



Full length article

Two faces of social comparison on Facebook: The interplay between social comparison orientation, emotions, and psychological well-being

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 9 May 2017

Received in revised form

18 September 2017

Accepted 16 October 2017

Keywords:

Social comparison orientation
 Psychological well-being
 Social comparison-based emotion
 Structural equation modelling
 Common method bias
 Facebook

ABSTRACT

This study examined how social networking site (SNS) users' social comparison orientations indirectly affect their psychological well-being via four types of social comparison-based emotions. Based on national survey data, we found that social comparison-based emotions mediated the relationships between Facebook users' social comparison orientations and psychological well-being. If Facebook users have a stronger ability-based social comparison orientation, their psychological well-being decreases via upward contrastive emotions (e.g., depression and envy) toward the comparison other; however, it increases via downward assimilative emotions (e.g., worry and sympathy). By contrast, if Facebook users have a stronger opinion-based social comparison orientation, their psychological well-being increases via increased feelings of upward assimilative emotions (e.g., optimism and inspiration) or decreased feelings of upward contrastive emotions (e.g., depression and envy) towards the comparison other. These results indicate that the effects of social comparison on psychological well-being on SNSs become positive or negative depending on whether the users' social comparison orientation emphasized ability or opinion, and the type of emotions triggered by the comparison. We provide theoretical discussions and practical suggestions for psychologically healthy SNS use based on these empirical findings.

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1. Introduction

In social settings, people want to understand their abilities and opinions through comparison with others (Festinger, 1954). Social networking sites (SNSs) may facilitate this social comparison (SC) process by constantly providing users with information about others (Appel, Gerlach, & Crusius, 2016; Feinstein et al., 2013; Gonzales & Hancock, 2010; Jelenchick, Eickhoff, & Moreno, 2013). As shown in social psychology research (Buunk & Ybema, 2003; Gibbons & Buunk, 1999; Smith, 2000; Wills, 1981; Wood, Giordano-Beech, Taylor, Michela, & Gaus, 1994), comparing the self with a superior other may result in positive emotions like inspiration or optimism, or negative emotions like depression or envy; moreover, comparing the self with an inferior other person may also lead to pleasant emotions like pride or schadenfreude, or unpleasant emotions like worry or sympathy. Those emotions, triggered in the SC process, may affect people's psychological well-being and mental health.

There is growing research interest in SC on SNSs (e.g., Facebook or Instagram) and its psychological consequences among SNS users. Regarding the psychological consequences of SC, most studies have shown empirical evidence of the negative effects of SC (Krasnova, Wenninger, Widjaja, & Buxmann, 2013; Kross et al., 2013; Sagioglou & Greitemeyer, 2014; Steers, Wickham, & Acitelli, 2014; Tandoc, Ferrucci, & Duffy, 2015), or mixed (e.g., Batenburg & Das, 2015; Johnson & Knobloch-Westerwick, 2014, 2017). However, our current study focused on the potential limitations of previous research. First, except for a few studies (e.g., Batenburg & Das, 2015; Haferkamp & Krämer, 2011; Steers et al., 2014; Johnson & Knobloch-Westerwick, 2014, 2017), most previous studies investigated upward SC (i.e., comparing oneself with a superior other) on SNSs or other online environments. Although we agree that upward SC is predominantly observed on SNSs, we think downward SC (i.e., comparing the self with an inferior person) should not be ignored. Second, most studies focused only on negative emotions like envy, depression, or shame that are triggered under upward SC situations. However, social psychology literature (Buunk & Ybema, 2003; Smith, 2000) also informs us that upward SC can trigger people to feel positive emotions such as optimism or inspiration. In

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other words, the effect of SC on psychological health can be positive or negative, depending on the type of SC-based emotions. Third, prior studies using Gibbons and Buunk's (1999) comparison orientation scale assumed SC orientation is a single factor construct; however, the original study reported that there could be two factors in SC (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999, pp. 131–132, 142): (1) SC orientation of ability, and (2) SC orientation of opinion. Unfortunately, previous studies borrowing Gibbons and Buunk's (1999) scale do not distinguish two dimensions of SC on SNSs.

This study attempted to overcome such limitations by (1) expanding the scope of emotions triggered in the SC process (Smith, 2000), and (2) focusing on the differences in SC orientation (Festinger, 1954; Gibbons & Buunk, 1999). Specifically, we distinguished SNS users' "SC orientation of ability" from "SC orientation of opinion" and adopted and tested Smith's (2000) four types of SC-based emotions: upward contrastive emotions (e.g., envy and depression), upward assimilative emotions (e.g., optimism and inspiration), downward contrastive emotions (e.g., pride and schadenfreude), and downward assimilative emotions (e.g., worry and sympathy). Armed with more detailed conceptualization of SC orientations and SC-based emotions, this study examined how SNS users' SC orientation influences their psychological well-being via SC-based emotions.

2. Literature review

2.1. Social comparison orientations and psychological well-being on social networking sites

According to Festinger (1954), people have basic desires to acquire information to evaluate themselves through SC. Festinger's social comparison theory identified two empirically interrelated, but conceptually separable, SC orientations: opinions and abilities (Festinger, 1954, p. 117).

On one hand, ability-based SC is typically related with self-esteem, such as self-improvement or self-enhancement (Buunk & Ybema, 2003; Gibbons & Buunk, 1999; Hakmiller, 1966; Wills, 1981; Wood et al., 1994). People with strong ability-based SC orientation intentionally select superior others whom they want to resemble in the future in order to promote self-improvement (i.e., upward SC), or they select inferior others from whom they derive a sense of relative superiority in order to promote self-enhancement (i.e., downward SC). Studies have shown that ability-based SC promotes people's self-esteem when they believe they will, in the future, enjoy the advantages of the superior other or when they think they will continue to enjoy their current advantages over the inferior other; however, people's self-esteem is harmed when they believe that they cannot overcome their own inferiority in the future or that they will lose their advantage (Smith, 2000; Wills, 1981). In this sense, people with a strong ability-based SC orientation view the relationship between the self and the comparison other through a competitive lens (e.g., "who is better between me and him/her?").

On the other hand, opinion-based SC is typically related with self-evaluation motives, indicating that people perform SC orientation to evaluate whether their own opinions are accurate or socially acceptable. In other words, people use "what others think" to understand the situations and to know what would be acceptable or appropriate (Festinger, 1954; Gibbons & Buunk, 1999). Festinger and other social psychologists predict that people with strong opinion-based SC orientation form stronger group identity with the comparison other or show higher propensity of conformity to social pressure (Festinger, 1954; Suls, Martin, & Wheeler, 2000). In this sense, people with a stronger opinion-based SC orientation may view the comparison other as a role model or an exemplar from

which they can learn, rather than as a competitor (as assumed by people with a stronger ability-based SC orientation).

As discussed in Festinger (1954), ability-based SC is conceptually different from opinion-based SC. Such distinction is also reflected on Gibbons and Buunk's (1999) SC orientation scale. According to Gibbons and Buunk (1999, p. 131), this scale comprises two factors: ability and opinion.

Research findings in offline settings imply that both opinion-based and ability-based SC orientations will be differently related with SNS users' psychological well-being (Festinger, 1954; Gibbons & Buunk, 1999; Suls et al., 2000). Unfortunately, empirical studies (e.g., Steers et al., 2014; Vogel, Rose, Okdie, Eckles, & Franz, 2015; Yang, 2016) borrowing Gibbons and Buunk's (1999) scale in their studies do not distinguish ability-based and opinion-based SC orientation and treat SC orientation as a single factor. Although it is true that Gibbons and Buunk (1999) found that both a single factor and two factors are compatible with their data (p. 132), studies on SNS users' psychological well-being should distinguish two different SC orientations because they may result in contrasting psychological consequences.

As discussed, people with strong ability-based SC orientation are more likely to see the comparison other as a "competitor," implying that SNS users driven by such orientation are more likely to check whether they are superior to their SNS friends. If they perceive they are superior to their SNS friends, their psychological well-being might be maintained or promoted. Contrastingly, if they think they are inferior to their SNS friends, their psychological well-being could be damaged, as discussed in previous studies (Feinstein et al., 2013; Frison & Eggermont, 2016; Gibbons & Buunk, 1999; Haferkamp & Krämer, 2011; Krasnova et al., 2013; Lim & Yang, 2015; Vogel et al., 2015; Yang, 2016). However, in such comparisons, people with a strong opinion-based SC orientation are more likely to see the other as an opinion-holder who they can consult regarding an issue, implying that SNS users with such an orientation are more likely to learn something from the news of their SNS friends' achievements or mistakes. In this sense, the psychological well-being of SNS users with strong opinion-based SC orientation may not suffer from upward SC, unlike those with strong ability-based SC orientation.

2.2. Social comparison-based emotions

If the above is true, how are the two SC orientations related with people's psychological well-being? As cumulatively demonstrated in studies on SC (Smith, 2000; Wills, 1981; Wood, 1989; Wood et al., 1994), the nature of the relationship between SC and psychological well-being varies according to a variety of SC characteristics. Among them, this study, based on Smith's (2000) typology of SC-based emotions, focused on four characteristics of the SC situation: (1) "direction of comparison" (i.e., upward versus downward comparison), (2) "degree of perceived control" (i.e., contrastive versus assimilative reaction), (3) "desirability" (i.e., positivity versus negativity), and (4) "focus of attention" (i.e., the self versus the other).

As shown in Fig. 1, SC-based emotions can be classified into four types, by crossing both "direction of comparison" and "perceived control": (1) upward contrastive emotions (UCE), (2) upward assimilative emotions (UAE), (3) downward contrastive emotions (DCE), and (4) downward assimilative emotions (DAE). Under each cell, discrete emotions can be further classified whether each emotion is positive or negative (i.e., desirability), and whether the focus of each emotion is either the self and/or the other (i.e., focus of attention).

First, let us start with UCE. Assume that a person encounters a superior other in an SC situation. When the person identifies the

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