What’s Driving Us?: Examining Possible Antecedents of the Use of Television Advertising and Programming for Social Comparison in China

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ABSTRACT

Much of the marketing research on social comparison theory examines the consequences of media-based social comparison, many of them negative (e.g. increased materialism and consumer dissatisfaction). The present research, however, focuses on a less frequently studied facet of social comparison: what conditions actually cause people to make comparisons in the first place. As this question is especially relevant to global television audiences, we examine it through the eyes of consumers in China. In this international context, we look more closely at antecedents that may influence Chinese consumers’ use of television images as a basis for the social comparison process, particularly pertaining to consumer evaluations of their personal appearance. We review perceived income and gender as well as the quantity of television watched as it relates to the social comparison process. Each of these antecedents was significantly related to some facet of the social comparison process, though findings were mixed in terms of television programming and advertising.

INTRODUCTION

Much of the marketing research on social comparison theory examines the consequences of media-based social comparison, many of them negative (e.g. increased materialism and consumer dissatisfaction). Lin and Tsai (2006), however, suggest an important related research question which has not been studied sufficiently: what conditions actually cause people to make comparisons in the first place. As this question is especially relevant to global television audiences, we examine it through the eyes of consumers in China.

In this international context, we look more closely at antecedents that may influence Chinese consumers’ use of television images as a basis for the social comparison process, particularly pertaining to consumer evaluations of their personal appearance. We review perceived income and gender as well as the quantity of television watched as it relates to the social comparison process, a variable which has only recently been considered (Eisend and Moller 2007).

The presence of television as a dominant medium continues to grow globally, making research related to its content and effectiveness as an advertising outlet all the more relevant. This increasing access to television programming and advertising becomes apparent when one takes note of the rising number of television sets per person. In China, the number of sets grew from 1 television receiver per 100 persons in 1980, to 16.2 per 100 persons in 1990, and to almost 25 per 100 persons in 1999 (AC Nielsen Media International, 2000). By 2000, penetration rates in China’s cities were over 95% (Davis, 2000) and by 2009, there were 130 color televisions per 100 persons in the urban areas of China and 109 televisions (black and white or color) per 100 people in rural areas (China Today, 2009). Even more
important to the purposes of the present study, Chan and McNeal (2007) confirm that Chinese children, both rural and urban, rank television as the most important source of useful information about new products.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Comparison Theory

Social comparison theory originated with Festinger (1954) who suggested that people have a drive to evaluate their abilities and opinions. When other non-personal avenues are unavailable, they do so by comparing their abilities and opinions with those of others. Many marketing studies have examined the role that social comparison theory plays in both explaining and motivating consumer behavior. The present research hones in on the work of Richins as pivotal to the understanding of the stages of the comparison process, as well as the analysis of key antecedents of that process. Richins (1991) breaks the social comparison process down into three components: a standard for comparison, the act of making the comparison, and the outcome of that comparison.

The following discussion considers factors which may explain under what circumstances television programming and advertising are used in the social comparison process. What influences affect the degree to which consumers use this content as the standard for comparison, the degree to which they pursue the act of comparison and finally, the outcome of the comparison process? Answering these questions will move us towards an enhanced understanding of the underlying conditions, which are linked to the strength of the comparison process using television content.

Quantity of Television Viewed

Richins’ (1991, 1996) research considers the amount of television viewed to be an important driver of the use of media images for social comparison. In the Chinese market, Chan and Cai (2009) have identified a link between heavy viewership of television advertising with high levels of materialism and perceived affluence in society. This research focuses on television programming as well as advertising. Each of these has been considered in past research, e.g. Richins’ work centered on advertising, while O’Guinn and Shrum primarily examined television programming. Eisend and Moller (2007) recommend that future marketing communication strategies should concentrate on television programming. With the growth in product placement, in fact, the roles played by advertising and programming in the social comparison process have become blurred (Hirschman and Thompson 1997). We consider the influence of both in the same study, facilitating a comparison of the relative effect each has in this process.

Gender Differences

Much of the evidence from research to date indicates that there are significant gender differences in the influence of media images in television programming and advertising on the social comparison process, with women being more influenced and adversely so. However, Eisend and Moller (2007) reveal that television viewing effects body dissatisfaction for both men and women.

An investigation of advertising trends in urban China (Zhou et al. 2002) identified a similar lack of significant difference between genders in terms of their attitudes and beliefs about advertising in general. However, their findings do confirm that women tend to view advertising as more informative and they seem to incorporate what they learn from advertising into their purchase decision-making. This result of the comparison process is very similar to that identified in the Eisend and Moller study; consumption
behavior, the ultimate goal of marketing strategy, appears to be influenced more strongly for women than for men. These mixed results in both the U.S. and, for the purposes of this study, the Chinese market, merit further exploration of the role of gender in the social comparison process.

**General Evaluation of Standard of Living (Relative Perceived Income)**

An important motivation for engaging in the social comparison process is to determine one’s relative standing in terms of wealth and attractiveness (Zhou, Zhou, and Xue 2008, Lin and Tsai 2006, Richins 1995, Pettigrew 1967). Given that most advertising images present idealized representations of wealth and beauty, those who choose to use television content as the basis for the social comparison process would either be engaging in a downward or upward comparison. Those who have a higher standard of living would engage in downward comparison, creating an enhanced appreciation for their circumstances. On the other hand, those who perceive themselves to be lower in terms of standard of living will face the upward comparison driven by the idealized images, likely resulting in the negative evaluation of one’s appearance and dress, as well as perceived life accomplishments relative to the standard set by media.

**METHODOLOGY AND RESULTS**

**Sample**

Respondents for this research were college business students from two different universities in China. The total useable sample size is 201 responses, with 105 (52%) from Xichang and 96 (48%) from Chengdu. The sample is evenly split between men and women (49% and 51%). The respondents ranged in age from 19 to 23 years old with an average age of 20.8 years.

**Measures**

We largely relied on previously published multi-item scales to tap into the constructs used in this study. In this way, we were able to take advantage of their established reliability and validity, particularly to measure the use of television programming and advertising content for each stage of the social comparison process.

**Quantity of Television Viewing (TVviewed).** Respondents were asked about the amount of time they had spent watching television, indicating the amount of time they watch television each week, on an average week day, and on an average weekend day (Kataria 2011, Atay et al. 2010, Lee et al. 2009). Because Chinese students do not normally have access to television while away at school, each of these questions was preceded by the phrase “when at home.” This research used amount of time they watch television each week since attempts at combining the three variables did not result in an internally consistent construct.

**General Evaluation of Standard of Living (Relative Perceived Income, RPInc).** Here our goal was to explore the respondent’s evaluation of his or her own socio-economic status with respect to income. The self-report is based on the family’s income relative to others (Sirgy et al. 1998). Respondents were asked to categorize their family income as more than, the same as, or less than the average family.

**Social Comparison Components in Television Programming and Advertising.** The central constructs of the proposed research are comparison standards, acts, and results (as provided by television programs and ads). This measure was developed for this research based on work by Richins (1991) and...
Yoon (1999). The constructs were measured on a 5-point Likert scale of agreement, with 1 indicating strongly disagree and 5 indicating strongly agree. The following is a sample of those questions:

TV Ads and Programming as Standards of Comparison:
- When buying clothes, I look at television programs/ads to give me ideas about how I should look.

TV Programming and Ads in Act of Comparison:
- When I see actors in television programs/ads, I think about how well or how badly I dress compared to the actors.

TV Programming and Ads Comparison Results for Clothing:
- I have wished that I looked more like the actors in television programs/ads.

Statistical Methods
A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was used to assess the statistical significance of the three antecedent variables (gender, TVviewed, and RPInc) on the six social comparison constructs. Gender and RPInc were categorical variables while TVviewed was continuous and therefore added as a covariate. The model included the main effects and the two-way interaction of gender by RPInc. The interactions with TVviewed were not significant, and were removed from the model. The MANOVA was followed by univariate analyses of variance to isolate the significant effects for each social comparison component.

RESULTS
The MANOVA identified significant effects of RPInc (p=.003), TVViewed (p=.007), and the interaction between gender and RPInc (p=.052) on the vector of the six social comparison constructs (standard, act, and results for both television programming and ads). After identifying significant effects in the MANOVA, each construct was analyzed individually. These univariate ANOVAs revealed significant effects in five out of the six constructs. The observed significance levels of the antecedents for each of the social comparison constructs are presented in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Antecedent</th>
<th>TV Programming Standard</th>
<th>TV Programming Act</th>
<th>TV Programming Result</th>
<th>TV Ad Standard</th>
<th>TV Ad Act</th>
<th>TV Ad Result</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>0.118</td>
<td>0.327</td>
<td>0.449</td>
<td>0.632</td>
<td>0.552</td>
<td>0.234</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RPInc</td>
<td>0.111</td>
<td>0.020</td>
<td>0.005**</td>
<td>0.000***</td>
<td>0.001***</td>
<td>0.000***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender * RPInc</td>
<td>0.127</td>
<td>0.005**</td>
<td>0.036*</td>
<td>0.121</td>
<td>0.008**</td>
<td>0.095</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TVViewed</td>
<td>0.066</td>
<td>0.293</td>
<td>0.004**</td>
<td>0.007**</td>
<td>0.496</td>
<td>0.450</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results of the univariate analyses revealed there were no significant antecedents for the construct of TV programming as a standard. The only antecedent that was significant for TV Programming Act was the gender by RPInc interaction term (p = .005). Examining the means for this interaction presented in table 2 leads to the conclusion that the highest mean for males was in the group that reports their relative perceived income as more than the average family, whereas the highest mean for females was in the group that perceived their income as the same as the average family.
The result of TV Programming, TVviewed (p = .004), RPInc (p = .005), and the gender by RPInc interaction (p = .036) were all significant. The parameter estimate for the amount of TVviewed was both significant and positive. This indicates that the TV Programming Result increased with increasing amounts of TVviewed. When there is a significant interaction between two factors, the variables are evaluated at the interaction (cell) level rather than at the level of the main effect. As with TV Programming Act, the highest mean occurred for males who reported their relative perceived income as more than the average family, whereas the highest mean for females occurred for those who report their RPInc as the same as the average family (see table 2).

Significant antecedents were found for all three constructs of social comparison with respect to television advertisements. For TV Ad Standard, the main effects of TVviewed (p = .007) and RPInc (p = .000) were both significant. Once again, there was a positive relationship between the construct and the amount of TVviewed, therefore the more television watched, the higher the use of TV advertisements as a standard of comparison. For RPInc, the mean for the construct was higher for those who perceived their income as more than or the same as the average family, while those who perceived their income as less than the average family had a lower mean (see table 2).

For the construct TV Ad Act, gender by RPInc (p = .008) and the main effect of RPInc (p = .001) were significant. Since the interaction was significant, the interpretation of the results should be examined at the levels of the cells. As before, the males had the highest value for the construct when they perceived their income as more than the average family, while females had the highest value for the construct when they perceived their income as the same as the average family (see table 2).

Finally, for the construct TV Ad Result, the only significant antecedent was RPInc (p = .000). In this case, the higher the respondents felt their income was relative to the average family, the higher the mean on the construct. Therefore, those who perceived themselves as having a higher relative perceived income scored higher on the result of comparison with television advertisements.

Table 2: Estimated Marginal Means and Standard Errors for Social Comparison Constructs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>TV Programming Standard</th>
<th>TV Programming Act</th>
<th>TV Programming Result</th>
<th>TV Ad Standard</th>
<th>TV Ad Act</th>
<th>TV Ad Result</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Males</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More Inc</td>
<td>3.9 (0.3)</td>
<td>3.9 (0.4)</td>
<td>4.3 (0.4)</td>
<td>3.8 (0.3)</td>
<td>3.7 (0.3)</td>
<td>4.1 (0.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Same Inc</td>
<td>3.5 (0.2)</td>
<td>2.7 (0.2)</td>
<td>3.2 (0.2)</td>
<td>3.5 (0.2)</td>
<td>2.7 (0.2)</td>
<td>3.2 (0.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less Inc</td>
<td>3.0 (0.2)</td>
<td>2.5 (0.2)</td>
<td>3.0 (0.2)</td>
<td>2.7 (0.2)</td>
<td>2.0 (0.2)</td>
<td>2.7 (0.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Females</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More Inc</td>
<td>3.6 (0.3)</td>
<td>2.6 (0.4)</td>
<td>3.4 (0.4)</td>
<td>3.2 (0.3)</td>
<td>2.5 (0.3)</td>
<td>3.2 (0.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Same Inc</td>
<td>4.1 (0.2)</td>
<td>3.3 (0.2)</td>
<td>3.7 (0.2)</td>
<td>3.9 (0.2)</td>
<td>3.0 (0.2)</td>
<td>3.5 (0.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less Inc</td>
<td>3.8 (0.2)</td>
<td>2.6 (0.2)</td>
<td>2.9 (0.2)</td>
<td>3.2 (0.2)</td>
<td>2.5 (0.2)</td>
<td>2.5 (0.2)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**DISCUSSION**

**Quantity of Television Viewed**

The mixed findings regarding the effect of the quantity of television viewed on the various components of the social comparison process, and particularly the differences between programming and advertising, tell an important story for China. For television programming, the amount of television viewed only had a positive relationship with the result of the act of comparison, whereas with television advertisements, the amount of television viewed had a positive relationship only with the use of television advertising as a standard. Thus, television advertising does seem to play an important role in determining the images to which these young people compare themselves. Given that many of these images are
idealized and not representative of the typical body type or average mode of dress, these standards may be unachievable. However, this comparison is not carried through to the act or result of social comparison with respect to television advertising.

Interestingly, it is the content of television programs and the images therein that appear to have an impact on how viewers perceive their look and dress, with that comparison resulting in positive, favorable results. In fact, the significance of this impact provides further evidence of the important role played by the marketing strategy of product placement, especially for the Gen Y generation in China. While the significant relationship between quantity of viewing and use of television programming content holds true for the outcome of the social comparison process, it does not seem to be the case for use of television programming content in setting the standards against which one compares how they look and dress. This reflects the powerful role that television advertising plays in setting the standards by which we evaluate our images. It also may stem from the increasing impact of other media in this particular step in the comparison process, e.g. social media outlets like Facebook and twitter, etc. In a similar study conducted five years previous to the current work, the Chinese student sample reported a significant reliance on television programming content for setting comparison standards for appearance (Speck 2010). The growth of television advertising, social media outlets and the use of the internet in general during that timeframe, may explain this particular finding.

Gender Differences and General Evaluation of Standard of Living (Relative Perceived Income)

Gender. Although the effect of gender is not manifested as a main effect, it is significant as part of an interaction with relative perceived income in three of the constructs (TV Programming Act, TV Programming Result, and TV Ad Act). The predominant theories in existing literature clearly suggest that there would be gender differences in this use of television content. Though the results of previous research in China have been mixed on this topic, they have specifically indicated that there would be gender differences in terms of viewing the information in advertising as informative and useful in decision-making. The fact that there is no significant difference between young women and men in the present research based on gender alone has important implications for our understanding of cultural differences impacting marketing strategy. Young men in China appear to rely on television content for use in the social comparison process in a similar way to young Chinese women. This suggests that using television as a medium for product placement and advertising is a viable channel for communication with that market segment. Developing communication strategies built upon this recognition has great potential for the creation of inroads into both the male and female market segments.

Relative Perceived Income. As suggested by the literature, the higher the Chinese students’ evaluation of their standard of living, the more they appear to use television content for the social comparison process. However, this effect was strongest for television advertising, suggesting that television advertising is a particularly viable medium for this target market. Because television advertising is a more expensive outlet, focusing such advertising efforts on this financially-attractive market segment should yield a positive return on investment.

A related finding regarding the relative perceived income measure provides evidence connected to the opposite end of the spectrum in terms of target markets. The influence of lower perceived income among these young people appears to be a positive one; they seem to rely less on television ads to set their standards for comparison and tend to engage less in the act of comparing themselves with advertising images. Given this, the fact that their lower perceived income isn’t significantly related to a
comparison outcome, either positively or negatively, makes sense. Relatedly, they appear to successfully avoid the (likely negative) up-ward comparison purposefully initiated by advertising.

There is a noteworthy interaction between the gender of study participants and their relative perceived income that adds a layer of complexity to this discussion. With the male sample, higher perceived family income was related to a significantly stronger influence of the use of television programming and advertising for social comparison, especially in the actual act of comparing oneself with the television images. Women’s use of these images in the comparison process was highest for those with average family incomes.

While the latter findings are not clear-cut, they do support the strategic wisdom of the continued use of product placement and television advertising as part of the media mix in advertising budgets. The target market for a majority of goods and services would likely be those consumers who perceive themselves to have average or above family incomes. The present study confirms that it is these consumers who use television images in the social comparison process, a process that inevitably influences consumer behavior.

**IMPLICATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

Due to the global nature of the communications landscape, we’ve pursued this examination specifically in the context of China, a major market worthy of close consideration. As suspected, the amount of television viewed is related to the social comparison process in terms of the result of the comparison process with respect to television programming and using television advertisements as a standard for comparison. Perceptions regarding standard of living are significantly related to all of the six constructs except using television programming as a standard. Not all of these antecedents had the same impact across all facets of the comparison process. Gender, for example, doesn’t directly affect the use of television for social comparison, a finding that is contrary to what past research has suggested. In tandem with perception of income, however, gender does play a role. These findings reinforce the need to examine specific antecedents within specific markets to adequately identify the particular factors driving use of television programming and advertising content for each stage of the social comparison process. These stages include setting the standard, the actual act of comparison, and the outcomes produced via the comparison process. In order to generalize the findings of such research, a broader pool of respondents, in terms of both age and geographic location, should be used to expand consideration of global marketing strategy development. In addition, the list of antecedents investigated is certainly not a comprehensive list of all potential forces driving the use of the television for social comparison purposes, so future research could also include an exploration of additional antecedents. Finally, television is just one medium and, while still very critical in the communications mix, other media should also be included in future investigations of this type, e.g. social media (Facebook, websites, movies).

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