



# The influence of social comparison on career decision-making: Vocational identity as a moderator and regret as a mediator<sup>☆</sup>



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## ABSTRACT

This study investigated the influence of social comparison on career choice certainty and its potential mechanisms: regret as a mediator and vocational identity as a moderator. Before the formal experiment, 30 pairs of vocational values representing typical conflicts in career decision-making for Chinese university students were obtained. The formal experiment adopted a single-factor (social comparison VS no comparison) between-subject design with vocational identity as an independent covariate. Ninety-eight junior and senior undergraduate students and graduate students in a university in China were invited to participate in the computer-controlled experiment, which involved vocational identity assessment, social comparison manipulation, and analogue career-choice scenario tests. Path analysis showed that: (a) Social comparison significantly and negatively predicted career choice certainty; (b) Regret partially mediated the effect of social comparison on career choice certainty; and (c) Vocational identity did not moderate the path between social comparison and regret, but significantly moderated the negative effect of regret on career choice certainty. These results indicated that in the collectivistic Chinese culture, individuals' career development trajectories may not be totally independent and are subject to influences by other people's choices, while emotion of regret and vocational identity development all play significant roles in this intricate process.

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## 1. Introduction

Career decision-making is an important branch of vocational psychology and has received much research attention, particularly with respect to exploring factors that may influence how certain people are about their choices, i.e., their career choice certainty (Osipow, Carney, Winer, Yanico, & Koschier, 1976; Tracey & Darcy, 2002). Vocational development theories have identified a number of variables that may influence an individual's career choice, including personal factors like one's interests and values (Holland, 1997), and contextual factors like the structure and process of original family (Whiston & Keller, 2004) and significant others (Gati, 2013). However, examining existing literature that explored the contextual factors, no study has investigated the impact of social comparison with peers on career decision-making and choice certainty, which seems to be a potentially significant contextual force in shaping individual's career paths, especially in China which predominantly embraces a collectivistic culture (Chen, 2009). A specific illustration follows.

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### 1.1. Social comparison in collectivistic cultures

Social comparison was first proposed by Festinger (1954) as the tendency to evaluate one's opinions and abilities using other group members as references. Studies investigating the relationship between culture and individual's self-concept have suggested a possible link between one's cultural background and inclination to engage in social comparison (Heine & Hamamura, 2007; White & Lehman, 2005). While individualistic culture entails a self-concept as independent, autonomous and self-contained, in collectivistic culture the prevalent view of self is interdependent, connected, and embedded in interpersonal relationships with others (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; White & Lehman, 2005). For individuals with such an interdependent self-concept, research has indicated that they may pay more attention to their social relationships and standing, thus are more sensitive to the social aspect of self under public scrutiny and evaluation (Heine & Hamamura, 2007). Therefore, it may be reasonable to infer that individuals in a collectivistic cultural context like China may be significantly influenced by social comparisons since their social self remains a salient part of their overall self-concept, which partly exists in relation with others (Chen, 2009).

In fact, some research has already demonstrated significant associations between social comparison seeking and one's cultural orientation (Chung & Mallery, 1999; Heine & Hamamura, 2007; White & Lehman, 2005). For example, Chung and Mallery (1999) found out that higher collectivism was significantly correlated with increased desire to make general and upward social comparisons ("upward" means comparing with others who are better off or superior). White and Lehman (2005) found that in comparison with European Canadians (representing individualistic culture), Asian Canadians (representing collectivistic culture) demonstrated significantly higher tendency to seek social comparison, particularly upward comparisons that allow for self-improvement. Because the Chinese culture is primarily characterized by collectivism where people adopt a self-in-relation perspective (Chen, 2009), it might be anticipated that social comparison would be prevalent in and have influence on Chinese people's daily lives. More specifically in career decision-making, it may be a contextual factor that has potential salient roles but has not been addressed theoretically or examined empirically in the Chinese culture.

### 1.2. Career choice certainty, decision-making, and social comparison

Although no previous research has directly examined the relationship between social comparison and career decision-making, a number of studies have investigated the effects of social comparison on general decision making processes and outcomes (He & Bai, 1997; Hoelzl & Loewenstein, 2005; Kumar, 2004; Linde & Sonnemans, 2012). For instance, in Kumar (2004), participants who were told their friends had chosen their forgone alternative and received a greater discount tended to report less intention to stick to this purchase choice, which indicated an inaction inertia resulting from social comparison and counterfactual regret. Hoelzl and Loewenstein (2005) pointed out that social counterfactuals increased individuals' tendency to stick with an investment. Within the Chinese context, though limited in number and scope, research results still indicated that social comparison influenced the risk aversion of people who had experienced gain in a prior choice (He & Bai, 1997). Above evidence implied that social comparison affected people's choice behaviors by either increasing or decreasing their willingness/intention to continue their former choice. Therefore, we infer that comparing with others may potentially influence individuals' choice certainty: how certain they feel about and how much they hold on to their previous choices are significantly shaped by the messages obtained from comparing with others.

Career choice is a very important type of choice people make in their lives, and the aforementioned findings have potential implications for career decision research as well. These findings evidence that social comparison influences choice certainty in general decision-making, thus suggest that such effects may also apply to people's choice certainty when making a career decision. In the field of vocational psychology, career choice certainty is an important variable that conceptualizes an individual's certainty and commitment to a career choice (Tracey & Darcy, 2002). Moreover, it has direct effects on career indecision (Osipow et al., 1976), career choice satisfaction (Robinson & Cooper, 1998), and turnover behavior (McLean, Bryan, Tanner, & Smits, 1993). However, in existing vocational psychology studies that examine what variables predict career choice certainty as an important career outcome, the contextual variable of social comparison has not been addressed, even though as aforementioned, research in other disciplines of psychology has already suggested such a link.

Several research findings about the characteristics of Chinese social context and Chinese students' career choice have also indirectly implied this prediction relationship specifically in the Chinese population. In the high-context Chinese culture (Kim, Pan, & Park, 1998), career decisions are often made within a larger context where family, peers, or social factors may play salient roles above and beyond one's individual circumstances (Li, Hou, & Feng, 2013). This suggests that contextual factors like family's career expectation or other peers' career choice may have potential significant effects on Chinese students' career decision-making. While Gottfredson (1996) proposed three aspects of career choice (i.e. sex type, prestige, and interest) in her circumscription and compromise model, for Chinese university students social prestige was always considered as the most important factor in situations calling for compromise, and Chinese people tend to associate one's occupation with his or her social status (Zhou & Ma, 2007). Moreover, studies investigating Chinese parents' career expectation on their children have found achievements and social status related expectations to be its most salient facet (Hou, Chen, Zhou, & Li, 2012). Given that people in collectivistic cultures have a greater tendency to make upward comparisons in terms of ability or social standing (White & Lehman, 2005), and given the prevalent emphasis on social status and prestige in career-related aspects in the Chinese society, it might be expected that Chinese students would tend to compare with others in terms of career choice which is widely perceived to reflect their social status, and this act of social comparison may have a potential impact on how certain people feel about their earlier career choices.

Taken together, the first objective of this study is to investigate whether the predicting effect of social comparison on career choice certainty could be found in Chinese university students. This research question is expected to expand current literature by examining

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