

Social comparison of material possessions among adolescents

CHAN, Kara K W

Published in:
Qualitative Market Research

DOI:
[10.1108/13522750810879039](https://doi.org/10.1108/13522750810879039)

Published: 01/01/2008

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

CHAN, K. K. W. (2008). Social comparison of material possessions among adolescents. *Qualitative Market Research*, 11(3), 316-330. <https://doi.org/10.1108/13522750810879039>

General rights

Copyright and intellectual property rights for the publications made accessible in HKBU Scholars are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners. In addition to the restrictions prescribed by the Copyright Ordinance of Hong Kong, all users and readers must also observe the following terms of use:

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from HKBU Scholars for the purpose of private study or research
- Users cannot further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- To share publications in HKBU Scholars with others, users are welcome to freely distribute the permanent publication URLs

Social comparison of material possessions among adolescents

Keywords: peer influence – role models – consumer psychology

Kara Chan

Professor

Department of Communication Studies

Hong Kong Baptist University

Kowloon Tong, Hong Kong

Phone: (852) 3411 7836 Fax: (852) 3411 7890

email: karachan@hkbu.edu.hk

Manuscript published in the

Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal

11(3): 316-330

Acknowledgement: The work described in this paper was supported by a Faculty Research Grant from the Hong Kong Baptist University (Project No. FRG/04-05/II-45).

Word count: 6,600

7 January 2008

QMR comparison R4

Social comparison of material possessions among adolescents

Structured abstract

Research paper

Purpose: The purpose of the article is to explore Chinese adolescents' engagement in social comparison of material possessions using qualitative inquiries.

Design: Sixty-four Chinese adolescents aged 13 to 17 were face-to-face interviewed.

They were asked whether they engaged in social comparison of possessions with direct role models and vicarious role models such as media celebrities. Characteristics of role models and products involved in social comparison were inquired.

Findings: Adolescents in Hong Kong frequently engaged in upward social comparison with friends and classmates. The products involved in social comparison were branded public goods that can be used to communicate ideal social self-image. There was a strong link between social comparison and peer communication about consumption.

Adolescents less often engaged in social comparison with media celebrities. This can be attributed to lack of resources, understanding of product sponsorship, and difficulties in identifying with the media celebrities. Role models of same sex and similar age was often used for social comparison. Social comparison is used mainly for self-enhancement, rather than self-evaluation.

Research Limitations: The study was from a convenient sample of adolescents in Hong

Kong, a Chinese city with high advancement in terms of economical and advertising development when compared with most other Chinese cities.

Originality: This is the first qualitative study on Chinese adolescents' engagement in social comparison of material possessions.

Keywords: peer influence – role models – media celebrities – consumer psychology

Social comparison of material possessions among adolescents in Hong Kong

Introduction

Social comparison has been an important concept in the study of how consumers process idealized advertising images and form self-evaluation (Gulas and McKeage, 2000; Richins, 1991). Originally proposed by Festinger (1954), social comparison theory states that people have a need for self-evaluation. They use a stable source of self-reference against which to assess their attitudes and compare their opinions and abilities with similar others. Wheeler and Miyake (1992) extended the scope of social comparison theory to include the dimensions of physical appearance and eating habits. Furthermore, when objective sources are not available, individuals use other people as reference points for judging the validity of their attitudes and action (Jones and Gerard, 1967).

The context for social comparison in a Chinese culture is different from that of western culture. Hierarchy is legitimate and conformity to group norms is acceptable in Confucian tradition, which is a foundation of Chinese culture. Social comparison of goods as a means to locate an individual's position in the social hierarchy is therefore encouraged (Wong and Ahuvia, 1998). Hu (1944) proposed that the Chinese concept of face comprises of two elements, including *lien* (or moral face) that represents one's moral character, and *mianzi* (or social face) that describes status and success. The

value of *mianzi* (or social face) for an individual will encourage the owning of symbolic goods to improve personal visibility within the social hierarchy (Wong and Ahuvia, 1998). The collective characteristic of Chinese culture encourages the use of material possessions to identify peers and establish long-term social relations. Both of these contribute to the engagement of social comparison of material possessions.

Hong Kong provides an ideal setting for the study of social comparison because wealth is highly visible. Many brand-name products and expensive clothing lines are available. Hong Kong youth, in particular, engage in conspicuous consumption. For instance, a survey of over 2,000 secondary school students aged from 15 to 18 revealed that two thirds of Hong Kong adolescents felt satisfied after consumption and thirteen percent reported an increase in self-esteem after consumption. About twelve percent perceived that consumption could enhance their personal image (*Ming Pao*, 2004).

Previous studies on social comparison put emphasis on comparison of physical appearance and financial success (Dittmar and Howard, 2004; Gulas and McKeage, 2000; Tiggemann and McGill, 2004). Most of these studies employed experimental designs. There is a lack of observational and field-based studies on social comparison and material possessions among adolescents. Adolescents play an important part in the market place as they exert great influence over personal and family spending across a

variety of product categories (Gregor-Paxton and John, 1995). Adolescents can also experience an identity crisis and need new role models for the formation of a new identity (Erikson, 1980). These are phenomena which may be related and provide fertile ground for research outside of the laboratory. The current study initiates a qualitative approach to the literature by examining social comparison of material possessions among adolescents in day-to-day living.

The research questions of the study are:

1. To what extent do adolescents engage in social comparison of possessions?
2. What are the products that they use for comparison?
3. Whom do they compare with?
4. What are the motives for social comparison?

The study can provide marketers insight about advertising message construction for adolescents in the Chinese context. The marketers can gain insights about the design of message strategies. For example, marketers can identify product categories that most suitable for using social comparison and peer acceptance appeals. The results can also help advertisers to decide whether same-sex models or different-sex models should be used in advertisements that target adolescents.

Literature review

Due to the combination of rapid body growth and the sexual changes of puberty

during adolescence, the early identity formed by children in childhood is no longer appropriate. Adolescents enter a period of identity crisis (Erikson, 1980). As adolescence is a transitional stage between childhood and adulthood, adolescents have to formulate new identities and to establish autonomy from their parents. Adolescents tend to seek personal relationships that give value to their perspectives and ensure that their feelings are understood. Peer groups, with their shared experience, are an inevitable source of these relationships. Peers share much of their inner feelings and secrets, and are knowledgeable about each other's feelings. Additionally, people tend to compare themselves with similar others on related attributes (Miller and Prentice, 1996). The frequent interaction with peers, even more so than with parents, can also lead to social comparison. In this case, peers become role models for the individual, influencing the attitudes and opinions of young people.

Social comparison

Social comparison theory was first introduced by Festinger (1954), positing that individuals have a need to evaluate their opinions and abilities. In the absence of objective criteria, individuals will engage in social comparison with others.

Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory hypothesized that comparison occurs within groups and in face-to-face situations with similar others. Since its original formulation, social comparison theory has undergone a few revisions. First, studies

found that social comparison would occur with an individual dissimilar to oneself (Martin and Kennedy, 1993) and in situations beyond face-to-face interactions (Richins, 1991; Morrison *et al.*, 2004). For example, Richins (1991) found that female participants engaged in social comparison with idealized images of physical attraction in fashion and cosmetic advertisements. Second, social comparison occurs on dimensions beyond attitudes and opinions. For example, individuals engaged in social comparison of physical appearance and eating habits (Wheeler and Miyake, 1992). Third, Festinger (1954) proposed that the motive of social comparison is to create an accurate self-evaluation. Wood (1989) added that individuals engage in social comparison for self-improvement and self-enhancement as well as self-evaluation. Individuals who perceive a discrepancy in their object of social comparison are motivated to close the gap on that dimension of interest (Wood, 1989; Wood and Taylor, 1991).

The emotional consequences of social comparison appear to be influenced by the direction of comparison (Schiffman and Kanuk, 2004). Downward comparison (i.e. comparing oneself to someone worse off on the dimension of interest) is believed to enhance subjective well-being, while upward comparison (i.e. comparing oneself to someone who is better off on the dimension of interest) is believed to decrease well-being (Wheeler and Miyake, 1992). Individuals who engage in social

comparison with remote referents such as idealized media images will create inflated and unrealistically high estimations of their models' standards of living (Kasser, 2002). The larger gap between the ideal and young people's actual standard of living triggers the desire for materialistic possessions (Sirgy 1998). A study of young Japanese adults found that upward social comparison was related to dissatisfaction with one's possessions. Respondents who engaged in upward social comparison demonstrated a higher desire for more possessions and higher consumption intentions (Ogden and Venkat, 2001).

Vicarious role models

Vicarious models are figures or celebrities who gain popularity among people through mass media channels. A study of 1,543 adolescents found that both male and female respondents engaged in social comparison of physical appearance with idealized body images in magazines and television programs (Morrison *et al.*, 2004). Media celebrities readily become targets for idol worshipping, especially among young people. Idol worship has become common among young people around the world (Yue and Cheung, 2000). They could exert a tremendous influence on their followers' formation of values, attitudes, and behaviors. Their lifestyles, dressing and make-up are often imitated by their fans (Schultz *et al.*, 1991).

Studies that examined the patterns of attachment to pop stars have also outlined

some antecedents to idol worshipping, such as autonomy from parents and affective identification needs (Greene and Adams-Price, 1990). It is believed that idol worship among young people may stem from a developmental need for identification and intimacy (Josselson, 1991). Adolescents develop secondary attachments to media figures in addition to relations with family and peers. These attachments facilitate adolescents' transition to adulthood and the formation of a mature adult identity (Erikson, 1968).

The influence of celebrity endorsement on young people's purchase decisions can be explained by several models. First, the source attractiveness model predicts that a physically attractive source will be more persuasive than a source perceived as not so attractive (Kahle and Homer, 1985). Second, the match-up hypothesis proposes that the physical attractiveness of the celebrity endorser may only enhance product-based and ad-based evaluations if the product's characteristics "match-up" with the image portrayed by the celebrity (Kamins, 1990). Third, young people are attracted to brands endorsed by their idolized celebrities because they want to acquire the idealized self-identity for self-enhancement (Swann et al., 1982). This can also be seen as a need to compensate for the particular image that young people do not possess (Woodruff-Burton and Elliott, 2005).

Social comparison of possessions with vicarious role models is certainly

desirable to the commercial world. Previous research indicates that direct role models (e.g. fathers and mothers) and vicarious role models (e.g. favorite entertainers) influenced adolescents in brand selection, brand switching and lodging consumer complaints (Martin and Bush, 2000). Consumers reported that they are more likely to use products endorsed by entertainers or famous athletes (Lafferty and Goldsmith, 1999).

Young people in Hong Kong are likely to engage in high levels of social comparison in the formation of their identities. A study of 826 high school and university students in Hong Kong and mainland China indicated that Hong Kong respondents select significantly more idealism – romanticism – absolutism oriented celebrities in model selection than respondents from mainland China (Yue and Cheung, 2000). Idealism, romanticism and absolutism in Yue and Cheung's (2000) study refer to the attributes describing the role models. For example, idealism includes four adjectives of very talented, attractive-looking, powerful, and extraordinary in manner. The authors conclude that worship of idols among Hong Kong young people was driven by consumerism and superficial romance (Chan *et al.*, 1998; Cheung and Yue, 2000). In a qualitative study using drawings, adolescents in Hong Kong perceived negative personality traits of wealthy people. The author suggested that adopting goods as status symbols will create social difference between adolescents

who are involved in social comparison (Chan, 2006). In a qualitative study of purchase of luxurious brands among young consumers in Hong Kong, respondents expressed great aspiration to the lifestyles and consumption patterns of celebrity models (Chan, 2005). A survey of 281 adolescents aged 11 to 20 in Hong Kong found that social comparison of consumption with friends was higher than social comparison of consumption with media figures (Chan and Prendergast, 2007).

At issue, then, is whether young people engage in social comparison of material possessions in Hong Kong. The objective of this study is to examine the degree of social comparison, the motives of social comparison, and the characteristics of the referent points used in social comparison.

Methodology

This study employed qualitative interviews. A qualitative methodology was justified because it allows for an exploratory examination of a phenomenon in which the relevant variables have yet to be identified (Wimmer and Dominick, 1997).

Because adolescents can engage in social comparison of a variety of products with a wide range of people regardless of direct personal interaction, interviewing was the preferred data collection method. Qualitative interviews were more aligned with a participant's cognitive process of engagement in social comparison of material possessions (McCracken, 1988).

Interview participants were 64 Chinese adolescents aged 13 to 17 recruited through personal network. A quota was set to recruit equal number of male and female participants. Undergraduate students of Hong Kong Baptist University were trained to understand the objectives of this study and how to conduct the interviews. Interviewers obtained verbal permission of the parents before they interviewed the respondents. Fifty-eight participants were students and four were full time employees. For the four full time employees, the mean monthly salary was HK\$5,125 (equivalent to US\$657). For the full time students, the source of income was allowance from the parents. They received on average HK\$245 (equivalent to US\$31) of weekly allowance. The interviews took about fifteen to twenty-five minutes. The study was conducted in Cantonese (a Chinese dialect spoken in Hong Kong) in March 2005.

A protocol of four open-ended questions was used in interviews. The protocol was pre-tested by conducting an informal interview with a Chinese female aged 15. The first question was “Have you ever tried to compare what other people possess, so as to evaluate your status of material possessions?” The second question was “Whom do you usually compare with?” The third one was “Have you ever tried to compare what famous people on media possess, so as to evaluate your status of material possessions?” The last one was “What kind of famous people do you usually compare with?”

The interviewer made an audio recording of each interview and later transcribed it in Chinese. The selected quotes were translated into English by the author. Marshall and Rossman's (1999) comparison analysis method was used throughout the data analysis process to link data by constantly comparing and contrasting them (Strauss, 1987). The transcripts were analyzed question by question for dominant themes. These themes are the focus of this article.

Direct role models in this study refer to individuals identified as referents in social comparison of material possessions with whom participants have direct personal contact. Vicarious role models in this study refer to individuals identified as referents in social comparison of material possessions that participants have little or no direct personal contact (Martin and Bush, 2000).

Results

Social comparison with direct role models

Results show that social comparison of material possessions was common among respondents. Forty-three out of 64 participants reported that they had engaged in social comparison with others. The remaining twenty-one participants mentioned that they did not see a need to compare with others in terms of possessions because they think every person is unique. Table 1 shows the products related with social comparison reported by sex of the respondents. The products that respondents most

frequently compared with others were publicly consumed goods such as mobile phones, handbags/wallets, clothing, watches and sneakers. Respondents paid a lot of attention to brand names and product features. For example, they would compare if the mobile phones can take pictures and if the handbag bears a famous brand name. Male participants were more likely to make comparisons of computers and game consoles. Female participants were more likely to make comparisons of clothing and handbags. All except one participant reported upward social comparison. Here is one example:

Sneakers are what I usually observe, because I play sports. Many of my teammates buy new and expensive sneakers. If I want to be “in” and stylish, I have to look cool. I can’t buy cheap products. Others would pay more respect to me if I appear to be rich. My friends and I always compete with each other to see who get the trendiest or the most expensive trainers. If you want to be popular, you have to buy a lot (female, 15).

[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

The motives of social comparison are summarized in Table 2. Results showed that social comparisons with direct role models were often motivated by the desire to be trendy, rich, superior, respected by others, and attractive. Aspiration to be popular was reported only by male participants while aspiration to be beautiful was reported only by female participants.

[TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

Characteristics of direct role models

Participants were asked whom they usually engaged in social comparison with.

Table 3 summarizes the characteristics of referents reported by the participants.

Results showed that they most often compared with close friends or classmates.

Participants reported that they had frequent interaction with close friends and

classmates. They visited one another's homes. They went out shopping together. They

had chances seeing friends wearing casual clothing instead of school uniforms. In

other words, friends were highly accessible. Results indicated that upward social

comparison occurred more frequently than downward social comparison. Nineteen

participants reported that they compared possessions with wealthier friends and eight

compared with friends of similar social and economic backgrounds. Two participants

reported that they compared with less wealthy friends.

Two participants reported that they paid much attention to people wearing trendy

clothes on the street. It was interesting to note that sometimes upward social

comparison was initiated by wealthy friends. Three participants reported that those

wealthy friends often showed off their new and luxurious possessions. They often

asked around what types of possessions others were having and were keen to make

comparison. One female participant reported that she compared her possessions with

children living in rural China. She felt content with what she had now after the

comparison.

[TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE]

Social comparison with vicarious role models

Forty out of 64 participants reported that they never compared possessions with famous people in the media. The remaining 24 participants reported that they did not compare possessions with famous people in the media. Role models compared were movie stars, popular singers, sports celebrities, and models in advertisements. Social comparison with vicarious role models was less prevalent than social comparison with direct role models. The reason most frequently reported by the participants was that they could not afford the products owned by the media celebrities. Seven participants gave this reason. Six respondents perceived that media celebrities were too remote to serve as role models. Five participants pointed out that the media celebrities did not really own the products. The products were sponsored by the advertisers. They therefore found it meaningless to engage in social comparison with them. Other reasons were media celebrities not attractive, too old, or not of the same style. Twenty out of 64 participants reported that they have engaged in social comparison with vicarious role models. Table 4 summarizes the product categories involved in social comparison with vicarious role models. Products frequently involved in social comparison were clothing, mobile phones and cars. Male participants were more

likely to compare electronic goods with vicarious role models. Female participants were more likely to compare clothing with vicarious role models.

The motives of social comparison are summarized in Table 5. Results showed that social comparison with vicarious role models was often motivated by the desire to be trendy, rich, popular or appealing to the other sex. Again, aspiration to be popular was reported only by male participants while attracting the other sex was reported only by female participants.

[TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE]

[TABLE 5 ABOUT HERE]

Characteristics of vicarious role models

Results found that participants most frequently mentioned movie stars, actors in television dramas, youth idols and models in advertisements as reference persons for social comparison. They chose these referent persons mainly because of beauty, trendiness, and popularity.

I like to compare with those young movie stars. They look so good in their trendy clothes (male, 17).

When Twins (a group of two female singers in Hong Kong) wear adidas clothing, I'll go and buy it. They are my idols. Also, guys love the products owned by female celebrities. I'd buy those products after seeing them on TV, because I want to gain attention from boys (female, 15).

Very often I pay attention to models in advertisements with beautiful skin. They are so lucky because they can afford expensive skincare products. I don't have

enough money. When people ask me which brand of skin care products I'm using, I just make up some names (female, 16).

Participants were more likely to compare with same-sex models than with opposite-sex models. Participants were also more likely to compare with vicarious role models that are of similar age.

[TABLE 6 ABOUT HERE]

Consequence of social comparison

We did not ask explicitly about consequence of social comparison but some interviewees brought it up spontaneously. The consequences of upward social comparison were mostly negative. The consequences of social comparison with direct role models include creating desire to buy or own the product (eight times), feeling inferior or outdated (eight times), feeling envious (four times), feeling inadequate in material possessions (three times), lodging a purchase request to parents (twice), and motivated to work harder (once). The consequences of social comparison with vicarious role models include feeling inadequate in material possessions (four times), creating purchase desire (three times), feeling envious (three times), and feeling inferior (once). Here is an example of the negative feeling generated from social comparison with direct role models.

I remember a year ago when polyphonic ring tone became popular, many of my classmates have bought new mobile phone models with this kind of ring tone. My mobile phone however, did not have this function. I always thought their mobile phones were better. Since I didn't want my outdated ring tone to be

noticed, I switched it to silent mode (female, 16).

Discussion

The current study attempts to examine the engagement of social comparison of material possessions among adolescents in Hong Kong. The following discussion will cover the extent of social comparison, the products involved, the type of role models involved, and motives for social comparison.

First, social comparison of material possessions was prevalent among participants. They more often compared with direct role models and they less often compared with vicarious role models. This finding was consistent with that obtained through a quantitative survey (Chan and Prendergast, 2007). While other studies found that adolescents engaged in social comparison of physical appearance and eating habits (Wheeler and Miyake, 1992), the current study found that adolescents engaged in social comparison of material possessions.

The products that they frequently compared were mobile phones, handbags, clothing and accessories. These products shared a common characteristic of having physical contacts with the body. These products were reported by adolescents to be associated with someone who is identified as having a lot of new and expensive branded goods in a drawing study (Chan, 2006). The result indicates that mobile phone, handbag and wallets, clothing and accessories are most likely used by

adolescents to confirm or extend their self-images. Product involved in social comparison with direct role models and vicarious role models showed much commonality. The only difference is that clothing singles out as the most frequently mentioned product category involved in social comparison with vicarious role models while clothing is one of the three most frequently mentioned product categories involved in social comparison with direct role models.

A variety of different self-images have been discussed in consumer research literature, including actual self-image, ideal self-image, social self-image, and ideal social self-image (Schiffman and Kanuk, 2004). The motives for social comparison indicate that participants were most concerned about ideal social self-images. This can be seen from the high frequency of mentioning the aspiration to be richer, superior, and more fashionable. It indicates that social comparison among adolescents focuses more on self-improvement than self-evaluation. In other words, participants are looking for ways to become more “ideal” among their social circles. The strong emphasis on ideal social self-image indicates the overwhelming importance of *mianzi* among consumers in the Chinese culture. Chinese adolescents put much emphasis on the public meanings of material possessions. They demonstrated a strong desire to use public symbolic goods to express their locations within the social hierarchy. This is different from Western society that symbolic goods are used to express one’s internal

self (Wong and Ahuvia, 1998).

The current study found that brand name is one of the focal points of social comparison. Participants pay much attention to what brands significant others are buying. The result was consistent with a previous study that by early adolescence, self-brand connections would be characterized by abstract and symbolic associations, including personality traits, user images, and reference group membership (Chaplin and John, 2005). It also support John's (1999) consumer socialization model that young consumers at the reflective stage (11-16 years old) would develop a sense of the social meaning and prestige associated with certain types of products and brand names.

Direct role models most frequently reported by participants were close friends or wealthier friends. Peer communication and interactions are closely related with social comparison with direct role models. Upward social comparison with direct role models is more prevalent than downward social comparison. In-group comparison was a result of frequent interaction and communication between group members. As adolescents went out shopping with friends and visited friends' house, they would observe others' material possessions and engage in communication about consumption as well as social comparison of possessions. The link between peer communication and social comparison with friends was consistent with the positive

correlation coefficient found between the two variables in a survey setting (Chan and Prendergast, 2007). It was interesting to find that peer communication and social comparison were sometimes initiated by wealthier friends who want to show off their newly acquired possessions.

In terms of vicarious role models for social comparison, the current study found that participants less frequently compared with media celebrities. Similar to previous studies that young consumers engaged in social comparison of physical attractiveness and financial success with models in magazines and television advertising (Morrison *et al.*, 2004; Tiggemann and McGill, 2004), the current study found that participants engage in social comparison of material possessions with vicarious role models.

Social comparison with vicarious role models was less prevalent than social comparison with direct role models. Our evidence indicates that limited resources, understanding of product sponsorship as a marketing practice, and perceived distance with vicarious role models were the main reasons of not engaging in social comparison with them. It suggests that adolescents are well aware of the soaring prices of the prestigious goods and their constraints in available resources.

Participants pointed out that the products used by vicarious role models were sponsored by marketers and these role models may not like or use the products. It shows that participants in the age range of 13 to 17 had some understanding of

product sponsorship and product placements in mass media. This understanding seems to shelter them from the social influence of the media celebrities.

Understanding of this particular marketing communication activity is not covered in John's (1999) consumer socialization model. The study suggests that media education about product sponsorship may help young consumers develop defense mechanism against media celebrities as commercial socializing agents.

Some participants found the vicarious model too remote as referents for social comparison. The marketing implication is that media celebrities used as role models for consumption should be accessible to the young consumers. One way to shorten the perceived distance is to create personal interaction between the media celebrities endorsing the products and the target audience through phone-in broadcast programs or online chat-rooms.

Vicarious role models are mainly movie stars, popular singers, and television celebrities. As suggested by Cheung and Yue (2000), vicarious role models are particularly appealing to young people in Hong Kong because they gain access to wealth and beauty easily and quickly. Furthermore, they all seem to live an extravagant life and are well received by the society. All these appear to be encouraging young people to stay cool and superior by comparing possessions with their idols, and eventually to imitate them. Social comparison is therefore associated

with young people's desire of hedonic or materialistic satisfaction, as well as identification with power, wealth and social status (Cheung and Yue, 2000).

Participants more often engaged in social comparison with same-sex model than opposite-sex model. Previous study indicates that role models are likely to be selected as role models based on specific characteristics with which the young person identify (Martin and Bush, 2000). Same-sex models would be ideal for identification, whereas opposite-sex models would be targets for remote intimacy (Cheung and Yue, 2000).

The evidence suggests that the need for identification is more prominent than the need for remote intimacy among participants. This may explain why young people in Hong Kong often compare themselves with same-sex vicarious role models, and think this would help to attract the attention of the opposite-sex. It supports previous finding that young consumers tend to be influenced by vicarious role models of similar race and same sex (Basow and Howe, 1980; Dates, 1980; King and Multon, 1996; Nicholas *et al.*, 1971). The marketing implication is that advertisers should use same-sex models to communicate to adolescents.

A proposed model for future research

Based on the qualitative interviews, we propose a model about social comparison and consumers' purchase decision that can be tested in future study (see Figure 1).

In the model, a purchase decision can be affected by two types of role models.

Through interacting with friends and communicating about consumption, young consumers engage in upward social comparison with direct role models. Social comparison will encourage the need to identify with in-group members. As a result, the need for social group identification will influence the purchase decision. Through exposure to television programs and advertisements, young consumers may also engage in upward social comparison with vicarious role models. Social comparison will lead to a desire to imitate the celebrities, and this can have an impact on the purchase decision.

To conclude, the current study found that Hong Kong adolescents often engaged in upward social comparison with friends. The products involved in social comparison were branded public goods that can be used to communicate ideal social self-image. Social comparison with direct role models was triggered by peer communication about consumption. Hong Kong adolescents less often engaged in social comparison with media celebrities. This can be attributed to lack of resources, understanding of product sponsorship, and difficulties in identifying with the media celebrities. For those who were keen to compare possessions with media celebrities, they were most likely attracted by same sex models that are glamorous and beautiful.

Table 1. Products involved in social comparison with direct role models

Product	Male	Female	Frequency
Mobile phone	7	6	13
Handbag and wallet	4	9	13
Clothing and accessories	4	9	13
Sneaker	3	4	7
House	2	3	5
PS2/ PSP	5	0	5
Watch	2	3	5
Computer	4	0	4
MP3	2	2	4
Toy	2	1	3
Car	1	1	2
Household appliance	0	2	2
Furniture	0	1	1
Camera	1	0	1
Jewelry	1	0	1

Note: Participants can mention none or more than one product

Table 2. Motives of social comparison with direct role models

Motive	Male	Female	Frequency
be rich and superior	20	20	40
be trendy	17	13	30
not to be looked down by others	2	3	5
popularity	5	0	5
be beautiful and attractive	0	4	4
Self-confidence	1	1	2

Note: Participants can mention none or more than one motive

Table 3. Characteristics of reference persons involved in social comparison with direct role models

Reference person	Frequency
Close friend	32
Wealthier friends	19
Classmates	14
Friends	8
Friends of similar social economic background	8
Friends of same sex/age	5
Classmates of better academic grades	3
“in” people on the street	2
Less wealthy friends	2
Relatives	2
Not so close friends	1
Poor people in rural China	1

Note: Participants can mention none or more than one referent

Table 4. Products involved in social comparison with vicarious role models

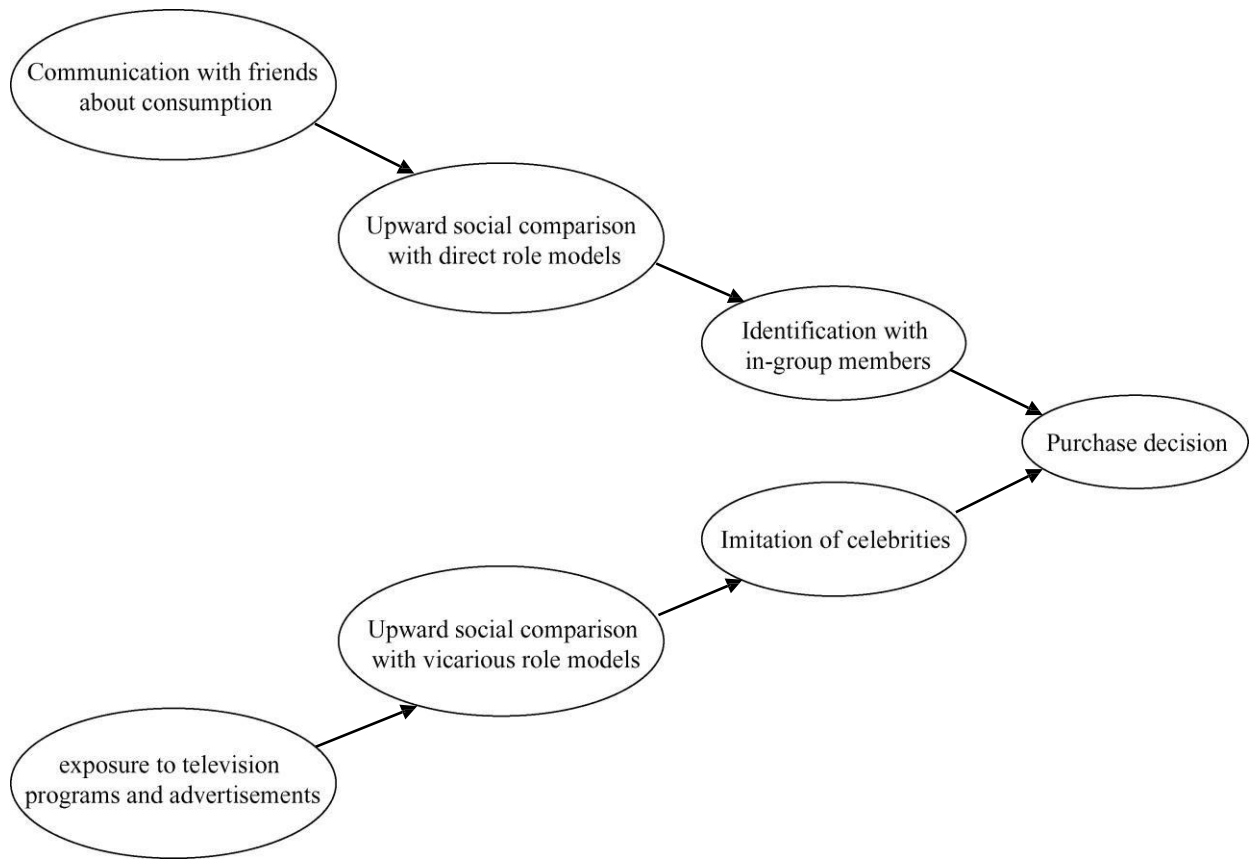
Product	Male	Female	Frequency
Clothing	5	7	12
Mobile phones	3	1	4
Car	2	2	4
House	1	1	2
Watch	2	0	2
Digital camera	2	0	2
Sneaker	2	0	2
Jewelry	1	0	1
Electronic goods	1	0	1

Table 5. Motives of social comparison with vicarious role models

Motive	Male	Female	Frequency
be trendy	4	4	8
be rich and superior	5	3	8
popularity	3	0	3
attract the other sex	0	2	2
imitate the idol	1	1	2
be beautiful and attractive	0	1	1

Note: Participants can mention none or more than one motive

Figure 1. A proposed theoretical model



References

- Basow, S.A. and Howe, K.G. (1980), "Role-model influence: effects of sex and sex-role attitude in college students", *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, Vol. 4 No. 4, pp. 558-72.
- Chan, K. (2005), "Consumption of prestigious brands and source of influence among young people in Hong Kong", *Media Digest*, September, pp. 14-15. (In Chinese)
- Chan, K. (2006), "Young consumers and perception of brands in Hong Kong: a qualitative study", *Journal of Product and Brand Management*, Vol. 15 No. 7, pp. 416-426.
- Chan, K. and Prendergast, G. (2007), "Materialism and social comparison among adolescents", *Social Behavior and Personality: an International Journal*, Vol. 35 No. 2, pp. 213-228.
- Chan, W.T., Cheung, C.K., Lee, T.Y., Leung, K.K. and Liu, S.C. (1998), *Moral Values of Youth in Hong Kong*, Hong Kong: Department of Applied Social Studies, City University of Hong Kong.
- Chaplin, L.N. and John, D.R. (2005), "The development of self-brand connections in children and adolescents", *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 32 June, pp. 119-129.
- Cheung, C.K. and Yue, X.D. (2000), Idol worshipping for vain glory, illusory romance or intellectual learning: A study in Nanjing and Hong Kong. *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth*, Vol. 8, pp. 299-317.
- Dates, J. (1980), "Race, racial attitudes and adolescent perceptions of black television characters", *Journal of Broadcasting*, Vol. 24 No. 4, pp. 549-60.
- Dittmar, H. and Howard, S. (2004), "Thin-ideal internalization and social comparison tendency as moderators of media models' impact on women's body-focused anxiety", *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, Vol. 23 No. 6, pp. 768-791.

- Erikson, E.H. (1968), *Identity, Youth, and Crisis*, Norton, New York.
- Erikson, E.H. (1980), *Identity and the Life Cycle*, Norton, New York.
- Festinger, L. (1954), "A theory of social comparison processes", *Human Relations*, Vol. 7 No. 3, pp. 117-140.
- Greene, A.L. and Adams-Price, C. (1990), "Adolescents' secondary attachments to celebrity figures", *Sex Roles*, Vol. 23 No. 7/8, pp. 335-347.
- Gregor-Paxton and John (1995), "Are young children adaptive decision makers? A study of age differences in information search behavior", *Education Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, Vol. 11 No. 3, pp. 255-274.
- Gulas, C.S. and McKeage, K. (2000), "Extending social comparison: An examination of the unintended consequences of idealized advertising imagery", *Journal of Advertising*, Vol. 29 No. 2, pp. 17-28.
- Hu, H.C. (1944), "The Chinese concept of 'face'", *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 46 No. 1, pp. 45-64.
- John, D.R. (1999), "Consumer socialization of children: a retrospective look at twenty-five years of research", *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 26 December, pp. 183-213.
- Jones, E.E. and Gerard, H. (1967), *Foundations of Social Psychology*, Wiley, New York.
- Josselson, A. (1991), *Finding Herself: Pathways to Identify Development in Women*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, CA.
- Kahle, L.R. and Homer, P.M. (1985), "Physical attractiveness of the celebrity endorser: A social adaptation perspective", *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 11 No. 4, pp. 954-961.
- Kamins, M.A. (1990), "An investigation into the 'match-up' hypothesis in celebrity advertising: when beauty may be only skin deep", *Journal of Advertising*, Vol. 19 No. 1, pp. 4-13.

- Kasser, T. (2002), *The High Price of Materialism*, A Bradford Book, The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA.
- King, M.M. and Multon, K.D. (1996), "The effects of television role models on the career aspirations of African-American junior high school students", *Journal of Career Development*, Vol. 23 No. 2, pp. 111-25.
- Lafferty, B.A. and Goldsmith, R.E. (1999), "Corporate credibility's role in consumers' attitudes and purchase intentions when a high versus a low credibility endorser is used in the ad", *Journal of Business Research*, Vol. 44 No. 2, pp. 109-16.
- Marshall, C. and Rossman, G.B. (1999), *Designing qualitative research* (3rd ed.), Sage, CA.
- Martin, C.A. and Bush, A.J. (2000), "Do role models influence teenagers' purchase intentions and behavior?", *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, Vol. 17 No. 5, pp. 441-453.
- Martin, M.C. and Kennedy, P.F. (1993), "Advertising and social comparison: Consequences for female preadolescents and adolescents", *Psychology and Marketing*, Vol. 10 No. 6, pp. 513-530.
- Miller, D.T. and Prentice, D.A. (1996), "The Construction of social norms and standards", in Higgins, E.T. and Kruglanski, A.W. (Ed.), *Social Psychology: Handbook of Basic Principle*, Guilford, New York, pp. 799-829.
- McCracken, G. (1988), *The Long Interview*, Sage, CA.
- Ming Pao (2004), "Forty percent of students perceived themselves as consumers of education services", *Ming Pao*, 24 December, A12.
- Morrison, T.G., Kalin, R. and Morrison, M.A. (2004), "Body-image evaluation and body-image investment among adolescents: A test of sociocultural and social comparison theories", *Adolescence*, Vol. 39, pp. 155-167.

- Nicholas, K.B., McCarter, R.E. and Heckel, R.V. (1971), "The effects of race and sex on the imitation of television models", *Journal of Social Psychology*, Vol. 85, pp. 315-16.
- Ogden, H.J. and Venkat, R. (2001), "Social comparison and possessions: Japan vs Canada", *Asia Pacific Journal of Marketing and Logistics*, Vol. 13 No. 2, pp. 72-84.
- Richins, M.L. (1991), "Social comparison and the idealized images of advertising", *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 18 June, pp. 71-83.
- Richins, M.L. and Dawson, D. (1992), "A consumer values orientation for materialism and its measurement: Scale development and validation", *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 19 December, pp. 303-316.
- Schiffman, L.G. and Kanuk, L.L. (2004), *Consumer Behavior*, Prentice-Hall, NJ.
- Schultz, Q.J., Anker, R.M., Bratt, J.D., Romanowski, W.D., Worst, J.W. and Zuidervaart, L. (1991), *Dancing in the Dark: Youth, Popular, Culture, and the Electronic Media*, Williams B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Strauss, A.L. (1987), *Qualitative analysis for social scientists*, Cambridge University Press, MA.
- Swann, W.J., Seroussi, A.L., and Giesler, R.B. (1992), "Why people self verify", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 66 No. 5, pp. 857-869.
- Tiggemann, M. and McGill, B. (2004), "The role of social comparison in the effect of magazine advertisements on women's mood and body dissatisfaction", *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, Vol. 23 No.1, pp. 23-44.
- Wheeler, L. and Miyake, K. (1992), "Social comparison in everyday life", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 62, pp. 760-773.
- Wimmer, R.D. and Dominick, J.R. (1997), *Mass media research: An introduction* (5th ed.). Wadsworth, CA.

- Wood, J.V. (1989), "Theory and research concerning social comparisons of personal attributes", *Psychology Bulletin*, Vol. 106 No. 2, pp. 231-248.
- Wood, J.V. and Taylor, K.L. (1991). *Social Comparison: Contemporary Theory and Research*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, NJ.
- Woodruff-Burton, H., and Elliott, R. (2005), "Compensatory consumption and narrative identity theory", in Menon, G. and Rao, A.R. (Eds.), *Advances in Consumer Research*, Vol. 32, Association for Consumer Research, Duluth, MN, pp. 461-465.
- Wong, N.Y. and Ahuvia, A.C. (1998), "Personal taste and family face: Luxury consumption in Confucian and Western societies", *Psychology and Marketing*, Vol. 15 No. 5, pp. 423-441.
- Yue, X.D. and Cheung, K.C. (2000), "Selection of favorite idols and models among Chinese young people: a comparative study in Hong Kong and Nanjing", *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, Vol. 24 No. 1, pp. 91-98.