

Emotional Responses to Social Comparisons in Reality Television Programming

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Abstract. In recent years, the viewing of reality television has become increasingly prevalent among television audiences. However, little is known about the psychological processes at work when viewing these programs. This study examined how social comparisons to cast members influenced emotional responses to reality television programming. Participants ($N = 231$) were cued with a specific comparison target group and placed in a situation of self-image enhancement or threat. Afterwards, participants watched a clip from a reality television program and then reported their emotional reactions to it. The manipulations of comparison target group and self-image affected both the direction of social comparisons made and their associated emotional responses. Participant gender also influenced social comparisons to the cast members and resulting emotional responses to the content. Although we were unable to compare the social comparison-related emotional responses to reality programs with those of scripted programs, the results of this study bring to bear the associations between specific emotional responses and the types of social comparisons that take place when watching reality television programming.

Keywords: social comparison, emotions, reality television

Reality television programming has experienced tremendous growth in the last decade. By combining relatively low production costs and a quick turnaround for broadcast, these types of programs have been made widely available to media audiences worldwide. In the last few years, it has increasingly become one of the most popular genres of television programming (Ferris, Smith, Greenberg, & Smith, 2007). However, what makes these programs engaging to mass audiences is still uncertain. Although several researchers have explored the relevant features of reality programs and viewers' perceptions of those programs (Hall, 2006, 2009; Hill, 2005; Potter et al., 1997), little is known about the psychological processes at work among the viewers themselves. This study examined how social comparisons to cast members influenced emotional responses to reality television programming.

When attempting to place reality programming in the larger scheme of television genres, we find it defies traditional categorization. Nabi (2007) explained that reality programs are marked by two distinct features: ordinary people and unscripted activity. Hall (2006) determined that audiences define reality programming as unscripted expressions of cast members' character, skills, and personality. These conceptualizations allow for the inclusion of a wide range of programming material. Indeed, in recent years, reality television has expanded to include a variety of program types, including the documentation of various

social and cultural groups (*Breaking Amish*, *The Shaws of Sunset*), interesting professions (*Deadliest Catch*, *Ice Road Truckers*), and celebrities' lives (*Keeping Up With the Kardashians* and *T.I. and Tiny: The Family Hustle*), among others.

Another defining characteristic of reality television is that it does not follow traditional narrative conventions. In that same vein, McCracken (2012) argued that television audiences have a desire for unpredictability. Reality television satisfies that desire because there is a perception that no one, not even the producer, necessarily knows how things will end. This is perhaps one of the greatest draws of reality television; that the ending is still to be determined. Although there are debates on how much reality television programs are actually "unscripted," previous research has demonstrated that exposure to reality television results in certain emotional reactions due to its unpredictable nature, including enhanced feelings of superiority and identification because the cast members are real people and not following a script (Hall, 2006).

The appeal of reality television may be explained in part because audiences are watching real people on the screen (Nabi, Stitt, Halford, & Finnerty, 2006). We argue that viewers are likely to engage in comparative processes between themselves and reality television show cast members because they are real people who are not following a script. Subsequently, the focus of this study was

twofold: first, to better understand how cueing for specific comparison target groups and manipulating one's self-image affect the emotional responses to reality television programming, and second, to interpret those emotional responses through the lens of social comparison theory. It is through this investigation that we hoped to extend the current body of research on the psychological processes involved in reality television consumption.

Motivations of Social Comparisons

Social comparison theory is based on an individual's desire to gain accurate evaluations about the self (Festinger, 1954). It posits that people determine their own abilities and opinions by comparing themselves to specific targets so that uncertainty about the self is reduced. In turn, they learn how to define who they are as individuals. This basic need to maintain an accurate perception of the self often leads to comparisons to other individuals (Corcoran, Crusius, & Mussweiler, 2011), and these comparisons are generally driven by three motivations: self-evaluation, self-improvement, and self-enhancement (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999). In turn, these motivations lead to three types of comparisons: lateral, upward, and downward.

Self-evaluation, that is, the desire to know information about the self, was clearly explained in Festinger's (1954) original theory and generally relates to lateral comparisons for the benefit of self-knowledge. The desire for self-improvement serves to explain the selection of upward comparison targets, where people aspire to be someone better than their current self so as to improve their own self-perception. Individuals making upward comparisons perceive themselves as similar to the superior other (Suls, Martin, & Wheeler, 2002). Alternatively, the desire for self-enhancement is what motivates downward comparisons, where individuals try to maintain a positive self-image by comparing themselves to worse off others. They disassociate themselves from those individuals or groups so as to feel better about themselves. Subsequently, this comparison increases one's subjective well-being (Wills, 1981).

There is evidence that these directional comparisons become increasingly relevant in times of self-image enhancement and threat. Individuals experiencing a situation of self-image enhancement may be more likely to select upward comparison standards to maintain or improve their self-perception. In a study by Spencer, Fein, and Lomore (2001), individuals who were self-affirmed based on measures of self-esteem chose upward comparison targets, whereas those who were not self-affirmed selected downward comparison targets. The information and affiliation provided by upward standards satisfies the need for self-improvement (Taylor & Lobel, 1989; Wood, 1989).

Conversely, those with a threatened self-image are especially likely to engage in downward social comparisons for purposes of self-protection or enhancement and do so to increase self-esteem (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007; Wills, 1981). This area of research, specifically called downward comparison theory, has been extended to victimized

populations and their mechanisms of coping. For instance, studies involving individuals with breast cancer demonstrated that women who had experienced the threat of breast cancer chose comparison targets whose medical condition was worse than their own (Taylor, Wood, & Lichtman, 1983; Wood, Taylor, & Lichtman, 1985).

In general, experiences of self-image threat, as opposed to enhancement, increase self-serving judgments, including social comparisons to worse off others (Hakmiller, 1966; Riese & Olson, 2007). This is because threats require immediate action, such as engaging in downward social comparisons, to initiate positive emotions and restore negative affect. Alternatively, situations of self-enhancement do not require the same reparative action; in these cases, one passively returns to a neutral state.

Emotional Responses to Social Comparisons

Social comparison theory considers the impact of perceivers, their comparison standards, and the context in which comparisons take place (Corcoran, Crusius, & Mussweiler, 2011). Accordingly, Smith (2000) developed a model of social comparison-based emotions using two distinctions: one being the direction of comparison (upward or downward) and the other being the assimilative and contrastive processes that occur, where individuals perceive themselves as either similar to or different from the comparison target. Based on these distinctions, social comparisons can be categorized into one of four types: upward assimilative, downward contrastive, upward contrastive, and downward assimilative.

Each of the four types of social comparisons result in either desirable or undesirable outcomes for the perceiver (Smith, 2000). Upward assimilative comparisons have a desirable outcome because when making an upward assimilative comparison, the perceiver is looking up to a superior comparison target and sees that he or she could be like them. Downward contrastive comparisons also have a desirable outcome because the perceiver is looking down on an inferior comparison target and sees themselves as dissimilar to them. Alternatively, upward contrastive and downward assimilative comparisons have undesirable outcomes for the perceiver. When upward contrastive comparisons occur, the perceiver looks up to a better-off target but feels he or she could not be like them. When downward assimilative comparisons occur, the perceiver looks down on a worse-off other whom they see as similar to themselves.

Each of the four types of social comparisons also have specific emotional reactions associated with them (Smith, 2000). The specific emotions associated with upward assimilative processes include admiration, inspiration, and optimism – admiration for the comparison target, inspiration to be like them, and optimism for attaining a better self. The emotions affiliated with downward contrastive processes involve pride, schadenfreude (a feeling of pleasure from another's misfortune), and contempt. Pride is a pleasant emotion that results from the perceiver believing he or she has a positive internal attribute or characteristic.

Schadenfreude is a pleasant feeling the perceiver experiences because of another's worse-off situation, and contempt is a scornful emotion directed toward the downward comparison target because the perceiver believes that individual's situation is deserved. As for upward contrastive emotions, the three emotions include resentment, envy, and depression – resentment toward an upward comparison target whom the perceiver believes received an unfair advantage, envy to be similar to that upward comparison target without having the means to do so, and depression because the perceiver feels inferior. Finally, the emotions associated with downward assimilative processes are pity, fear, and sympathy – pity for the downward comparison target's situation, fear that the perceiver's own situation may worsen, and sympathy, which combines both the perceiver's concern for the downward target and fear that they could become like them.

Applications of Social Comparison Theory in Media

Previous examinations of social comparison theory as it relates to media consumption have traditionally revolved around women and their perceptions of self compared to images of women on television, in movies, and in magazines (Bessenoff, 2006; Irving, 1990; Tiggemann & McGill, 2004). The altered and unrealistic body types of these women have infiltrated the mass media and as a result are deemed to be the societal ideal of what is attractive. Other applications in mass communication have been sparse until recently. Mares and Cantor (1992) provided the first study of social comparison in television by examining the effects of television programming on lonely and nonlonely elderly individuals. They found that lonely individuals preferred televised portrayals of other lonely individuals and were happier afterwards. Alternatively, nonlonely individuals preferred portrayals of other nonlonely individuals and were happier afterwards as well. The authors suggested that downward comparisons among the lonely and upward comparisons among the nonlonely served to explain these effects.

More recently, social comparison has been examined through selective exposure to news content, where younger readers preferred stories about other young individuals and readers overall preferred stories featuring same-gender characters (Knobloch-Westerwick & Hastall, 2006). These findings suggest that individuals perceive same-age and same-gender comparison targets as similar to themselves. Indeed, perceived similarity has demonstrated to be an important factor in social comparison processes, where cueing for similarities leads to assimilative effects (Brown, Novick, Lord, & Richards, 1992; Häfner, 2004; Papies & Nicolaije, 2012).

Beyond this, there is some tentative evidence that comparison processes occur when viewers watch reality television programming as well. Reiss and Wiltz (2004) determined that reality television consumption was both correlated with individuals who had motivations of

self-importance and those who valued status highly. Hall (2006) found that viewers had feelings of identification when a reality television character behaved well and feelings of superiority when a character behaved poorly. Both of these studies suggest that comparative processes are at work, either through comparison tendencies of the viewers themselves (Reiss & Wiltz, 2004) or in the form of the emotional responses that occur as a result of exposure to reality programming (Hall, 2006).

More specifically, recent work by Nabi and Keblusek (2014) determined that discrete emotions, especially envy and hope, mediate the influence of social comparisons on behavioral motivations. The authors examined these emotional responses in the context of cosmetic surgery makeover reality programs and employed a survey methodology. The current study aims to extend previous work in an experimental context by both cueing a specific comparison target group (age or gender) and instigating a situation of self-image enhancement or threat to elicit corresponding upward and downward comparisons to cast members in a reality television program. To this end, the resulting emotional responses to the content should inform not only the types of comparisons that take place, but whether these emotional responses are influenced both by directing attention to a particular comparison target group and by the participants' own self-image.

One way to do this is by utilizing a reality television program that directs attention to the behavior of a specific comparison target group. A subgenre of reality television called "surveillance" programming (Aubrey et al., 2012; Riddle & De Simone, 2013) is a documentary-style type of reality television program that follows the featured cast members' daily lives. Surveillance reality television programs on cable networks tend to document the lifestyles of various social and cultural groups, with programs like *Love & Hip Hop* on VH1, *Southern Charm* on Bravo, and *Duck Dynasty* on A&E. These documentations clearly emphasize certain comparison target groups, such as those based on race and social class.

Recent programming trends suggest that reality television producers are increasingly focusing their attention on creating surveillance reality television programs that document youth culture, with programs like *Buck Wild*, *Party Down South*, and *Real World: Ex-plosion*. *Jersey Shore*, a program portraying the party lifestyle of young singles enjoying a vacation home for the summer, scored the highest-ever ratings for a telecast on MTV (Hibberd, 2011). The E! Network recently green-lighted *Rich Kids of Beverly Hills* for a second season, a program that follows the lives of extremely wealthy 20-something adults as they shop, spend, and party without much concern for anything else.

Although there have been no content analyses conducted on the surveillance subgenre, these youth-focused surveillance programs consistently feature young individuals who behave poorly and generally ignore guidance from older, responsible adults. In these scenarios, opportunities for upward comparisons are limited because the youthful comparison targets demonstrate few positive attributes and behave badly. This is not to say upward comparisons do not occur when watching surveillance reality television

programs. Indeed, it has been argued that these types of programs often portray wealthy lifestyles (Riddle & De Simone, 2013) and in turn, may instigate upward social comparisons based on this factor. What is important to consider is the role of self-image in the social comparison process. As described above, evidence suggests that instances of self-image threat initiate more affect regulation, including the engagement of downward social comparisons, as opposed to instances of self-image enhancement (Roese & Olson, 2007). To this point, youth-focused surveillance reality television programs generally feature unbecoming comparison targets, and based on their poor behavior, viewers will likely perceive them to be worse off than themselves. Accordingly, the following hypothesis was posited:

Hypothesis 1 (H1): Those placed in a situation of self-image threat, as compared with those placed in a situation of self-image enhancement, will experience stronger emotional responses associated with downward comparisons after viewing the reality television program.

Because perceived similarity to comparison targets is an important component of social comparison processes (Brown, Novick, Lord, & Richards, 1992; Häfner, 2004; Knobloch-Westerwick & Hastall, 2006; Papies & Nicolaije, 2012), cueing comparison target groups based on gender and age may also affect the types of social comparisons made and the resulting emotional reactions to the program. While youth-focused surveillance reality television programs regularly portray younger individuals behaving poorly and older individuals behaving more respectably (if they are present at all), many of these programs do not emphasize the differences in poor behavior among men and women. In general, reality television cast members of both genders demonstrate undesirable behavior on screen (Lundy, Ruth, & Park, 2008), providing many negative comparison targets for viewers. As a result, cueing for age as a comparison target group should result in stronger emotional responses associated with downward comparisons, as opposed to cueing for gender as a comparison target group. By cueing for age as a comparison target group, this stimulates the notion among young viewers that the younger comparison targets in the reality program are similar to themselves, drawing greater attention to the younger cast members' irresponsible behavior and the older cast members' commendable behavior. Alternatively, there are no pronounced differences in the poor behavior between men and women, intimating that cueing for gender would be less salient. Hence, the following hypothesis was posited:

Hypothesis 2 (H2): Those cued with age as a comparison target group, as compared with those cued with gender as a comparison target group, will experience stronger emotional responses associated with downward comparisons after viewing the reality television program.

Potential gender differences among the viewers themselves are also relevant in social comparison processes. Women generally have an increased comparison orientation (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999), and this may influence emotional responses to reality television content. Beyond this, reality television programs currently make up a large portion of top television programming for adult women, but the same pattern does not hold for men (Adalian, 2012). The ways in which males and females are generally represented in reality television may also be of relevance. Lundy, Ruth, and Park (2008) found that reality television viewers believe that the genre portrays large amounts of both physical and emotional harm, and other research demonstrates that women in reality television are regularly portrayed as relationally aggressive (Coyne, Robinson, & Nelson, 2010; Riddle & De Simone, 2013). Alternatively, Ferguson and colleagues (2013) found no relationship between reality television viewing and actual relational aggression among adolescent girls. If reality television as a whole depicts physical and emotional harm by both men and women, but shows women regularly demonstrating relational aggression, this could possibly influence the subsequent emotional responses to the reality television program. Thus, the following research question was posited:

Research Question 1 (RQ1): Does gender of the viewer influence the resulting emotional responses to the reality television program?

As outlined above, specific types of social comparisons have either desirable or undesirable outcomes for the perceiver, where upward assimilative and downward contrastive comparisons are desirable and upward contrastive and downward assimilative comparisons are undesirable (Smith, 2000). It is likely that the desirability or undesirability of these outcomes will influence overall enjoyment of the program. Enjoyment has been defined as a pleasurable feeling as the result of an experience (Tan, 2008) and more specifically, media enjoyment has been conceptualized as an overall positive disposition toward content (Raney, 2003; Zillmann & Bryant, 1994). Considering that upward assimilative and downward contrastive social comparisons are desirable in nature, it is likely that the emotional responses that occur as a result of these comparisons will result in a positive feeling or disposition toward the presented media content. Conversely, undesirable social comparisons (upward contrastive and downward assimilative) should result in a negative feeling or disposition toward the reality television program. Thus, the following hypotheses were suggested:

Hypothesis 3 (H3): Emotional responses associated with desirable social comparisons (upward assimilative and downward contrastive) will be positively related to enjoyment of the reality television program.

Hypothesis 4 (H4): Emotional responses associated with undesirable social comparisons (upward contrastive and downward assimilative) will be negatively related to enjoyment of the reality television program.

Method

Participants

Undergraduate students ($N = 302$) were recruited from several classes at a large Midwestern university to participate in this study in exchange for extra credit. Sixty-six of those participants were excluded from the study because they reported issues with watching the program or failed the news article comprehension item, leaving a study group of 236. The age of participants ranged from 18 to 24 ($M = 19.53$), with 116 men and 118 women. Two participants did not report their gender. Five participants had partial or missing data and were not included in the analysis, leaving a total study group of 231.

Design and Procedure

This study implemented a 2 (Participant Gender: male, female) $\times$ 2 (Comparison Target Group: gender, age) $\times$ 2 (Self-Image: enhancement, threat) between-subjects design. During recruitment, participants were told that this was a study about personality characteristics and reality television consumption. A link to the online experiment was posted on corresponding course websites. Those who followed the link were randomly distributed to one of four conditions: gender cue/self-image enhancement, gender cue/self-image threat, age cue/self-image enhancement, or age cue/self-image threat. Participants in all conditions were provided with an informed consent form and filled out the initial demographic, media use, and personality questionnaire. Then, participants were exposed to a short news story that either emphasized gender or age and given a word task that resulted in either positive or negative performance feedback. The goal of the news story was to cue participants with a specific comparison target group; the goal of the word task with corresponding performance feedback was to instigate an experience of self-image enhancement or threat. Presentation of the news story and word task with performance feedback was randomized.

Afterwards, participants watched a clip from a reality television program lasting approximately 27 minutes. Once the viewing session was completed, they filled out a questionnaire that included items addressing emotional reactions to the content. Finally, they were debriefed and thanked for their participation in the study.

Materials

News Articles

Two online news articles were selected to cue the participants for either gender or age as a comparison target group.

Each news article was adapted from a real-life instance of workplace discrimination, one focusing on gender discrimination and the other on age discrimination. Each story was three paragraphs in length, explained the specific discrimination that took place, and was followed by a comprehension item asking participants what group of individuals the article focused on. Participants who did not mention the group of individuals referenced in the story were not included in subsequent data analysis. The implementation of news articles engaged a process similar to those used in other social comparison research, where cueing for relevant characteristics can influence the direction of social comparisons made to comparison targets (Brown, Novick, Lord, & Richards, 1992; Häfner, 2004; Papies & Nicolaije, 2012). Here, the intention was to draw attention to the social comparison target group (gender or age), not to have participants make evaluations about the featured target group based on the article's content.

Remote Associates Test

A written task was used to instigate an instance of self-image enhancement or threat. Participants completed a 15-item modified version of the Remote Associates Test (RAT; Mednick, 1968). The RAT contained lists of three words that were related to one word (e.g., the words *walker*, *main*, and *sweeper* are related to the word *street*), and the word tasks varied in difficulty. Before completing the test, participants were told that the RAT was a reliable intelligence test that has been used by business and educational groups worldwide to indicate future success and future earning potential.

No matter their actual performance on the test, participants were given false feedback. Participants in the self-image enhancement condition were told they performed far above the national average of US college students, indicating good reasoning ability and increasing the likelihood for future success and future earning potential. Those in the self-image threat condition were told they performed far below the national average of US college students, indicating poor reasoning ability and decreasing the likelihood for future success and future earning potential. This procedure is similar to ones that have reliably instigated situations of threat to self (Heatherton & Vohs, 2000; Vohs & Heatherton, 2001, 2004). A measure of state self-esteem (State Self-Esteem Scale [SSES]; Heatherton & Polivy, 1991) served as a manipulation check for the self-image manipulation. There was a significant difference in state self-esteem between individuals in the self-image threat condition ($M = 3.13$, $SD = 0.73$) and individuals in the self-image enhancement condition ($M = 3.58$, $SD = 0.57$), $t(225) = 5.18$, $p < .001$.

Reality Television Program

Vanderpump Rules was a reality television program that aired on the cable network Bravo and served as one example of the youth-focused surveillance reality television

programming described above. It documented the work and personal lives of the owner, managers, and servers at a West Hollywood restaurant called Sur. The owners of the restaurant were a middle-aged couple who oversaw the day-to-day operations of the restaurant. The young servers and bartenders behaved poorly and immaturely throughout the program; got involved in verbal and physical fights, partook in binge drinking, and engaged in other negative behaviors. The particular clip selected for this study involved the restaurant owner having to call a staff meeting to reprimand the employees for their past behavior and clearly demonstrating the inappropriateness of their actions. This clip was chosen for two reasons: first, because it effectively portrayed positive behavior by an older comparison target (the owner) and negative behavior by younger comparison targets (the employees), and second, it presented negative behavior by both male and female employees.

Measures

State Self-Esteem

The SSES (Heatherton & Polivy, 1991) served to measure how individuals felt about themselves in that particular moment, independent of their global self-esteem. It is a commonly used measure that is sensitive to experimental manipulations and intended to gauge temporary fluctuations in self-evaluation (Heatherton & Wyland, 2003). It included 20 items on a 5-point Likert scale and contained elements related to academic performance, social evaluation, and appearance. Individual ratings were averaged and collapsed across all 20 items. The SSES was implemented after completion of the RAT (Chronbach's $\alpha = .92$).

Emotional Responses

Emotional responses were measured based on Smith's (2000) model of social comparison-based emotions. Each emotion was measured on a 5-point Likert scale and was prefaced with the following statement: "Please indicate how much you felt the following emotions after watching the program." Upward assimilative emotions included: admiration ($M = 1.63$, $SD = 0.91$), inspiration ($M = 1.73$, $SD = 0.98$), and optimism ($M = 1.93$, $SD = 0.99$). Downward contrastive emotions included: pride ($M = 1.86$, $SD = 1.08$), schadenfreude ($M = 2.04$, $SD = 1.12$), and contempt ($M = 2.25$, $SD = 1.12$). Upward contrastive emotions included: depression ($M = 2.01$, $SD = 1.13$), envy ($M = 1.78$, $SD = 1.01$), and resentment ($M = 2.15$, $SD = 1.25$). Downward assimilative emotions included: pity ($M = 2.33$, $SD = 1.22$), sympathy ($M = 2.30$, $SD = 1.20$), and fear ($M = 1.64$, $SD = 0.91$).

Enjoyment

Enjoyment was measured using two items (Weaver & Wilson, 2009) and answered using a 5-point Likert scale.

Individual ratings were averaged across the two items, $r(229) = .80$, $p < .001$; $M = 2.36$, $SD = 1.16$.

Data analysis was completed using a factorial analysis of variance (ANOVA), including three between-subjects factors: participant gender (men, women), comparison target group (gender, age), and self-image (enhancement, threat). Fisher's least significant difference (LSD) post hoc tests ($p < .05$) were conducted to determine mean differences for significant interactions. Means reported below with different subscripts were significantly different at $p < .05$.

Results

It was posited that those placed in a situation of self-image threat (H1) and those cued with age as a comparison target group (H2) would experience emotional responses associated with downward comparisons after viewing the reality television program. Regarding the emotion of pride (downward contrastive), there was a significant main effect for self-image, $F(1, 223) = 6.74$, $p = .01$, $\eta^2 = .03$, where individuals whose self-image was threatened experienced more pride than those whose self-image was enhanced (see Table 1, for all means). There was no significant main effect for comparison target group on feelings of pride, $F(1, 223) = 2.03$, $p = .16$, $\eta^2 = .01$. However, a significant interaction emerged for comparison target group and self-image, $F(1, 223) = 4.52$, $p = .04$, $\eta^2 = .02$, where those cued with age and threatened ($M = 2.33_b$, 95% confidence interval [95% CI] [2.00, 2.65]) felt more pride than those cued with gender and threatened ($M = 1.82_a$, 95% CI [1.57, 2.06]), those cued with gender and enhanced ($M = 1.75_a$, 95% CI [1.51, 1.99]), and those cued with age and enhanced ($M = 1.65_a$, 95% CI [1.34, 1.96]). Figure 1 highlights the significant relationships.

Concerning sympathy (downward assimilative), there was no significant main effect for self-image, $F(1, 223) = 1.41$, $p = .24$, $\eta^2 = .01$, or comparison target group, $F(1, 223) = .69$, $p = .41$, $\eta^2 = .003$, but there was a significant interaction for comparison target group and self-image, $F(1, 223) = 3.80$, $p = .05$, $\eta^2 = .02$, where those cued with age and threatened ($M = 2.62_b$, 95% CI [2.25, 2.99]) felt more sympathy as compared with those cued with gender and enhanced ($M = 2.29_{ab}$, 95% CI [2.02, 2.57]), those cued with gender and threatened ($M = 2.17_a$, 95% CI [1.89, 2.45]), and those cued with age and enhanced ($M = 2.11_a$, 95% CI [1.76, 2.46]). See Figure 2 for the significant relationships.

A significant main effect for envy (upward contrastive) and self-image emerged, $F(1, 223) = 3.84$, $p = .05$, $\eta^2 = .02$, where those who were threatened experienced more envy than those who were enhanced (See Table 2, for all means). In sum, individuals who experienced self-image threat and individuals cued with age experienced more emotions associated with downward comparisons (pride and sympathy) than individuals who experienced self-image enhancement and individuals cued with gender, which provided support for both H1 and H2.

Table 1. Downward social comparison emotions by condition

Emotion	Target Group	Self-Image Enhanced	Self-Image Threatened
Downward contrastive	Gender		
	Men	2.50 (1.19)	2.41 (1.10)
	Women	2.03 (1.09)	1.92 (0.94)
	Age		
	Men	2.48 (1.08)	2.76 (1.20)
	Women	2.00 (1.23)	2.04 (1.00)
	Schadenfreude		
	Men	2.17 (1.12)	2.28 (1.25)
	Women	1.88 (1.01)	1.87 (1.02)
	Age		
Pride	Men	2.26 (1.10)	2.76 (1.20)
	Women	1.43 (0.75)	1.75 (1.11)
	Gender		
	Men	1.71 (0.94)	1.91 (1.03)
	Women	1.78 (1.07)	1.72 (0.93)
	Age		
	Men	1.91 (1.04)	2.53 (1.33)
	Women	1.38 (0.87)	2.13 (1.30)
	Downward assimilative		
	Pity		
Sympathy	Men	2.69 (1.37)	2.47 (1.34)
	Women	2.97 (1.00)	2.40 (1.19)
	Age		
	Men	2.22 (1.17)	2.29 (1.26)
	Women	2.05 (0.97)	2.33 (1.27)
	Gender		
	Men	2.52 (1.45)	2.06 (1.01)
	Women	2.06 (0.98)	2.28 (1.24)
	Age		
	Men	2.17 (1.11)	2.41 (1.18)
Fear	Women	2.05 (1.02)	2.83 (1.24)
	Gender		
	Men	1.76 (0.96)	1.69 (0.78)
	Women	1.44 (0.67)	1.65 (0.98)
	Age		
	Men	1.83 (1.15)	1.71 (0.92)
	Women	1.43 (0.87)	1.62 (1.01)

Note. Values are means (standard deviation).

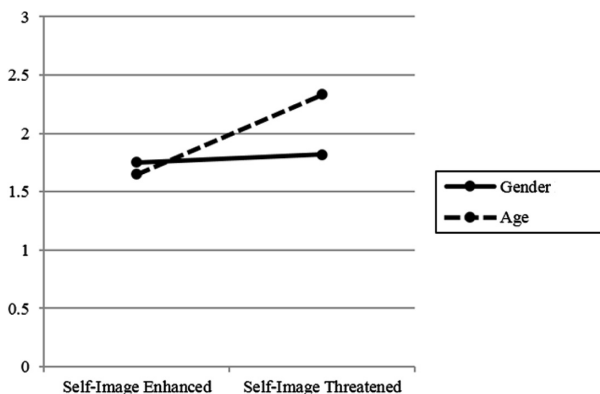


Figure 1. Interaction between comparison target group and self-image on feelings of pride after watching the reality television program.

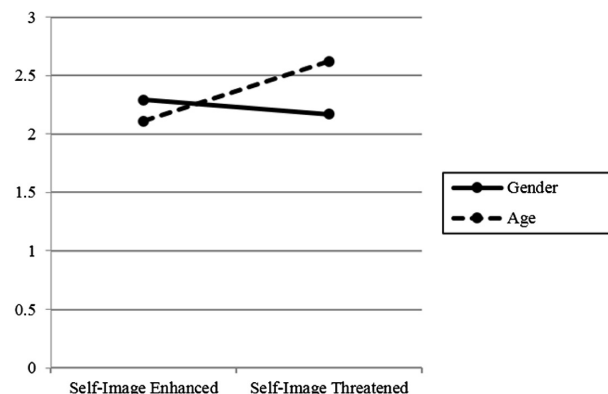


Figure 2. Interaction between comparison target group and self-image on feelings of sympathy after watching the reality television program.

Table 2. Upward social comparison emotions by condition

Emotion	Target Group	Self-Image Enhanced	Self-Image Threatened
Upward contrastive	<i>Gender</i>		
	Men	2.36 (1.34)	2.03 (1.06)
	Women	1.62 (0.98)	2.00 (1.16)
	<i>Age</i>		
	Men	2.30 (1.19)	2.12 (1.05)
	Women	1.62 (0.97)	1.96 (1.00)
	<i>Gender</i>		
	Men	1.86 (1.14)	1.97 (1.18)
	Women	1.53 (0.80)	1.77 (0.97)
	<i>Age</i>		
	Men	1.83 (0.94)	2.06 (1.14)
	Women	1.33 (0.73)	1.83 (1.01)
Upward assimilative	<i>Gender</i>		
	Men	2.69 (1.39)	2.09 (1.23)
	Women	1.69 (1.00)	2.00 (1.11)
	<i>Age</i>		
	Men	2.22 (1.17)	2.47 (1.42)
	Women	1.76 (1.26)	2.08 (1.21)
	<i>Gender</i>		
	Men	1.74 (1.08)	1.62 (0.94)
	Women	1.41 (0.71)	1.60 (0.78)
	<i>Age</i>		
	Men	1.78 (0.85)	1.82 (1.07)
	Women	1.38 (0.67)	1.67 (0.96)
Upward contrastive	<i>Gender</i>		
	Men	1.76 (1.01)	1.69 (0.90)
	Women	1.56 (0.95)	1.60 (0.90)
	<i>Age</i>		
	Men	1.87 (1.01)	2.41 (1.18)
	Women	1.43 (0.81)	1.79 (0.93)
	<i>Gender</i>		
	Men	1.81 (1.04)	1.84 (0.95)
	Women	1.81 (0.86)	1.87 (0.85)
	<i>Age</i>		
	Men	2.04 (0.98)	2.53 (1.28)
	Women	1.90 (1.18)	1.88 (0.80)

Note. Values are means (standard deviation).

RQ1 asked whether gender of the viewer influenced the resulting emotional responses to the reality television program. Beginning with downward contrastive emotions, there was a significant main effect for contempt, $F(1, 223) = 12.63, p < .001, \eta^2 = .05$, and schadenfreude, $F(1, 223) = 18.25, p < .001, \eta^2 = .08$, where men experienced these emotions more than women (see Table 1). A main effect for pride approached significance, where men experienced more pride than women, $F(1, 223) = 3.33, p = .07, \eta^2 = .02$. Regarding sympathy (downward assimilative), a main effect for participant gender was not significant, $F(1, 223) = .01, p = .94, \eta^2 < .001$, but an interaction approached significance for participant gender and self-image, $F(1, 223) = 3.50, p = .06, \eta^2 = .02$, where threatened women felt more sympathy ($M = 2.55_{ab}$, 95% CI [2.25, 2.86]) than enhanced men ($M = 2.35_{ab}$, 95% CI [2.05, 2.65]), threatened men, ($M = 2.24_{ab}$, 95% CI [1.89,

2.59]), and enhanced women ($M = 2.06_a$, 95% CI [1.73, 2.38]). See Figure 3 for the interaction.

With reference to upward contrastive emotions, a main effect for depression was significant, $F(1, 223) = 6.78, p = .01, \eta^2 = .03$, where men experienced more depression than women (See Table 2). There was also a significant interaction for participant gender and self-image on feelings of depression, $F(1, 223) = 3.95, p = .05, \eta^2 = .02$, where enhanced men experienced more depression ($M = 2.33_b$, 95% CI [2.04, 2.62]) than threatened men ($M = 2.07_{ab}$, 95% CI [1.74, 2.41]), threatened women ($M = 1.98_{ab}$, 95% CI [1.69, 2.27]), and enhanced women ($M = 1.62_a$, 95% CI [1.31, 1.93]). Figure 4 highlights the significant relationship. Significant main effects emerged for participant gender and other upward contrastive emotional responses, including envy, $F(1, 223) = 4.96, p = .03, \eta^2 = .02$, and resentment, $F(1, 223) = 8.33, p = .004$,

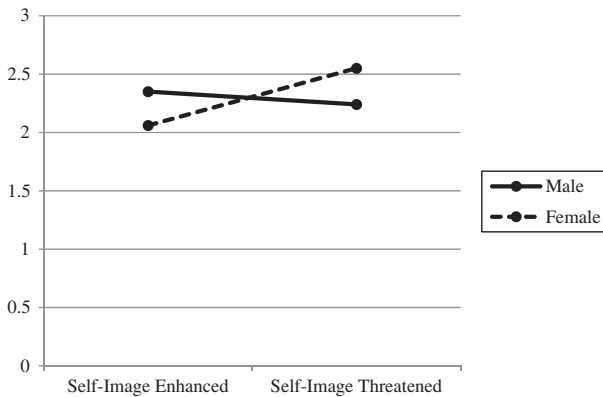


Figure 3. Interaction between participant gender and self-image on feelings of sympathy after watching the reality television program.

$\eta^2 = .04$, where men experienced these emotions more than women. Concerning upward assimilative emotions, there was a significant main effect for inspiration where men felt more inspired than women, $F(1, 223) = 6.57, p = .01, \eta^2 = .03$, and a main effect for admiration approached significance, where men experienced more admiration than women, $F(1, 223) = 3.44, p = .07, \eta^2 = .02$. Finally, regarding enjoyment, women enjoyed the program significantly more than men, $F(1, 222) = 17.95, p < .001, \eta^2 = .08$. The findings above demonstrated that gender of the viewer did influence emotional reactions to the reality television program (RQ1). In general, men experienced stronger social comparison-related emotions than women except in the case of sympathy, where threatened women experienced this emotion most strongly.

H3 posited that emotional responses associated with desirable social comparisons (upward assimilative and downward contrastive) would be positively related to enjoyment of the reality television program. For women, the upward assimilative emotions of admiration, $r(115) = .32, p = .001$, inspiration, $r(115) = .46, p < .001$, and optimism,

$r(115) = .40, p < .001$, were positively correlated with enjoyment of the program. These emotions were also positively correlated with enjoyment of the program for men, admiration: $r(112) = .23, p = .02$; inspiration: $r(112) = .36, p < .001$; optimism: $r(112) = .37, p < .001$. For women, the downward contrastive emotions of contempt, $r(115) = .22, p = .02$, schadenfreude, $r(115) = .20, p = .03$, and pride, $r(115) = .26, p = .01$, were positively correlated with enjoyment of the program. However, these emotions were not positively correlated with enjoyment of the program for men, contempt: $r(112) = .06, p = .53$; schadenfreude: $r(112) = .11, p = .23$; pride: $r(112) = .12, p = .20$. Because upward assimilative emotions were positively correlated with enjoyment for both genders but downward contrastive emotions were only positively correlated with enjoyment for women, H3 was partially supported.

H4 posited that emotional responses associated with undesirable social comparisons (upward contrastive and downward assimilative) would be negatively related to enjoyment of the reality television program. Of the upward contrastive emotions, envy was positively correlated with enjoyment of the program for both women, $r(115) = .20, p = .03$, and men, $r(112) = .30, p = .001$. Of the downward assimilative emotions, sympathy was positively correlated with enjoyment for both women, $r(115) = .38, p < .001$, and men, $r(112) = .36, p < .001$. In addition, pity was positively correlated with enjoyment for men, $r(112) = .22, p = .02$. For women, the positive correlation between feelings of pity and enjoyment approached significance, $r(115) = .17, p = .07$. Considering the positive relationships between undesirable social comparison emotions and enjoyment, H4 was not supported.

Discussion

The results of this study bring to bear the associations between specific emotional responses and the types of social comparisons that take place when watching reality television programming. Several meaningful factors emerged, including that of cueing for a specific comparison target group (age), placement of the viewer in a situation of self-image threat, and gender of the participants themselves. Feelings of pride and sympathy, according to Smith (2000), are both the result of downward comparisons. In this study, when individuals were threatened, feelings of pride and sympathy were enhanced after viewing the reality television program, suggesting that viewers engaged in downward social comparisons to the cast members. This aligns with previous work on social comparison during instances of self-image threat, where those with a threatened self-image engaged in downward comparisons to lesser others for self-protective or self-enhancement purposes so as to increase self-esteem (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007; Wills, 1981). Viewers perceived the reality television cast members in their same age group to be worse off than them, in turn, emphasizing their own positive self-identity. These findings suggest that it is possible to simultaneously engage in

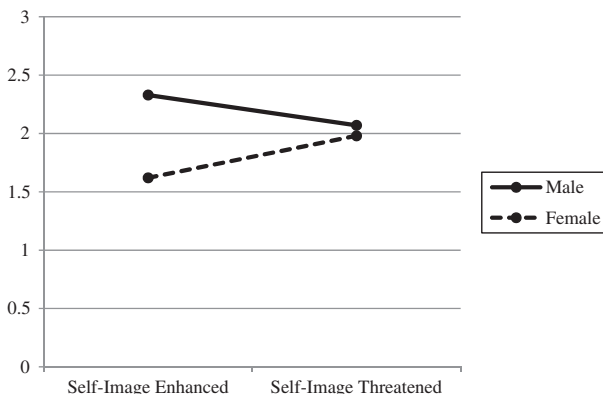


Figure 4. Interaction between participant gender and self-image on feelings of depression after watching the reality television program.

directional social comparisons that involve both assimilative and contrastive processes, as has been demonstrated in past social psychological research (Taylor & Lobel, 1989). Here, viewers with a threatened self-image experienced both pride (downward contrastive) and sympathy (downward assimilative) toward the reality television cast members.

To better understand the findings related to pride and sympathy, it is of importance to consider the influence of cueing for age as a relevant comparison target group. Considering that, in general, all younger members of the cast behaved in undesirable ways, cueing for gender as a comparison target group did not instigate the same effects as the cueing for age did. This is likely because characters of both genders in this reality television program behaved poorly. The older restaurant owner reprimanded the younger employees for behaving irresponsibly and acting like “high school children,” and indeed, the young restaurant workers regularly engaged in both verbal and physical fights, bullying, and gossip. Directing attention to age as a salient comparison target group instigated a sense of perceived similarity between the viewer and the younger comparison targets, drawing attention to the behavioral differences between the younger and older comparison targets and resulting in stronger emotional responses to the reality television program. These findings reinforce the notion that perceived similarity to targets is an important aspect of social comparisons, as demonstrated in previous research (Brown, Novick, Lord, & Richards, 1992; Häfner, 2004; Knobloch-Westerwick & Hastall, 2006; Papies & Nicolaije, 2012).

Concerning gender differences among the participants themselves, the interaction between participant gender and self-image demonstrated that women expressed sympathy for the cast members when their self-image was threatened. This aligns with existing social comparison literature on victimized populations and mechanisms of coping (Wood, Taylor, & Lichtman, 1985). Here, in a much different setting – that of reality television entertainment – women responded similarly after experiencing threat. They felt sympathy toward the reality cast members, an emotion associated with downward assimilative social comparisons (Smith, 2000). It is likely that after women experienced a situation of self-image threat, the reality television program featured a variety of downward comparison targets for them to compare to, allowing them to minimize the self-image threat and feel better about themselves.

Feelings of depression also informed the relationship between participant gender and manipulation of self-image. Men felt more depression when their self-image was enhanced as compared with women. Smith (2000) deems depression to be an emotion associated with upward contrastive comparisons. As mentioned previously, individuals experiencing self-image enhancement are likely to select upward comparison standards for information and affiliation purposes to maintain or improve their self-image (Spencer, Fein, & Lomore, 2001; Taylor & Lobel, 1989; Wood, 1989). Perhaps after having their self-image enhanced and engaging in upward comparisons to the cast members, men felt depressed because they felt their own

lives did not measure up to their upward targets. The men featured in *Vanderpump Rules* are indeed attractive, live in a desirable location, and have relationships with multiple women. They also lead a lifestyle focused on “hook up” culture, surrounded by parties and alcohol consumption, a lifestyle that many male undergraduate college students may desire. Hence, this may be why men experienced more envy and resentment than women after watching the program. Men also felt more inspiration and admiration than women after watching the program, suggesting that despite other negative emotional responses to the content, men tended to admire and be inspired by these young and attractive restaurant workers. Once again, these findings provide evidence that social comparison processes are not mutually exclusive and can involve both contrastive and assimilative processes (Taylor & Lobel, 1989). More concretely, although men experienced feelings of depression, envy, and resentment (upward contrastive) about their own situation as compared with cast members of the program, they also felt inspiration and admiration (upward assimilative) to be like them.

Regarding general findings of enjoyment, emotions associated with upward assimilative comparisons (admiration, inspiration, and optimism) were significantly correlated with enjoyment of the program. This suggests that reality television programs that feature superior comparison targets to whom the viewers find themselves to be similar will result in greater enjoyment than programs that do not. Although youth-focused surveillance reality television programs may appear to demonstrate irresponsible behavior by the young cast members featured within them, if viewers perceive those cast members to be similar (but also superior) to them, enjoyment is likely to be increased.

In assessing participant gender differences and enjoyment, we found that women enjoyed the program significantly more than men. This finding aligns with previous research regarding programming preferences for men and women, where reality television makes up substantial portion of content viewing for women, but not men (Adalian, 2012). Of interest here is that although men generally had stronger emotional responses to the content, these emotions did not lead to increased enjoyment. Emotions associated with downward contrastive comparisons (pride, contempt, and schadenfreude) were all significantly correlated with enjoyment for women, but not for men. This specific finding may lend greater insight to reality television’s general appeal. In this study, downward contrastive emotions were positively related to enjoyment for women, and in general, women are regularly portrayed as relationally aggressive in reality television (Coyne, Robinson, & Nelson, 2010; Riddle & De Simone, 2013). Considering this, the multiple opportunities provided by reality television for female viewers to engage in downward contrastive social comparisons to cast members may lead to those gratifying emotions, and in turn, enjoyment.

Regarding enjoyment for men, it is possible that surveillance reality television programs are not as enjoyable for men because they are more entertained by traditional representations of men in television programming. Surveillance reality television programs tend to emphasize the conflict

surrounding romantic relationships (Riddle & De Simone, 2013), consistent with other female representations in primetime television (Lauzen, Dozier, & Horan, 2008). Men, on the other hand, are regularly represented in primetime television as taking on work-related roles associated with ambition and earning success. Perhaps seeing men engage in poor behavior associated with romantic relationships on these youth-focused surveillance reality programs is in contrast to the programs that men regularly watch, and in turn, resulted in decreased enjoyment.

To the authors' knowledge, this is the first experimental attempt to identify the specific emotional responses that emerge from directional social comparisons to cast members in reality television programming. It also answers the call by other researchers to explore the surveillance subgenre of reality television programming, based on its popularity among viewers (Riddle & De Simone, 2013). Previous examinations of social comparison theory in media have involved the selections of specific media content by participants (Knobloch-Westerwick, Appiah, & Alter, 2008; Knobloch-Westerwick & Hastall, 2006, 2010). In these studies, it was by choice behavior that suggested social comparisons were taking place. By applying Smith's (2000) model of emotional reactions to social comparisons, the findings here suggest that not only are directional comparisons taking place, but that they result in distinctly different affective responses to media content. This extends previous work conducted by Mares and Cantor (1992) regarding social comparison theory and the affective responses to portrayals of elderly individuals. They generalized affective responses to content as positive and negative, whereas Smith's model allows for more precise identification of the specific emotional reactions that occur as a result of social comparisons.

In this study, we were unable to compare the social comparison-related emotional responses to reality programs with those of scripted programs or test multiple surveillance reality television programs. Future research should extend the application of social comparison theory into a variety of programming genres and audiences to determine whether the social comparisons that occur during reality television consumption are inherently unique. Furthermore, other individual difference variables besides participant gender likely influence the emotional responses to social comparisons in reality television consumption. Explorations of viewers' age, race, and social class could be fruitful in explaining how comparison targets are perceived. In that same vein, we were also unable to examine the social comparisons that occur between viewers and specific comparison targets – in this case, the individual cast members themselves. Further research involving one-to-one comparisons to television cast members and characters may provide greater understanding of the effects that specific social comparisons have on reality television viewers. To be sure, analyzing the underlying social psychological processes and resulting effects of reality television consumption behavior through the lens of social comparison theory should lend insight into the genre's increasing and lasting appeal.

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