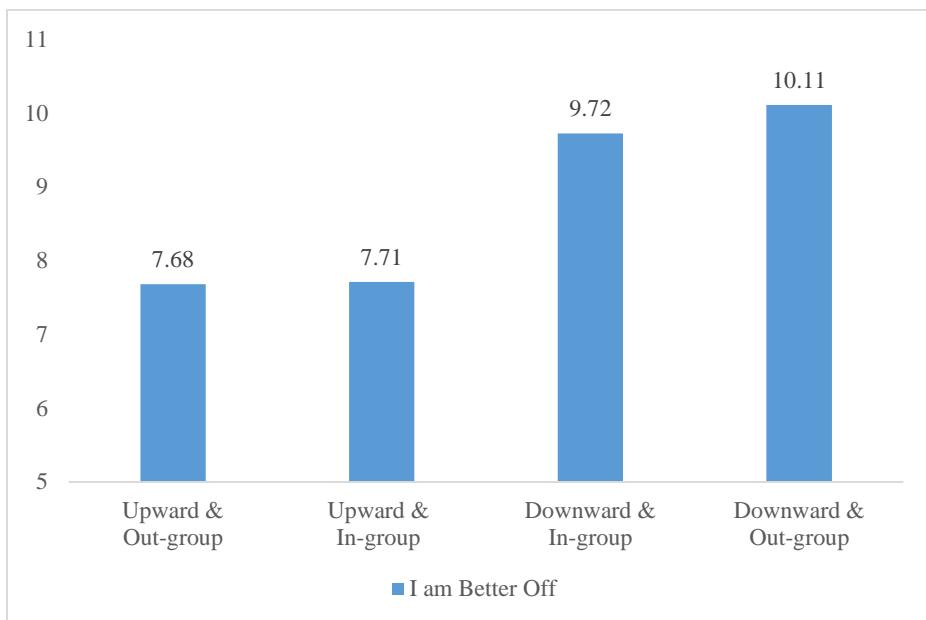
protagonists. As these individuals were exposed to all four characters, they were able to compare them, so their responses were more extreme than the actual participants of the main study who were only exposed to one.

4. Results and Discussion

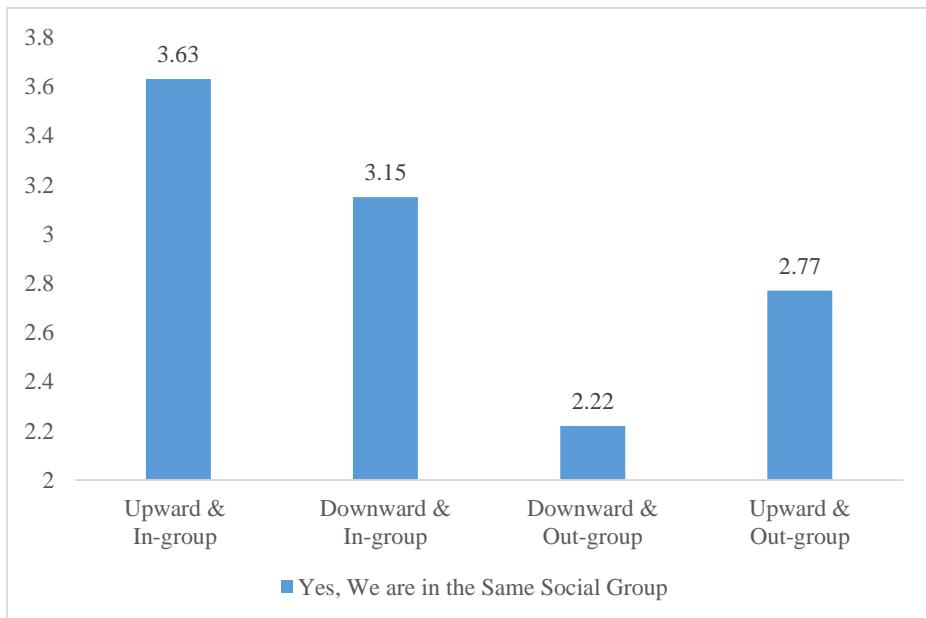
4.1 Manipulation Checks

Each scenario was evaluated if they conveyed the necessary attributes to accurately prime participants. Participants were instructed to indicate whether the fictitious protagonist was in the same social group as they were, and who was better off in Part C. Participants who were not accurately manipulated were 6, and they were discarded from the analysis. The below graphs show that participants were well manipulated.

As the below graph, respondents in the Downward scenarios indicated that they were better off with an average of 9.72 (In-group) and 10.11 (Out-group), where the average is 9.92 of both groups. On the other hand, the average of the participants for the Upward scenarios were 7.68 (Out-group) and 7.71 (In-group) with an average of 7.70.



[Figure 1] Who is Better Off?



[Figure 2] Are We in the Same Social Group?

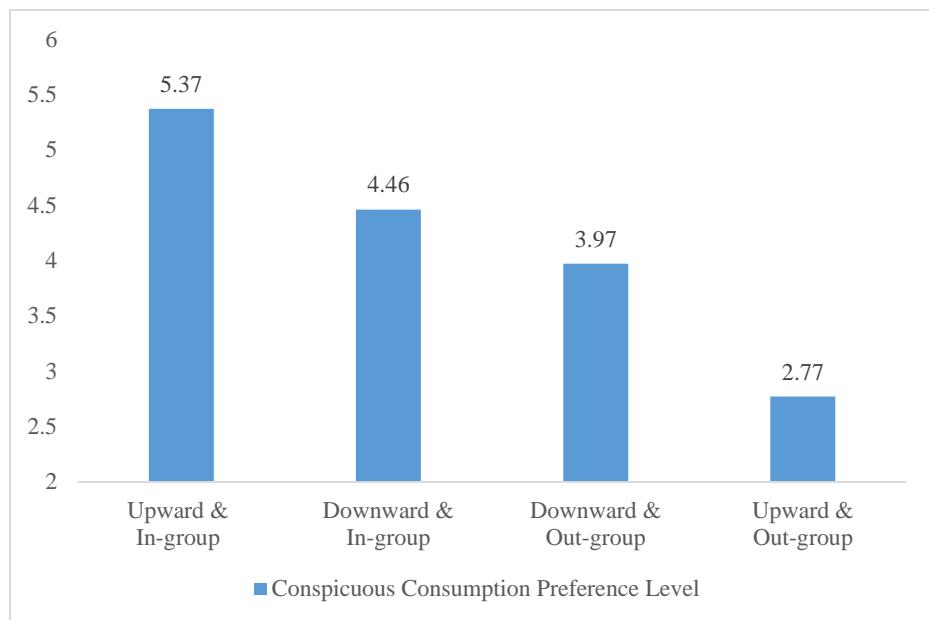
Manipulation was also checked for In-groups and Out-groups. The averages for the In-group scenarios were 3.63 (Upward) and 3.15 (Downward), which is an average of 3.39. Whereas, the averages for the Out-group scenarios were 2.22 (Downward) and 2.77 (Upward), with an average of 2.50. Thus, In-group participants indicated that they were relatively in the same social group as the protagonist. However, the reason why there is a larger difference between the Downward & Out-group and Upward & Out-group compared to the In-groups, could be because of the tendency for people trying to be more similar with people in the upper group rather than the lower group.

4.2 Results

Conspicuous Consumption Preference

The dependent variable, which is the level of preference towards conspicuous consumption was measured in Part B. In this survey, participants were advised to select one out of a pair of objects, where one was conspicuous and the other was not. As hypothesized, the level of conspicuous goods preference differed by social comparison type. Results indicated that the averages were $M=2.77$ and $M=5.37$ for the Upward & Out-

group and Upward & In-group social comparison groups, respectively. This shows that individuals have a higher preference of conspicuous goods when the comparison object is more similar in the Upward groups. On the other hand, for the Downwards comparison groups, conspicuous consumption preference were $M=4.46$ and $M=3.97$ for Downward & In-group and Downward & Out-group, correspondingly. This also points out that individuals have a higher preference of conspicuous goods for the similar group. It could be seen that there is a significant difference among conspicuous levels between In-groups ($M=4.92$) and Out-groups ($M=3.37$; $t(1, 147) = 2.679$ $p < 0.00$). Also, between the two In-group types, those in the Upward & In-group showed higher preference of conspicuous comparison than the Downward & In-group participants.



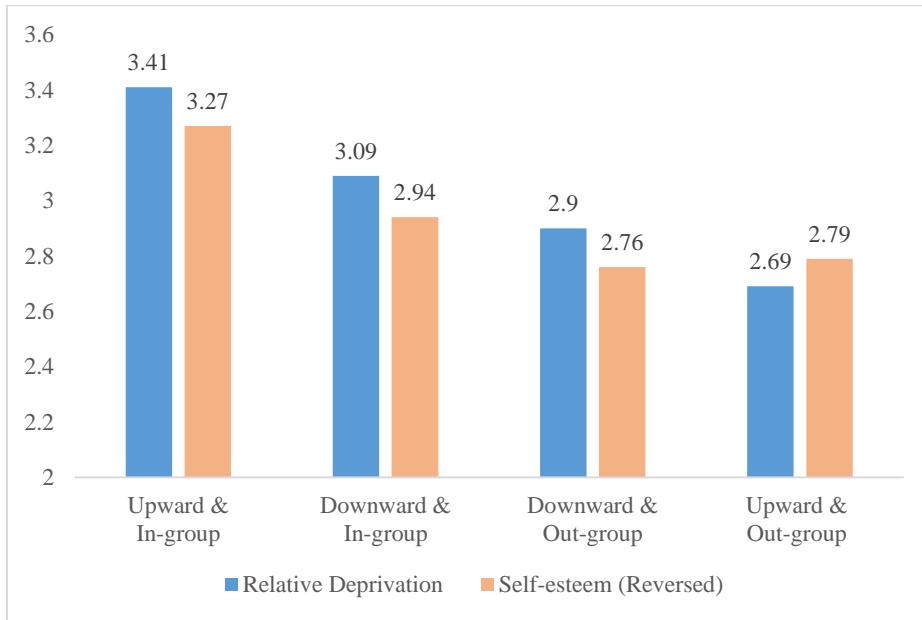
[Figure 3] Conspicuous Consumption Intention Level by Comparison Type

The average relative deprivation level was also analyzed for each group to check if relative deprivation could be related to conspicuous consumption preference. First of all, the average for all the groups were significantly different ($F(1, 147) = 6.03, p<0.05$) from each other. The intensity of relative deprivation for the four different groups were in the same order as the conspicuous preference level. The Upward & In-group showed the highest with $M=3.41$, followed by the Downward & In-group with $M=3.09$. Also, the average for the Upward & Out-group and Downward & Out-group were $M=2.69, M=2.90$, respectively. Also, a significant difference among In-

groups ($M=3.25$) and Out-groups ($M=2.80$) existed ($t(1, 147) = 3.639$, $p<0.05$).

Results also revealed that differences in self-esteem levels existed by each social comparison group ($F(1, 147) = 3.394$, $p<0.05$). Furthermore, self-esteem level and conspicuous consumption preference showed a significant correlation ($p<0.05$), and the self-esteem level revealed similar patterns with relative deprivation and conspicuous consumption preference. The Upward & In-group showed the lowest self-esteem level with $M=3.27$ (the averages were reversed so the higher the number, the lower the self-esteem), followed by the Downward & In-group with $M=2.94$. The Out-groups showed similar self-esteem level of $M=2.79$ and $M=2.76$ for Upward and Downward, respectively. There also existed a significant difference between In-groups ($M=3.11$) and Out-groups ($M=2.78$; $t(1, 147) = 2.594$, $p<0.05$) as shown for the relative deprivation and conspicuous preference level. Through these results, it can be concluded that different social comparison types can trigger different levels of relative deprivation and self-esteem, which will eventually lead to differences in conspicuous consumption preference. Moreover, we can see that if the similarity between the comparison object and oneself is higher, the more an individual is influenced. More specifically, if the similarity is comparable, upward comparisons are more influential than

downward comparisons. On the other hand, if the similarity is not high, the direction of social comparison does not have a strong impact.



[Figure 4]. Relative Deprivation and Self-esteem Level by Comparison Type

Brand Preference

To check if there were differences in brand conformity and deviation, the averages of brand preference were analyzed. The four groups were combined into two groups based on the hypothesis, as Upward social comparison group and Downward social comparison group. Results revealed that the Upward

group and Downward group differed slightly, however, significantly from each other as the Upward group preferred brand conformity, and the Downward group preferred brand deviation ($F(1, 247) = 2.896, p < 0.1$). Therefore, it can be perceived that participants did tend to prefer the brands that the Upward group characters favored, and disliked brands the Downward group characters liked. There were no brand preference differences between the In-groups and Out-groups.

5. Conclusion and Implications

A total of four experiments were conducted to analyze if conspicuous consumption level differed depending on the type of social comparison individuals were unconsciously exposed to. As predicted, there were differences in the conspicuous consumption level. In addition, the self-esteem and relative deprivation levels were different by comparison types and showed similar patterns as the conspicuous consumption levels. Accordingly, these two psychological factors can be used to explain the mechanism of this phenomenon. It can be interpreted that individuals unconsciously exercise in social comparisons, and their self-esteem and

relative deprivation levels are affected by them. Individuals feel different levels in relative deprivation and self-esteem depending on the similarity and direction of the comparison, which ultimately influences their conspicuous consumption preference. It can be seen that similarity is a strong factor, and upward comparison results to lower self-esteem and higher preference in conspicuous consumption relative with downward comparison when the comparison object is perceived as similar. On the other hand, the levels of self-esteem and conspicuous consumption preference are similar for Out-group comparisons regardless of the direction. In conclusion, the data analyses point out that individuals are distinctively affected by diverse comparison types resulting to different levels of self-esteem, and eventually, this self-esteem level change leads to different preferences toward conspicuous consumption. Subsequently, it can be seen that individuals have higher intention of conspicuous consumption when their self-esteem level is lower. In addition, brand preference could also be analyzed. Individuals tend to prefer the same brands as people in the upward comparison groups, but prefer different brands in the downward comparison groups.

This study is unique as it focuses on unconscious factors. Also, it links social comparison types and conspicuous consumption together, whereas, other studies incline to concentrate on them separately. This study

specifically concentrates on the preference of conspicuous consumption influenced by diverse social comparison types, and analyzes the psychological mechanism. Currently, individuals are frequently being exposed to factors that can easily generate unintended social comparisons more than ever. These factors can be social media services, better technology, higher competition among others, and etc. Thus, individuals will naturally produce negative feelings without realizing it, and these can affect small, daily decisions to more critical ones, such as consumption. Social comparison is also a mundane psychological mechanism that is practiced not only consciously, but also unconsciously towards everyone. Thus, it is evident that individuals are aware of their status when potential of unconscious social comparison exists.

Some interesting implications can be derived from this study. For example, companies relevant with conspicuous brands or products can use these findings to generate more favorable decisions. Specifically, these brands or products can be highly promoted when advertised in websites that trigger social comparisons such as social networking websites. In addition, diverse advertising strategies can be created. As individuals tend to purchase these goods if they perceive that similar and better off others have or favor this brand or product, advertising models should have similar attributes, but

higher status. Furthermore, decisions on product or brand concepts based on this study can be utilized. Companies can use this behavior and develop products that uplift consumer well-being. For example, they can design products that can elevate self-esteem, so consumers do not lavish on unnecessary, ostentatious goods, and purchase these “self-esteem elevating” goods when they feel deprived. These products should be promoted near products or channels where social comparison can easily occur.

All in all, this study is highly meaningful for both individuals and companies as it provides intriguing insights for both sides. It is important that individuals acknowledge their unconscious psychological circumstances that can influence their consumption decisions. In contrast, companies can use these findings to promote sales and identify marketing strategies.

6. Limitations and Future Research

There exists a few limitations in the experiments of this study. First of all, due to that fact that the experiments were conducted toward undergraduate students, preference towards conspicuous consumption might have been more significant. Younger adults may be more interested in brands, fashion,

and appearances, whereas, older adults might be less interested in these ostentatious behaviors. Thus, the results of this research may have come out more favorable.

Other limitations might be because the experiments were only conducted towards Korean students living in major cities in South Korea. There might have been a few external factors that were not considered. For example, urban students may be more fashionable and care more about their appearances compared to rural students. Also, Korean students may have higher interests on how they appear relative to other countries or cultures. As Korea is comparably considered a collective country, they care more about other people and how they are perceived to fit into the society. Koreans might be more concerned about how others are doing, and compare themselves more frequently or intensively compared to individualistic cultures. There is a proverb in Korea, “You will get a stomachache when your cousin buys land.” Basically, it is about becoming jealous if someone nearby does well. South Korea’s population density is very high. Thus, competition cannot be avoided and Koreans are exposed to high levels of competitions since they are young. Therefore, Koreans can be more sensitive than other cultures when it comes to social comparison, and they might have more extreme measures when comparing themselves with others.

Consequently, for future research, it might be interesting to see if there are cultural differences by conducting these experiments in other cultures, especially more individualistic cultures. In addition, diverse age ranges might result to different conclusions; this may provide interesting findings also. Another idea for future research, is to identify other psychological mechanisms besides self-esteem and relative deprivation. To be specific, looking towards jealousy, differences between individuals' original self-esteem, and so on may lead to valuable conclusions.

Social comparison is an inevitable, psychological mechanism that is practiced not only consciously, but also unintentionally for everyone regularly. There is always going to be someone doing better, going faster, or flying higher than you. Only when an individual accepts this, sometimes painful, fact, they would be free to analyze their situation accurately and construct wise decisions. I believe that this research provides an important foundation for identifying the consequences that can occur from different social comparison types and the mechanism of this phenomenon. It is essential that individuals realize and accurately accept this aspect, so that individuals do not fall into the deep downward spiral of incessant comparisons.

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Appendix

Questionnaire (Type B)

설문지

안녕하십니까?

본 설문지는 3가지의 다른 목적으로 구성되어 있습니다. 차근차근 읽어주시고 평소 귀하의 행동 및 성향을 고려하여 솔직하게 답변하여 주시면 감사하겠습니다.

귀하께서 응답하신 내용들은 연구 목적으로만 사용 될 것이며, 그 외 어떠한 사용도 하지 않을 것임을 약속 드립니다. 부디 바쁘시더라도 성실하게 답변해 주신다면 본 연구에 큰 도움이 될 것입니다.

귀중한 시간을 할애하여 설문조사에 참여해주셔서 진심으로 감사합니다.

서울대학교 경영대학원

지도 교수 김재일 교수님

연구자 경영학과 김예니

다음은 자료 분류용 질문으로 이외에 다른 용도로 쓰이지 않을 것임을 다시 한 번 말씀 드립니다.

1. 귀하의 성별은 어떻게 되십니까?

- ① 남 ② 여

2. 귀하의 연령은 어떻게 되십니까?

만 _____ 살

3. 귀하께서 현재 몇 학년이십니까?

- ① 1학년 ② 2학년 ③ 3학년 ④ 4학년 ⑤ 5학년 이상

4. 귀하의 전공이 어떻게 되십니까?

_____ 전공

A. 다음에 제시되는 문장들은 순서가 올바르지 않습니다. 말이 되도록 순서를 바로잡아 괄호 안에 바른 번호대로 나열해 보십시오.

예) A에 대한 다룬 내용이다. A의 앞으로 계획을 아래의 글은

1

2

3

4

간략한 소개 그리고

5

답: 4, 1, 5, 3, 2

1. 집안 형편이 넉넉하여 남 부럽지 않게 어렸을 때부터

1

2

3

한양대에 무난하게 입학했다. 행복한 유년시절을 보내

4

5

→ 답:

2. 학교 동아리 활동을 열심히 적극적으로 참여했다.

1

2

좋은 A 는 활발하고 사교성이 하면서 학교 행사에도

3

4

5

→ 답:

3. 닥터 드레 이어폰을 나눠줬는데, 인기상을 탄 적도 있었다.

1

2

한번은 학교 행사에서 그 상품을 타기 위해 대회에 나가

3

4

상품으로 A 가 유난히 좋아하는

5

→ 답:

4. 나이키 운동화를 자주 백팩을 매고 검정색 이어폰을 꽂고

1

2

학교 생활에도 충실했던 A 는 신고 다녔다. 캠퍼스에서 초록색 이스트팩

3

4

5

→ 답:

5. 인상이 좋고 깔끔하게 이성 사이에서도 인기가 높았다.

1

2

뚜렷하게 잘생기지는 않았지만, 생겨 동성뿐 아니라 A 는 이목구이가

3

4

5

→ 답:

6. A는 군대를 다녀와 카페에서 공부하였다. 주로 학교 앞의 탐앤탐스

1

2

3

공부를 열심히 했고, 학점관리를 위해

4

5

→ 답:

7. 하게 되었다. 졸업하여 남들이 결국, 우수한 성적으로

1

2

3

자산운용사에 입사를 알아주는 외국계

4

5

→ 답:

8. 인정받는 인재가 인간관계를 유지하면서 회사에서도 원만한 되었다.

1

2

3

4

주위 동기와 상사로부터

5

→ 답:

9. 본사에 일할 수 있는 기회를 얻었는데, 입사한지 2년만에 A는

1

2

않기로 결정한다. 뉴욕 월스트리트에 위치한 고심 끝에 이 기회를 놓치지

3

4

5

→ 답:

10. 여자친구의 지지도 우유를 좋아하는 한 몇 했다.

1

2

3

이 결심은 빙그레 바나나

4

→ 답:

11. 기회이며 1년의 짧은 응원해줬고, 그녀도 휴가를 내서 뉴욕에 놀러

1

2

3

기간인 만큼 잘 다녀오라고 가겠다고 약속을 했다. 그녀는 이 기회가 좋은

4

5

6

→ 답:

12. 현재 직장 생활을 한참 현재 A는 한달 앞으로

1

2

직장 생활을 준비하며 다가온 뉴욕에서의 정리하고 있다.

3

4

5

→ 답:

B. 각각 짹 지어진 그림의 브랜드 및 디자인을 보고 둘 중 더 선호하는 보기 (A 또는 B)에 동그라미로 표시해주시기 바랍니다. 혹시 두 제품 모두 선택하고 싶지 않더라도 그나마 더 선호하는 제품을 선택해주세요. 짹 지어진 물품의 가격은 모두 비슷합니다. 가격을 생각하지 마시고 디자인 및 브랜드에 집중하시길 바랍니다.

1.	 A. <이스트팩 백팩 3 만원대>	 B. <이스트팩 백팩 3 만원>
2.	 A. <알마니 후디티 15 만원>	 B. <알마니 후디티 15만원>

3.	 <p>A. <스킨푸드 핸드크림 4 천원대></p>	 <p>B. <더페이스샵 핸드크림 4천원대></p>
4.	 <p>A. <구찌 핸드폰 케이스 5만원대> (본인 핸드폰 기종과 일치한다고 가정)</p>	 <p>B. <구찌 핸드폰 케이스 5만원대> (본인 핸드폰 기종과 일치한다고 가정)</p>
5.	 <p>A. <보스 이어폰 15 만원대></p>	 <p>B. <닥터 드레 이어폰 15 만원대></p>

6.	 <p>A. < 롱샴 백팩 10 만원대></p>	 <p>B. < 롱샴 라지 솔더백 10 만원대></p>
7.	 <p>A. < 루이비통 종이가방 100 원 ></p>	 <p>B. <루이비통 종이가방 100 원></p>
8.	 <p>A. <탐앤탐스 머그 1 만원대></p>	 <p>B. <할리스 머그 1 만원대></p>

9.	 A. <코치 카드지갑 10 만원대>	 B. < 코치 카드지갑 10 만원대 >
10.	 A. <매일유업 바나나 우유 2 천원대>	 B. <서울우유 바나나 우유 2 천원대>
11.	 A. <아우디 열쇠고리 2 만원대>	 B. <아우디 열쇠고리 2 만원대>
12.	 A. <나이키 운동화 6 만원대>	 B. <나이키 운동화 6 만원대>

C. 마지막으로 귀하의 현재 기분 및 정서 등을 파악하기 위한 질문입니다. 각 항목에 대해 얼마나 본인과 얼마나 일치하는지를 표기해주시길 바랍니다. ①은 전혀 일치하지 않으며, ④은 중립, ⑦은 매우 일치한다는 것을 의미합니다. 읊고 그린 답이 없으니 너무 고민하지 마시고 바로 생각나는 보기 선택해주시면 됩니다. ☺

1. 앞의 문장 순서 맞추기 활동은 나에게 어려웠다.	①--②--③--④--⑤--⑥--⑦
2. 앞의 A는 나와 매우 유사하다.	①--②--③--④--⑤--⑥--⑦
3. 내 친한 친구 중 A같은 친구들이 많다. (있다면, 최대 2명까지 친구의 이름 성을 써주세요. 1) 2))	①--②--③--④--⑤--⑥--⑦
4. A는 나와 같은 사회적 집단에 속한다.	①--②--③--④--⑤--⑥--⑦
5. 나는 A보다 더 나쁜 환경에서 생활하고 있다.	①--②--③--④--⑤--⑥--⑦
6. A와 비교해 전반적으로 내 상황이 더 우월하다.	①--②--③--④--⑤--⑥--⑦
7. 나는 현재 즐거운 기분이 든다.	①--②--③--④--⑤--⑥--⑦
8. 나는 내가 다른 사람들처럼 가치 있는 사람이라고 생각한다.	①--②--③--④--⑤--⑥--⑦
9. 나는 다른 사람들에 비해 가진 것이 없어서 불만족스럽다.	①--②--③--④--⑤--⑥--⑦
10. 어떤 집단에도 영원한 1등은 없기에 항상 긴장해야 한다.	①--②--③--④--⑤--⑥--⑦
11. 나는 지금 활기차다.	①--②--③--④--⑤--⑥--⑦
12. 나는 나 자신을 쓸모 있는 사람이라고 생각한다.	①--②--③--④--⑤--⑥--⑦
13. 내가 뒤쳐지고 있다고 생각하면 더욱 노력을 하는 편이다.	①--②--③--④--⑤--⑥--⑦
14. 나는 타인의 옷 스타일이나 소지품 등으로 대략 어떤 사람인지 판단할 수 있다고 생각한다.	①--②--③--④--⑤--⑥--⑦
15. 나는 지금 씁쓸하고 우울하다.	①--②--③--④--⑤--⑥--⑦
16. 다른 사람들에 비해 나의 경제적인 생활이 만족스럽다.	①--②--③--④--⑤--⑥--⑦
17. 나는 자랑할 것이 별로 없다.	①--②--③--④--⑤--⑥--⑦
18. 나는 지금 화가 많이 난다.	①--②--③--④--⑤--⑥--⑦
19. 나는 전반적으로 나에 대해 만족한다.	①--②--③--④--⑤--⑥--⑦
20. 나는 타인의 취미 생활이나 관심 분야 등을 보고 전반적으로 어떤 사람일 것이라고 예상할 수 있다고 생각한다.	①--②--③--④--⑤--⑥--⑦
21. 나는 지금 기진맥진하고 의욕이 없다.	①--②--③--④--⑤--⑥--⑦

22. 나는 다른 사람들보다 뒤쳐지게 될까봐 불안하다.	①--②--③--④--⑤--⑥--⑦
23. 나는 때때로 내가 좋지 않은 사람이라고 생각한다	①--②--③--④--⑤--⑥--⑦
24. TV, 드라마 등 대중매체를 통해 나보다 생활수준이 높은 상류 생활을 보면 불편한 감정을 느낀다.	①--②--③--④--⑤--⑥--⑦
25. 나는 지금보다 더 가치 있는 사람이 되기 위해 더욱 노력해야 한다고 생각한다.	①--②--③--④--⑤--⑥--⑦

- 설문에 참여해주세요 감사합니다 ☺ -

국문 초록

사회적 비교는 개인의 일상생활에서 의식적으로 또는 무의식적으로 자연스럽고 불가피하게 행해지는 심리적 메커니즘이다. 본 연구는 사회적 비교 행위에 대한 이해를 넓히고 이 행위가 개인의 소비 결정에 어떠한 영향을 미치는지 규명하기 위해 사회적 비교와 과시적 소비의 관계를 측정하였으며, 특히 사회적 비교 집단이 개인의 과시적 소비와 브랜드 동조(brand conformity)에 어떠한 영향을 미치는지에 초점을 맞추었다. 실험은 4년제 대학교에 재학중인 학부생 249명을 대상으로 진행되었으며, 학생들에게 내집단(in-group) 또는 외집단(out-group)의 가상 인물을 접하게 하여 무의식적으로 상향비교(upward comparsion) 또는 하향비교(downward comparison)를 유발하였다. 연구 결과에 의하면 비교 대상이 내집단일 때, 하향비교보다 상향비교에 노출된 실험 참가자들이 과시적 재화를 선호하는 경향을 보였다. 반면, 비교대상이 외집단일 때, 비교 방향과 무관하게 과시적 소비에 대한 선호의 수준은 비슷하였다. 또, 상향비교를 접한 참가자들은 브랜드 동조를 선

호하는 반면, 하향 비교를 접한 참가자들은 브랜드 비동조를 선호
함을 확인할 수 있었다.

핵심단어: 사회적 비교, 과시적 소비, 브랜드 동조, 내집단과 외집
단

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