

# Social Comparison with Groups Portrayed in Online News

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**Abstract:** *The current investigation<sup>1</sup> differs from earlier researches in at least two points. It aims to test the effects of selective exposure to headlines depicting groups on the internet users. In formulating news, our investigation takes into account Lockwood's finding (2000), that people make more often use of downward social comparison when they cannot imagine to get into a situation like their selection target. Participants (N = 161) of a single age group were exposed to selective exposure to manipulated online headlines focused on groups living in poverty or luxury. Results indicate that the level of self-esteem did not influence the direction of social comparisons. Selective exposure to news by gender shows that while women chose significantly frequent news on worse-off others, men preferred negatively valenced ones on groups living in luxury. Downward comparison is most*

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*significant when both the news depicting groups in poverty and news on groups living in luxury are positive. Contrary to our hypothesis based on Wheeler and Miyake's findings (1992), participants in a bad mood favoured mostly (weak tendency) downward comparison, meanwhile those in good mood preferred news about better-off others to news about worse-off others significantly frequent.*

**Keywords:** *social comparison, selective exposure to online news, high perceived control, groups living in very bad or very good social condition.*

## **Theoretical background**

By definition "Social comparison involves thinking about one or more other people in relation to the self" (Wood, Choi & Gaucher, 2007). However, social comparison – in a wider sense – as a reference to physically or virtually present other is decisive factor in constructing, restructuring and developing of the self (İluğ, 2009). This is the case with the media consumption as well. Through media consumption social comparisons often take place. Even if it does not involve interactions, a large portion of the daily social encounters occurs through media consumption (Knobloch-Westerwick & Hastall, 2006).

In social psychology the term of social comparison has been used in an increasingly broader sense for the last decades (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007). Festinger (1954) originally envisaged it focusing especially on abilities and opinions but nowadays it is even assumed, "that impression formation (or person perception) necessarily involves some social comparison" (Dunning, 2000). Forsyth goes further and in a recent chapter on social comparison in groups (2000, *apud* Buunk, A. P. and Gibbons, F. X., 2007, 16) states that a wide range of classical social psychological phenomena now can be considered as social comparison phenomena. The broadening of mainstream research can be properly exemplified by the inclusion of social identity theory. Traditionally in its original form developed – by Tajfel (1978) & Turner (1975) – before 2000's it was classified outside the social comparison mainstream, now it seems to take its well-deserved place in framework of social comparison theory, having been included in every important related volume (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007, 16).

From our point of view, all the social psychological theories concerning media choice can not get around the question of the number of personae represented by media that preoccupies the user. From our point of view the number of the portrayed persons by the media is an inevitable question. The theories in question, namely social cognitive-, social identity and social comparison theories not only use different terminology, but they also differ in their interpretation on media content whether it refers to *individuals* or *groups of persons*. Albeit, at first sight, this categorization seems to be sufficient to describe the concerned phenomena, we encounter a dilemma

properly formulated by Iluț in his book (2009, 366). In explaining upward comparison he attracts our attention to the insolvable problem we face in deciding whether we have to do with social comparison with an individual or a group when one compares himself or herself with a reference group. As Iluț (366) points out we should not exacerbate the difference between upward social comparison and the act of borrowing values from reference group (in the terminology of social comparison: "assimilation with an upward target"). While in the majority of borrowing values from the reference group people refer to concrete individuals, during upward social comparison can also be taken into account prototypes of groups, not only individual personae.

Taking into account all considerations above, we would like to suggest that Iluț's dilemma may probably be applied not only to upward, but also to downward social comparison. May we be sure, as a matter of fact, that in the course of the latter phenomena a person compares himself or herself exclusively to individuals and not to the prototypes of groups the same as in the case described by Iluț above? Probably, we may not. One compares him- or herself during downward social comparison to worse-off others in point of different dimensions (financial background, state of health, marital, professional status et cetera) in order to enhance his or her self (Iluț, 2009, 365), but comparison, contrast with a downward target depends on the perceived control as well (Lockwood, 1997, 2002). Facing the question regarding the perceived control, on the one hand, it has helped us not only to create a research design consistent with Lockwood's findings, but also to take into consideration a few dimensions of the above mentioned dilemma, on the other hand. In respect to the latter, there can be found good examples based on prototype-willingness model of adolescent behavior (Gibbons, Gerrard, Reimer, & Pomery, 2006; Gerrard et al., 2006, *apud* Buunk & Gibbons, 2007, 15) for justifying a broadened use of Iluț's reasoning, applied to downward comparison, too. A number of studies have shown that prototype contemplation had an impact on students' behavior, especially when they are typical comparors, i.e. those who are high in SCO (social comparison orientation). This prototype influence of the "typical smoker", for example, on a non-smoker occurs via social comparison process (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007,15).

All in all, we may probably not say precisely even in the case of downward social comparison when one's comparison target is an individual and when a group of persons/prototypes of group.

In our humble opinion, our reasoning is consistent with the foregoing inclusion tendency of the social identity theory in the mainstream social comparison research as well as with our hypotheses regarding preferences of news depicting groups.

We consider that our previous presuppositions have made reasonable our project that aims to explain news referring exclusively to groups. To our knowledge no empirical research addresses this theme.

## Media character preferences

Thereinafter we aim to present the most important findings regarding online news preference in the light of two important social psychological theories. In our research both of social identity and social comparison theory have reference to news depicting groups. Although we think of social identity theory as being part of the social comparison theoretical framework, according to the former scientific research we summarize the two theories separately.

According to the social identity theory for the individual a favourable comparison between one's own group (in-group) and other groups (out-groups) enables him to create, "maintain a positive self-concept and support self-esteem" (Knobloch-Westervick & Hastall, 2006, 265). Regarding media use this means, while individuals choose media contents about out-group members depicting in a negative light, they prefer exposure to positive media contents on their own group (*ibidem*).

Few researches or experiments have been conducted on online media content preferences, even less on news preferences in the light of the two theories in point. According to Knobloch-Westervick and Hastall (2006, 265) and Harwood's (1997) experiments as well as Trepte's investigations (2004) some incoherent results concerning media content choices are revealed. In Knobloch-Westervick and Hastall's experiment college students expressed more interest in viewing shows featuring same-age characters, however, these findings could not be replicated later during with a larger sample. Trepte, on the other hand, concluded that social identity – based on biological sex and nationality – does not influence content preferences, emphasizing, at the same time, that media users prefer Tv series depicting same-sex characters. The case of males, however, is different: they present this kind of choice only after sex schemata is rendered salient.

Nevertheless, as Knobloch-Westervick and Hastall (*ibidem*) aptly remark that none of the two researches take into account neither valence of the news nor self-esteem. Moreover, Knobloch-Westervick and Hastall points out that their research findings are inconsistent with the social identity theory. Harwood like Trepte suggests that to boost self-esteem media users seek out media characters who are similar to themselves and not those belonging to out-groups.

Important additional investigations have been conducted on the subject of *emotional responses* to media. Both mood management and social comparison theory offers possible explanation on media content preferences. The mood management theory states that users choose media contents which probably influence their mood positively. At the same time, mood management theory predicts not only that media users prefer positive to negative portrayals if empathy occurs, but also that they feel better after exposure to positive portrayals. Although several research findings are consistent with these results (e.g., McIlwraith & Schallow, 1983), they show only that viewers' amount of TV viewing depends on their mood. However, they do not refer directly to the impact of mood on type of content chosen (MacBeth, 2004, 207).

In the light of social comparison theory, Mares and Cantor (1992) analyzed why people choose sad and down-bringing media content. Elderly viewers' were given descriptions of television programs. They demonstrated that while elderly preferred watching documentaries about same-age people, lonely participants chose unhappy characters, especially in the case of elderly Knobloch-Westervick & Hastall, 2006, 267). Contrary to the lonely group, the non-lonely participants showed greater interest in positive portrayals. In a second session, participants were randomly assigned to watch positive or negative portrayals, demonstrating that selections in the first session have had beneficial effects on mood or state of mind which can be seen later, in the second session. However, as MacBeth (2004, 208) points out, these findings were more consistent with social comparison than with mood-management theory.

Three other important research results conducted all by Knobloch, Weisbach and Zillman should by all means be presented. The first two (Knobloch, Weisbach, & Zillmann, 2004; Knobloch & Zillmann, 2003) aim to employ an unobtrusive media choice observation of sad versus happy love music. Findings were interpreted along the lines of social comparison theory, demonstrating that in a negative situation people apparently avoid media characters being in a better situation (Knobloch-Westervick & Hastall, 2006, 267).

The third study entitled *Portrayals of Same-Sex and Same-Age Characters – Social Comparisons With News Personae: Selective Exposure to News* is closely related to our research, which combines approaches used in different earlier researches conducted by Knobloch-Westervick and Hastall (2006). They earlier had focused on a specific age group and looked at either age or sex to assess similarities between media users and media characters. Their investigation, at present in question, considered both sex and age, employing young and middle-aged respondents of both sexes. This research design allowed the authors to test different hypotheses formulated on the ground of social comparison theory.

Our research is in line with some of Knobloch-Westervick and Hastall' (2006) hypotheses. In planning our research we have also focused on downward social comparison, partly based on Wills' classical work (1981). Although he states that downward comparison is motivated to enhance a person's self-esteem, this model of contrasting with worse-off others has been nuanced later. Consider at this moment only Wood's (1989) refinement that differentiates self-enhancement (leading to contrast with downward target) and self-improvement motives (leading to identification with an upward target), or Lockwood and Pinkus' findings (Lockwood & Pinkus, 2008, 251), which provide the evidence of both positive and negative effect on the self after downward social comparison has taken place. Generally speaking, these theoretical models have outlined the "conditions under which upward and downward comparison will have contrast or assimilation effects" (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007, 11). Like Knobloch-Westervick & Hastall' we have taken into consideration

one of the individual variables mentioned by them, namely mood, that can help grasping the incoherent results of the field, and made also possible for to formulate alternative hypotheses. In their literature review this “dilemma of paradoxical findings” (267), properly shows up the reasonable presence of contradictory presuppositions in research designs. Thus, they formulate and test against each other two competing hypotheses:

*“Hypothesis 1 (H1): Media users with dispositionally high self-esteem engage more in downward comparisons than do those with low self-esteem.*

*Hypothesis 2 (H2): Media users with dispositionally low self-esteem engage more in downward comparisons than do those with high self-esteem.” (267)*

We should, however, emphasize that our investigation differs from the earlier researches in at least two points. Firstly, as we have pointed out above, it aims to test the effects of selective exposure to headlines depicting groups on the internet users, and. Secondly, it varies in the selection target, having been formulated news referring to groups living either in very bad social condition (*poverty/severe distress*) or in very good circumstances (living is *luxuriance*). Moreover, taking into consideration Lockwood’s findings (2002), i.e. that people make more often use of downward social comparison when they can not imagine to get into a situation like their selection target (high perceived control), we formulated our headlines to test whether this presupposition can be applied not only to abilities, but also to *circumstances and financial background*.

*Hypothesis 1 (H1): Subjects prefer significantly more news about those being in a severe distress even in the case of positive valence of the news.*

Consistent with Wheeler & Miyake’ (1992) findings we have formulated our following hypotheses: people incline to compare upward when they feel out of sorts and downward when they are cheerful.

*Hypothesis 2 (H2): Media users engage more in downward comparison in good mood and make upward comparison when they are out of spirits.*

## **Method**

Hungarian participants ( $N = 161$ ) from Sapientia University (Romania) browsed online headlines before completing a questionnaire. Their browsing time was not limited. All 12 headlines focused on groups and varied along two dimensions: 1.circumstances portrayed in text, 2. valence of the news (positive vs. negative).

After having selected 4 of the displayed headlines, participants completed a questionnaire including a self-esteem measure.

## **Respondents**

In order to test the effectiveness of the stimulus material students were recruited from social sciences faculty. Thirty-six of the 60 respondents were female and 24 were male. The average age of the respondents was 20.5 years.

After testing there were recruited experiment participants from Sapientia University. There participated 161 volunteers in four experimental groups from the following specializations: social sciences, humanities, economics and food- and environmental engineering.

### Group divisions after filtering out invalid answers

There were 4 experimental groups: E1 – positive news depicting groups in very bad social conditions and negative news about groups in very good social conditions (N=40), E2 – negative news depicting groups in very bad s.c., positive news about groups living in very good s.c. (N=40), E3 – positive news about both groups in very bad and very good social conditions (N=40), E4 – negative news about both groups in very bad and very good social conditions (N=41).

The sociological distribution of the variables of 161 participants was:

- by sex: 68 males (42,2%) and 93 female (57,8%).
- by domicile: 96 urban (60%) and 64 rural (40%)<sup>2</sup>.
- by class: 32 belonging to I. year (20%), 56 to II. year (35%), 58 to III. year (36,2%) and 14 to IV. year (8,8%).<sup>3</sup>
- distribution by field: sociology 19% (31), communication and PR 15% (24), enviromental engineering 21% (34), economic sciences 19% (31), Romanian – English 10% (16), food engineering 10% (16), bookkeeping/accounting and informatics 6% (9).
- By how they adjudge their own family circumstances: bad 21 (13%), average 114 (70,8%), good 24 (15%) and very good 2 (1,2%).
- by the extent of allowance that can be spend according to her or his lights:

Table 1. Distribution by the extent of allowance

Monthly allowance (RON)	Mean	Median	Mode	Std. deviation	Min.	Max.	Total
	223,797	200	200	192,845	0	1000	158

The experimental groups were equivalents by independent variables, namely sex, domicile and field.

Group distribution by allowance: 206,34 – 238,205.

As mentioned above, based on Wheeler and Miyake' findings (1992), Buunk *et al.* (1991, 2001), Buunk (1995), we have taken into consideration the momentary mood of participants. Facing some threat, the subjects of the investigations in point have

2 One participant did not answer.

3 One participant did not answer. The apparent underrepresentation of the IV class was due to the fact that only on the fields of engineering there have been four year term training.

often made upward comparison when they felt bad and downward when they felt good (see also Buunk & Miyake, 2007, 8).

Table 2. Groups' present mood indexes

Group	Mood	N	Percent
E1	Cheerful	34	85,0
	Moody	6	15,0
	Total	40	100,0
E2	Cheerful	31	77,5
	Moody	9	22,5
	Total	40	100,0
E3	Cheerful	29	72,5
	Moody	11	27,5
	Total	40	100,0
E4	Cheerful	36	87,8
	Moody	5	12,2
	Total	41	100,0

Contrarily to Will's classical findings, recent research findings on target selection – with social comparison records technique (SCR) and laboratory studies – have produced consistent results, sustaining that high self-esteem is related to downward comparison (Wheeler, 2000, 154).

Similarly, researches focusing on reaction have concluded that high self-esteem people make more frequently downward comparison, but they do not benefit more from comparing, than those of lower self-worth (155). At the same time, it should be noted, that even if all of the above mentioned researches have been conducted with stressed people, there are also findings suggesting that downward comparison is also found among healthy, well-adjusted individuals with high self-esteem (Rickabaugh & Tomlinson-Keasy, 1997, Kleinke & Miller, 1998, Wenlaff & Prohaska, 1989). These results emphasize that downward comparisons are not definitely associated with low well-being, presupposing that low self-esteem is the indicative of low well-being (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007, 8).

Social comparison also depends on the individuals' self-esteem. As we pointed out above, the literature review done by Knobloch-Westervick & Hastall (2006) aptly shows up the reason for existence of competing hypotheses in social comparison research focused on the role of self-esteem.

In order to measure self-esteem, preciousness and confidence, we applied the Janis and Field' test (1959). The test results can be found in the table below:

Table 3. indicators of self-esteem by groups

Group	Self-esteem	Frequency	Percent
E1	value under 2: low self-esteem	3	7,5
	mean around 3: moderate self-esteem	17	42,5
	mean above 3: good and very good s.e.	20	50,0
	Total	40	100,0
E2	mean around 3: moderate self-esteem	19	47,5
	mean above 3: good and very good s.e.	21	52,5
	Total	40	100,0
E3	mean around 3: moderate self-esteem	18	45,0
	mean above 3: good and very good s.e.	22	55,0
	Total	40	100,0
E4	value under 2: low self-esteem	1	2,4
	mean around 3: moderate self-esteem	22	53,7
	mean above 3: good and very good s.e.	18	43,9
	Total	41	100,0

### Experimental Procedure

Walking in the hall of the university 2 teachers and 2 students asked students to participate in a study at the round-table. They were randomly seated to one of the 4 computers. After the general greeting they were instructed as follows: "We kindly ask you to read all the 12 online headlines without browsing time limitation, then choose only 4 you would like to read more about by clicking on the links. As soon as you have finished it, you will anonymously complete a printed questionnaire".

### Experimental material

The experimental portal was designed for this study and installed on the laptops. The overview page showed 12 headlines. Whenever a participant clicked on a link the program registered it. Following the research design all the 12 headlines of the first and second group were positively, respectively negatively valenced. For the participants of the third and fourth group the valence of the news was alternating, there were 6 positive and 6 negative headlines. Half of the framed news depicted events about groups living in very bad social condition (*poverty/severe distress*), half of them presented people living in very good social condition (*luxuriance*). Consistent with Lockwood's findings (2002) we had formulated negative news which reflected situations that students from our region in Romania could really not imagine to get into (called by Lockwood high perceived control). For example, one of the negative news was that doss-houses for homeless – a group living in severe distress – would be demolished. Another example of positive, respectively negative news referring to a group living in similar bad social condition was entitled "Significant preferences for handicapped", or an other title was "Boc: much less money for handicapped". In

formulating the last two items we have taken into consideration Lockwood's criterion that emphasizes the role of high perceived control in downward comparison.

We would like to emphasize that in formulating news we were helped by the contradicting political-financial circumstances of the year 2010. I consider important to mention that there appeared such contradictory news at that time which otherwise are not characteristic, not even to Romania. One day a 25% salary cut was announced in state institutions, the next day, on the contrary news took wing about a salary rise. Such real news helped our research, since we formulated the same content as positive than as negative news. The other topics of the 12 manipulated news were: a) organ transplant (whether the government will support it or not), b) whether big deposits will or will not be taxed, c) whether pork-barrel for treatment will be revoked from drug addicts, d) radiation danger in a refugee camp, e) infrastructure modernization in a refugee camp, f) congressmen official quarters will be revoked or they can give account of more charges, g) more efficient safety measures for stars, respectively they may become the target of thieves.

### **Post-test of headlines**

All 12 news items used in the experiment were selected from different Romanian news portals between 15-20 May 2010. Some localities and names in the news were changed.

Headlines have been post-tested with 100 students who did not participate in the experiment. They received a questionnaire with the 12 news items. In order to rate them on 7-point scales ranging from *very negative* to *very positive*, from *not credible at all* to *very credible*. The third 7-point scale ranging from *not credible at all* to *very credible* was based on the question "Can you imagine to get into the same situation like the group in the news?". They found the negatively valenced news about groups living in poverty as negative ( $M = 1.99$ ;  $SD = 1.44$ ), positively valenced ones as positive ( $M = 5.73$ ;  $SD = 2.61$ ). Respondents found all the 12 headlines credible ( $M = 4.87$ ;  $SD = 1.54$ ). As we can see, all the means were reported by the respondents well beyond neutral level.

### **Results of experiment**

Data sheets and the list of news chosen on the portal l4 were totalized in a SPSS spreadsheet.

### **Relationship analysis between groups**

We focused on the general tendencies of the social comparison in every experimental group. During processing we have created the variables designed for measuring both upward and downward comparison. Irrespectively of different combination of news in each group these variables show by chosen headlines the direction of

social comparison. They totalize the frequency of choices of headlines about worse-off, respectively about better-off others, without taking into consideration the valence of news. Since respondents had to choose 4 news items by clicking on the links of headlines on the portal, the minimal value of choice could be 0, when one had not chosen any news indicating in same direction. The maximal value could be 4, when all the news had been chosen from the same category. The concrete distribution of the are presented as follows: preference of news depicting groups in very bad social condition (*poverty/severe distress*) – mean 2,523 (st. dev. 1,046), preference of news depicting groups in very good s.c. (in *luxuriance*) – mean 1,412 (st. dev. 1,042).

On the whole it can be seen that downward social comparison is notably stronger than the preference of the headlines about better-off others. Nevertheless, we would like to nuance the role of the variables that could have impact on the direction of comparison. For this reason we have checked the possible effects of self-esteem, circumstances, sex and grouping of news on it.

First, we present the impact of the level of self-esteem on the social comparison. As noted above, we have used Janis and Field' test (1959). The results are the following: only 4 of 161 participants had low self-esteem, 76 had moderate self-esteem (47,2%) and 81 (50,3%) could be characterized with a high level of self-esteem. Consequently, we have been able to work only with two categories: contracting the first two we formed one category, named the moderate self-esteem group and the second was the high self-esteem category.

In order to find out whether there is a relationship between the level of self-esteem and the direction of social comparison, we conducted an One Way Anova analysis of variance. Based on the findings, we may conclude that there is no significant relationship neither between the preference of news about worse-off others and the level of self-esteem ( $p=0,155$ ), nor between the preference of news about better-off others and self-esteem ( $p=0,158$ ). Thus, the level of self-esteem does not influence the social comparisons.

At the same time, it should be mentioned, this result probably might be due to the fact that among participants few were with low self-esteem. Because there is no significant difference between participants with moderate and high level of self-esteem, we may not know what kind of results would have been characteristic to the low, respectively high self-esteem. Although the analysis of variance does not indicate significant differences. The average score of the two groups presents some differences. Participants with moderate self-esteem preferred an average 2,64 headlines about groups in severe distress and an average 1,29 news depicting groups living in luxuriance. Those with a high level of self-esteem chose an average 2,4 headlines about worse-off and an average 1,53 news about better-off others.

According to one of the hypothesis of the current research, the mood of participants also influences the direction of the comparison. Concerning their present mood, our volunteers answered the question as follows.

Table 4. the effect of present mood on social comparison (ANOVA)

		Sum of Sq.	Df	Mean Sq.	F	Sig
Number of chosen news about groups living in severe distress:	Between Groups	3,709	1	3,709	3,622	0,059
	Within Groups	185,319	181	1,024		
	Total	189,027	182			
Number of chosen news about groups living in luxuriance:	Between Groups	3,709	1	6,065	5,898	0,016
	Within Groups	186,132	181	1,028		
	Total	192,197	182			

After having weighted moody participants resulted that the present mood of the participants influences significantly the frequency of choosing news about those who are living in luxuriance ( $p=0,016$ ), as follows:

1. participants in good mood chose an average 1,49 news about people living in luxury, news about better-off others,
2. participants in bad mood chose an average 1,1 news about people in luxury, news about better-off others.

To conclude, compared to those in bad mood in the case of people in good mood the upward comparison is more relevant. Although the present mood does not have a significant influence on preferring the news about worse-off others, we can speak about a weak tendency in this respect:

1. persons in good mood chose an average 2,46 news about worse-off others,
2. persons in bad mood chose an average 2,77 news about worse-off others.

To sum up, bad mood favours mostly downward comparison.

We considered important to measure the impact of the financial background of the respondents. We evaluated it by the amount of the monthly allowance of the students and by their own subjective appreciation of their financial situation. The results showed that the amount of the monthly allowance did not have a significant impact on the direction of social comparison. We examined the relationship between the preference of news about worse-off others and the monthly allowance of students by correlation. There has not been found any significant relationship ( $r=-0,067$ ,  $p=0,414$ ), the results were the same in the case of frequency of choosing news about better-off others ( $r=0,077$ ,  $p=0,347$ ).

However, it is important to note that our participants formed a more or less homogenous group. This does not apply to the adults who earn their own living. As consequence we do not generalize the results. According to the results the subjective financial background of the family did not influence significantly the direction of the social comparison, neither the downward ( $p=0,837$ ), nor the upward comparison ( $p=0,760$ ).

It is also important to map the differences between sexes, considering the direction of social comparison. We examined the difference by sexes by the means of analysis of variance and the results show a significant relationship.

Table 5. The impact of sex on the social comparison (ANOVA)

		Sum of Sq.	Df	Mean Sq.	F	Sig
Number of chosen news about groups living in severe distress:	Between Groups	14,202	1	14,202	14,111	0,000
	Within Groups	151,968	151	1,006		
	Total	166,170	152			
Number of chosen news about groups living in luxuriance:	Between Groups	15,619	1	15,619	15,782	0,000
	Within Groups	149,440	151	0,990		
	Total	165,059	152			

Concerning the direction of comparison, we should emphasize that men search significant frequently for upward targets than women. While men preferred an average 1,794 news, women chose only an average 1,144 news about better-off others. Contrarily to our hypotheses, downward comparison was characteristic mostly to the women with an average 2,778 news preferences, men preferring an average 2,159 news about better-off others.

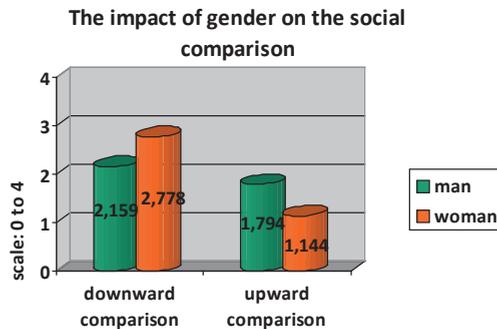


Figure 1

Residence type (urban and rural), study field and year do not have impact on the direction of the social comparison.

We examined the possible differences caused by how the news were associated in the experimental groups. Although every participant read 12 news articles, 6 of them depicted worse-off others in severe distress, the rest portrayed better-off others living in luxuriance, the valence – positive or negative – of the news differed from group to group.

The news had been associated as follows:

- First experimental group (E1): positive news depicting groups in poverty and negative news about groups living in luxuriance
- Second experimental group (E2): negative news depicting groups in poverty, positive news about groups living in luxuriance
- Third experimental group (E3): positive news about both groups, people living in poverty and people living in luxuriance
- Fourth experimental group (E4): negative news about both groups, people living in poverty and people living in luxuriance

After having realized an One Way Anova analysis of variance we conclude that:

- the valence, as well as the association of news influence significantly upward social comparison.
- the valence as well as news association indicates a tendency in the case of downward comparison.

Table 6. The effect of valence and association of the news on the social comparison (One Way ANOVA)

		Sum of Sq.	df	Mean Sq.	F	Sig
Number of chosen news about groups in severe distress:	Between Groups	8,478	3	2,826	2,670	0,050
	Within Groups	157,692	149	1,058		
	Total	166,170	152			
Number of chosen news about groups in luxuriance:	Between Groups	8,928	3	2,976	2,840	0,040
	Within Groups	156,130	149	1,048		
	Total	165,059	152			

On the next figure we present how the association of valence of the news influence the direction of social comparison (target selection).

Effects of news valence on social comparison

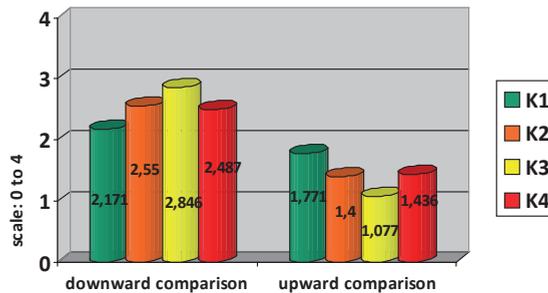


Figure 2

It can be seen that there are differences in the direction of comparison. Downward comparison is most significant when both news depicting groups in poverty and news about groups living in luxuriance are positive (E3) and this relationship is the weakest when the news about groups in poverty are positive, but those about groups in luxuriance are negative (E1). Implicitly, upward comparison is the reverse: participants search significantly more upward targets when the positive news about groups in poverty are associated with the negative news informing about better-off others, living in luxuriance.

Taking into account the gender of the subjects in the above mentioned experimental groups we found that the valence of the news is not important. It becomes important only in the case when all of them/all news are positive. Selective exposure to mixed valenced news by gender in the other groups have the following impact

on target selection: men search for upward targets in every group, especially in E2 (negative news on worse-off others associated with positive ones on better-off others) where we find significant relation ( $t=4,41$ ,  $df=47$ ,  $p\leq 0,0001$ ), women clicking significantly frequent on news on worse-off others ( $t=-4,04$ ,  $df=47$ ,  $p\leq 0,0001$ ). Generally speaking, we may conclude that in the case of mixed-valenced news while men compare upward, women search for downward targets.

## Discussion

Based on our findings we conclude that there is no significant relationship neither between the preference of news about worse-off others and self-esteem level, nor between self-esteem and news preference about better-off others. The level of self-esteem does not influence social comparisons. At the same time, it should be noted that this result might be due to the fact that among participants there were few in number (4 out of the total 161) with low self-esteem. However, even if there cannot be established something relevant concerning the relationship between low self-esteem and downward comparison, our present findings reveal an interesting difference relative to participants' comparison with moderate and high self-esteem. The average preferences in the two groups in point show downward "direction" by decreasing the level of self-esteem: participants with moderate self-esteem preferred an average 2,64 headlines about groups in severe distress and an average 1,29 news depicting groups living in luxuriance, those with a high level of self-esteem chose an average 2,4 headlines about worse-off, respectively an average 1,53 news covering about better-off others.

At the same time, it should be emphasized the role of the valence of the news. We were able to detect a marked preference in the direction of comparison only in the case of group E1 (positive news on worse-off others associated with bad news covering on better-off others) we marked preference. Those with low and moderate self-esteem preferred headlines on worse-off others, respondents with high self-esteem searching for upward targets.

Even if we were not able to establish a significant relationship referring to participants with low self-esteem, we would like to formulate an additional conception: self-esteem could have influenced social comparison if we had investigated persons with low, moderate and high self-esteem. These assumptions, however, are not consistent with some of the recent results in the field. These findings state that downward comparison is more related to high level of self-esteem and is more akin to Will's classical findings, i. e. that downward comparison is motivated to enhance a person's self-esteem. Anyhow, the interpretation of these results should be completed by introducing other variables such as the recipient's sex, mood, perceived control and the valence of the news.

The above mentioned consistence with Will's classical downward social comparison theory might be the results of applying headlines based on Lockwood's findings.

According to Lockwood people use more often downward social comparison when they can not imagine to get into situations like their selection target. Perhaps the way how groups were depicted in extreme poverty had a bigger impact on news readers as if they could have browsed news about groups in an only small extent less unfortunate financial background than theirs. Probably due to the criteria based on Lockwood's results our findings are not consistent with the relatively recent investigations that link high self-esteem to downward comparison among normal populations. In the case of our research the group of participants with moderate and low self-esteem presented a higher average of the news about worse-off others than those with high self-esteem.

On the other hand, downward comparison was significantly characteristic to the women, men preferring news about better-off others. This result is highly consistent with the Knobloch-Westerwick and Hastall (2006, 279) findings regarding the selective exposure to news by sex. According to them, this results are due to the fact that women are more social relationship oriented and they are characterized by a high level of interdependency. Men are focused on performance and achievement, considering independency more important than women. In the current research men preferred news about better-off others.

Park-Stamm et. al. article (2008) might offer, in part, a plausible explanation why our women participants selected significantly more downward targets. Based on their research results, the authors concluded that women are motivated to penalize successful women (to characterize them as unlikable and interpersonally hostile) to minimize the self-esteem consequences of social comparison with a highly successful female target. This result may be consistent with our results linked to the news preference of those belonging to E1 group (positive news on worse-off others associated with negative ones on better-off others) where the upward target selection was most significant. Women upward comparison in this group was the strongest among the four experimental groups. Probably this result might also be linked to the Knobloch-Westerwick and Hastall' (2006, 280) findings that specify that high self-esteem women search more for negative articles than for positive ones.

At the same time, in explaining selective exposure to news, some other factors should be taken into account such as the role of the participants' state of health, the presence or absence of threat, of valence of news presented as well as the impact of *competing information* during the target selection process. Consider Wheeler's conclusion (2000, 14) based on the systematical review of the field of an almost half century, claiming that in the case of mixed information non-depressive optimists "select" that portion that shows them to be *superior*. However, our findings are only in part consistent with this result and are more akin to a more general conclusion formulated also by Wheeler (15) which takes into consideration *motivations* and *effects* of social comparison as well. According to Wheeler, "Nondysphorics and those with high self-esteem are most likely to use social comparison in ways that are

self-enhancing" (2000, 155). Taking into account our results concerning the impact of the sex on social comparison in the case of mixed information/news, target selection was determined significantly not by the search of superiority, at least in the case of *men*, who preferred negative news covering on those in very good social conditions. Probably, this way of comparison is done to improve the self, but it is, almost sure, not about superiority.

Contrarily to our hypothesis based on Wheeler and Miyake' findings (1992), participants in bad mood favoured mostly downward comparison, meanwhile those in good mood preferred to read news about better-off others. This inconsistency might have occurred because of the fact that all the researches concerning the effect of mood on social comparison had been conducted with stressed and ill people. Probably our results can be linked to normal, unstressed population.

In default of significant relationship between financial background and direction of social comparison we should emphasize the homogenous character of the experimental groups.

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