"Other People' s Children" vs. Mediocre Self: The Effect of Social Comparison on Uniqueness Seeking Behavior

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Abstract

People generally exhibit the better-than-average effect in self-evaluation, while upward social comparison breaks this self-evaluation bias, triggering subsequent compensatory consumption behavior. Through five experiments, we sequentially demonstrate that upward comparison (vs. downward comparison) enhances individuals' preference for unique product options (Experiment 1); the psychological mechanism is that upward comparison reduces—rather than downward comparison enhancing—individuals' sense of self-uniqueness, thereby motivating individuals to seek uniqueness for compensatory purposes (Experiments 2a, 2b, and 2c); this effect applies to the specific comparison dimension of economic status and is strengthened or weakened by the moderating role of perceived economic mobility (Experiment 3). The research conclusions offer valuable implications for advancing theoretical progress in the fields of social comparison and uniqueness-seeking behavior, guiding marketing strategies for firms in long-tail markets, and helping individuals mitigate the threat posed by upward comparison.

Full Text

"Outstanding Others" vs. Mediocre Me: The Effect of Social Comparison on Uniqueness-Seeking Behavior

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Abstract

People generally exhibit a better-than-average effect in self-evaluation, and upward social comparison disrupts this self-evaluation bias, triggering subsequent

compensatory consumption behaviors. Through five experiments, we demonstrate that upward comparison (vs. downward comparison) increases preference for unique product options (Study 1). The psychological mechanism lies in the fact that upward comparison decreases—rather than downward comparison increasing—individuals' perceived self-uniqueness, thereby motivating them to seek uniqueness for compensatory purposes (Studies 2a, 2b, and 2c). This effect applies to the specific comparison dimension of economic status and is strengthened or weakened under the moderating influence of perceived economic mobility (Study 3). The research conclusions offer valuable insights for advancing theoretical development in social comparison and uniqueness-seeking behavior, guiding marketing strategies for enterprises in the long-tail market, and helping individuals alleviate threats from upward social comparison.

Keywords: social comparison; uniqueness-seeking behavior; better-than-average effect; compensatory consumption; perceived economic mobility

1 Introduction

As an important pathway for obtaining self-evaluation, social comparison widely exists in people' s daily life and work contexts. Today, individuals increasingly post personal updates or browse others' statuses on social platforms such as WeChat Moments and Facebook, generating frequent social comparisons (Appel, Gerlach, & Crusius, 2016). In the absence of any comparison, people' s self-evaluations universally exhibit a better-than-average effect—that is, the perception that one' s performance in intelligence, income, physical attractiveness, and other aspects is better and superior to most others (Alicke & Govorun, 2005; Brown, 1986). However, comparison with superior others disrupts this self-evaluation bias, triggering a series of psychological and behavioral consequences, such as prosocial behavior (Schlosser & Levy, 2016), materialism (Zheng, Baskin, & Peng, 2018a), and conspicuous consumption (Zheng, Baskin, & Peng, 2018b). Yet, how social comparison influences people' s uniqueness-seeking behavior remains unexplored.

In real life, a common phenomenon is that well-positioned individuals display more personality and uniqueness, but no scholar has examined differences in uniqueness-seeking behavior between better-off and worse-off individuals within the social comparison framework, nor has this phenomenon received empirical support. Essentially, behaviors pursuing personalization, differentiation, or customization in decision-making all constitute uniqueness-seeking behavior, which is influenced by internal and external factors such as need for uniqueness (Tian, Bearden, & Hunter, 2001), unique elements in the physical environment (Zhu & Argo, 2013), and social exclusion (Bozkurt & Gligor, 2019). As an important antecedent of uniqueness-seeking behavior, perceived uniqueness refers to individuals' perception of differences between themselves and others (Fromkin & Snyder, 1980; Lynn & Harris, 1997; Snyder, 1992), with influencing factors including the stability of social exclusion triggers (Wan, Xu, & Ding, 2014) and negational identity framing (Jin, He, Zou, & Xu, 2013). According to the

better-than-average effect, without social comparison, people generally believe their performance on multiple important dimensions exceeds the average (Alicke & Govorun, 2005). Meanwhile, people tend to view average performers as ordinary, mediocre, or unexceptional (Klar & Giladi, 1997), while considering themselves distinctive and unique (Hoorens, 1993; Snyder & Fromkin, 1977). Thus, when not comparing with others, people possess high perceived uniqueness. How, then, does perceived uniqueness change when comparing with superior or inferior others, and what subsequent behavioral reactions occur? A systematic examination of these questions is absent in existing literature. This study aims to explore the effect of social comparison on uniqueness-seeking behavior, reveal the mediating role of perceived uniqueness, and examine an important boundary condition: perceived status malleability. We first review relevant literature on social comparison, the better-than-average effect, and the compensatory consumption behavior model, then derive research hypotheses.

1.1 Social Comparison and Its Effects

People generally possess an internal drive to obtain self-evaluation, turning to comparison with others when objective evaluation standards are unavailable (Festinger, 1954). Social comparison dimensions include physical attractiveness, intelligence, academic ability, and many other aspects (Zheng, Peng, & Peng, 2015; Argo & Dahl, 2018; Hoegg, Scott, Morales, & Dahl, 2014; Schlosser & Levy, 2016). Generally, comparing with worse-off, disadvantaged others enhances self-evaluation and self-satisfaction (Wills, 1981), whereas comparing with superior others threatens individuals' self-concept, reduces self-esteem, and leads to negative self-evaluation (Han & Chi, 2012; Collins, 1996). Facing threats from upward comparison, individuals employ direct strategies such as distancing themselves from superior comparison targets (Pleban & Tesser, 1981), reducing the importance of comparison dimensions to the self (Festinger, 1954), and exaggerating the unattainability of superior comparison targets (Alicke, LoSchiavo, Zerbst, & Zhang, 1997). Additionally, upward comparison leads to compensatory consumption behaviors. For example, upward comparison on physical attractiveness motivates individuals to increase investment in enhancing their appearance (Markey & Markey, 2010), purchase green products or engage in other-concerned behaviors (Li & Zhang, 2011), and make optimal purchase decisions in unrelated consumption domains (Sobol & Darke, 2014).

However, most previous scholars have focused on single social comparison dimensions, such as physical attractiveness (Argo & Dahl, 2018; Li & Zhang, 2011; Sobol & Darke, 2014), social status (Huang, Liu, Wang, & Zhang, 2016), and body shape (Smeesters, Mussweiler, & Mandel, 2010), making their conclusions not directly applicable to other dimensions. Moreover, although prior research has found that social comparison affects self-evaluation, it often treats self-evaluation as a broad concept (Collins, 1996). In reality, self-evaluation has multiple specific manifestations. Some scholars propose that self-evaluation comprises self-esteem, self-efficacy, neuroticism, and locus of control (Gardner

& Pierce, 2010), while most scholars operationalize self-evaluation as specific constructs, such as social identity self-evaluation (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992) and interpersonal performance self-evaluation (Clark & Arkowitz, 1975). As an operational research construct of self-evaluation, perceived self-uniqueness is more general and higher-level, potentially derived from self-evaluation on specific dimensions such as intelligence or physical appearance—being smarter or more attractive than most makes one distinctive. Although previous research indicates that people tend to believe their performance exceeds average without any comparison (Alicke & Govorun, 2005; Brown, 1986) and that upward comparison directly affects self-evaluation on specific comparison dimensions (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1993; Collins, 1996), no empirical research has examined whether and how social comparison influences perceived self-uniqueness.

1.2 The Better-than-Average Effect and Perceived Uniqueness

According to social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954), people always have an upward drive to "want to be better than others," yet they tend to underestimate the proportion of excellent or well-positioned individuals (Alicke, 1985; Allison, Messick, & Goethals, 1989). Without social comparison, people' s self-evaluations universally exhibit a better-than-average effect—the perception that their performance on multiple dimensions is better and superior to most others (Alicke & Govorun, 2005)—and they always mistakenly believe they are more extraordinary and unique (Hoorens, 1993; Snyder & Fromkin, 1977). Thus, people not only possess an upward drive to "want to be better than others" but also an internal drive to "want to be better than most." In fact, across many domains and industries, extremely good or poor performers constitute relatively small proportions, while average, mediocre performers occupy the majority. Therefore, "being better than most" not only helps individuals stand out and obtain affirmation of self-worth but also strengthens perceived self-uniqueness (McClelland, 1961). In summary, without social comparison, people generally have high perceived uniqueness, and an inherent relationship exists between social comparison and perceived uniqueness.

In social comparison, downward comparison allows individuals to perceive that they are indeed better and superior to others, thereby confirming their held better-than-average self-evaluation bias and making them more convinced of their uniqueness. However, upward comparison disrupts this self-evaluation bias, prompting individuals to realize their performance does not exceed average and to adjust self-evaluation downward. Since people have the motivation to maintain a positive self-image (Tesser & Cornell, 1991), after upward comparison they are more likely to adjust self-evaluation to average rather than below average. As average performers are viewed as ordinary, mediocre, and unexceptional (Klar & Giladi, 1997), this results in lower perceived self-uniqueness. In other words, relative to downward comparison, upward comparison decreases individuals' perceived self-uniqueness. According to the compensatory consumption behavior model, people purchase specific products or services to eliminate or

reduce negative self-discrepancies and compensate for deficiencies in specific domains (Mandel, Rucker, Levav, & Galinsky, 2017). On one hand, people engage in direct compensation within the same domain—for example, individuals with lower physical attractiveness are more willing to purchase products that enhance appearance (Hoegg et al., 2014). On the other hand, people indirectly compensate for deficiencies in other domains—for example, those with lower physical attractiveness are more inclined to make optimal consumption decisions in unrelated domains (Sobol & Darke, 2014), show higher prosocial behavior tendencies (Li & Zhang, 2011), and exhibit conspicuous consumption tendencies (Zheng et al., 2018b). Since threats to internal needs or self-concept are key psychological factors triggering compensatory consumption (Mandel et al., 2017), threats to perceived uniqueness from upward comparison trigger subsequent compensatory uniqueness-seeking behavior, such as preferring niche products with high uniqueness or customized products (Wan et al., 2014; Zou, Jin, He, & Xu, 2014). Therefore, we propose the following hypotheses:

H1: Relative to downward comparison, upward comparison triggers higher uniqueness-seeking behavior tendencies.

H2: The effect of social comparison on uniqueness-seeking behavior is mediated by perceived uniqueness. Specifically, upward comparison (vs. downward comparison) decreases individuals' perceived uniqueness, which in turn leads to uniqueness-seeking behavior.

1.3 Perceived Status Malleability

People' s reactions to specific negative events or threats are influenced by perceived status malleability. According to prior research, perceived status malleability refers to individuals' beliefs about their ability to change their current status or situation through effort, which affects their cognition and reactions to threatening events (Cannon, Goldsmith, & Roux, 2019; Roese & Olson, 2007). Specifically, when perceived status malleability is high, people believe they can change unsatisfactory status or situations through effort, mitigating negative psychological consequences from threatening events and weakening subsequent compensatory behavioral responses. Conversely, when perceived status malleability is low, people tend to believe status formation is determined by external environments and cannot be changed through effort, strengthening negative psychological feelings from threatening events and making compensatory coping strategies more likely.

According to the compensatory consumption behavior model, when specific threats or needs are mitigated or satisfied through some means, individuals' subsequent motivation for compensatory consumption in other domains weakens (Mandel et al., 2017). For example, research finds that when the threat of upward comparison is relieved through direct self-affirmation, the compensatory conspicuous consumption tendency triggered by upward comparison weakens (Zheng, Peng, & Dai, 2014). Similarly, in social comparison contexts, perceived

status malleability and uniqueness-seeking behavior can be viewed as direct and compensatory strategies for coping with upward comparison threats, with essentially equivalent functions. When perceived status malleability is high, individuals believe they can rely on effort to change poor status, directly mitigating threats to perceived uniqueness from upward comparison, thereby weakening subsequent compensatory uniqueness-seeking behavior. Conversely, when perceived status malleability is low, individuals have weaker beliefs in changing status through effort, cannot mitigate threats to perceived uniqueness from upward comparison, and thus trigger compensatory coping strategies that make uniqueness-seeking more likely under compensatory motivation. Therefore, we propose the following hypotheses:

H3a: Perceived status malleability moderates the effect of social comparison on uniqueness-seeking behavior. When perceived status malleability is low, the positive effect of upward comparison on uniqueness-seeking behavior is strengthened; when perceived status malleability is high, this positive effect is weakened.

H3b: Perceived status malleability moderates the indirect effect of social comparison on uniqueness-seeking behavior through perceived uniqueness. When perceived status malleability is low, perceived uniqueness plays a significant mediating role in the effect of social comparison on uniqueness-seeking behavior; when perceived status malleability is high, the mediating effect of perceived uniqueness is not significant.

2.1 Pretest

To determine product stimuli for the main experiment, we selected two highly similar tourist attractions—Phuket and Bali—as options based on prior research (Wan et al., 2014) and conducted an independent pretest to verify appropriateness. The pretest involved 55 university students (43.6% male, Mage = 21.47), who evaluated both attractions on three aspects: "How attractive do you find this tourist destination?" (1 = not at all attractive, 7 = very attractive); "How much do you like this tourist destination?" (1 = don' t like at all, 7 = like very much); and "How familiar are you with this tourist destination?" (1 = not at all familiar, 7 = very familiar). The order of attraction images was randomized to exclude order effects. Results showed no significant differences in attractiveness ratings (MBali = 5.36 vs. MPhuket = 5.40; $t(54)$ = -0.16, p = 0.87), liking (MBali = 5.27 vs. MPhuket = 5.33; $t(54)$ = -0.31, p = 0.76), or familiarity (MBali = 5.38 vs. MPhuket = 5.27; $t(54)$ = 0.43, p = 0.67). Thus, the selected product stimuli were appropriate.

2.2 Experimental Design and Participants

Sixty-four university students from a Beijing university (54.5% male, Mage = 22.55, SD = 2.94) participated in this experiment. Upon entering the lab, all participants were randomly assigned to a one-factor (social comparison: upward

vs. downward) between-subjects design, with 32 participants in the upward comparison group and 32 in the downward comparison group.

2.3 Experimental Procedure

Following prior research (Schlosser & Levy, 2016), we manipulated social comparison using a "person description task." In the upward comparison group, participants were asked to list three people they knew whose current situation or status was better and more superior than their own, writing down the initials of these three people. They then selected one person from their list and described in detail why this person' s current situation was better and more superior than theirs. Conversely, in the downward comparison group, participants listed three people whose current situation or status was worse and more inferior than theirs, wrote down their initials, selected one person, and described in detail why this person' s situation was worse and more inferior. This task had no time or word limit, allowing participants to describe the person as detailed as possible. After completing this task, participants responded to a manipulation check item on a 7-point scale: "To what extent do you feel your current situation is better than the person you described?" (1 = not at all, 7 = very much).

Next, participants entered a "vacation destination preference survey" task measuring uniqueness-seeking behavior. They were told that a travel agency planned to launch two tour routes to Islands A and B targeting the university student market and wanted to understand student preferences before formally launching the routes. Participants also learned that previous surveys among university students showed that 81% preferred Island A, while only 19% preferred Island B. To exclude confounding effects from pre-existing preferences, we counterbalanced the pairing of attractions with these percentages. Participants then made a choice between the two attractions. Additionally, participants were asked to recall the content of their social comparison and check multiple dimensions including academic performance, personal talent, appearance, and social skills. Finally, participants completed demographic information (gender, age) and received experimental compensation.

2.4 Data Analysis and Results

Manipulation Check. One-way ANOVA results showed that compared with the downward comparison group ($M = 5.06$, $SD = 1.19$), participants in the upward comparison group perceived their current situation as worse ($M = 3.22$, $SD = 1.09$; $F(1, 62) = 41.46$, $p < 0.001$, $2 = 0.40$), indicating successful manipulation of social comparison.

Hypothesis Testing. First, we coded participants' attraction choices, assigning 0 to popular attraction choices and 1 to niche attraction choices. Second, we conducted binary logistic regression with social comparison as the independent variable and coded attraction preference as the dependent variable. Results

showed that the proportion of participants choosing the niche attraction was significantly higher in the upward comparison group (53.1%) than in the downward comparison group (28.1%; = 1.06, Wald 2 = 4.04, $p = 0.044$), indicating that upward comparison leads to higher uniqueness-seeking behavior tendencies, supporting H1.

Finally, we analyzed the dimensions on which participants made social comparisons (see Figure 1 [Figure 1: see original paper]). Results showed that most participants compared on personal talent (81.3%), followed by academic performance (60.9%) and social skills (56.3%), indirectly reflecting that the experimental results could apply to multiple social comparison dimensions.

Figure 1. Dimensions of Social Comparison Among Participants

Study 1 preliminarily verified the positive effect of upward comparison on uniqueness-seeking behavior, but did not reveal its psychological mechanism. The next experiments will test the mediating role of perceived uniqueness while analyzing and ruling out alternative explanations including self-esteem (Collins, 1996), emotion (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1993), and self-efficacy (Sobol & Darke, 2014).

3.1 Pretest

Study 2a used T-shirt pattern designs as product stimuli and conducted an independent pretest to ensure material validity. The pretest was administered via online questionnaire to 39 online consumers (33.2% male, *M*age = 21.56), who evaluated three T-shirt pattern designs (A, B, C) on attractiveness (1 = not at all attractive, 7 = very attractive) and liking (1 = don' t like at all, 7 = like very much).

Results showed no significant differences in attractiveness ratings (tA,B(38) = 1.26, $p = 0.21$; tA,C(38) = 1.63, $p = 0.11$; tB,C(38) = 0.34, $p = 0.73$) or liking (tA,B(38) = 0.39, $p = 0.69$; tA,C(38) = 0.57, $p = 0.57$; tB,C(38) = -0.26, p = 0.80) among the three pattern designs. Thus, the selected product stimuli were appropriate.

3.2 Experimental Design and Participants

Sixty-eight university students from a Beijing university (16.2% male, *M*age = 22.29, *SD* = 5.85) participated in this experiment. After entering the lab, participants were randomly assigned to a one-factor (social comparison: upward vs. downward) between-subjects design, with 34 participants in the upward comparison group and 34 in the downward comparison group.

3.3 Experimental Procedure

Consistent with Study 1, we manipulated social comparison using the "person description task." After completing the manipulation check, participants

responded to two items measuring the mediating variable of perceived uniqueness on a 7-point scale. These items were adapted from prior research (Tian et al., 2001; Wan et al., 2014): "My current situation makes me feel unique" and "My current situation makes me feel my uniqueness is reduced" (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Additionally, participants completed measures of three potential confounding variables: self-esteem, emotion, and self-efficacy.

Self-esteem (= 0.835) was measured with: "I feel I do not have much to be proud of" ; "I feel I am worthless" ; and "Overall, I have positive feelings about myself" (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree) (Rosenberg, 1965). Emotion (= 0.956) was assessed with: "How is your mood right now?" (1 = very bad, 7 = very good; 1 = very sad, 7 = very happy; 1 = very low, 7 = very high) (Wan & Wyer Jr, 2015). Self-efficacy (= 0.865) was measured with: "I am confident that I can deal effectively with unexpected events" ; "Even when facing difficult tasks, I believe I can do them well" ; and "I believe I can effectively complete many different tasks" (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree) (Chen, Gully, & Eden, 2001).

Next, participants entered the "T-shirt customization task." They were asked to imagine customizing a T-shirt, having browsed and narrowed down their options to three pattern styles A, B, and C, from which they needed to select one to print on their customized T-shirt to complete the purchase. Participants were then shown images of the three pattern styles with corresponding market share information: 41% of customers chose Pattern A, 13% chose Pattern B, and 46% chose Pattern C. Based on prior research (Wan et al., 2014), choosing Pattern B represents higher uniqueness-seeking behavior tendency. To exclude confounding effects from the patterns themselves, we counterbalanced the pairing of T-shirt patterns with market share information. Participants made their choice among the three patterns based on this information.

3.4 Data Analysis and Results

Manipulation Check. One-way ANOVA results showed that compared with the downward comparison group ($M = 4.68$, $SD = 1.49$), participants in the upward comparison group perceived their current situation as worse ($M = 3.38$, $SD = 1.18$; $F(1, 66) = 15.73$, $p < 0.001$, 2 = 0.19), indicating successful manipulation of social comparison.

Hypothesis Testing. First, we recoded participants' product choices, assigning 0 to popular pattern designs (41%, 46%) and 1 to the niche pattern design (13%). Second, binary logistic regression with social comparison as the independent variable and recoded product choice as the dependent variable showed that the proportion of participants choosing the unique niche pattern design was significantly higher in the upward comparison group (61.8%) than in the downward comparison group (35.3%; = 1.09, Wald 2 = 4.65, $p = 0.031$), again supporting H1.

Testing the Mediating Role of Perceived Uniqueness. After reverse-

coding the negative item, we averaged the two items ($r = 0.753$) as the mediator index. Regression analysis with social comparison as the independent variable and perceived uniqueness as the dependent variable showed that social comparison had a significant negative effect on perceived uniqueness (= -0.38, t = -3.30, $p = 0.002$). Specifically, compared with the downward comparison group (M = 3.60, $SD = 1.04$), the upward comparison group had lower perceived uniqueness and felt less unique ($M = 2.75$, $SD = 1.09$; $F(1, 66) = 10.88$, $p = 0.002$, 2 = 0.14). Meanwhile, binary logistic regression with both social comparison and perceived uniqueness as independent variables and product choice as the dependent variable showed that perceived uniqueness significantly influenced unique T-shirt pattern choice (= -0.64, Wald 2 = 5.04, $p = 0.025$), while the effect of social comparison became non-significant (= 0.63, Wald 2 = 1.33, $p = 0.25$), indicating significant mediation (see Figure 2 [Figure 2: see original paper]), supporting H2.

We further tested the mediating effect of perceived uniqueness using PROCESS (Model 4; Hayes, 2013) with 5,000 samples and a 95% confidence interval. The bootstrap analysis showed that the indirect effect through perceived uniqueness did not include zero (LLCI = 0.11, ULCI = 1.40), with an effect size of 0.54. Moreover, the direct effect of social comparison on unique product choice was not significant when perceived uniqueness was controlled (LLCI = -0.45, ULCI = 1.72), confirming the significant mediating effect of perceived uniqueness.

Figure 2. Mediating Effect of Perceived Uniqueness

Finally, we analyzed the confounding variables. Regression results showed that social comparison had no significant effects on self-esteem (= -0.04, t = -0.29, $p = 0.77$), emotion (= -0.12, t = -1.01, $p = 0.32$), or self-efficacy (= -0.05, t = -0.44, $p = 0.66$). PROCESS analyses showed that the mediation tests for self-esteem (95% LLCI = -0.11, ULCI = 0.22), emotion (95% LLCI = -0.37, ULCI = 0.05), and self-efficacy (95% LLCI = -0.28, ULCI = 0.09) all included zero. Thus, these three variables could be ruled out as alternative explanations and will not be discussed further in subsequent experiments.

Study 2a further revealed the mediating role of perceived uniqueness while ruling out self-esteem, emotion, and self-efficacy as alternative explanations. However, Studies 1 and 2a have certain limitations. First, both experiments used student samples, limiting external validity and application value. Second, social comparison was only manipulated at two levels (upward vs. downward) without a no-comparison control group, making it impossible to accurately determine whether the main effect was driven by upward comparison increasing or downward comparison decreasing preference for unique products. Finally, although both experiments used minority-chosen products as unique options, less popular products may also signal unpopularity or poor quality, failing to rule out the alternative explanation that consumers might choose unpopular, inferior products out of resignation after perceiving their own mediocrity.

4.1 Experimental Design and Participants

This experiment aimed to clarify the true driving force behind the main effect by adding a no-comparison control group and testing whether findings apply to Western cultural contexts and non-student populations. Conducted on Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk), the sample encompassed various occupations, ages, education levels, and economic statuses, overcoming limitations of student samples and enhancing result persuasiveness. A total of 143 participants (36.4% male) participated, with ages ranging from 19 to 75 years (Mage = 35.76, SD = 13.44). Participants were randomly assigned to the upward comparison group (n = 44), downward comparison group (n = 52), or no-comparison group (n = 47).

4.2 Experimental Procedure

Building on Study 1, we added a no-comparison control group. First, participants in the upward and downward comparison groups completed the same "person description task" as in Study 1. Following prior research (Zheng et al., 2015), the no-comparison group received no social comparison manipulation and proceeded directly to other measures (excluding the manipulation check), which included two items measuring perceived uniqueness (r = 0.703). Additionally, since social comparison is an important source of competitive behavior (Garcia, Tor, & Schiff, 2013) and competitive orientation can motivate differentiation-focused motives and tendencies, competitive orientation might serve as a potential mediator. Therefore, we measured competitive orientation (= 0.842) with items including: "I must succeed even at the expense of others" ; "Another' s loss is my gain" ; "Losers are inferior" ; and "I will do whatever it takes to succeed" (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree) (Martin & Larsen, 1976).

Next, all participants entered an independent product purchase decision. Since purchasing customized products is an important manifestation of consumer uniqueness-seeking behavior (Lynn & Harris, 1997; Snyder, 1992) and does not reflect product popularity or quality information, we measured uniqueness-seeking behavior through customized product choice, ruling out the alternative explanation that consumers might choose unpopular, inferior products out of resignation after perceiving disadvantage. Participants were presented with a hypothetical purchase scenario: "A well-known T-shirt brand not only sells ready-designed T-shirts on its website but also offers T-shirt customization services. Consumers can either directly purchase a popular ready-designed T-shirt or design their own unique-style T-shirt. Overall, customized T-shirts are slightly more expensive than ready-designed ones." Participants then imagined needing a new T-shirt and chose between two options: A. Customize a T-shirt; B. Purchase a ready-designed T-shirt.

4.3 Data Analysis and Results

Manipulation Check. Compared with the downward comparison group (M = 5.37, SD = 1.31), participants in the upward comparison group rated their current situation as worse (M = 2.39, SD = 1.51; $t(94)$ = 10.33, $p < 0.001$, Cohen' s d = 2.11), indicating successful manipulation of social comparison.

Hypothesis Testing. We coded the upward comparison, downward comparison, and no-comparison groups as 1, -1, and 0, respectively, and coded choices for customized and ready-designed T-shirts as 1 and -1, respectively. Binary logistic regression showed that compared with the downward comparison group (21.2%, Wald 2 = 3.88, p = 0.047) and no-comparison group (25.5%, Wald 2 = 6.21, p = 0.011), participants in the upward comparison group were more likely to choose customized T-shirts (45.5%). However, no significant difference existed between downward comparison and no-comparison groups (Wald 2 = 0.27, $p > 0.60$). Thus, the fundamental driving force of social comparison' s effect on uniqueness-seeking behavior is that upward comparison increases rather than downward comparison decreases preference for unique products, again supporting H1.

We then tested the mediating effect of perceived uniqueness. ANOVA with social comparison as the independent variable and perceived uniqueness as the dependent variable revealed significant differences among groups ($F(2, 140)$ = 5.69, p = 0.004, 2 = 0.08). Specifically, perceived uniqueness in the upward comparison group (M = 3.56, SD = 1.28) was significantly lower than in the downward comparison group (M = 4.43, SD = 1.32; $t(94)$ = -3.28, p = 0.001, Cohen' s d = 0.67) and no-comparison group (M = 4.46, SD = 1.72; $t(89)$ = -2.82, p = 0.006, Cohen' s d = 0.59), while no difference existed between downward comparison and no-comparison groups ($t(97)$ = -0.08, p = 0.94).

Further PROCESS analysis (Model 4; Hayes, 2013) with 5,000 samples and a 95% confidence interval showed that the indirect effect through perceived uniqueness did not include zero (LLCI = 0.03, ULCI = 0.35), with an effect size of 0.14, again supporting H2. Additionally, competitive orientation did not mediate the effect (95% LLCI = -0.03, ULCI = 0.11) and could be ruled out as an alternative explanation.

4.4 Discussion

This experiment tested the main and mediating effects using non-student participants from MTurk, ruled out competitive orientation (or winning mentality) and resignation as alternative psychological explanations, and again supported H1 and H2, strengthening result robustness and persuasiveness. Moreover, by adding a no-comparison control group, this experiment further revealed that the true driving force of the main effect is that upward comparison decreases perceived uniqueness, which in turn leads to uniqueness-seeking behavior.

However, Studies 1 through 2b had relatively small sample sizes, potentially

weakening result persuasiveness. Additionally, whether overall self-evaluation and dimension-specific self-evaluation explain the effect of social comparison on uniqueness-seeking behavior requires more direct evidence. Therefore, to further enhance result persuasiveness and robustness, the next experiment will expand sample size and measure overall and dimension-specific self-evaluation.

5.1 Pretest

Study 2c used video documentaries as product stimuli and conducted an independent pretest to ensure material validity. The pretest involved 60 university students (41.7% male, *M*age = 21.63) who evaluated three documentaries (A, B, C) with the same theme on familiarity (1 = not at all familiar, 7 = very familiar), attractiveness (1 = not at all attractive, 7 = very attractive), and liking (1 = don' t like at all, 7 = like very much). Results showed no significant differences in familiarity (tA,B(59) = 0.46, p = 0.65; tA,C(59) = 0.77, p = 0.45; tB,C(59) = 0.41, p = 0.68), attractiveness (tA,B(59) = 0.09, p = 0.93; tA,C(59) = 1.33, p = 0.19; tB,C(59) = 1.43, p = 0.16), or liking (tA,B(59) = 0.51, p = 0.62; tA,C(59) = -1.09, p = 0.28; tB,C(59) = -1.96, p = 0.06). Thus, the selected product stimuli were appropriate.

5.2 Experimental Design and Participants

A total of 146 university students (39% male, *M*age = 21.97, *SD* = 2.17) participated in this experiment. All participants were randomly assigned to a one-factor (social comparison: upward vs. downward) between-subjects design, with 73 participants in the upward comparison group and 73 in the downward comparison group.

5.3 Experimental Procedure

Following prior research (Zheng et al., 2018a), we manipulated social comparison on the academic performance dimension. Specifically, all participants entered a "self-positioning study" and were told that the purpose was to understand university students' self-positioning through academic performance. In the upward comparison group, participants compared their previous academic year performance (GPA/academic research achievements) with the top-ranked student in their major and grade, locating their own ranking position on a provided coordinate axis where the far right represented the top rank. Conversely, the downward comparison group compared their performance with the bottom-ranked student, locating their position on a coordinate axis where the far left represented the last place. To enhance manipulation effectiveness, participants also detailed how their academic performance compared to the top (or bottom) student and their psychological feelings resulting from this comparison. Participants then completed the social comparison manipulation check: "To what extent do you feel your academic performance is better than the comparison target?" (1 = not at all, 7 = very much), and two items measuring perceived

uniqueness (r = 0.750). Following prior literature (Zheng et al., 2018a), we also measured overall self-evaluation: "Right now, how do you feel about yourself overall?" (1 = very bad, 7 = very good), and academic performance self-evaluation: "Right now, how do you feel about your academic performance?" (1 = very bad, 7 = very good).

After completing these tasks, participants entered a viewing preference survey. Following prior research (Wan et al., 2014), participants imagined wanting to watch an ocean-themed documentary and, after searching, found three options: Documentary A with 82,611 views, Documentary B with 3,067 views, and Documentary C with 79,335 views. To exclude confounding effects from the documentaries themselves, we counterbalanced the pairing of documentaries with view counts. Based on this information, participants chose among the three documentaries. Choosing Documentary B represented higher uniqueness-seeking behavior tendency, while choosing Documentaries A or C represented lower uniqueness-seeking behavior tendency.

5.4 Data Analysis and Results

Manipulation Check. Independent samples t-test results showed that participants in the upward comparison group felt their academic performance was worse than their comparison target (Mupward = 3.14, SD = 1.42 vs. Mdownward = 5.10, SD = 1.56; $t(144)$ = -7.95, $p < 0.001$, Cohen' s d = 1.31), indicating successful manipulation of social comparison.

Hypothesis Testing. First, we coded participants' documentary choices, assigning 0 to the two high-view-count documentaries (82,611 and 79,335 views) and 1 to the low-view-count documentary (3,067 views). Second, binary logistic regression with social comparison (1 = upward, 0 = downward) as the independent variable and documentary choice as the dependent variable showed that the proportion choosing the niche documentary was significantly higher in the upward comparison group (67.1%) than in the downward comparison group (46.6%; = 0.85, Wald 2 = 6.18, p = 0.013), supporting H1.

Testing the Mediating Role of Perceived Uniqueness. PROCESS analysis (Model 4; Hayes, 2013) with 5,000 samples and a 95% confidence interval showed that the indirect effect through perceived uniqueness did not include zero (LLCI = 0.12, ULCI = 0.72), with an effect size of 0.35, again supporting H2.

Ruling Out Alternative Explanations. One-way ANOVA results showed that upward comparison participants had significantly lower overall self-evaluation (Mupward = 3.77, SD = 1.74 vs. Mdownward = 4.42, SD = 1.65; $F(1, 144)$ = 5.48, p = 0.021) and academic performance self-evaluation (Mupward = 4.10, SD = 1.45 vs. Mdownward = 4.64, SD = 1.25; $F(1, 144)$ = 5.99, p = 0.016) than downward comparison participants. Separate PROCESS mediation analyses (Model 4; Hayes, 2013) with 5,000 samples and 95% confidence intervals showed that overall self-evaluation (LLCI = -0.09, ULCI

= 0.24) and academic performance self-evaluation (LLCI = -0.16, ULCI = 0.18) both included zero. Therefore, neither overall nor dimension-specific self-evaluation serves as a potential explanatory mechanism for the effect of social comparison on uniqueness-seeking behavior and can be ruled out.

Study 2c expanded the sample size, manipulated social comparison on the specific dimension of academic performance, and again verified the positive effect of upward comparison on uniqueness-seeking behavior and the mediating role of perceived uniqueness, while ruling out overall and dimension-specific self-evaluation as alternative explanations, further enhancing result robustness and generalizability.

Analysis of social comparison dimensions in Study 1 showed that besides academic performance, economic status is also an important dimension, primarily manifested as material wealth, income level, or socioeconomic status. According to our hypotheses, upward comparison on economic status should also trigger uniqueness-seeking behavior through the mediation of perceived uniqueness. Although economic status is relatively fixed and difficult to change immediately during comparison, individuals' beliefs about whether they can improve their economic situation through effort affect their psychological feelings and behavioral responses. The next experiment focuses on economic status as a specific social comparison dimension and operationalizes perceived status malleability as perceived economic mobility (Yoon & Kim, 2016; Yoon & Kim, 2017) to examine its moderating effect.

6.1 Experimental Design and Participants

One hundred twenty-four U.S. participants from MTurk (43.5% male) were randomly assigned to a 2 (social comparison: upward vs. downward) × 2 (perceived economic mobility: high vs. low) between-subjects design. The sample included 32 participants in the upward comparison/high mobility group, 31 in the upward comparison/low mobility group, 31 in the downward comparison/high mobility group, and 30 in the downward comparison/low mobility group.

6.2 Experimental Procedure

Following prior literature, we manipulated perceived economic mobility using a "news reading task" (Yoon & Kim, 2016). In the high perceived economic mobility group, the news headline was "American Dream: Good News on Economic Mobility!" with core content conveying that "today' s American social environment is full of opportunities, and people can change their humble origins and socioeconomic status through effort," accompanied by an image of strong hands climbing a ladder. In the low perceived economic mobility group, the headline was "American Nightmare: What Happened to Economic Mobility?" conveying that "today' s American society is no longer a land of opportunity, and those from humble origins often cannot change their socioeconomic status through effort, with social class solidification,"accompanied by an image of ordinary people

disappointedly watching a suit-clad person sawing the ladder behind them while climbing. The news format, content, paragraphs, and word count were largely consistent between groups, differing only in expressed themes. Participants then completed two manipulation check items: "Future socioeconomic status depends on my environment" (0) vs. "Future socioeconomic status depends on my own effort" (10); and "Future socioeconomic status mainly depends on what I was born with" (0) vs. "Future socioeconomic status mainly depends on what I do today" (10).

Next, we manipulated economic status social comparison by combining the MacArthur 10-step ladder scale (Kraus, Côté, & Keltner, 2010) with the person description method (Schlosser & Levy, 2016). All participants entered a "self-positioning task" where they imagined a ladder representing relative positions of people in their social network, with the top representing those with the best economic and material wealth status and the bottom representing those with the worst. Upward comparison participants thought of someone at the top of the ladder and marked their own position relative to that person, while downward comparison participants thought of someone at the bottom and marked their position relative to that person. Participants then completed the social comparison manipulation check and two items measuring perceived uniqueness ($r = 0.754$).

To enhance external validity, we measured uniqueness-seeking behavior in the experiential product domain. Specifically, participants entered a "book club membership choice" task, imagining they wanted to join a book club and had narrowed their options to two clubs. The "Words of Wisdom" club "has 513 readers, 致力于提供一个激发俱乐部会员共同兴趣爱好的读书环境、重视会员之间的共同点和相似性" (provides an environment stimulating shared interests, emphasizing commonalities and similarities among members). The "Beyond Words" club "has 43 readers, 致力于提供一个激发独特兴趣和主题的读书环境、重视每个会员独特的个性特征" (provides an environment stimulating unique interests and themes, emphasizing each member' s unique personality traits). The former represents the popular option, the latter the niche option. After reading each club' s description, participants indicated their preference on 7-point scales: "How likely are you to join this book club?" (1 = very unlikely, 7 = very likely) and "How willing are you to join this book club?" (1 = not at all willing, 7 = very willing). The presentation order of the two clubs was randomized. To check task attentiveness, participants also recalled and wrote down each club's membership numbers.

6.3 Data Analysis and Results

Manipulation Check. Four participants failed the attention check and were excluded, leaving 120 valid responses (48.3% male, Mage = 33.88, $SD = 10.37$) for analysis. One-way ANOVA on perceived economic mobility (= 0.875) showed that compared with the low mobility group ($M = 6.81$, $SD = 2.99$), high mobility group participants were more likely to believe their future economic

status depended on their own effort (M = 8.38, SD = 2.01; F(1, 118) = 11.29, $p < 0.001$, 2 = 0.09), indicating successful manipulation of perceived economic mobility. Additionally, compared with the downward comparison group (M = 3.92, SD = 1.78), upward comparison participants rated their current economic status as worse (M = 3.01, SD = 1.64; F(1, 118) = 8.45, p = 0.004, 2 = 0.07), indicating successful manipulation of social comparison.

Hypothesis Testing. We averaged participants' intention scores for each book club and computed a difference score between "Beyond Words" and "Words of Wisdom" clubs as the dependent variable, with higher scores indicating higher uniqueness-seeking behavior tendency. One-way ANOVA showed that compared with the downward comparison group (M = 0.13, SD = 2.16), upward comparison participants preferred the less popular "Beyond Words"club more (M = 0.90, SD = 2.03; F(1, 118) = 4.11, p = 0.045, 2 = 0.03), indicating that upward comparison triggers higher uniqueness-seeking behavior tendency, supporting and validating H1.

Testing the Moderating Effect of Perceived Economic Mobility. A 2 (social comparison: upward vs. downward) × 2 (perceived economic mobility: high vs. low) ANOVA revealed a significant interaction effect (F(1, 116) = 4.25, p = 0.042, 2 = 0.04) and a significant main effect of social comparison (F(1, 116) = 4.10, p = 0.045, 2 = 0.03), but no significant main effect of perceived economic mobility (F(1, 116) = 0.45, p = 0.50, 2 < 0.01). Thus, perceived economic mobility moderates the effect of social comparison on uniqueness-seeking behavior. Simple effects analysis further showed that when perceived economic mobility was high, uniqueness-seeking behavior did not differ between upward and downward comparison groups (Mupward = 0.38 vs. Mdownward = 0.40; F(1, 116) = 0.001, p = 0.98). When perceived economic mobility was low, upward comparison participants showed significantly higher uniqueness-seeking behavior than downward comparison participants (Mupward = 1.42 vs. Mdownward = -0.13; F(1, 116) = 8.49, p = 0.004, 2 = 0.07), validating H3a.

Finally, we tested whether perceived economic mobility moderates the mediated effect through perceived uniqueness using PROCESS (Model 7; Hayes, 2013) with 5,000 samples and a 95% confidence interval. When perceived economic mobility was low, the bootstrap analysis showed that the indirect effect through perceived uniqueness did not include zero (LLCI = 0.08, ULCI = 0.64), indicating significant mediation with an effect size of 0.29. However, when perceived economic mobility was high, the indirect effect included zero (LLCI = -0.22, ULCI = 0.15), indicating non-significant mediation. Therefore, perceived economic mobility significantly moderates the mediated effect of perceived uniqueness, supporting H3b.

Study 3 validated the effect of social comparison on uniqueness-seeking behavior in the specific dimension of economic status, using different methods to manipulate social comparison and measuring consumer uniqueness-seeking behavior in different product domains, further enhancing result robustness and external validity. Additionally, by operationalizing perceived status malleability as

the construct of perceived economic mobility, we systematically examined its moderating role in economic status social comparison effects, revealing effective strategies for coping with threats from upward economic comparison.

7.1 Research Conclusions

Based on the better-than-average effect and compensatory consumption behavior model, this study establishes a causal relationship between social comparison and uniqueness-seeking behavior from a psychological compensation perspective, examines the mediating effect of perceived uniqueness, and operationalizes the core moderating variable of perceived status malleability as perceived economic mobility to analyze its moderating role in the specific dimension of economic status. Across five experiments, we verify that upward comparison (vs. downward comparison) positively affects uniqueness-seeking behavior (Study 1) and reveal that the fundamental driving force is that upward comparison decreases—rather than downward comparison increasing—individuals' perceived self-uniqueness, leading to higher uniqueness-seeking behavior tendencies for compensatory purposes (Studies 2a, 2b, and 2c). Furthermore, this effect persists in the specific dimension of economic status and is strengthened or weakened under the moderating influence of perceived economic mobility (Study 3).

7.2 Theoretical Contributions

This research makes positive theoretical contributions to literature on social comparison, uniqueness-seeking behavior, and compensatory consumption. First, from a psychological compensation perspective, we are the first to examine uniqueness-seeking behavior as a behavioral consequence of social comparison. Although scholars have extensively studied compensatory behavioral consequences of social comparison, such as materialism (Zheng et al., 2018a), conspicuous consumption (Zheng et al., 2018b), and decision optimization (Sobol & Darke, 2014), many potential behavioral consequence variables remain to be explored. Meanwhile, based on real-life observations, people' s intuitive impression is that well-positioned individuals display more personality and uniqueness, potentially leading to the conclusion that better-off individuals have higher uniqueness-seeking behavior tendencies than worse-off individuals. However, no scholar has empirically examined differences in uniqueness-seeking behavior between better-off and worse-off individuals within the social comparison framework, and this phenomenon has not received empirical support or validation. This study uses the better-than-average effect in self-evaluation as a theoretical breakthrough to empirically investigate this question, constructing and validating the positive effect of upward comparison on uniqueness-seeking behavior, opening a new perspective for social comparison research and enriching research findings in compensatory consumption and uniqueness-seeking behavior domains.

Second, this study proposes and validates the mediating role of perceived unique-

ness, broadening theoretical perspectives on psychological variables following social comparison. Previous social comparison research has examined psychological consequences such as self-esteem (Morse & Gergen, 1970), envy (Zheng et al., 2018a), empathy (Zheng et al., 2015), and motives for expressing altruism (Schlosser & Levy, 2016), but the logical relationship between social comparison and perceived uniqueness has not received scholarly attention. Based on the better-than-average effect, we derive the argument that people generally have high perceived uniqueness when not engaging in social comparison, while upward comparison disrupts this pervasively held self-evaluation bias, prompting people to adjust self-evaluation downward to average, resulting in lower perceived uniqueness. This establishes a novel theoretical relationship between social comparison and perceived uniqueness, validated through a series of experiments examining the mediating role of perceived uniqueness. This deepens and advances research on psychological consequences of social comparison and represents theoretical extension and innovation based on uniqueness need literature.

Finally, by introducing the moderating role of perceived status malleability and operationalizing it as the construct of perceived economic mobility, we systematically examine its moderating role in economic status social comparison effects, expanding the research scope of perceived economic mobility. Essentially, perceived economic mobility represents people' s beliefs and perceptions about improving economic status through effort, closely related to concepts of material wealth and socioeconomic status, and overall affects individuals' psychological and behavioral reactions to threatening events (Yoon & Kim, 2016; Yoon & Kim, 2017). However, theoretical discussion around this construct has been limited. By focusing on the important social comparison dimension of economic status, this study deeply analyzes and explores the theoretical connection between perceived status malleability and social comparison, revealing the important role of perceived economic mobility in helping consumers alleviate threats from upward economic comparison.

7.3 Practical Implications

The research conclusions offer valuable practical implications for both enterprises and individual consumers. First, according to our findings, when engaging in upward comparison, people' s preference for niche, customized products or brands increases. Therefore, for enterprises engaged in customization/personalization or operating in long-tail markets, the target market can be positioned toward consumer groups who more frequently compare themselves with others, such as professionals in internet finance, investment banking, and real estate, who need to regularly compare themselves with superior colleagues to understand their position and assess whether they might be eliminated. Moreover, since people have a "single upward" drive in social comparison (Festinger, 1954), they engage more frequently in upward comparison, which in turn drives compensatory uniqueness-seeking behavior through decreased

perceived uniqueness. In light of this, enterprises can use social media to target these groups with advertisements for niche or customized products, thereby stimulating product preference and purchase behavior.

Additionally, individuals can purchase customized, niche products or services to cope with threats from upward comparison. Consumers frequently need to compare themselves with superior others in daily life, including both actively sought upward comparisons and forced comparisons with superior peers—"other people' s children." Upward comparison decreases perceived self-uniqueness and weakens individuals' positive self-worth perceptions, while purchasing customized, niche products or services can help alleviate or reduce threats to self-uniqueness from upward comparison, thereby enhancing overall subjective well-being. Furthermore, in social comparisons regarding economic status, perceived economic mobility is an effective coping strategy. By selectively attending to positive information about socioeconomic mobility, consumers can develop positive expectations about improving future economic status through effort, thereby mitigating psychological threats from decreased self-uniqueness after upward comparison.

7.4 Research Limitations and Future Directions

This study has certain limitations and issues for future exploration. For example, while examining the effect of social comparison on uniqueness-seeking behavior, we introduced and validated the moderating role of perceived economic mobility but only manipulated it experimentally as a categorical variable with high and low levels, lacking analysis from an individual difference perspective. Due to influences from historical background, family environment, social culture, and life experiences, people' s perceptions of socioeconomic mobility vary individually and remain relatively stable in the short term. Therefore, perceived economic mobility could be examined as a continuous individual difference variable. Due to space limitations, this study did not conduct such analysis. However, prior research shows that consistent and robust results can be obtained whether testing the moderating effect of perceived economic mobility through measurement or experimental manipulation (Yoon & Kim, 2017). Additionally, when examining the moderating role of perceived status malleability, this study only operationalized and tested it as perceived economic mobility in the specific dimension of economic status, without testing its moderating role in other social comparison dimensions such as intelligence or physical attractiveness. Future research could conduct more comprehensive and detailed exploration and validation.

Moreover, social culture has powerful influence in shaping individuals' thinking habits and behavioral patterns regarding uniqueness pursuit. For example, traditional Chinese culture advocates "the golden mean," striving for moderate levels without pursuing extremes. Traditional values such as "the nail that sticks out gets hammered" and "the tree that stands out is destroyed by wind" reflect concerns and fears about negative consequences from appearing distinctive or superior. However, Western cultural contexts encourage individuals to be innovative and pursue excellence, positively affecting perceptions of uniqueness

pursuit. Although this study obtained consistent results using participants from both Eastern and Western cultural contexts, we did not comparatively analyze whether the intensity of social comparison' s effect on uniqueness-seeking behavior differs significantly across cultural contexts. Future research could conduct more in-depth empirical analysis and examination from a cross-cultural perspective.

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Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.