

# A Study of the Relationship between Vanity Trait and Social Comparison

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**Abstract.** The aim of this study is to investigate the relationship between vanity traits and social comparison among music fans. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12-18 year-old adolescents in Taiwan. The results of this study show that: (1) fans with high level of concerns with their physical appearance were likely to make “lateral” social comparison; (2) fans with strong view on physical appearance were likely to make “downward” social comparison; (3) fans with high level of concerns with achievements were likely to make “upward” social comparison; and (4) fans with strong view on achievements were likely to make “lateral” social comparison. A key contribution of this study is the development of these four research propositions.

**Keywords:** Vanity Traits, Social Comparison, Human Brand

## 1. Introduction

Idol worship has been an important research topic in the realm of consumer behavior during the past decade [1, 2, 3, 4]. In particular, idol worship is a common phenomenon among adolescents [3]. Fans usually identify and imitate the behavior of their favorable idol. This can potentially trigger strong attachments to their idol. A human brand is made from the combination of an idol’s name, reputation and image [5]. In short, idols can be considered human brands. Thomson [5] addresses consumers’ attachments to human brands, a term that refers to any well-known persona who is the subject of marketing communications efforts (p.104). U.S. media and entertainment industry finds that a successful human brand can generate huge profits [5].

The enhancement of personal physical appearance and achievement is the main focus of vain individuals [6]. Vanity-related traits are relevant to a number of consumer attitudes and behaviors such as materialism, price-based prestige sensitivity, cosmetics use, fashion, and clothing concerns [7, p.308]. Vain individuals have the strong desire not only to attract others’ attention but also to showcase their achievements. These individuals tend to compare themselves with others in order to evaluate their beliefs, abilities or appearance [8]. Similarly, they may from time to time compare themselves with idealized media images such as entertainers, singers, actors or models [7]. In sum, social comparison is a process of identifying similarities or differences between others and the self [7]. Workman and Lee [7] have pointed out that vanity is an important variable in social comparison theory and that little research has been conducted on the relationship between vanity traits and social comparison. Therefore, this study aims to explore the relationship between vanity traits and social comparison among music fans via in-depth semi-structured interviews.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Human Brand and Attachment

Bowlby’s [9] attachment theory describes the relationship between parent and infant. An attachment is an emotion-laden target-specific bond between a person and a specific object [9, 10, p.77]. Thomson [5] addresses the strength of a human brand attachment and defines it as the intensity of a person’s target-specific emotional bond with a human brand. In other words, fans reflect their own feelings towards the human brand. Attachments differ from intensity, and stronger attachments are associated with stronger feelings of connection, affection and passion [9]. Strong human brand attachment by fans imply strong and

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positive emotional bond between themselves and human brands. Media and entertainment marketing executives need to understand the determinants for strong human brand attachment in order to maintain long-lasting relationship with fans.

## **2.2. Vanity Trait and Social Comparison**

Consumer vanity consists of physical vanity and achievement vanity [6, 11]. Netemeyer et al. [6] have defined physical vanity as “an excessive concern for, and/or a positive (and perhaps inflated) view of, one’s physical appearance” while achievement vanity has been defined as “an excessive concern for, and/or a positive (and perhaps inflated) view of, one’s personal achievements” (p.612). Vanity can be categorized into two psychological levels: (1) concerns for their own physical appearance and achievements; and (2) how others view or evaluate them [6, 12]. In sum, vanity can be categorized into four trait components: (1) Physical concern: a positive or inflated cognition of one’s physical appearance (e.g., “I consider myself very beautiful”); (2) Physical view: how others view or evaluate one’s physical appearance (e.g., “I want others to admire my physical appearance”); (3) Achievement concern: a positive or inflated cognition of one’s personal achievements (e.g., “I consider myself to be very successful in my own profession”); and (4) Achievement view: how others view or evaluate one’s achievement (e.g., “I want others to respect my professional accomplishments”) [6, 12].

Social comparison is a process of assessing and comparing the self with others [7, p.308]. According to Festinger [8], human beings compare with others in order to evaluate their opinions and abilities. In general, individuals choose to compare with people who are similar to themselves as this can generate a more accurate evaluation of opinions and abilities [7, 8]. Individuals choose different social comparison objects as a result of different social comparison motives [13]. Seltzer [13] have presented three social comparison objects: (1) Upward comparison: comparison with better-off others; (2) Lateral comparison: comparison with similar others; (3) Downward comparison: comparison with worse-off others. In other words, individuals can achieve self-improvement by upward comparison; self-evaluation by lateral comparison; self-enhancement by downward comparison [14]. Workman and Lee [7] have suggested that vanity is an important variable in social comparison since the concerns for physical appearance and achievements and the view of others on one’s vanity can be influenced by comparing with others. Therefore, in order to maintain long-lasting relationship with music fans, media and entertainment marketing executives need to better understand the effect of vanity traits and social comparison theory on these fans’ decision-making process.

## **3. Methodology**

Pilot interviews and informal discussion were held with experts in idol worship and high school students who had purchased music products in the past four weeks. These interview questions which were generated via an extensive literature review explored people’s understanding of vanity traits and social comparison as well as their feelings about the questions asked. Critically, it allowed the researchers to determine whether the interview questions posed were being interpreted in the manner in which they were intended, and that there was not accidental ambiguity that might not be picked up during a standard piloting phase. All comments and suggestions were discussed among the research group as a whole. Once a consensus on appropriate changes was reached, a final draft of the interview questions was compiled. Then twenty Taiwanese students aged 12-18 who love to listen to pop music were the target for this study because they are the main group engaged in buying pop music CDs. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted on these students to enable the researchers to examine the relationships between human brand attachment, vanity traits, and social comparison. The questions asked during the interviews included respondents’ favorite idol singers as well as their perception of physical appearance and achievement vanity. Main interview questions are included in Table 1. Each interview lasted between 1 to 2 hours. All interviews were taped and the transcripts were sent to the interviewees for validation. Only three interviewees had minor amendments to their transcripts. The transcripts were later coded and analyzed using qualitative content analysis by Miles and Huberman [15]. The analysis of the interview transcripts was conducted in a cyclical manner and the results were checked by other experts in the field. The external experts were asked to trace the logical flow of the research study, research questions, the findings and analysis and identification of four

research propositions and thereby identifying any gaps in the chain of evidence [16]. The findings from these information gathering approaches were analyzed iteratively by the researchers on an individual level, differences reconciled and then a judgment made on each of the major themes. Questions relating to a particular research theme, for example, concerns for physical appearance, were examined as a cluster. These steps were taken to enhance the construct validity, reliability and overall quality of the research [16].

Table 1: Main Interview Questions

<p><u>Human Brand and Attachment</u></p> <p>Who is your favorite singer or music artist and why?</p> <p>What do you like most about your favorite singer or music artist (e.g., physical appearance, achievements etc.)? Why?</p> <p>How long have you been following this particular singer or music artist? Why and how?</p> <p>Are you willing to make sacrifices for your favorite singer or music artist and why?</p> <p><u>Vanity Traits</u></p> <p>How important is your own physical appearance to you and why?</p> <p>Are you concerned about your own physical appearance and why?</p> <p>What do you think about other people evaluating or judging your physical appearance and why?</p> <p>Do you think that your favorite singer or music artist’s achievements and artistic talents should be recognized by others? Why?</p> <p>Are you concerned about your own achievements and why?</p> <p>Do you think that your achievements and talents should be recognized by others? Why?</p> <p>Do you imitate your favorite singer or music artist? Why and how?</p> <p><u>Social Comparison</u></p> <p>Are you satisfied with your own physical appearance and achievements? Why?</p> <p>Would you compare your physical appearance and achievements with your favorite singer or music artist? Why and how?</p> <p>Would you like to have the look and achievements of your favorite singer or music artist? Why?</p>
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## 4. Results

This study examines the relationships between music fans’ vanity traits and social comparison. Depending on the type of social comparison motives, fans would choose their most suitable social comparison objects. This study attempts to understand the effect of music fans’ vanity traits and social comparison on their decision-making process.

### 4.1. Vanity (physical concern) and Social Comparison

Fans with physical vanity were likely to be concerned with their physical appearance. Their social comparison motives focuses on self-evaluation via comparing with people who are similar to themselves (e.g., their classmates or friends). For example, one respondent said: *“I don’t care what other people think of my weight. But I do hope that my own physical appearance and health will be getting better each day. I do look at myself in the mirror before going to school daily, just to see if I have gained any weight. I exercise from time to time. Some of my classmates have said to me that I am pretty. So I believe that I am not a bad looker when comparing with others.”* Thus, the proposition is proposed as follows:

Proposition 1: Fans with high level of concerns with their physical appearance are likely to make “lateral” social comparison.

### 4.2. Vanity (physical view) and Social Comparison

Fans with strong view on physical appearance were likely to take note of how others evaluate their physical appearance. They tended to undertake social comparison (by comparing with people who are worse off than them) in order to further enhance their self-esteem and confidence. For instance, one respondent

stated that: *“I do care about what other people think of me as a good first impression is very important. Many of my classmates make their lasting impressions and judgments about others within the first few minutes of an encounter. They don’t pay much attention to people who are not good looking.....I want to be at least 170cm tall as my younger sister is almost taller than me now. I definitely need to be taller than my younger sister.”* Thus, the proposition is proposed as follows:

Proposition 2: Fans with strong view on physical appearance are likely to make “downward” social comparison.

#### **4.3. Vanity (achievement concern) and Social Comparison**

Fans with achievement vanity were likely to be concerned with their talents and would pay a lot of attention to the voice and dance by their favorite idol. They were also likely to imitate their favorite idol and actively work to improve their skills in singing and dancing. These fan strived to make self-improvement by comparing with people who were better than them. For example, one respondent said: *“Talents and achievements are extremely important and in fact I think they are more important than one’s physical appearance. You can work hard to develop your talents and accomplish great achievements..... However, I feel it is a bit superficial to focus on one’s physical appearance since you are born with it. Make-ups and plastic surgery are not natural. .... The reason why I like my idol is that she can sing in English and I hope that one day my English proficiency will be as good as hers.”* Thus, the proposition is proposed as follows:

Proposition 3: Fans with high level of concerns with achievements are likely to make “upward” social comparison.

#### **4.4. Vanity (achievement view) and Social Comparison**

Fans with strong view on achievements were likely to take note of how others evaluate their achievements. They hoped to obtain similar achievements of their favorite idol in order to gain peer group approval as well as to improve interpersonal relationship. They were also likely to involve in a group which possesses similar beliefs and values to theirs as well as to conduct a self-evaluation through this participation. In other words, this type of fans was likely to conduct self-evaluation with people who were similar to themselves. One respondent stated that: *“I do care about what other people think of me. I want to work hard to improve my skills in dancing in order to gain peer group approval.....I want to show my talents to other people. I want to share my talents to my friends. I want to improve my interpersonal skills via learning dancing with others.”* Therefore, the last proposition is as follows:

Proposition 4: Fans with strong view on achievements are likely to make “lateral” social comparison.

### **5. Conclusion and Implications**

The aim of this study is to investigate the relationship between vanity traits and social comparison among music fans. Our study results show that: (1) fans with high level of concerns with their physical appearance were likely to make “lateral” social comparison; (2) fans with strong view on physical appearance were likely to make “downward” social comparison; (3) fans with high level of concerns with achievements were likely to make “upward” social comparison; and (4) fans with strong view on achievements were likely to make “lateral” social comparison.

Current knowledge about the relationship between vanity traits and social comparison is very limited as little research has been conducted in this area. Hence, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted to understand the motives and decision-making process of music fans in adopting social comparison. A key contribution of this study is the development of the four research propositions. The results may assist media and entertainment marketing executives to develop their own approaches or strategies to better manage the opportunities and threats with respect to the behaviour and attitudes of music fans.

Finally, results from only twenty semi-structured interviews were presented in this study and the findings need to be looked at in this context. It would be interesting to conduct the research in other countries and with different age groups. This research relied on the information provided at a particular point in time. Further research could take a longitudinal approach as the behavior, beliefs, and opinions of music fans are

likely to change over time. Alternatively, the study could be replicated in a few years' time to examine how the four propositions have changed.

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