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Comparing with the Better: Effects of Upward Social Comparisons in Competence and
Warmth on Brand Preference

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Abstract

Engaging in a social comparison with someone superior was found to be a potential threat for the self and was linked to conspicuous consumption behaviors. Previous research suggested that such effects can be distinct for different domains, finding that social comparisons in competence and sociability lead to preferences for advertisements, conveying the corresponding associations of competence or warmth. Such judgements of competence and warmth are fundamental dimensions and can relate to human beings as well as to brands. However, only little research concerning social comparisons explicitly in warmth was conducted in the past. In the present study, participants ($N = 209$) engaged in upward social comparisons in warmth or competence and indicated subsequent preferences for two brands, associated with warmth or competence. It was assumed that an initial upward comparison in one domain would increase preferences for a brand associated with the same domain, as a form of compensatory consumption. Furthermore, the individual tendency to engage in social comparisons was considered to test for its moderating effects. However, results did not support such assumptions or could replicate earlier research. The results also showed that higher age was linked to lower social comparison orientation, perceiving upward comparison as easier was linked to higher competence brand preference, and the competence brand received higher preference ratings than the warmth brand. The present research contributes to existing social comparison literature, while emphasizing a focus on domain-specificity of comparison effects. Its findings offer practical applicability for consumer research and is also discussed in the broader context of comparison processes within social media and its consequences.

Keywords: Upward social comparison, warmth, competence, compensatory consumption, consumer behavior

Theoretical Background

Living in a social world, people have to make sense of each other (Dunning, 2000; Fiske, 2018). Therefore, in order to understand their environment, individuals need to comprehend other people, their traits and behaviors as well as entire social groups and cultures (Fiske, 2018; Fiske et al., 2002). For such an understanding, social judgements are necessary (Judd et al., 2005), in order to lead to the development of impressions and global appraisals of others which then eventually influence behaviors (Brambilla et al., 2021). Especially, when meeting someone new, people might want to know whether this stranger is a potential threat or not (Brambilla et al., 2021; Cuddy et al., 2011). To find out, it is important firstly to judge whether the stranger possesses good-natured or bad-natured intentions, and secondly to assess the efficacy in achieving those intentions (Cuddy et al., 2007; Willis & Todorov, 2006). In social psychology, these two aspects are referred to as warmth and competence, warmth describing the quality of intentions and competence describing the efficacy in fulfilling them (Fiske et al., 2002).

Interestingly, this research concerning such social cognition and the perception of other people inspired marketing- and consumer behavior research, because the way people perceive and relate to other humans shows parallels to the perception of brands and products (Davvetas & Halkias, 2019; Fournier, 1998; Kervyn et al., 2012, 2022). For example, Aaker (1997) conceptualized the framework of brand personality, which she derived from research on human personality dimensions and postulated five brand personality dimensions, namely sincerity, competence, excitement, sophistication, and ruggedness. Fournier (1998) compared the forms of relationships that customers have with different brands to relationships between two humans and differentiated several brand-customer relationship types. Kervyn et al. (2012) even defined brands as intentional agents that are perceived as having intentions and abilities. By understanding brands as agents, customers can perceive them as warm or competent, like

any other human being (Kervyn et al., 2012; Kolbl et al., 2020). Such perceptions of a brand not only influence the impressions customers have about it, but they also affect their willingness to engage with it and therefore the consumer behavior (Aaker et al., 2012). This suggests that the value of brands and products is not limited to only their instrumental value and practical use, but they also possess a hedonic and symbolic value (Aaker, 1997; Rucker & Galinsky, 2008; Wong & Ahuvia, 1998). Luxury brands, for example, can be used to enhance one's social status (Han et al., 2010; Mandel et al., 2006). In this case, symbolic value is especially relevant because it refers to the usage of products to convey a certain association or impression (Shrum et al., 2013; Wong & Ahuvia, 1998). Such behavior can be described as conspicuous consumption or as compensatory consumption. Conspicuous consumption is the public display of wealth using products, possessions or services with the intention to signal status or the desire for uniqueness and belonging to a social group (Kumar et al., 2022; Mason, 1984; Zheng et al., 2018b). Closely related, compensatory consumption is a term used to describe consumption behavior in response to perceived deficits or self-discrepancies caused by the realization that one's actual position in a certain domain differs from one's desired and ideal position (Higgins, 1987; Koles et al., 2018). To reduce this aversive realization, products which signal accomplishment in the threatened domain can be used (Lisjak et al., 2015). For example, in an experiment, Kim and Rucker (2012) confronted undergraduate students with test results indicating that their perceptual intelligence is below average. Subsequently, participants were asked about their willingness to pay for different products, one of which was related to the threatened domain (a dictionary set) and one of which was not (a box of chocolates). Participants who were informed about below-average test results were willing to pay more for the product related to the threatened domain than the comparison group.

Linking this to the initial topic of individuals making sense of their social surroundings, social context in various ways can be the cause for such self-discrepancies or threats to the self (Muller & Fayant, 2010; Sääksjärvi et al., 2016; Vogel et al., 2014; Zheng et al., 2018b). In the previously described experiment by Kim and Rucker (2012) the effect on consumer behavior was caused by the realization of being worse-off than most others. Such comparisons with others might be the cause for the feeling of inferiority and can be a threat for the self (Corcoran et al., 2011; Muller & Fayant, 2010).

The present study focuses on such comparisons and how they affect subsequent consumer behavior. It uses social comparisons with superior others as independent variable and examines the effect onto preferences of brands associated either with warmth or competence. In what follows, the theories of social comparison as well as warmth and competence will be described before bringing them together to explain the research aims of the present study.

Social Comparison

Social comparison theory was first described by Festinger in 1954. Its core feature can be summarized as the process of putting information about other people in relation to oneself (Mussweiler et al., 2006; Wood, 1996). Festinger (1954) described this process as a human drive with the goal of evaluating one's own abilities and opinions particularly in situations when objective standards are not available (Taylor et al., 1990). The two central questions in such self-evaluations are "Am I able to do that?" in terms of ability comparisons, whereas in opinion comparisons it might be "Is my opinion correct?" (Schneider & Schupp, 2011; Suls et al., 2002). However, the purpose and motives of social comparisons can vary. Primarily, comparing oneself to someone else provides information for the evaluation of one's own standing in the world as well as one's own abilities or opinions, which is why Festinger (1954) emphasized self-evaluation as main motif of social comparison.

Social comparison research nowadays categorizes three different motives, which are defined as self-evaluation, self-improvement, and self-enhancement (Crusius et al., 2022; Wood, 1989; Wood & Taylor, 1991). Self-evaluation, as mentioned earlier, aims for an accurate view of the world and the individual standing in it (Mussweiler & Rüter, 2003; Wood, 1989). Similarly, the motif of self-improvement involves seeking for comparative feedback and is based on the idea that improvement can be accomplished through initial evaluation (Collins, 1996; Gibbons & Buunk, 1999). The purpose of the self-enhancement motif however is not to gain an accurate view of oneself, but has the intention to boost one's self-esteem and self-concept (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999; Wood, 1989). This theoretical division in three motives is also supported by research results from a study by Wayment and Taylor (1995) who found that participants used information gained through social comparisons for each of the three motives.

Different forms of social comparison may result depending on the standing of the target person. When being outperformed by the target, the comparison is referred to as upward comparison, whereas when comparing to an inferior target, it is defined as downward comparison (Buunk et al., 1990; Lockwood & Kunda, 1997). The consequences can be either assimilative or contrastive (Crusius et al., 2022). Assimilation happens when the comparer perceives similarities to the target and therefore the comparer's self-evaluation approximates towards the target, meaning that after an upward comparison the comparer's self-evaluations become more positive and after a downward comparison more negative (Collins, 2000; Gerber et al., 2018). Contrary to that, contrast means that the self-evaluations of the comparer move away from the target and therefore turn more negative after an upward comparison and more positive after a downward comparison (Collins, 2000; Gerber et al., 2018). Such a contrast effect was shown in the study by Brown et al. (1992) with female participants. They were exposed to either attractive or less attractive same-sex targets and had to rate their own

attractiveness afterwards. After the exposure to the attractive target, ratings of their own attractiveness were more negative compared to a control group. Vice versa, participants who initially were confronted with a less attractive target rated their own attractiveness more positively. However, in a further experiment, Brown et al. (1992) influenced this effect by manipulating aspects such as psychological closeness, informing participants about similarities with the target, such as sharing the same date of birth. In these cases, they found a tendency for assimilation effects. This illustrates that whether the consequence of comparisons is assimilative or contrastive is determined by a variety of aspects (Crusius et al., 2022).

Combining upward and downward directions of social comparison with assimilation or contrast, Smith (2000) linked specific emotions to each of the combinations. When comparing contrastive downwards, affective consequences might be schadenfreude, scorn, or pride, whereas downward assimilation is linked to sympathy, pity, or worry (Fiske, 2010; Smith, 2000). Upward comparisons, when assimilative, can lead to inspiration, optimism, or admiration, whereas when contrastive, they can provoke depression, envy, or resentment (Fiske, 2010; Smith, 2000). These emotional responses are also supported by neuroscientific examinations, finding that upward comparisons caused brain activations in networks that are associated with envy and social pain while downward comparison activated networks associated with reward (Swencionis & Fiske, 2014).

Upward Social Comparison

Because choosing a desired comparison target freely in most situations is not possible (Alicke et al., 1997), upward social comparisons in every day contexts are inevitable. Festinger (1954) even described a universal drive upwards. He defined it as a general preference for comparisons in an upward direction, which only occurs in abilities. This can be explained through the constant aspiration of improving one's own performance, and therefore

the upward target might act as a model (Blanton et al., 1999; Festinger, 1954; Huguet et al., 2001; Suls & Tesch, 1978). In their study, Huguet et al. (2001) found a unidirectional drive upwards among children in classroom contexts. As a comparison target, the students preferred choosing a same-sex student who slightly outperformed them. Furthermore, such a comparison behavior was linked to beneficial effects on the academic performance of the students. Similar results supporting the unidirectional drive upwards were also found in school contexts (Blanton et al., 1999), in a college test context (Suls & Tesch, 1978), in a test result context (Wheeler, 1966), and is supported by meta-analytic findings of Gerber et al. (2018).

However, as illustrated in the broad variety of associated emotions (Smith, 2000), the comparison direction alone does not define its outcome (Taylor et al., 1990). In a study Lockwood and Kunda (1997) confronted first-year as well as fourth-year university students with information about a so-called superstar, which was a student from their faculty with outstanding academic performances. Afterwards, participants rated this target and themselves in success relevant traits. While first-year participants were enhanced by the superstar and reported higher self-evaluations than the control group. The fourth-year students, however, reported lower self-evaluations than the control group. This was explained through the different attainability. For the first-year students, the superstars' performance still was attainable and therefore inspiring. For the four-year students, the superstar was a threat because it was unattainable and therefore, they were deflated. Similar results were also found in a study with art students by Burleson et al. (2005). There, the outcome depended on the individual interpretation of upward social comparisons as either inspiring, and positive for self-concepts or as unfavorably and thus with negative impact on the artistic self-concepts.

Even though people might seek comparisons with superior others (Gerber et al. 2018), the previously described studies by Lockwood and Kunda (1997) and Burleson et al. (2005)

demonstrate negative effects on self-evaluations and illustrate that upward comparisons can be a threat for the self and cause feelings of inferiority (Corcoran et al., 2011; Muller & Fayant, 2010). Morse and Gergen (1970) examined such negative effects in a study. They confronted job applicants with a comparison target who either had socially desirable or undesirable traits. They found that encountering the socially desirable target resulted in a decrease of participants' self-esteem. Similarly, the link between upward social comparison and negative impact on self-esteem was found in situations in which comparisons appeared during social media use (Schmuck et al., 2019; Vogel et al., 2014), test results (Major et al., 1993), or competitive vs. cooperative tasks (Colpaert et al., 2015; Stapel & Koomen, 2005).

The relation between the performance of others and self-esteem can be explained by Tesser's self-evaluation maintenance model (Tesser, 1988). According to the model, people are always interested in maintaining or increasing their self-esteem and others play an important role in it. In this model, when confronted with an upward comparison, people either react with comparison or reflection. Reflection takes place when a comparer has a close relationship to the high-performing target, and the domain in which the target is performing well is not important for the comparer's self-esteem. In this case, the comparer's self-esteem will be indirectly enhanced via the good accomplishments of the close other. Contrarily, comparison occurs when the comparer considers the domain to be important for self-esteem. Such situations represent a threat for self-evaluations, and in order to protect them, the comparer might, for example, lower the perceived domain importance, reduce the perceived closeness to the target, hinder the target's performance, or exaggerate the outperformer's abilities (Alicke et al., 1997; Tesser, 1988; Tesser & Campbell, 1982).

Social Comparison Orientation

Following Festinger's initial theory, the drive for engaging in social comparisons is universal (Festinger, 1954), but the frequency with which people compare themselves to

others varies (Buunk & Mussweiler, 2001; Festinger, 1954; Gibbons & Buunk, 1999). The concept of individual comparison dispositions was postulated by Gibbons and Buunk (1999) as social comparison orientation (SCO) and refers to the frequency and the extent to which an individual engages in social comparisons (Buunk et al., 2020; Buunk & Dijkstra, 2011). People scoring high in SCO tend to relate experiences of others to themselves and show interest in behaviors or beliefs of others in similar situations (Buunk & Mussweiler, 2001). The individual SCO can be measured using the Iowa-Netherlands Comparison Orientation Measure (INCOM) which is an 11-item scale comprising both aspects of social comparison, ability and opinion (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999; Schneider & Schupp, 2011). The results of a study by Van der Zee et al. (1998) using the INCOM with cancer patients illustrate the effects of different scores. Patients were given the opportunity to read about experiences from other patients and results showed that those scoring high in SCO tended more to select information of others, spend more time reading and had stronger affective reactions as a result. Similarly, several other studies showed the impact of SCO on comparison processes and therefore highlight the importance in social comparison research (Buunk & Dijkstra, 2011; Buunk, Van der Zee, et al., 2001; Buunk, Ybema, et al., 2001).

Stereotype Content Model

As mentioned initially, when meeting someone new, people's initial interest might especially concern the other's intentions and competence (Cuddy et al., 2007), which is referred to as warmth and competence (Fiske et al., 2002). However, not only individuals, but entire social groups are judged along those two dimensions, resulting in stereotypical beliefs about the group and its members (Cuddy et al., 2008; Fiske et al., 2007). Based on this, Fiske et al. (2002) postulated a corresponding framework called stereotype content model (SCM). When perceiving others or social groups, the SCM describes the two universal dimensions, warmth and competence, which are used to judge and differentiate them (Fiske et al., 2002).

The warmth dimension refers to the perceived intentions perceived by others and reflects traits such as friendliness, trustworthiness, or helpfulness (Fiske et al., 2007; Halkias & Diamantopoulos, 2020). The competence dimension is about the perceived effectiveness and capability of others in realizing their intentions and therefore covers judgements of intelligence, skill, or creativity (Fiske et al., 2007; Halkias & Diamantopoulos, 2020). Research also tested for their antecedents finding that competence is predicted through status, such as economic success, while warmth is predicted through the perceived cooperation or competition with the target (Fiske, 2015). Finally, the shared beliefs about a group's warmth and competence then is referred to as stereotype (Fiske, 2018). Those stereotypical beliefs can be summarized into four different warmth-by-competence clusters, which are high in warmth and in competence, low in both, or high in one and low in the other. A wide-ranging study with a cross-cultural sample realized by Cuddy et al. (2009) provided support for the universality of the two dimensions by showing that perceived warmth and competence reliably differentiated stereotypes of social groups.

Each of the four clusters is also linked to a different emotional reaction as well as a corresponding behavior (Cuddy et al., 2008; Fiske, 2015). To illustrate this with an example, the social group of rich has been evaluated as high in competence but low in warmth in several studies (e.g. Asbrock, 2010; Cuddy et al., 2009; Fiske et al., 2002). Social groups with this stereotype combination are regarded with envy (Fiske, 2015) and elicit rather passive behaviors, which can be described as convenient cooperation or strategic association (Cuddy et al., 2008). High competence and high warmth is linked to admiration, high warmth and low competence to pity and sympathy, low warmth and low competence to contempt and disgust (Fiske, 2015). Behavioral outcomes are especially determined by the warmth dimension: High warmth elicits active help and protection and low warmth leads to attack and fight, while low competence leads to passive behavior such as ignoring and neglect (Cuddy et al., 2008; Fiske,

2015). Past research has not been consistent about the importance of warmth and competence individually in impression formation. Although there is a widespread agreement of studies describing the primacy of warmth judgements over competence by bringing forward the importance of judging others as harmful or beneficial (Cuddy et al., 2007; Wojciszke, 2005), others did not find support for this primacy-of-warmth effect and defined warmth and competence as equally important in impression formation (Nauts et al., 2014). New research, however, also supports warmth as being dominant in impression formation (Brambilla et al., 2021).

The SCM does not only apply for humans. All entities perceived as owning an intent can be judged on warmth and competence dimensions (Fiske, 2015). Therefore, it is possible to perceive warmth and competence also in brands (Davvetas & Halkias, 2019; Kervyn et al., 2012) and entire firms (Aaker et al., 2010), services and employees (Habel et al., 2017) as well as advertisement (Zawisza & Pittard, 2015). For the perception of brands, Kervyn et al. (2012) postulated the brands as intentional agents framework, which highlights the parallels of the perceptions of warmth and competence in humans and in brands. They also found an impact on consumer behavior, suggesting that purchase intention is higher when brands are perceived to be high in warmth or high in competence compared to brands scoring low. Brands associated with high competence often are seen as intelligent, capable, and efficient (Diamantopoulos et al., 2021). Moreover, they are often associated with luxury and high-end consumption (Dubois et al., 2021; Lee & Bolton, 2020; Septianto et al., 2021). As an example, the brand Mercedes Benz has been scoring high in perceived competence in an Austrian sample by Diamantopoulos et al. (2021). Brands associated with high warmth can be described as friendly, good-intentioned, and kind (Kolbl et al., 2020). Furthermore, the brand perception is also influenced by the perception of its country of origin (Diamantopoulos et al., 2021; Kolbl et al., 2020). In the example of Mercedes Benz, the warmth and competence

judgements of its country of origin Germany transfer to the judgement of the brand itself (Diamantopoulos et al., 2021).

The Present Study

The present study arises from the combination of social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) and the stereotype content model (Fiske et al., 2002). Because social comparisons are possible to occur in any domain (Gerber et al., 2018), this study examines social comparisons of ability in warmth and competence, and focuses on the subsequent reactions. Research about comparisons in these domains already similarly exists but is strongly focused on comparisons in competence (Swencionis & Fiske, 2014). Several studies also examined the effects of comparisons onto subsequent impression management in warmth and competence (Swencionis et al., 2017; Swencionis & Fiske, 2016; Terache et al., 2020). Swencionis and Fiske (2016) confronted participants with either superior or subordinate co-workers, therefore inducing upward or downward comparisons in status. Status, such as economic success and prestigious jobs, predicts competence (Fiske, 2015), so this comparison can be seen a comparison in competence. Swencionis and Fiske (2016) found that upward comparison was linked to downplaying warmth in order to appear more competent and vice versa in downward comparisons, which they interpreted as behavior aiming to manage the impression onto others. Warmth as a domain for social comparison, however, has only been rarely comprised in past research (Swencionis & Fiske, 2014). Some studies only included a few warmth related domains, for example in the context of comparisons within romantic relationships (Pinkus et al., 2008), within present and past selves (Wilson & Ross, 2001), or in neuropsychological studies (Beer & Hughes, 2010), but none of these studies explicitly focused on comparisons in warmth. However, the study by Fleischmann et al. (2021) focused on morality, which is described as being a part of the warmth domain (Fiske et al., 2007). Inter alia, they found that in morality, downward comparisons are more common than in most

other domains and that such downward comparisons in morality are made to enhance well-being after self-esteem threats.

Research concerning consumer behavior after upward comparisons is mostly limited to social comparisons in competence or in not explicitly defined domains. For example, Sääksjärvi et al. (2016) examined products advertised with a celebrity who had a positive or negative public image. A positive public image led to the celebrity being seen as superior, which in certain circumstances was perceived by consumers as a threat to their self-esteem, which in turn was associated with a lower brand evaluation and purchase intentions. The study by Zheng et al. (2018a) found, that upward social comparisons in academic performances increased participants' willingness to spend more money on conspicuous products. In addition, they found that conspicuous consumption after a threatening upward social comparison in nonmaterial domains occurs in order to restore their sense of superiority. Also, Mandel et al. (2006) found an increased desire for luxury brands after upward comparisons with academically successful targets. Similarly, in their study, Zheng et al. (2018b) instructed undergraduate students to compare in academic achievements, finding that upward comparisons with a better-off student elicited a greater materialistic inclination and this observed effect in materialism was found to be mediated by envy. Furthermore, when participants were comparing in any domain, upward comparison led to a higher likeliness to spend more money on publicly visible expensive products. Especially the studies by Mandel et al. (2006) and Zheng et al. (2018b) similarly found, that an initial upward comparison in academic performance, which is associated with competence (Fiske et al., 2002), is linked to an increased interest in luxury consumption, which is also associated with competence (Dubois et al., 2021). All these findings can be brought in line with the finding by Zheng et al. (2018a) suggesting that upward social comparison motivates conspicuous consumption behavior to restore a sense of superiority. However, only the study by Zheng et al. from 2022

explicitly incorporated social comparison effects on brand preferences of warmth or competence associated brands. They found that engaging in an upward comparison elicited a higher preference for competence-oriented products, whereas a downward comparison increased the preference for warmth-oriented products. In case of upward comparison, the effect was explained through its self-threatening aspect, which increased the need for affirmation of self-efficacy and could be satisfied through products conveying competence. Downward comparisons, in contrast, were linked to social distress because of the fear that one's own superiority could be a threat for others. Therefore, warmth-oriented products were preferred to satisfy these relationship needs. However, the initial comparison domains of upward and downward comparisons in this study were not specified by the experiment.

The present study applied a similar reaction method observing product preferences, but comparison domains were designed to be either in warmth or in competence. In doing so, the focus is to investigate whether the increase of competence-associated product preference after upward comparisons in competence will similarly occur in the domain of warmth and with warmth-associated products. Support for this assumption also comes from Zheng et al. (2022). In another experiment, participants compared either upwards or downwards in either a competence-related domain, which was intelligence, or a warmth-related domain, which was social skill. Afterwards, liking for two versions of a slogan for a day-care center was measured, with one slogan conveying competence and the other conveying warmth. Interestingly, after comparing upward in social skill, the preference for the warmth-oriented slogan was higher than after an initial upward comparison in intelligence. This is interesting because their previous experiments suggested that upward comparison is linked to preferences for competence-oriented products. Zheng et al. (2022) described warmth comparisons to be a special case, because upward comparisons in warmth cause the realization to be lacking in social skills and therefore elicit social distress. So, the focus on relationship needs in this

context is higher than for self-efficacy needs and results in higher preference for warmth-oriented products.

The present study took these findings one step further by examining the effect of the upward social comparison not only on slogans but onto product preference of products. Furthermore, it explicitly separates the comparison domains according to the domains of the SCM, which are either warmth or competence. Based on the previous research, the following hypotheses were formulated:

H_{1a}: Engaging in an upward social comparison in competence will increase the preference for competence associated brands compared to warmth associated brands.

H_{1b}: Engaging in an upward social comparison in warmth will increase the preference for warmth associated brands compared to competence associated brands.

As mentioned previously, the individual propensity to engage in social comparisons varies between people (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999). Buunk and Mussweiler (2001) emphasized the importance of including these differences in SCO when examining social comparisons, especially when focusing on the subsequent reactions, because individuals scoring high or low in SCO differ in their focus and interpretation of comparison information. For such differences in SCO, effects in various contexts were found. A higher SOC is associated with increased alcohol use in adolescents when they perceive high use of friends and siblings (Litt et al., 2015). Also, higher SCO is linked to more negative affect after downward comparisons (Buunk et al., 2001) and with increasing SCO a higher quality of life is reported by cancer patients after being confronted with coping material (Buunk et al., 2011).

For consumer behavior, such effects of SCO have also been found. For example, Pillai & Nair (2021) conducted a study focusing on the effects of SCO onto purchase intentions of luxury brands. There, a higher SCO was linked to a higher willingness to buy luxury brands through direct and indirect effects. This, they explained through assimilative and contrasting

effects, where consumer either try to assimilate to successful others and attaining social status or to contrast from other social groups, both by consuming luxury brands. These results led to the approach that the SCO was included in the present study as a moderator. Based on this, the following hypotheses were formulated:

H_{2a}: The influence of the upward social comparison in competence on brand preference is moderated by social comparison orientation, assuming that a stronger social comparison orientation is associated with a stronger effect of upward social comparison in competence on brand preference.

H_{2b}: The influence of the upward social comparison in warmth on brand preference is moderated by social comparison orientation, assuming that a stronger social comparison orientation is associated with a stronger effect of upward social comparison in warmth on brand preference.

To examine this, the present study applied a reaction approach of social comparison, meaning that the reactions following an initial social comparison were measured (Wood, 1996). Participants were instructed to engage in upward social comparisons in either warmth or competence within a comparative rating. Afterwards, their brand preferences were measured for two brands, either associated with competence or warmth using an advertisement. Furthermore, participants' individual tendency to engage in social comparison was measured.

Method

Materials

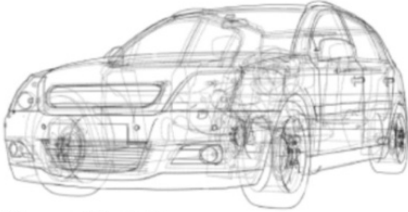
Preference ratings of two different brands were used in order to measure the effects of initial upward social comparisons. Therefore, two mockup advertisement designs for new car models were presented (please see figure 1 and figure 2). As product category, car brands were chosen because they possess a high symbolic value and are important to an individual's

status and self-worth and cars are used in the context of conspicuous consumption (Charles et al., 2009; Gatersleben, 2011; Shukla, 2008). The second argument for choosing cars as product category was based on the assumption that car brands should be known to all participants. As competence associated brand, Mercedes Benz was selected due to findings of previous research in an Austrian sample, defining Mercedes Benz as competence associated (Diamantopoulos et al., 2021). As for a warmth brand, Fiat was chosen based on previous research by Bauer et al. (2018) and the findings by Diamantopoulos et al. (2021) which suggest a transfer effect on product perception from the country of origin, and in the case of Fiat, Italy is ranked high in warmth.

Two fictional new car models were described in the advertisement designs, one named INTELLIGENCE-1 (Mercedes Benz) and the other one named Naturella (Fiat). To reinforce the competence and warmth associations, a short description text was added on the advertisement design. One text was formulated pronouncing the new Mercedes Benz model INTELLIGENCE-1 and the brand itself as competent, capable, efficient, and intelligent. These adjectives used to describe the brand were matched with the adjectives used previously during the upward comparison instructions. The other text emphasized the new Fiat model Naturella and the brand as warm, friendly, good-natured, and kind. In the case of Fiat, the model Naturella was particularly pronounced as eco-friendly electronic car in order to include the aspect of good intentions of warmth domain and because sustainable brands are often stereotyped as warm (Septianto et al., 2021). In both texts, also the country of origin was mentioned to enhance the transfer of perceptions of competence or warmth, as suggested by Diamantopoulos et al. (2021).

Both advertisements were designed identically only changing the car brand logo and text, inspired by stimuli used by Septianto et al. (2020). Also, on both advertisements the same line drawing design of a car was used to avoid effects of aesthetical preferences.

Figure 1*Competence Advertisement*



**Kompetenz
ist entscheidend**

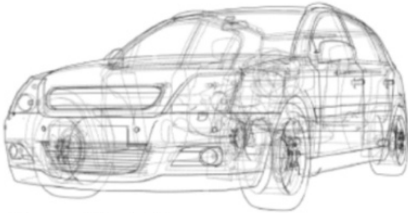
Neues Modell:
INTELLIGENCE-1

Mercedes-Benz ist eine Marke, die Effizienz und Kompetenz vermittelt, genau wie ihr Herkunftsland - Deutschland.

Das neue Sondermodell von Mercedes-Benz ist ein Meisterwerk der intelligenten und innovativen Lösungen des Unternehmens - und macht seinem Namen INTELLIGENCE-1 alle Ehre. Der luxuriöse Innenraum ist voll von effizienten Gadgets, die es so in Vorgängermodellen noch nie gegeben hat. Damit steht der INTELLIGENCE-1 im Einklang mit dem smarten Spirit des Unternehmens und ist ein stolzes Mitglied in der Reihe mit vorherigen Mercedes-Benz Top-Modellen.

Lassen Sie sich von verblüffenden Innovationen überraschen - Holen Sie sich jetzt Ihren INTELLIGENCE-1!

Figure 2*Warmth Advertisement*



**Alles beginnt mit
einer guten Absicht**

Neues Modell:
NATURELLA

Fiat ist eine Marke, die stark mit Wärme und Herzlichkeit assoziiert ist, genau so, wie ihr Herkunftsland - Italien.

Das neue Modell NATURELLA von Fiat ist das Ergebnis der guten Intentionen des Unternehmens, durch die Entwicklung eines Elektroautos in nachhaltiger Weise zu handeln. Die 1899 als Familienunternehmen gegründete Marke Fiat hat sich schon immer in außergewöhnlicher Form um ihre Mitarbeiter gekümmert und tut das auch bis heute noch, indem sie nach wie vor unter besonders arbeitnehmerfreundlichen Bedingungen produziert.

"So sorgen wir hier bei Fiat dafür, dass auch Sie als Kunde und Kundin Teil unseres herzlichen Fiat-Spirits werden können"

Werden Sie Teil der Fiat Familie - holen Sie sich jetzt Ihren NATURELLA!

Sampling and Participants

The minimum required sample size was determined ahead of data collection and aimed for the requirement to reach 80% of power. Based on previous research, an expected effect size of $\eta^2_p = 0.03$ (Zheng et al., 2022) was used for calculation. Working with G*Power (Faul et al., 2007), an ideal sample size of 104 participants was calculated. This number was doubled due to the planned moderation analysis, resulting in 208 participants.

Participants were recruited via the Laboratory Administration for Behavioral Sciences (LABS) of the Faculty of Psychology at Universität Wien as well as online. In total, 286 participants were recruited of which 209 ($M_{\text{age}} = 25.07$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 7.72$, 141 female, 67 male, 1 other gender) were included into further analyses. This number included participants conducting the study in the LABS laboratory or online. All 124 participants in the laboratory were either psychology students at the Universität Wien receiving credits for participation, or they were spontaneously recruited at the NIG university building and participated voluntarily with sweets or apples as reward ($M_{\text{age laboratory}} = 22.46$, $SD_{\text{age laboratory}} = 3.72$, 84 female, 39 male, 1 other gender). Furthermore, 85 online participants were recruited via social media postings as well as through convenience sampling ($M_{\text{age online}} = 28.87$, $SD_{\text{age online}} = 10.14$, 57 female, 28 male). The educational level of participants in the laboratory was not measured but based on their participation within the LABS program or their presence at university buildings, a high educational level can be assumed (e.g., a general qualification for university entrance or higher). Educational levels of online participants were measured, and analysis showed a high level of education (49 university degree, 25 general qualification for university entrance, 10 apprenticeship, 1 compulsory education). Criteria for exclusion were defined ahead to ensure comparability between the participants. Matching one or several of the following criteria, participants were excluded if they did not finish the study ($n = 29$), did not pass the attention check, which was presented only in the online version of the study ($n = 13$),

did not engage in all upward social comparisons during manipulation instructions (reported zero during any of the upward comparison instructions; $n = 41$), stated at the end that their data should not be used ($n = 1$). Due to these exclusion criteria, the two condition groups resulted unequally large, with 112 in the competence group and 97 in the warmth group. See table 1 for an overview over the condition compositions.

Procedure

A 2 (between: competence vs. warmth upward comparison) $\times$ 2 (within: competence vs. warmth brand preference) mixed design was realized. The entire experiment lasted about 20 to maximum 35 minutes and was conducted in German. All the LABS participants performed the experiment on a computer screen whereas online participants were asked to use a computer screen too (23 participants), but some also used phone screens (65 participants). The design comprised two conditions and the randomized assignment to one of the two conditions depicted the between-subject variable. The conditions differed only in the manipulation tasks participants were engaging in. All participants first read the description and gave their consent before starting the experiment.

Manipulation

In both conditions, participants were instructed to engage in an upward social comparison. One condition was defined as the competence comparison condition where participants compared to superior others in competence. The other condition was defined as

Table 1

Composition of the Conditions

Condition	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i> _{age}	<i>SD</i> _{age}	Gender
Competence Comparison Condition	112	25.46	8.15	69 female, 42 male, 1 other gender
Warmth Comparison Condition	97	24.61	7.22	72 female, 25 male

the warmth comparison condition, which was identical in procedure to the competence comparison condition, but individuals were comparing to superior others in warmth.

In the competence comparison condition, four competence associated upward comparisons were performed. For each comparison, participants were confronted with a brief description of a person who was performing very well in a certain domain defined by an adjective. Participants were shown a German version of the following instructions (please see appendix B: Materials for all screens presented during the experiment):

Occasionally in life we meet people who appear to us to be very *competent* in what they are doing, and we find that they are much more *competent* than we are. Now please take a moment and think of a person you know who is very *competent* or perhaps the most *competent* person you know. Try to picture this person very clearly or perhaps even how you interact with the person.

By offering free choice of a personally known comparison target it was intended to create ideal conditions for upward social comparison, based on research suggesting the frequent selection of routine comparison targets (Mussweiler & Rüter, 2003).

The wording of the general description remained unchanged while only the relevant adjective exchanged in a randomized order. The competence associated adjectives were “competent”, “capable”, “efficient”, and “intelligent” (a German translation was realized using the back translation technique; translations, in the same order as above: kompetent, leistungsfähig, effizient, and intelligent). After choosing a comparison target, participants were asked to type the initial letter of the targets first name in a field below (e.g., “A”). Adapted from Kim et al. (2018), this initial letter was used on the next screen to instruct participants to compare their own standing in the same domain to the target (e.g., “Compared to A, I am ... worse-off.”) using a slide reaching from 0 = *equal* to 10 = *very much worse off*. High scores indicated a high inferiority compared to the target. By instructing the

comparisons in a competitive relationship with the target, it was tied to ensure a solid link to conspicuous consumption, as it was found in the research by Zheng et al. (2018a), suggesting that competitive upward comparisons motivate more conspicuous consumption behavior than a cooperative relationship.

The procedure was identical for the warmth comparison condition, however, warmth associated adjectives were used. These were “warm”, “friendly”, “good-natured”, and “kind” (German translations, in the same order as above: warmherzig, freundlich, gutmütig, and nett). All eight adjectives were chosen based on previous research (Diamantopoulos et al., 2021; Kolbl et al., 2019). In the study by Diamantopoulos et al. (2021) the same adjectives were used for describing different brands attitudes but also different cultures. This suggests that they were appropriate in the context of human beings as well as brands.

To ensure upward comparison occurred in a comparable way for all participants, those indicating zero, meaning “equal to the comparison target”, later were excluded from further analysis. After all four comparisons, participants in both conditions reported their ease of comparison using one single item, “How easy was it to engage in the previous comparisons?”, given a slider scale ranging from 0 = *not easy at all* to 10 = *very easy*. Low scores indicated difficulties engaging in the social comparisons. This ease of comparison item was adapted from Mussweiler et al. (2004) and was included to ensure that participants engaged in the upward comparisons and to later evaluate the difficulty of comparing in warmth or competence between conditions.

Brand Preference

After the comparisons, the two advertisement designs were presented in randomized order to measure brand preferences (please see figure 1 and figure 2). This measurement depicted the within-subject variable because all participants rated both advertisements.

Participants first saw and read the advertisement before rating the preference for the brand.

The second brand and its preference ratings were presented on a new page afterwards.

Brand preference was measured using three items adapted from Banerjee (2016). These items were designed by Govers and Schoormans (2005) to measure product preference of ordinary household products. Banerjee (2016) however, adapted and used them for measuring brand preference in cars (e.g., “I think this car brand is attractive”). Only one item was adapted to fit the present study better by asking explicitly about the desirability of the brand and not about its perceived beauty, as it was in the original form (please see appendix A: Used Items and Descriptive Statistics for each item used). In this scale, participants rated their brand preference for the presented car model advertisement on a 10-point Likert scale, reaching from 1 = *I don't agree at all* to 10 = *I agree completely*. The mean ratings were calculated across all three items, separately for competence brand preference and warmth brand preference, to obtain two overall brand preference ratings. For both scales, high scores described a high preference for the brand. The reliability was excellent for competence brand preference ($\alpha = .91$) and good for the warmth brand preference ($\alpha = .85$).

Social Comparison Orientation

SCO was measured using the INCOM scale developed by Gibbons and Buunk (1999). This scale comprises 11 items and measures the SCO in ability and opinion. In the present study, the German language translation by Schneider and Schupp (2011) was used in its short version of only six items. The items measure individual comparison behavior and tendency towards comparison with others (e.g., “I always pay a lot of attention to how I do things compared with how others do things”). This scale was presented on a new page after both brand preference ratings were completed and the order of items was randomized. Participants used a 11-point Likert scale to answer, reaching from 0 = *I don't agree at all* to 10 = *I agree completely*. Before starting online recruitment of participants, one attention check item was

added within this scale, instructing to select the highest level of agreement in order to ensure an attentive participation (“In this item, please select 10 = I agree completely”). High scores indicated a high social comparison orientation. The reliability of this scale was good ($\alpha = .79$).

Results

Randomization and Confound Check

The program IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 27) was used for all analysis. First, because of two different methods of recruitment, it was checked whether the data of online participants and laboratory participants were comparable and could be taken together. Seven t tests for unmatched samples and one χ^2 test were conducted to compare online and laboratory data in age, gender, the means of reported inferiority ratings during upward comparison instructions for warmth and competence, ease of comparison, competence brand preference, warmth brand preference, and social comparison orientation. Only for age, significant results were found, suggesting that the online sample had a higher age ($M = 28.87$, $SD = 10.14$) than the laboratory sample ($M = 22.46$, $SD = 3.72$, $t(207) = 6.44$, $p < .001$). All other tests resulted non-significant. Because no significant differences in the dependent variables could be detected, the two samples were merged.

Before main analyses, it was checked whether the two conditions differ in their perceived ease of comparison using a t test for unmatched samples. No significant difference in ease of comparison could be detected between upward comparisons in competence ($M = 5.69$, $SD = 2.31$) and warmth ($M = 5.54$, $SD = 2.51$, $t(207) = 0.46$, $p = .65$). Also, scale intercorrelations and descriptive statistics for measures were analyzed and depicted in table 2. Results showed a significant correlation between competence brand preference and warmth brand preference ($r(207) = .32$, $p < .001$), meaning that high ratings of competence brand preference were linked to high warmth brand preference and vice versa. Competence brand

Table 2*Descriptive Statistics and Intercorrelations for Measures*

Measure	<i>M (SD)</i>	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.
1. Inferiority Competence	5.07 (1.47)						
2. Inferiority Warmth	4.19 (1.41)						
3. Ease of Comparison	5.62 (2.40)	-.06	-.05	-			
4. Competence BP	4.91 (2.50)	.09	.17	.15*	-		
5. Warmth BP	4.48 (2.06)	.02	-.13	.04	.32**	-	
6. SCO	6.45 (1.79)	.21*	-.05	-.05	.03	.12	-
7. Age	25.07 (7.72)	-.10	-.07	.04	-.03	.04	-.26**

Note. Inferiority Competence/Warmth = Inferiority ratings during upward comparison

instruction in competence/warmth comparison condition, BP = Brand Preference, SCO =

Social Comparison Orientation

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

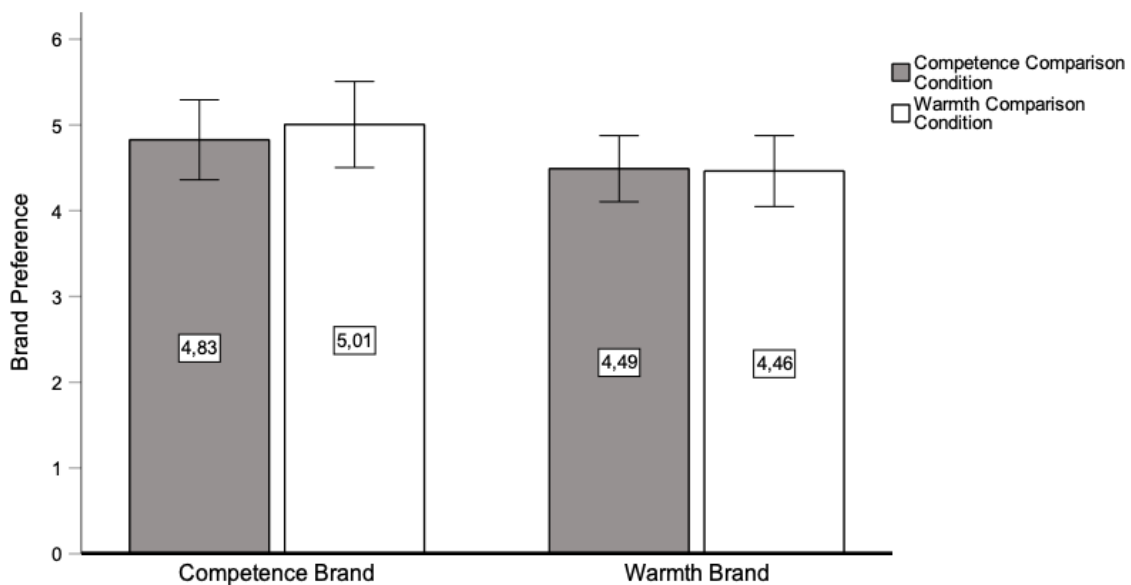
preference correlated significantly and positively with ease of comparison ($r(207) = .15, p = .03$), meaning that perceiving the upward comparison instructions as easy, no matter in which domain, was accompanied by higher preference for the competence band and vice versa. For age, a significant negative correlation was found with SCO ($r(207) = -.26, p < .001$), meaning that a higher age was linked to lower tendency to engage in social comparisons and vice versa. Also, SCO correlated positively with the mean rating of inferiority during the instructions for upward comparisons in competence ($r(207) = .21, p = .03$), meaning that reporting a greater degree of inferiority compared to the target in competence during the manipulation was linked with higher tendencies for engaging in social comparison and vice versa. Means for all scales and each single items are depicted in appendix A: Used Items and Descriptive Statistics.

Main Analyses

The aim of the study was to examine whether an initial upward social comparison either in warmth or competence is linked to an increase in brand preference of a corresponding warmth or competence associated brand, as defined in H_{1a} and H_{1b}. To examine this, a 2 (between-subject: competence comparison condition or warmth comparison condition) $\times$ 2 (within-subject: competence brand preference and warmth brand preference) mixed model analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted.

No significant interaction between brand preference and condition was found ($F(1, 207) = 0.31, p = .58, \eta_p^2 = .001$). This means that the preference for the competence or warmth associated brand did not differ depending on the domain of the initial upward comparison. But, there was a significant main effect for brand preference ($F(1, 207) = 5.55, p = .02, \eta_p^2 = .026$). This main effect indicates a difference between the preferences for the competence brand and the warmth brand regardless of the condition. A pairwise comparison revealed that there was a higher mean preference for the competence brand ($M = 4.92, SD = 0.17$) than for the warmth brand ($M = 4.48, SD = 0.14$), without considering the condition participants were in. No significant result was found for the main effect of condition ($F(1, 207) = 0.09, p = .77, \eta_p^2 < .001$), meaning that there was no difference between the competence comparison condition ($M = 4.66, SD = 0.18$) and the warmth comparison condition ($M = 4.74, SD = 0.19$) in their general brand preference, regardless of the brands, in a pairwise comparison (please see figure 3 for a visualization of these results).

Because ease of comparison previously was identified as significantly correlating with the dependent variable of competence brand preference (please see table 2), ease of comparison was considered as covariate in a further analysis, using same 2 $\times$ 2 mixed ANOVA. The interaction of brand preference and condition remained non-significant

Figure 3*Mean Brand Preferences Divided by Brands and Conditions*

Note. Means are depicted in the center of each bar ($\pm$ 95% confidence intervals).

($F(1,206) = 0.37, p = .54, \eta^2_p = .002$). Also, the interaction of brand preference and ease of comparison was non-significant ($F(1, 206) = 2.72, p = .10, \eta^2_p = .013$). However, under consideration of ease of comparison as a covariate, also the previously found main effect of brand preference resulted non-significant ($F(1, 206) = 0.35, p = .56, \eta^2_p = .002$). This suggests that the existence of differences in brand preference might be partially explained through differences in ease of comparison.

Moderation Analyses

To test H_{2a} and H_{2b} , a moderating effect of SCO on the relationship between initial upward social comparison and competence brand preference was tested using PROCESS model 1 (Hayes, 2017), with warmth comparison and competence comparison conditions as independent variable, SCO as a moderator, and competence brand preference as dependent variable. Because ease of comparison previously was detected as correlating with competence

Table 3

PROCESS Moderation Analysis (Model 1)

<i>Predictor</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i> (204)	<i>p</i>	<i>LLCI</i>	<i>ULCI</i>
Competence Brand Preference						
Condition	1.90	1.31	1.45	.15	-0.68	4.48
SCO	0.17	0.13	1.29	.20	-0.09	0.44
Interaction (Condition*SCO)	-0.26	0.20	-1.34	.18	-0.65	0.12
Ease of Comparison	0.17	0.07	2.30	.02*	0.02	0.31
Warmth Brand Preference						
Condition	1.21	1.08	1.11	.27	-0.93	3.34
SCO	0.24	.11	2.11	.04*	0.02	0.46
Interaction (Condition*SCO)	-0.19	0.16	-1.17	.24	-0.51	0.13
Ease of Comparison	0.04	0.06	0.67	.51	-0.08	0.16

Note. SCO = Social Comparison Orientation* $p < .05$.** $p < .01$.

brand preference, it was included as covariate (please see table 3 for detailed results). The overall model was not significant ($R^2 = .03$, $F(4, 204) = 1.82$, $p = .13$). Also, the interaction of condition and SCO was not significant, meaning that SCO did not moderate the effect between condition and competence brand preference. For ease of comparison a significant effect resulted, meaning that ease of comparison explained a significant part of the variance of competence brand preference.

Corresponding to this, a second moderation analysis was conducted using condition as independent variable, SCO as a moderator, warmth brand preference as dependent variable, and ease of comparison was included as covariate. The overall model was not significant

($R^2 = .02$, $F(4, 204) = 1.22$, $p = .30$) and also the interaction of condition and SCO was not found to be significant. However, a significant effect resulted for SCO, meaning that in this model SCO predicted a significant amount of the variance of warmth brand preference. In order to further analyze this effect and following the recommendation of Hayes (2017), the interaction term was dropped from the model. In this new simple effects model, the relationship between SCO and warmth brand preference resulted non-significant ($B = 0.14$, $p = .08$).

Further Analysis

Initial criteria for excluding data were chosen very strictly, however, resulted in unequally large sample sizes in the two conditions. For exploratory reasons, the previously described analyses were conducted while including participants reporting zero during comparison instructions ($N = 244$). The results showed similar patterns to the previous analyses. All relevant interactions in the 2×2 ANOVA and moderation analyses resulted non-significant (all F -values < 0.67 , all p -values $> .42$).

For further exploratory reasons of the moderation effects, only the relevant items of the short version INCOM scale, measuring SCO in ability were included to test for moderating effects. Recent research suggested such a separation of ability and opinion SCO (Callan et al., 2015; Kim et al., 2017; Schneider & Schupp, 2014) and SCO in ability is more related to the manipulation and dependent variables of the present research. Both moderation analyses resulted in non-significant interactions (all F -values < 3.17 , all p -values $> .08$). The same analyses were conducted again, dropping the exclusion criteria of reporting zero during comparison instructions, but relevant interactions also resulted non-significant (all F -values < 2.75 , all p -values $> .10$). If anything, in all these analyses a trend could be observed, suggesting that higher SCO in ability might be linked to higher brand preferences for both brands after competence comparison, which in this form did not seem to be the case after

warmth comparison. However, because the analyses did not result in significant interaction effects, this is weakly supported by the observed evidence.

Discussion

To sum up, the present study's research interest was the influence of upward social comparisons in warmth and competence on subsequent brand preferences. It was hypothesized that an initial upward social comparison in competence is linked to higher preference for competence associated brands (H_{1a}), whereas upward social comparison in warmth is linked to an increase of warmth brand preference (H_{1b}). The results, however, did not support such assumptions because no difference in brand preference depending on the initial upward comparison domain was found. Furthermore, the present study considered individual differences in the propensity of engaging in social comparisons. A moderating effect of SCO on the relationship between upward comparison domain and competence brand preference (H_{2a}) or warmth brand preference (H_{2b}) was hypothesized, expecting a high SOC to enhance the effect between upward comparison and brand preference. This assumption was also not supported by the results of the moderation analysis.

It is surprising that none of the theorized effects was found in the present sample. Hypotheses H_{1a} and H_{1b} were built on the findings by Kim and Rucker (2012), Mandel et al. (2006), and Zheng et al. (2018a, 2018b). All these studies found comparable effects of upward social comparisons on brand perception with increased brand preferences or spending behavior when confronted with competence brands. Particularly the study by Zheng et al. (2022) suggested preferences for a warmth associated advertisement after an initial upward social comparison in warmth. However, the present study could not replicate such findings.

One explanation could be the study by Fleischmann et al. (2021), focusing on social comparisons in morality, which is related to warmth (Fiske et al., 2007). They found that in morality, people search for downward comparisons much more than in other domains and

avoid upward moral comparisons when threatened, which was explained through the high importance of morality to the self-concept. This suggests that upward comparisons in warmth might be different from other comparisons processes which could have caused difficulties for participants in the warmth comparison condition and therefore diminished effects on brand preferences. To address this, the ease of comparison was measured in both groups but no significant differences in perceived difficulty of competence and warmth comparisons could be detected. In this context, however, it is interesting to note that in the present study, the ease of comparison scores were lower in the warmth comparison condition, implying that the warmth comparisons were perceived as less easy, although not significantly lower than in the competence comparison condition. Also, in the warmth comparison condition, more participants reported zero during upward comparison instruction, meaning that they felt equal to their target. Such observations could be brought in line with the findings of Fleischmann et al. (2021), suggesting that upward comparisons in morality are preferentially avoided.

Another explanation why the hypothesized could not be found in the present study could be the findings by Lisjak et al. (2015). They activated self-threats in participants in competence or sociability and found that engaging in within-domain compensation was linked to rumination about the discrepancy created by the threat and had a negative impact on subsequent self-regulation tasks. Although this study did not comprise engaging in upward social comparison, these findings suggest that it cannot be excluded that a within-domain compensation could have been causing ruminative thinking, which weakened the effects on brand preferences.

Furthermore, not finding results supporting the theorized moderating effect of SCO was surprising because past studies could identify SCO as a moderator (Buunk et al., 2011; Buunk et al., 2001; Litt et al., 2015). However, the interpretation of not finding such a moderating effect of SCO in the present study is difficult because it remains debatable

whether there is no moderating effect of SCO on brand preferences in competence and warmth or a moderating effect could not be observed because the relationship between upward social comparison and brand preferences did not occur in the predicted way. Although results showed an effect of SCO predicting warmth brand preference, meaning that SCO explained a significant amount of the variance of warmth brand preference, this finding alone is difficult to be brought in line with previous research due to the lack of literature concerning warmth brand preference in the context of social comparisons. Additionally, further analyses of the moderating effect including only SCO of ability suggested a trend of higher SCO of ability being linked to higher brand preferences, no matter which brand, but only occurring in the competence comparison condition and not in the warmth comparison condition. This might be aligned with the research by Pillai and Nair (2021), who found high SCO to increase willingness to purchase luxury brands. However, this assumption is only little supported by the present study's data due to non-significant results.

Explanations for the lack of the expected effects could also be discussed in the context of the experimental design or the sample. Due to recruitment problems of the LABS program, recruitment was also carried out online. Before merging the two samples, their comparability was checked by comparing them in all relevant measures, finding only differences for age. Nevertheless, it cannot be ruled out that there were important differences in other unconsidered variables which affected the effects on independent variables. In addition, the initial exclusion criteria were chosen very strictly to ensure comparability of upward comparisons, but resulted in unequal numbers of participants between conditions, with fewer participants in the warmth comparison condition. This was unfortunate because the comparison in warmth condition was of special interest due to the little research in this field. However, also when exclusion criteria were dropped in a further analysis, no significant effects of main analyses could be found.

Additionally, experimental design or stimuli could be the cause for the lack of findings. Upward comparisons instructions might not have had the effects of threatening the selves of participants found in previous research (Zheng et al., 2022), which was impaired by the unnatural situation on a computer screen. Furthermore, it is unclear whether comparisons in warmth or competence are comparable. Comparisons in warmth domains could occur more rarely on a daily basis, whereas competence comparisons are very common in school grades or competitions. Therefore, people may have a clear idea of their standing in competence, while it is more unclear in the case of warmth due to the lack of objective standards. Moreover, it is arguable whether the choice of cars as brand category was suitable. Several participants stated in the comment field at the end of the study that they do not consider cars as desirable, that possession of private cars is not in line with their beliefs concerning a sustainable lifestyle, and that they currently do not consider buying a car. Such influences could weaken brand preference effects elicited by initial comparisons. A study by Shukla (2008) identified middle-aged adults to be the largest consumer segment who purchases cars out of conspicuous reasons and past research also proposed that millennials tend to consider car brands as less aspirational (Trocchia et al., 2014). These findings could explain such critical comments about cars and why no effects were found, arguing that the sample might have been too young. Additionally, the design of the fictional advertisements might have been unconvincing and effects on brand preferences were diminished by participants finding the advertisements implausible. A realistic scenario might have suited better for the present study's design. As an example, Zheng et al. (2018a) measured conspicuous consumption by informing participants that the study ended and that they could win a real product with a large or a subtle branding. Participants choosing the large branding product was interpreted as conspicuous consumption.

However, besides lacking support for main assumptions, several other findings resulted from the study. SCO was found to be negatively linked to age, suggesting that with a higher age the tendency to compare with others is lower. This finding is in line with past research, suggesting that older adults tend to report lower tendencies to engage in social comparisons (Callan et al., 2015; Schneider & Schupp, 2014). Moreover, a positive correlative relationship between the reported inferiority during upward comparison instructions and the SCO was found. In this case, however, it is not possible to tell whether a high SCO caused participants to indicate feeling more inferior in competence or vice versa. Furthermore, high ratings of brand preference in one brand were significantly linked to high preference of the other brand. Brand preferences depicted the within-subject variable and the correlation between the two ratings within a person could be explained by the study of Gatersleben (2011), which found that individuals assign different social-symbolic value to cars and possess different materialistic values which participants would apply on both cars. Furthermore, the preference of the competence brand was found to be significantly higher than for the warmth brand. Such a finding is in line with previous research suggesting that luxury brands are generally preferred (Griskevicius et al., 2010; Pillai & Nair, 2021) and in an U.S. American sample Mercedes Benz was found to be a desirable aspirational brand (Trocchia et al., 2014).

Another finding of the present study was that the measurement of ease of comparison positively correlated with the preference of the competence brand. For this reason, the ease of comparison was included as covariate in the main analysis and results showed that the significant general preference for the competence brand might be partially explained through differences in the ease of comparison. The ease of comparison in this study could be interpreted as participants' perceived difficulty in engaging in the comparison task. Perceiving comparing to others as easy might be due to a person comparing with others in high frequency

and therefore gaining a form of fluency of engaging in comparisons. It might be argued that such a fluency is related to SCO and therefore could be in line with the study by Pillai and Nair (2021), finding that a high SCO is linked to stronger conspicuous consumption. Accordingly, this might be an explanation for the relationship between higher ease of comparison and higher preference of the competent brand in the present study. However, SCO did not correlate with competence brand preferences, so the ease of comparison could comprise further aspects. Assuming that participants indicating low ease of comparison did not engage in the social comparison to the same extent as participants reporting high ease, the measurement of ease of comparison could comprise an aspect of social comparison intensity. In turn, intense upward comparison might be more threatening to the self and such intense threats for the self could be linked to stronger competence brand preferences. Past research already supports such a link between self-threats and compensatory consumption and competence brand preferences (Zheng et al., 2018b), but in this idea of interpretation, comparison intensity could have an important influence on this relationship.

A further finding in the present study was that the general competence brand preferences were higher than the warmth brand preference, regardless of condition. These findings, however, are difficult to interpret without a control group because ratings cannot be compared to brand preferences without upward comparisons. Therefore, several interpretations are possible. It could be the case that the higher preference of the competence brand occurred regardless of the upward social comparison, only explained by Mercedes being a desirable brand (Trocchia et al., 2014). It could also be that upward comparison increased brand preferences for both brands and both are higher, than they would result in a non-comparison control group. It might be that the higher preference of the competence brand occurred due to upward comparison regardless of the comparison domain, as found in previous research (Kim & Rucker, 2012; Mandel et al., 2006; Zheng et al., 2018a, 2018b).

Lastly, it is possible that other effects influenced brand preferences. Previous research by Griskevicius et al. (2010), for example, found that when activating status motives, purchase intentions for a pro-environmental car were higher than for a luxury car. This finding was explained by the costly signaling theory which suggests that a free choice of self-sacrifice enhances status. Such an effect could explain high preferences for the environmentally friendly warm brand even after initial competence comparison. Contrary to this, the study by Liang et al. (2017) found that when participants were confronted with negative social feedback and exclusion (e.g., being rejected in a social media friend request) they increased their preference for conspicuous consumption when shopping for high-end products. This could explain an effect of competence brand preference after initial upward comparison in warmth. The occurrence of such effects on brand preferences would be indistinguishable from effects of social comparison in the present study and cannot be ruled out, which limits the findings of the present study.

Limitations and Future Research

Several other aspects of limitation need to be considered in the interpretation of the present study's findings. Firstly, the sample is not representative because of several reasons. The main part of recruitment was conducted among university students, resulting in a high level of education and young age, especially in the subsample conducted in the LABS laboratory, but also in the whole sample. Furthermore, recruitment was only conducted among German speaking participants, mostly in Vienna. Also, the online recruitment was partly based on convenience sampling. All these aspects limit the generalizability of the findings.

Secondly, several aspects of the experiment and its' design need to be taken into consideration. No pilot study was run ahead of the study in order to test the brand preferences or credibility of the advertisements used in the study and they were designed only based on

similar stimuli used by Septianto et al. (2020). Also, no data for warmth and competence ratings of the brand Fiat in an Austrian sample was previously collected or found in literature as it was the case for Mercedes (Diamantopoulos et al., 2021). Because in the present study no control group was included, the actual effect of upward social comparison on the brand preference measures are limited in interpretation, because it remains unclear whether preferences for both brands were higher, lower, or equal to preferences without an initial comparison. Furthermore, because the adjectives, used during the upward comparison instructions were matched with the adjectives in the texts of the advertisement designs, it cannot be excluded that an increased brand preference occurred because of a priming effect. Such effects have been found in previous studies, where initial environmental primes increased brand preference of ecological fashion products (Lee et al., 2020). In the present study's design, finding a significant moderating effect of SCO supporting the assumption of the effect of upward social comparison on brand preferences, would have made a priming effect seem rather implausible. However, because no such moderating effect was found, a possible priming effect cannot be excluded.

Even if no effects were found in the present study, its' findings offer broad implications. Future research might be examining the suggested effect of ease of comparison and the idea of a social comparison intensity. In the present study, it needs to be taken into consideration, that the ease of comparison item was adapted from Mussweiler et al. (2004), translated using the back-translation method, and it was only one single item. However, defining social comparison not only by upward or downward direction but the assumption of multiple levels of intensity of social comparison could be interesting for further examination and open a new direction of study. Different levels of perceived intensity of comparison might differentially influence social comparison outcomes and further research examining this

idea could help gaining a finer understanding of emotional, behavioral, or cognitive reactions following social comparisons.

By applying a reaction method (Gerber et al., 2018) and using existing brands, this study's findings are transferable to practical applications that may be of interest to marketers and for brand positioning strategies. In addition, this study contributes to the literature on conspicuous and compensatory consumption by examining the underlying mechanisms that lead to consumer preferences, which in turn might influence purchasing decisions. By continuing such an approach, future research could further examine the mechanisms which affect the use of products as a reaction onto social comparison information but also other psychological states. Future research concerning competence and warmth perceptions of brands may especially focus on the warmth associations of environmentally friendly brands, which could be highly relevant in marketing and distribution of sustainable products. Furthermore, a more nuanced understanding of warmth associations of brands would contribute to a further understanding of the SCMs' relevance in the context of consumer research.

Conclusion

In summary, the present study did not find support for the assumed relationship between upward social comparison in competence or warmth and within-domain compensatory consumption. Not finding such effects can be discussed in context of previous research. Past findings linked within-domain compensatory consumption to ruminative thinking about one's inferiority, which is preferred to be avoided (Lisjak et al., 2015), or suggested that consumers prefer environmentally friendly cars to luxury cars when seeking status gain because free choice of self-sacrifice increases the perceived status (Griskevicius et al., 2010). This illustrates the complexity of research concerning consumer preferences and decisions.

The research interest of the present study focused on consumer behavior following social comparisons. However, in a broader sense, it also aimed for a better understanding of the self-threatening aspect of social comparisons in upward direction. Studies linked upward social comparison with self-threat (Zheng et al., 2018a) and discussed negative impacts of upward comparisons on physical and mental health, relating it to depression and anxiety (Butzer & Kuiper, 2006; Dickerson et al., 2009; Shively et al., 1997), and to negative emotional outcomes, for example, that self-threat increases *schadenfreude* (van Dijk et al., 2011). Moreover, downward comparison is also theorized to elicit negative emotional reactions in certain circumstances (Smith, 2000). Such findings emphasize the relevance of social comparison in diverse fields and highlight the importance of a better understanding of comparison mechanisms in order to avoid negative outcomes. This seems to be particularly important in younger generations, because the tendency to engage in social comparisons is higher in younger people (Callan et al., 2015; Schneider & Schupp, 2014), which also the present study found. Especially in social network sites, social comparison effects are discussed in context of depressive symptoms and anxiety by a very recent field of research (Kim et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2017; Yoon et al., 2019). By understanding the underlying theory of social comparison, such undesirable effects can be defined in order to develop strategies to overcome such challenges.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Used Items and Descriptive Statistics

Scale	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	α
Competence Comparison Instructions	5.07	1.47	-
kompetent <i>competent</i>	5.24	2.02	-
leistungsfähig <i>capable</i>	5.13	1.96	-
effizient <i>efficient</i>	5.11	2.25	-
intelligent <i>intelligent</i>	4.79	2.25	-
Warmth Comparison Instructions	4.19	1.41	-
warmherzig <i>warm</i>	4.12	1.83	-
freundlich <i>friendly</i>	4.11	1.79	-
gutmütig <i>good-natured</i>	4.62	2.09	-
nett <i>kind</i>	3.91	1.99	-
Ease of Comparison (Mussweiler et al., 2004)	5.62	2.40	-
Bitte geben Sie an, wie leicht Ihnen die Vergleiche mit den von Ihnen ausgewählten Personen gefallen sind. <i>Please indicate how easy it was for you to engage in the comparisons with the people you selected.</i>	5.62	2.40	-
Brand Preferences Competence (Banerjee, 2016)	4.91	2.50	.909
Ich finde, diese Automarke ist begehrenswert. <i>I think this car brand is desirable.</i>	5.11	2.56	-

Ich hätte dieses Auto gerne. <i>I would like to have this car.</i>	4.44	2.77	-
Ich finde, diese Automarke ist attraktiv. <i>I think this car brand is attractive.</i>	5.19	2.82	-
Brand Preferences Warmth (Banerjee, 2016)	4.48	2.06	.851
Ich finde, diese Automarke ist begehrenswert. <i>I think this car brand is desirable.</i>	4.66	2.25	-
Ich hätte dieses Auto gerne. <i>I would like to have this car.</i>	4.20	2.44	-
Ich finde, diese Automarke ist attraktiv. <i>I think this car brand is attractive.</i>	4.58	2.35	-
Iowa-Netherlands Comparison Orientation Measure (INCOM) (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999) German short version (Schneider & Schupp, 2011)	6.45	1.76	.792
Ich achte immer sehr stark darauf, wie ich Dinge im Vergleich zu anderen mache. <i>I always pay a lot of attention to how I do things compared with how others do things.</i>	6.19	2.37	-
Ich vergleiche häufig meine sozialen Fähigkeiten und meine Beliebtheit mit denen anderer Personen. <i>I often compare how I am doing socially (e.g., social skills, popularity) with other people.</i>	6.11	2.57	-
Ich bin nicht der Typ Mensch, der sich oft mit anderen vergleicht. (reverse-coded) <i>I am not the type of person who compares often with others.</i>	6.57	2.67	-
Ich versuche häufig herauszufinden, was andere denken, die mit ähnlichen Problemen konfrontiert sind wie ich. <i>I often try to find out what others think who face similar problems as I face.</i>	6.78	2.38	-

Ich möchte immer gerne wissen wie sich andere in einer ähnlichen Situation verhalten würden. <i>I always like to know what others in a similar situation would do.</i>	6.47	2.65	-
Wenn ich über etwas mehr erfahren möchte, versuche ich herauszufinden was andere darüber denken oder wissen. <i>If I want to learn more about something, I try to find out what others think about it</i>	6.58	2.44	-
<i>Note.</i> The left column shows the individual items of each scale as presented in German, and the original form in English in italics below. The right column shows overall means, standard deviation, and Cronbach's alpha for scales in the line of the scale title and means and standard deviation for each item individually below.			

Appendix B: Materials

A1: Introduction



Liebe Teilnehmer:innen,

hiermit sind Sie herzlich dazu eingeladen, an einem Forschungsvorhaben des Institutes für Arbeits-, Wirtschafts- und Sozialpsychologie der Universität Wien teilzunehmen. Hierbei soll der soziale Vergleich mit anderen Personen und dessen Auswirkungen untersucht werden.

Zeitlicher Aufwand für die Untersuchung: Der Zeitaufwand für eine Teilnahme beträgt **etwa 10 Minuten**.

Ablauf der Untersuchung: Zunächst werden Sie gebeten, sich anhand einer Skala mit einer Ihnen bekannten Person in verschiedenen Domänen zu vergleichen. Im Anschluss daran werden Ihnen verschiedene Werbeplakate präsentiert, die Sie mithilfe einiger kurzer Fragen bewerten sollen. Abschließend sind noch einige Fragen anhand eines Fragebogens zu beantworten.

Idealerweise führen Sie die Studie am Computerbildschirm aus, weil sie hierfür konzipiert wurde. Sollten Sie am Handy teilnehmen, können Sie Ihren Bildschirm auf waagerecht kippen, um die Teilnahme bequemer zu gestalten.

Ansprechperson für Rückfragen: Simon Renz
(a01609504@unet.univie.ac.at)



A2: Declaration of Consent**Einverständniserklärung**

Die Studie dient ausschließlich wissenschaftlichen Zwecken. Die Befragung wird vom Institut für Arbeits-, Wirtschafts- und Sozialpsychologie der Universität Wien durchgeführt. Ihre Studienergebnisse werden streng vertraulich behandelt. Die Daten der Studien werden zu jedem Zeitpunkt vollständig anonymisiert. Die Ergebnisse und Daten dieser Studie werden unter Umständen veröffentlicht. Dies geschieht in anonymisierter Form, d.h., ohne, dass die Daten einer spezifischen Person zugeordnet werden können. Anonyme und anonymisierte Daten unterliegen nicht dem Datenschutz.

Die Teilnahme an der Studie ist freiwillig und mit keinen bekannten Risiken verbunden. Sie können die Teilnahme an dieser Untersuchung zu jedem Zeitpunkt ohne Angaben von Gründen abbrechen. Daraus ergeben sich keine Nachteile für Sie. Eine Löschung Ihrer Antworten zu einem späteren Zeitpunkt ist nicht möglich.

Ich habe die oben genannten Informationen gelesen und verstanden und erkläre mich mit den Teilnahmebedingungen einverstanden.

Ja

☐

Nein

☐

A3: Manipulation Instructions

Im Folgenden werden Sie nun mehrfach gebeten, an konkrete Personen zu denken, die Sie persönlich kennen und die in bestimmten Bereichen besonders gute Leistungen erzielen. Bitte versuchen Sie jedes Mal erneut so konkret wie möglich an eine entsprechende Person zu denken und tippen Sie den Anfangsbuchstaben des Names der Person in das darunter stehende Feld (dies wird selbstverständlich anonym sein).

Es ist möglich, in mehreren Bereichen an dieselbe Person zu denken, aber bitte versuchen Sie jedes Mal von Neuem eine spezifische Person zu finden, die der vorgegebenen Beschreibung am genauesten entspricht.



A4: Instruction of Competence Comparison Condition, Exemplary Screen

Competence Comparison Adjectives: competent, capable, efficient, intelligent

Warmth Comparison Adjectives: warm, friendly, good-natured, kind



Gelegentlich treffen wir im Leben auf Personen, die uns sehr **kompetent** erscheinen, in dem was sie tun und wir müssen feststellen, dass diese Personen wesentlich **kompetenter** sind, als man selbst. Bitte nehmen Sie sich nun einen Moment lang Zeit und denken Sie an eine Person, die Sie kennen und die **sehr kompetent** ist oder möglicherweise die **kompetenteste** Person, die Sie kennen.

Versuchen Sie sich die Person ganz konkret vorzustellen oder vielleicht sogar, wie Sie mit der Person interagieren.

Bitte tippen Sie den Anfangsbuchstaben des Namens der Person in das darunter stehende Feld.

A5: Instruction of Competence Comparison Condition, Exemplary Screen 2

Bitte vergleichen Sie sich mit **A**. Um wie viel **weniger kompetent** als **A** würden Sie sich selbst einschätzen?

sehr viel weniger 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 **gleich** 0

Um wie viel **weniger kompetent** als **A** würden Sie sich selbst einschätzen?



A6: Ease of Comparison Measurement

Bitte geben Sie an, wie leicht Ihnen die Vergleiche mit den von Ihnen ausgewählten Personen gefallen sind.

Überhaupt nicht einfach

Sehr einfach

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

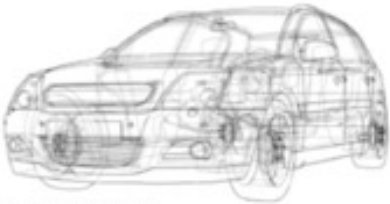
Wie einfach oder schwierig ist es Ihnen gefallen, sich mit den Personen zu vergleichen?



A7: Brand Preference Measurement, Warmth Brand Preference

Bitte betrachten und lesen Sie diesen Entwurf für ein Werbeplakat des Unternehmens Fiat für deren neues Automodell.

Bitte nehmen Sie sich Zeit hierfür – Sie können erst nach einer gewissen Zeit mit der Bearbeitung fortfahren.

Alles beginnt mit einer guten Absicht

Neues Modell:
NATURELLA

Fiat ist eine Marke, die stark mit Wärme und Herzlichkeit assoziiert ist, genau so, wie ihr Herkunftsland - Italien.

Das neue Modell NATURELLA von Fiat ist das Ergebnis der guten Intentionen des Unternehmens, durch die Entwicklung eines Elektroautos in nachhaltiger Weise zu handeln. Die 1899 als Familienunternehmen gegründete Marke Fiat hat sich schon immer in außergewöhnlicher Form um ihre Mitarbeiter gekümmert und tut das auch bis heute noch, indem sie nach wie vor unter besonders arbeitnehmerfreundlichen Bedingungen produziert.

"So sorgen wir hier bei Fiat dafür, dass auch Sie als Kunde und Kundin Teil unseres herzlichen Fiat-Spirits werden können"

Werden Sie Teil der Fiat Familie - holen Sie sich jetzt Ihren NATURELLA!

Bitte geben Sie an, in wie weit Sie den untenstehenden Aussagen in Bezug auf den obigen Plakatentwurf zustimmen.

Ich stimme überhaupt nicht zu 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Ich stimme voll und ganz zu

Ich finde, diese Automarke ist begehrenswert.

☐

Ich hätte dieses Auto gerne.

☐

Ich finde, diese Automarke ist attraktiv.

☐

A8: Social Comparison Orientation Measurement

Bitte geben Sie an, inwieweit Sie den unten stehenden Aussagen zustimmen.

Ich stimme überhaupt nicht zu 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 **Ich stimme voll und ganz zu** 7 8 9 10

Ich versuche häufig herauszufinden, was andere denken, die mit ähnlichen Problemen konfrontiert sind wie ich.

Dies ist ein Aufmerksamkeits-Check: Bitte wählen Sie hier die Antwortmöglichkeit "10 – ich stimme voll und ganz zu" aus.

Ich möchte immer gerne wissen wie sich andere in einer ähnlichen Situation verhalten würden.

Ich achte immer sehr stark darauf, wie ich Dinge im Vergleich zu anderen mache.

Ich bin nicht der Typ Mensch, der sich oft mit anderen vergleicht.

Ich vergleiche häufig meine sozialen Fähigkeiten und meine Beliebtheit mit denen anderer Personen.

Wenn ich über etwas mehr erfahren möchte, versuche ich herauszufinden was andere darüber denken oder wissen.

A9: Demographic Variables

Abschließend würde ich Sie bitten, noch einige Daten bezüglich Ihrer Person anzugeben.

Bitte geben Sie Ihr Geschlecht an

☐ weiblich

☐ männlich

☐ divers

Studieren Sie derzeit? Wenn ja, bitte geben Sie Ihr Studienfach an.

☐ Nein

☐ Ja, ich studiere folgendes:

Welcher ist Ihr höchster absolvierter Bildungsabschluss?

☐ Pflichtschule

☐ Matura/Abitur

☐ Lehre/Ausbildung

☐ Hochschulabschluss/Universität

Erhalten Sie für die Teilnahme an dieser Studie LAB-Credits?

Ja

☐

Nein

☐

Wo führen Sie diese Befragung durch?

☐ Im Universitätslabor am Computer

☐ Privat am Computer

☐ Privat am Handy

A10: Seriousness Check

Für die Datenauswertung ist es notwendig, dass Sie die Studie ernsthaft und gewissenhaft bearbeitet haben.

Ihrer ehrlichen Meinung nach, sollten Ihre Daten in der Auswertung berücksichtigt werden?

Ja

☐

Nein

☐

A11: Explanations

Vielen Dank für Ihre Teilnahmen an dieser Untersuchung – Sie haben uns sehr geholfen!

Anbei finden Sie Informationen zu den Zielen der Studie.

Ich möchte Sie bitten, diese konkreten Informationen für sich zu behalten und nicht mit anderen Personen über die Studie zu sprechen.

In der soeben absolvierten Studie wird untersucht, inwieweit sich ein unterlegener sozialer Vergleich in den Domänen Wärme und Kompetenz auf die anschließende Präferenz von Marken auswirkt. Ähnlich wie Menschen können Marken ebenso mit Wärme oder Kompetenz assoziiert sein (Kervyn et al., 2012) – im Fall dieser Studie werden die Automarken Mercedes Benz als kompetent und Fiat als warm verwendet. Zheng et al. (2021) konnten bereits eine höhere Präferenz für kompetenz-orientierte Produkte nach einem unterlegenen sozialen Vergleich beobachten. Außerdem konnten Pillai und Nair (2021) zeigen, dass eine höhere individuelle Tendenz zu sozialen Vergleichen mit anderen einen direkten positiven Einfluss auf die Bereitschaft hat, Luxusprodukte zu kaufen.

In dieser Studie wurden Sie zunächst aufgefordert, sich mit einer Ihnen bekannten Person zu vergleichen. Hierfür wurden Sie zufällig zu einer von zwei Gruppen zugeteilt, die jeweils vier Vergleiche in vier verschiedenen Aspekten von entweder Wärme oder Kompetenz beinhalteten. Die Vergleichsperson sollte als besonders erfolgreich in diesen Aspekten gewählt werden, um einen Aufwärtsvergleich zu generieren. Anschließend wurden Sie gebeten zwei Werbeplakate für fiktive neue Automodelle nach Ihrer Präferenz zu bewerten. Abschließend haben Sie noch einen Fragebogen zu Ihrer individuellen Tendenz zu sozialen Vergleichen mit anderen bearbeitet.

Untersucht wird nun, ob ein vorausgegangener Aufwärtsvergleich in den Bereichen Wärme oder Kompetenz im Anschluss zu einer verstärkten Präferenz genau jener Produkte führt, die mit denselben Attributen assoziiert sind. Außerdem wird untersucht, ob die generelle individuelle Tendenz dazu, sich mit anderen zu vergleichen, einen verstärkenden Einfluss auf diesen Zusammenhang hat.

Es ist anzumerken, dass die gezeigten Werbeplakate und Modelle rein fiktiv sind und lediglich für den Zweck dieser Studie erstellt wurden. Die Unternehmen Fiat und Mercedes-Benz waren in keiner Weise an dieser Studie beteiligt.

Wir danken Ihnen für Ihre Teilnahme an dieser Studie. Mit Ihrer Teilnahme haben Sie einen wichtigen Beitrag zu unserer Forschung geleistet. Wenn Sie weitere Fragen oder Anmerkungen haben, wenden Sie sich gerne an Simon Renz (a01609504@unet.univie.ac.at).

A12: Comments

Haben Sie Anmerkungen oder Kommentare zur Studie?

(Wenn nicht, klicken Sie bitte auf "weiter")



Appendix C: Zusammenfassung

Vergangene Forschung konnte zeigen, dass der soziale Vergleich mit überlegenen Personen eine potenzielle Bedrohung für das Selbst darstellt und mit wohlstandsorientiertem Konsumverhalten in Verbindung steht. Solche Effekte können für verschiedene Domänen unterschiedlich sein, denn es wurde gezeigt, dass soziale Vergleiche in Bezug auf Kompetenz und Sozialverhalten zu Präferenzen für Werbung führen, die die entsprechenden Assoziationen von Kompetenz oder Wärme vermittelt. Solche Beurteilungen von Kompetenz und Wärme können sich auf Menschen und auf Marken beziehen. Allerdings existiert bislang nur wenig Forschung zu sozialen Vergleichen im Bereich von Wärme. In dieser Studie wurden Teilnehmende ($N = 209$) zu Aufwärtsvergleichen in Wärme oder Kompetenz aufgefordert und anschließend ihre Präferenzen für zwei Marken gemessen, die mit Wärme oder Kompetenz assoziiert waren. Angenommen wurde, dass sich durch Aufwärtsvergleiche in einer bestimmten Domäne die Präferenz für Marken erhöht, die mit derselben Domäne assoziiert sind, was auf kompensatorischen Konsum schließen lassen würde. Weiters wurde die individuelle Neigung zu sozialen Vergleichen berücksichtigt, um deren moderierende Wirkung zu testen. Die Ergebnisse dieser Studie stützten jedoch weder diese Annahmen noch konnten sie frühere Ergebnisse replizieren. Weitere Ergebnisse waren, dass ein höheres Alter mit geringeren Tendenzen zu sozialen Vergleichen verbunden war, dass die Empfindung der Aufwärtsvergleiche als einfach mit höheren Präferenzen der Kompetenzmarke verbunden war und dass die Kompetenzmarke stärker präferiert wurde als die Wärmemarke. Die vorliegende Studie trägt zur Forschung sozialer Vergleiche bei und fokussierte die Domänenspezifität der Effekte. Die Ergebnisse bieten praktische Anwendung für die Konsumentenforschung, aber haben auch Relevanz im Kontext von beispielsweise Vergleichen in sozialen Medien.

Schlüsselwörter: Aufwärtsgerichteter sozialer Vergleich, Wärme, Kompetenz, kompensatorischer Konsum, Konsumentenverhalten