# Images of Success and the Preference for Luxury Brands

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This research examines the impact of media depictions of success (or failure) on consumers' desire for luxury brands. In a pilot study and three additional studies, we demonstrate that reading a story about a successful other, such as a business major from the same university, increases consumers' expectations about their own future wealth, which in turn increases their desire for luxury brands. However, reading about a dissimilar successful other, such as a biology major, lowers consumers' preferences for luxury brands. Furthermore, we examine the role of ease of imagining oneself in the narrative as a mediator of the relation between direction of comparison, similarity, and brand preference.

In the past 30 years, media portrayals of life in America have frequently depicted images of wealth and success. Popular magazines such as People and In Style offer readers the opportunity to emulate their favorite celebrities via clothing or other consumer purchases. Business magazines such as Fortune or Forbes often provide stories of success, for example, profiling "America's Richest Under 40" or "The World's Richest People." These images of success and wealth are dominant on television and in popular music as well. The media help define consumers' worlds by sketching images in their minds (Lippmann, 1922), biasing their views of reality toward the norms, values, and social perceptions they present (Gerbner, Gross, & Signorelli, 1986). For example, people who watch more television provide higher estimates of the average level of affluence in the United States (O'Guinn & Shrum, 1997): "The more people watch television, the more they think American households have tennis courts, private planes, convertibles, maids and swimming pools … " (Schor, 1999, p. 80).

In this research, we investigate how stories about successful others might impact one's expectations and consumption preferences. Along with their utilitarian functions, products may communicate information about the identities of their owners (Belk, Bahn, & Mayer, 1982; Shavitt, 1990; Shavitt & Nelson, 1999). Luxury products are often purchased simply because they cost more, without providing any additional direct utility over their cheaper counterparts (Dubois &

Duquesne, 1993). Instead, luxury brands may be used to enhance one's social status. Americans are increasingly trading up to luxury brands (Silverstein & Fiske 2003), regardless of their economic status, because these products provide an opportunity for the middle class to attain the perception of prosperity (Schwartz, 2002). Conspicuous consumption of such products displays individuals' wealth, differentiating them from others (Liebenstein, 1950).

In a pilot study and three additional studies, we examine the possibility that reading narratives about successful others may increase consumers' own expectations about future wealth, along with their preferences for luxury brands, by causing them to fantasize about their own future successes. We further examine variables that can reduce the ease with which consumers can imagine themselves in the narrative (e.g., the dissimilarity of the successful other) and consequently diminish or even reverse the effects of success stories on luxury brand preferences.

## CONCEPTUAL DEVELOPMENT

Individuals have a drive to evaluate their own opinions and abilities, which they satisfy by comparing themselves to others (Festinger, 1954). These social comparisons may involve not only directly assessing another person, but also reading about others in the newspaper or hearing about them by word of mouth (Wood, 1996):

> It can be hard to hear an extremely intelligent person on the radio, or see an extremely handsome one in the grocery store,

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or participate on a panel with an expert without engaging in social comparison, no matter how much we would not like to. (Goethals, 1986, p. 261)

Prior research has demonstrated both contrast and assimilation effects that result from social comparison. In one example of a contrast effect, Salovey and Rodin (1984) demonstrated that individuals who received negative feedback on a characteristic on which others performed well experienced anxiety and depression. Similarly, college women who saw an ad featuring attractive models were less satisfied with their own level of attractiveness than were those who saw an ad without a model (Richins, 1991). In the case of assimilation, a successful person might serve as a role model, rather than a source of envy. For example, women performed better on a math test administered by a competent female rather than an incompetent female (Marx & Roman, 2002). In such a case, exposure to a successful other can serve as a source of inspiration or basking in reflected glory (Cialdini et al., 1976), whereas exposure to an unsuccessful other can be disheartening or threatening (Stapel & Koomen, 2001). Furthermore, Mills, Polivy, Herman, and Tiggemann (2002) demonstrated that when dieters viewed pictures of thin models, they enjoyed a self-enhancing "thin fantasy," in which they rated their own bodies as thinner and thus consumed more cookies than participants who viewed pictures of heavy models.

Building on the existing findings regarding contrast and assimilation effects of social comparison, in this research we investigate these effects in a domain previously unexplored by researchers. That is, if social comparison processes can impact individuals' ratings of their own abilities and traits, can such processes impact individuals' expectations for their future as well? We propose that when consumers compare themselves to more successful others, they may alter their expectations for their own future wealth, which can consequently impact their brand preferences. We further propose that the direction of these effects will depend on whether assimilation or contrast occurs. In the case of an assimilation effect, when the comparison target is an academically or financially successful other, individuals will fantasize about their own successful futures. This expectation of future wealth might allow them to afford more expensive possessions, thereby increasing their desire for luxury brands. On the other hand, comparison with unsuccessful others might lower expectations for future income, thereby lowering preference for luxury brands. In the case of contrast effects, comparison with a successful other is expected to lower one's expectations for success and luxury products preferences, whereas comparison with an unsuccessful other is expected to increase expectations for personal success and preferences for luxury brands.

Previous social comparison research has suggested several variables that may influence the conditions under which contrast or assimilation occurs, including the self-relevance of the comparison dimension (Tesser & Campbell, 1980); the

salience of a group identity (Brewer & Weber, 1994); whether participants can draw an analogy between themselves and the target other, thereby impacting perceived vulnerability (Lockwood, 2002); the actual similarity or primed similarity of the comparison target (Brown, Novick, Lord, & Richards, 1992; Häfner, 2003); and the feasibility of the comparison target's success (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997). Some researchers have suggested that when the comparison target is viewed as an extension of one's self construal, the target's successes might be celebrated as one's own successes (Gardner, Gabriel, & Hochschild, 2002). For example, McFarland, Buehler, and MacKay (2001) found that upward social comparisons produced assimilation effects when the participant shared an intimate relationship (such as spouse, romantic partner, or parent–child) with the comparison target. Based on these findings, we propose that the comparison target's similarity on an important dimension will moderate the effect of depictions of successful–unsuccessful others on individuals' expectations for success and brand preferences. For example, business students might increase their expectations for future wealth when reading a story about a fellow business major who has achieved success, thus leading them to express more interest in purchasing luxury items than would someone reading a story about an unsuccessful business major. However, reading about someone with a different college major who has achieved success should not produce this effect and might even decrease expectations for success, because the reader and comparison target do not share the same destiny.

Furthermore, we believe that the diagnosticity of the dimension of similarity might also play an important role (Mussweiler & Strack, 2000b). For example, college students might find a comparison target's college major to be more relevant to predicting their own future career success than the target's gender, making it easier to imagine themselves in the same situation. Therefore, we expect the comparison target's college major, but not the target's gender, to moderate the effect of depictions of success or failure on future expectations and brand preferences.

Our research also attempts to provide insight into the cognitive processes underlying assimilation and contrast effects. We propose that when exposed to a comparison target, individuals spontaneously attempt to imagine themselves in the same position. To the extent that they can easily imagine themselves in the place of the comparison target, an assimilation effect is likely to occur. However, when individuals experience difficulty imagining themselves in the place of the comparison target (for example, because of dissimilarity to the target), a contrast effect is likely to occur. This proposition stems from research on the effects of imagery on likelihood judgments demonstrating that individuals use the ease with which they can imagine a possible outcome as an indicator of the likelihood of this outcome (Carroll, 1978; Gregory, Cialdini, & Carpenter, 1982; Petrova & Cialdini, 2005; Sherman, Cialdini,

Schwartzman, & Reynolds, 1985). For example, participants who imagined winning a contest estimated the probability of this event happening to them as higher than participants who did not imagine the scenario (Gregory et al., 1982). Moreover, the difficulty of imagining an event can decrease the perceived likelihood of the event. For example, the difficulty of imagining having a disease decreased participants' estimates of the likelihood that they would contract the disease (Sherman et al., 1982). Similarly, difficulty of imagining a consumption experience decreases the perceived likelihood of purchasing the product and product evaluations (Petrova & Cialdini, 2005). Our proposition is also consistent with recent research on metacognitive experiences such as ease of retrieval and processing fluency (Schwarz, 2004), suggesting that individuals are likely to base their judgments not only on the content of relevant information but also on the ease with which this information comes to mind. Although this research has provided fruitful insights regarding the impact of metacognitive experiences of ease in several domains, the role of ease of imagination in the effects of narrative stories or social comparison processes has not been investigated. As a step in this direction, we propose that when consumers find it easy to imagine themselves in a success story, they should be more likely to expect themselves to be successful in the future and thus more likely to desire luxury brands. However, when consumers find it difficult to imagine themselves in a success story, they should decrease their expectations for future success and their preferences for luxury brands. Therefore, we hypothesize that the effects of depictions of success on participants' expectations for success and product preferences will be mediated by the ease with which participants can imagine themselves in the story.

The aforementioned hypotheses are consistent with existing literature (Mussweiler, 2003), suggesting that when engaging in social comparison, an individual searches his or her memory for evidence of similarities or dissimilarities between the self and the target. Subsequent self-evaluation should assimilate to the standard when it is based on highly accessible standard-consistent information of the self and contrast away from the standard when standard-inconsistent information of the self is accessible. Consistent with Mussweiler's framework, we propose that when a common attribute is perceived as diagnostic to future success (such as college major), individuals will find it easier to imagine themselves in the same situation as the comparison target at some point in the future than when they do not share that attribute. However, we diverge from Mussweiler's model in that our participants are searching for evidence of similarity by testing the ease of imagining their future selves (Markus & Nurius 1986), rather than searching for evidence of past behavior. When it is easy to imagine a similar future self (whether an ideal self, in the case of success, or a feared self, in the case of failure), we expect participants to assimilate to the comparison target. When it is difficult to generate a plau-

sible future self, we expect them to contrast away from the target.

In addition to target similarity, we examine other factors that may influence participants' ease of imagining themselves in a success or failure story. One variable that seems particularly relevant to our model is the feasibility of the comparison target's success or failure. For example, Lockwood and Kunda (1997) demonstrated that when the achievements of a "superstar" in the participant's domain of interest seem attainable, an assimilation effect occurs, and the participant is inspired by the star. On the other hand, when these achievements do not seem feasible for the observer, a contrast effect occurs, and the person feels discouraged and self-deflated. Research on the effects of imagery has also demonstrated that imagining a scenario is more likely to impact future intentions when the scenario is perceived as plausible (Bone & Ellen, 1992). These findings suggest that when individuals find the depicted story of success or failure to be feasible, they will be likely to imagine themselves in a similar situation and assimilate their expectations for success and desire for luxury brands to the depiction. However, when the depicted success seems infeasible, two outcomes are possible. First, individuals may find it difficult to imagine themselves in the same position, and consequently, contrast their expectations for success and desire for luxury brands from the depiction. On the other hand, it may also be possible that when the depicted success is infeasible, individuals may not attempt to imagine themselves in the story. In such a case, depictions of success would not influence individuals' expectations for success or brand preferences.

In sum, integrating previous research on social comparison and imagery, we propose a theoretical model to explain the effects of depictions of success on preferences for luxury brands. We propose that comparisons with successful others can cause individuals to imagine themselves achieving a similar level of success, which can alter their future expectations, and consequently, their preferences for luxury brands. However, we also propose that these effects will be moderated by the ease with which individuals can imagine themselves in similar scenarios. We manipulate participants' ease of imagination via the similarity of the comparison target in terms of college major (Study 1), the feasibility of the outcome (Study 2), and by directly undermining the imagery effects by adding unrelated statistics to the story (Study 3).

## PILOT STUDY

We conducted a pilot study to measure the effects of our proposed manipulations on participants' perceived similarity to the comparison target, as well as the ease with which they could imagine themselves in the same situation. Participants were 394 business students who completed the study for partial course credit. They first read a fictional news article describing either a very successful or very unsuccessful recent

graduate from the same university (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997; Stapel & Koomen, 2001). The successful comparison target had finished his or her studies in only 3 years, won a prestigious scholarship, and graduated summa cum laude. The target had a rewarding social life, was involved in campus activities, recently got engaged, and had also recently started a successful local business. The unsuccessful target had dropped out of school after 3 years, after receiving failing grades and getting caught cheating on an exam. The target was described as being unemployed most of the time and depressed. The student in the article was either a business major or biology major, and either male or female, resulting in a 2 (direction of comparison: upward vs. downward) × 2 (college major: business vs. biology) × 2 (gender: male vs. female) between-subjects design. After reading the article, participants rated their similarity to the comparison target, the likelihood they would achieve the same success or failure, and the ease of imagining themselves in the same situation, all on scales ranging from 1 to 7. Participants rated themselves significantly more similar to those with the same major (vs. different major, $M = 3.14$ vs. 2.73), $F(1, 386) = 11.32$, $p < .001$, and also to those with the same gender (vs. different gender, $M = 3.22$ vs. 2.66), $F(1, 386) = 13.79$, $p < .0005$. However, they found it easier to imagine themselves in the same situation described in the story when the comparison target had the same major (vs. different major, $M = 3.92$ vs. 3.58), $F(1, 389) = 3.63$, $p < .05$, whereas there were no significant effects of gender on ease of imagination. Furthermore, their ratings of the likelihood that they would experience the same level of success or failure depended on the comparison target's major ($M = 3.95$ vs. 3.52), $F(1, 389) = 7.85$, $p < .005$, but not gender. It appears that participants had an easier time imagining themselves in the story when the subject of the story had the same major, which thereby influenced their expectations for success in the future. In support of this possibility, ease of imagination mediated the relation between the comparison target's college major and participants' expectations for a similar level of future success or failure. When ease of imagination was added to the original model, it yielded a significant effect on participants' expectations for the future, $F(1, 389) = 39.54$, $p < .0001$, whereas the effect of college major became nonsignificant, $F(1, 389) = 0.71$, *ns.*

## STUDY 1

Study 1 examined the basic effect of exposure to stories of success or failure on luxury brand preferences. Business students were presented with a news story about the success or failure of another business student or another biology student from the same university. Then participants were shown advertisements for high status or low status brands, and their preferences for these brands were assessed. We expected that when a success or failure story depicted a fellow business

student, an assimilation effect would occur, and when the story depicted a biology student, a contrast would occur.

### Pretest

The purpose of the pretest was to develop stimuli that represented high and low status brands for the target population of undergraduate business students. Sixty-seven participants rated brands of automobiles and watches on a 7-point scale that ranged from 1 (*very low status*) to 7 (*very high status*). In the car category, the Lexus was rated significantly higher in status than the Kia ($M = 6.6$ vs. 2.2), $t(66) = 28.5$, $p < .0001$. In the watch category, the Rolex was rated significantly higher in status than the Timex ($M = 6.9$ vs. 3.5), $t(66) = 18.4$, $p < .0001$.

### Design

This study explored the effect of exposure to others' successes or failures on the preference for luxury brands. Each participant was exposed to a news article, as described in the pilot study, about a fellow student who was either very successful or very unsuccessful. To examine the moderating role of similarity, the student in the story was described as either a business major or biology major and was either a man or woman. This resulted in a 2 (upward vs. downward comparison) × 2 (business vs. biology major) × 2 (male vs. female) × 2 (watches vs. cars) mixed design.

Participants were 310 undergraduate business majors at a large state university who completed the survey in exchange for course credit. They were given several presumably unrelated surveys to complete, two of which were the surveys for this research.

After reading the article about the successful or unsuccessful fellow student, participants were asked to guess in which newspaper the article had appeared. They then rated the character of the story on intelligence, success, arrogance, and likeability (Stapel & Koomen, 2001).

During the second part of the study, participants evaluated advertisements for Lexus, Kia, Rolex, and Timex brands. Each person examined these ads in one of two possible orders. For each of the two brand categories, participants indicated their preference between the high status brand and the low status brand by dividing 100 points between the two brands. They also rated the effectiveness of each ad on a 7-point Likert-type scale.

### Results

*Manipulation check.*    The participants did indeed rate the successful target as smarter, more successful, and more likeable than the unsuccessful target. On a scale from 1 to 7, the successful target was rated an average of 5.9 on intelligence, whereas the unsuccessful target rated an average of 3.3, $t(308) = 23.0$, $p < .0001$. The successful target rated 6.0

on success, compared to 2.3 for the unsuccessful target, $t(308) = 34.6$, $p < .0001$; and scored 4.8 on likeability, compared to 3.5 for the unsuccessful target, $t(308) = 9.64$, $p < .0001$. Finally, the successful target was rated slightly but not significantly less arrogant than the unsuccessful target ($M = 3.3$ vs. $3.6$), $t(308) = 1.65$, *ns*.

*Preference for luxury brands.*     To examine the effects of the news story on brand preferences, an analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted with direction of comparison, major, and gender of the target as between-subject factors and product category as a within-subject factor. A significant interaction between direction of comparison and major of the target, $F(1, 301) = 5.04$, $p < .05$, indicated that participants gave more preference points to the luxury brand when they read about a successful business major than when they read about an unsuccessful business major, $F(1, 148) = 4.29$, $p < .05$; and directionally (but not significantly) fewer points to the luxury product when they read about a successful biology major than when they read about an unsuccessful biology major, $F(1, 157) = 1.50$, *ns*. In other words, as predicted, individuals exposed to a success story expressed more interest in the luxury brands than did those exposed to a failure story, but only when the comparison target was similar in college major. See Figure 1 for an illustration of these results. Although there was a main effect of product category, indicating a stronger overall preference for Lexus over Rolex, $F(1, 301) = 4.30$, $p < .05$, the product category did not moderate the effects of social comparison direction and college major on luxury brand preference, $F(1, 301) = 0.48$, *ns*. No main effects or interactions were observed depending on whether the gender of the target was the same as the gender of the participant (*ns*).

In the car category, a significant interaction between direction of comparison and college major, $F(1, 301) = 5.13$, $p < .05$, revealed that the success story had a differential effect on participants' preferences for Lexus over Kia, depending on the target's major. Participants who read about a successful business major gave 78.47 points to the Lexus, whereas participants who read about an unsuccessful business major gave 69.18 points to the Lexus, $F(1, 148) = 5.79$, $p < .05$. Those who read about a successful biology major gave 71.99 points to the Lexus, whereas those who read about the unsuccessful biology major gave 75.93 points to the Lexus, $F(1, 157) = 0.96$, *ns*. A similar pattern was observed in the watch category, although the interaction between direction of comparison and college major was not significant, $F(1, 301) = 1.82$, *ns*. Participants who read an article about a successful business major gave an average of 73.18 points out of 100 to the Rolex, whereas those who read an article about an unsuccessful business major gave an average of 69.04 points to the Rolex. Participants who read about a successful biology major gave an average of 67.59 points to the Rolex, whereas those who read about an unsuccessful biology major gave 71.46 points to the Rolex. These results provide preliminary evidence that a news story about a more successful similar other can increase preference for high status brands. On the other hand, the story about a successful dissimilar other resulted in a lower preference for luxury brands than the story about a less successful dissimilar other.

## Discussion

The results of Study 1 showed that reading a success story increased desire for luxury brands only when the story depicted the success of someone similar on a diagnostic dimension. But what is the process underlying these results? Study 2 examines the mediating role of expectations on brand preferences. We expect that when individuals estimate a higher level of future success for themselves, they will express a stronger desire for luxury brands. To examine this possibility, we measure participants' estimates of their future success by asking them for their future predicted salaries. We also add two potential moderators, the participants' levels of interconnectedness with other business majors at the same university and the feasibility of the success or failure described in the news story, which might also influence the ease with which participants can imagine themselves in the narratives.
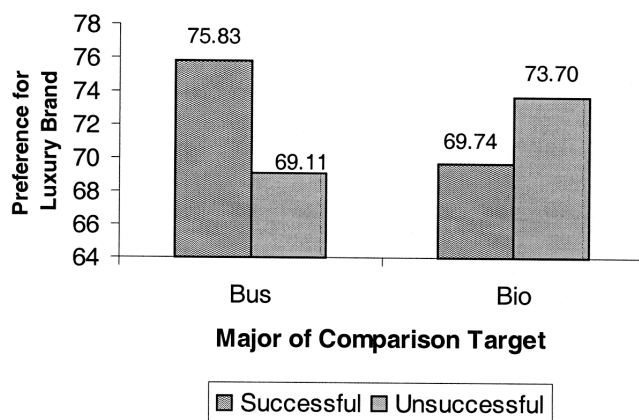


FIGURE 1     Preference (out of 100 points) for the luxury brand is shown, pooled across the two product categories, as a function of the direction of comparison (successful vs. unsuccessful) and the major of the comparison target (business vs. biology).

## STUDY 2

Our second study examines the mediating role of expectations on brand preferences. Prior research has shown that when individuals consider themselves part of a group, they assess their own abilities as higher due to the high performance of the group (Brewer & Weber, 1994). Consistent with these findings, the results of our pilot study suggest that individuals expect greater success for themselves after reading about someone successful who is similar on a diagnostic dimension, such as college major, than after reading about

someone successful who is dissimilar on that dimension. In Study 2, we test the effects of these expectations of future success on preferences for luxury brands. We expect similarity with the comparison target to moderate the effect of depictions of successful–unsuccessful others on expectations for future success. Thus, when the comparison target is similar to the participant on a diagnostic dimension, exposure to a successful other should result in higher expectations for the participant's own future success than should exposure to an unsuccessful other. However, when the comparison target is dissimilar to the participant, exposure to a successful other should lead to lower expectations for future success than should exposure to an unsuccessful other. Moreover, we expect these differences in expectations to mediate the relation among comparison direction, similarity, and brand preference.

As suggested by the results of our pilot study, the ease with which participants can draw a parallel between themselves and the comparison target can determine their estimated probability of their own future success. Another variable that might determine the impact of social comparisons on expectations and luxury brand preference is the perceived interconnectedness between the participant and the comparison target. For example, individuals who have close relationships with their romantic partners respond more positively to the successes of their partners (Lockwood, Dolderman, Sadler, & Gerchak, 2004). Similarly, we expect that exposure to successful business majors will raise participants' expectations, whereas exposure to successful biology majors will not, because participants should perceive a higher level of interconnectedness, or psychological closeness (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992), with business majors than with biology majors at the same university. A student who feels highly interconnected with a successful other should perceive a shared destiny with that individual, and thus should be more likely to imagine a similar success for himself–herself which should lead to a stronger preference for luxury brands. This study also examines an alternative explanation for our results in Study 1. Despite the evidence for assimilation effects in the case of a similar comparison target, other research has shown that upward comparison to a close or similar other may result in jealousy, anxiety, or the use of ego-defense strategies (e.g., Salovey & Rodin, 1984). Individuals might feel threatened by information about a more successful individual, and as a result, might try to protect or enhance their self-esteem (Mussweiler, Gabriel, & Bodenhausen, 2000; Tesser, 2001). Comparing oneself to more successful similar others might lead to frustration, which might motivate individuals to restore their self-esteem through different ways (Tesser, 2001). One way in which individuals might attempt to restore their perceived self-worth is through the acquisition of material possessions, such as a luxury car or a prestigious watch. As O'Guinn and Faber (1987) have suggested, malaise or unhappiness caused by mass-mediated social comparisons can lead to the desire to have what others have.

Consequently, individuals might be more likely to want to obtain a luxury item after comparing themselves to a more successful other to cope with these negative feelings, rather than because they felt encouraged by the success story. To examine this alternative explanation, we also measure participants' affect levels in this study.

## Method

Two hundred and twenty undergraduate business majors completed the study in exchange for course credit. As in Study 1, participants were exposed to a news article about either a successful or an unsuccessful fellow student who was either a business or biology major. A third manipulated factor was feasibility. The feasible success and failure stories were exactly the same stories used in Study 1. However, in the infeasible stories, the comparison target started an Internet business several years earlier (before the NASDAQ crash of 2000) and achieved either an atypical level of success or an atypical level of failure. In the atypical success story, the target sold the Internet business for a "hefty profit" just prior to the economic downturn and used some of the proceeds to start a consulting company. This example would be considered an infeasible upward comparison, because it is unlikely that someone investing in an Internet startup at the time of the study (2002) could achieve a comparable level of success in such a short time. In the atypical failure story, the target raised an impressive amount of venture capital, but when the Internet business failed, the target was left "without a job and $500,000 in debt." This example would be considered an infeasible downward comparison, because it would be unlikely for an individual to achieve this level of failure in such a short time. As in Study 1, participants expressed their preferences for Rolex over Timex and Lexus over Kia. This resulted in a 2 (upward vs. downward comparison) × 2 (business vs. biology major) × 2 (high vs. low feasibility) × 2 (watches vs. cars) mixed design. The stories in this study were rewritten to describe a gender-neutral individual named "Jordan."

One way to measure an individual's interconnectedness with others is via the Inclusion of Other in the Self Scale (IOS; Aron et al., 1992), a pictorial measure of psychological closeness that uses overlapping Venn diagrams to represent the self and the comparison other. In this study, we used an extension of the IOS Scale, the Inclusion of the Ingroup in the Self Scale (IIS; Tropp & Wright, 2001), which indicates the level of ingroup identification by measuring the degree to which individuals see themselves as group members and the importance of that group membership. Participants chose one of seven pairs of circles, representing the self and the group (either business majors or biology majors), which varied in the degree of overlap. A larger overlap between the self circle and the group circle indicates a higher level of interconnectedness with the group.

After reading the story, participants answered several filler questions and rated the target in terms of intelligence,

success, and likeability. They then completed the IOS scale, to indicate how interconnected they felt with other business or biology majors, and the Positive and Negative Affect Scale (PANAS; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). Next, in a presumably unrelated survey, they examined ads for the Rolex, Timex, Lexus, and Kia, and indicated their preferences for these brands. Finally, they estimated their expected salaries in 10 years.

## Results

*Preference for luxury brands.* An ANOVA, with direction of comparison, college major, and feasibility as between-subject factors and product category as a within-subject factor, revealed a significant three-way interaction between direction of comparison, college major, and

### Feasible Outcome
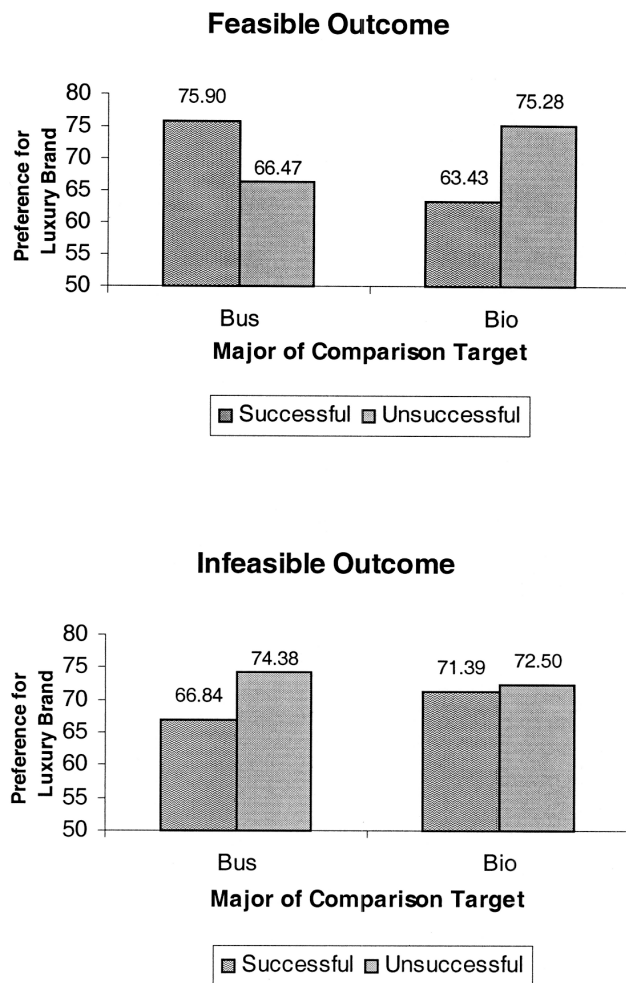


### Infeasible Outcome



FIGURE 2   Preference (out of 100 points) for the luxury brand is shown, pooled across the two product categories, as a function of the feasibility of the outcome (feasible vs. infeasible), the direction of comparison (successful vs. unsuccessful), and the major of the comparison target (business vs. biology).

feasibility, $F(1, 212) = 5.14$, $p < .005$. This three-way interaction, illustrated in Figure 2, was not moderated by the product category, $F(1, 212) = 0.18$, *ns.* Within the high feasibility conditions, the findings of Study 1 were replicated. A significant interaction between direction of comparison and the major of the target, $F(1, 106) = 8.66$, $p < .005$, revealed that again, the success story had differential effects on product preferences, depending on the similarity of the target. Participants gave slightly more preference points to the luxury brand when they read about a successful business major than when they read about an unsuccessful business major, $F(1, 54) = 2.72$, $p < .10$; and significantly fewer points to the luxury product when they read about a successful biology major than when they read about an unsuccessful biology major, $F(1, 52) = 7.36$, $p < .01$. However, in the low feasibility conditions, there was no significant effect of direction of comparison, college major, or their interaction on luxury brand preferences.

In the watch category, participants were directionally more likely to prefer a Rolex over a Timex when they read about a successful business major than when they read about an unsuccessful business major ($M = 70.38$ vs. 61.8), $F(1, 54) = 1.33$, *ns*; and marginally less likely to prefer a Rolex over a Timex when they read about a successful biology major than when they read about an unsuccessful biology major ($M = 56.11$ vs. 69.67), $F(1, 52) = 3.48$, $p < .10$, resulting in a significant interaction, $F(1, 106) = 4.52$; $p < .05$. However, when the target's success (or failure) was infeasible for the observer, there was no significant effect of the direction of social comparison, the target's major, or their interaction on preference for the two watches. The results for the car category mirrored those for watches. Participants in the high feasibility conditions were directionally more likely to prefer Lexus over Kia when they read about a successful business major than when they read about an unsuccessful business major ($M = 81.42$ vs. 71.13), $F(1, 54) = 2.34$, *ns*; and directionally less likely to prefer Lexus over Kia when they read about a successful biology major than when they read about an unsuccessful biology major ($M = 70.74$ vs. 80.89), $F(1, 52) = 2.21$, *ns*, resulting in a significant interaction, $F(1, 106) = 4.56$, $p < .05$. Moreover, when the target's success (or failure) was infeasible, it had no effect on automobile preference (*ns* for all main effects and interactions). According to these results, individuals did not use social comparison information to influence their preferences when it was deemed to fall outside of the likely range of their outcomes. Instead of attempting to imagine themselves in the story, in which case a difficult experience might result in a contrast effect, participants merely dismissed these infeasible stories as irrelevant to the current task.

*Predicted future income.* Participants' predictions of their own future incomes followed the same pattern as did their brand preferences, resulting in a marginally significant three-way interaction between direction of comparison, col-

lege major, and feasibility, $F(1, 212) = 3.11$, $p < .10$. Within the high feasibility conditions, there was a significant two-way interaction between the direction of comparison and the target's major, $F(1, 106) = 3.96$, $p < .05$. Participants expected higher future salaries for themselves after reading about a successful business major ($M = \$116,560$) than after reading about an unsuccessful business major ($M = \$96,800$), $F(1, 54) = 4.99$, $p < .05$. They expected slightly lower salaries after reading about a successful biology major ($M = \$108,850$) than after reading about an unsuccessful biology major ($M = \$113,960$), but this simple effect was not significant, $F(1, 52) = 0.48$, $ns$. When the target's success (or failure) was infeasible, it did not affect predicted future income.

To test whether predicted income mediated the interaction effects of type of story and major of the target on preference for Lexus and Rolex, following the procedure suggested by Baron and Kenny (1986), we included in the model predicted future income along with direction of comparison and college major. The results revealed a significant effect of predicted income on preference for Rolex, $F(1, 215) = 21.87$, $p < .01$, and Lexus, $F(1, 215) = 17.658$, $p < .01$. Furthermore, the interaction effects of direction of comparison and college major on preference for Rolex-Lexus became nonsignificant when controlling for the effect of predicted income, Rolex, $F(1, 215) = .373$; Lexus, $F(1, 215) = 1.03$. According to this analysis, the interaction effect of comparison direction and college major was fully mediated by the predicted future income. These results provide additional support for our hypothesis that the effects of the story on preference for luxury brands would be due to the expectations of personal success.

*Interconnectedness with the comparison target.*
Participants were more likely to include another business student than to include another biology student in their self-definition ($M = 4.25$ vs. 2.6 on a 7-point scale), $F(1, 211) = 62.29$, $p < .0001$. They also felt more interconnected to the comparison target in the feasible conditions than in the infeasible conditions ($M = 3.7$ vs. 3.2), $F(1, 211) = 6.00$, $p < .05$. Furthermore, participants felt equally interconnected to successful and unsuccessful others. To test whether the interaction effects between college major and type of story were driven by the perceived interconnectedness with the target, we conducted the analyses replacing the major of the comparison target with the participant's IOS score, a continuous variable ranging between 1 and 7, which represents the participant's perceived interconnectedness with the target. When the IOS score was added as an independent variable in the ANOVA, a significant interaction between the IOS score and the comparison direction on luxury brand preference emerged, $F(1, 105) = 4.90$, $p < .05$, providing further evidence that the results are due to stronger feelings of interconnectedness with business majors than with biology majors. However, when both major and IOS were included in the analysis, the Major X Comparison Direction interaction remained significant, $F(1, 101) = 9.05$, $p < .005$. Therefore, in-

terconnectedness does not appear to account for all of the variance due to college major in our model.

*Alternative explanations.* Earlier, we reviewed the possibility that reading about a successful similar other might produce negative feelings (e.g., jealousy and anxiety). Consequently, consumers might increase their preferences for luxury products to cope with these feelings and restore their self-esteem. To test this possibility, we examined participants' affective responses to the story as measured by the PANAS scale. The results revealed that the fictional stories of success and failure did not produce any significant differences in positive affect or negative affect between experimental conditions.

## Discussion

The results of Study 2 provided additional support for our proposition that depictions of success or failure can increase or decrease expectations for future success, but only when they are easy to imagine. Business majors reading about the success of a fellow business major predicted higher future salaries for themselves and increased preferences for Lexus and Rolex, compared to those reading about the failure of a business major. In contrast, reading about a successful biology major resulted in a lower predicted future salary and a decreased preference for Lexus or Rolex compared to those reading about an unsuccessful biology major. These results are consistent with our hypothesis that similarity of the comparison target can moderate the effects of social comparison on expectations for one's own success, which determines preference for luxury brands. In Study 3, we more directly test our hypothesis that ease of imagination determines the extent to which similarity moderates this relation.

## STUDY 3

The results of the three previous studies, taken together, provide compelling evidence that similarity alone does not predict whether assimilation or contrast will occur when forming future expectations and brand preferences. Although participants rated themselves as more similar to those with the same college major but also those with the same gender, the results of Study 1 showed that only college major moderated the effects of direction of comparison on brand preferences. And according to our findings in the pilot study, although both major and gender had an impact on perceived similarity, only major had an impact on the ease with which participants imagined themselves in the story and their expectations for a similar success. Study 3 attempts to unify these findings by examining the mediating role of ease of imagination on the relation among comparison direction, similarity, and brand preferences. We also introduce an additional dependent variable, the Material Values Short Form

Scale (Richins, 2004), which measures the perceived importance of material possessions in helping consumers to achieve their life goals. Although materialism is typically viewed as a stable, unchanging trait rather than a temporary state, previous research has established that experimental manipulations can temporarily influence dispositional values measures (e.g., Gardner, Gabriel, & Lee, 1999). Therefore, we reasoned that expectations of future success might temporarily change participants' level of materialism, as well as their preference for luxury brands.

## Method

As in the previous studies, participants first read a newspaper article about Jordan, a successful or unsuccessful business major from the same university, and then completed a presumably unrelated advertisement rating task. In this study, ease of imagination was manipulated at three levels. In the easy-to-imagine condition, we simply used the same story as in previous studies, in which Jordan was a business major. In the moderately difficult-to-imagine condition, we modified the "business major" story by adding several irrelevant numerical statistics to the story, such as the average monthly rainfall in the target's state of residence, as numerical information has been previously shown to undermine the effects of imagery (Petrova & Cialdini, 2005). In the highly difficult-to-imagine condition, we used the story in which Jordan was a biology major, as used in previous studies. This resulted in a 2 (upward vs. downward comparison) × 3 (easy vs. moderate vs. difficult to imagine) × 2 (watches vs. cars) mixed design.

Participants were 253 undergraduate business students who completed the study in exchange for partial course credit. On entering the laboratory, they first read the newspaper story and answered several questions, such as indicating in which newspaper they thought the article appeared. They then completed the 12-item transportation scale (Green & Brock, 2000), which served as a manipulation check that measured the ease with which they were able to imagine themselves in Jordan's situation. The transportation scale is designed to measure the extent to which individuals are absorbed into a narrative story. For example, some of the items in the scale are as follows: "While I was reading the article, I could easily picture the events in it taking place," and "I could picture myself in the scene of the events described in the article." Each item was measured on a 7-point scale, anchored by *not at all* and *very much*. Previous research using this scale has demonstrated that the extent to which a narrative story impacts real-world beliefs related to the story depends on the extent to which readers are transported into the story (Green & Brock, 2000). At the end of the first survey, participants also completed the PANAS scale, which measured their levels of positive and negative affect (Wilson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). In the subsequent advertising task, they indicated their preference between two brands of

watches (Rolex vs. Timex) and two brands of cars (Lexus vs. Kia), as used previously. Next, they completed the Material Values Scale (Richins, 2004) and indicated their expected salaries in 10 years.

## Results

*Manipulation check.* The 12 items on the transportation scale were found to be highly intercorrelated (Cronbach $\alpha = .82$), so they were averaged to create a single measure of transportation. The mean score on the transportation scale was the lowest for participants in the difficult (biology major) condition ($M = 3.33$), second lowest for those in the moderate (numerical statistics) condition ($M = 3.55$), and highest in the easy (business major) condition ($M = 3.76$). A set of planned comparisons confirmed that the difficult condition was significantly harder to imagine than the moderate condition, $F(1, 417) = 4.51$, $p < .05$, which was significantly harder to imagine than the easy condition, $F(1, 417) = 7.53$, $p < .01$.

*Preference for luxury brands.* Across both product categories, there was a significant interaction between direction of comparison and manipulated ease of imagination, $F(2, 247) = 13.85$, $p < .0001$. See Figure 3 for a summary of these results. Within the easy-to-imagine conditions, participants exhibited a stronger preference for the luxury brand after reading a success story than after reading a failure story ($M = 79.7$ vs. 64.1), $F(1, 82) = 13.06$, $p < .0005$. Within the moderate conditions, there was a slightly (but not significantly) stronger preference for the luxury brand following the success story versus the failure story ($M = 75.6$ vs. 68.6), *ns.* However, in the difficult-to-imagine conditions, there was a weaker preference for the luxury brand following the success story versus the failure story ($M = 67.7$ vs. 84.7), $F(1, 85) = 11.53$, $p < .001$. The product category did not produce a main effect or an interaction with direction of comparison or ease of imagination. Within the watches category, a significant interaction confirmed that reading about a successful or
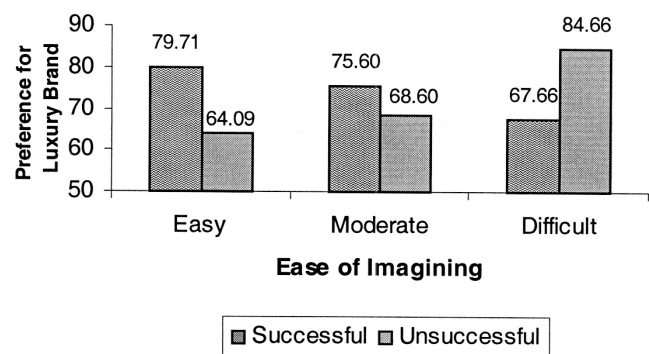


FIGURE 3    Preference (out of 100 points) for the luxury brand is shown, pooled across the two product categories, as a function of the direction of comparison (successful vs. unsuccessful) and the ease of imagining oneself in the narrative (easy vs. moderate vs. difficult).

unsuccessful other had differential effects on brand preferences, depending on the ease with which participants imagined themselves in the story, $F(2, 247) = 12.23$, $p < .0001$. After reading about the successful comparison target, participants exhibited a stronger preference for Rolex when they found the story easy to imagine ($M = 82.7$ points out of 100), compared to when they found the story moderately difficult ($M = 73.8$) or difficult ($M = 67.2$) to imagine, $F(1, 247) = 6.78$, $p < .01$. On the other hand, after reading about the unsuccessful comparison target, participants exhibited a weaker preference for Rolex when they found the story easy to imagine ($M = 65.8$), compared to when they found the story moderately difficult ($M = 66.7$) or difficult ($M = 87.0$) to imagine, $F(1, 247) = 5.25$, $p < .05$. Moreover, comparisons within each of the ease-of-imagination conditions revealed that the stories of success and failure had opposite effects on participants' preferences, depending on whether it was easy or difficult to imagine themselves in the story. When participants found the story easy to imagine, they exhibited a stronger preference for Rolex after reading a success story than after reading a failure story, $F(1, 247) = 9.46$, $p < .005$. In contrast, when they found it difficult to imagine themselves in the story, participants exhibited a weaker preference for Rolex after reading a success story than after reading a failure story, $F(1, 247) = 13.49$, $p < .0005$. And in the moderately difficult condition, there was no significant difference in preference for the Rolex after the success story versus after the failure story, $F(1, 247) = 163$, *ns*.

A similar pattern emerged in the car preference task, resulting in a significant interaction between direction of comparison and ease of imagination, $F(2, 247) = 8.83$, $p < .0005$. After reading about the successful comparison target, participants demonstrated a similar level of preference for Lexus when they found the scenario easy ($M = 76.7$) or moderately difficult to imagine ($M = 77.4$), but a significantly lower preference for Lexus when the scenario was difficult to imagine ($M = 68.1$), $F(1, 247) = 5.71$, $p < .05$. In contrast, after reading about the unsuccessful comparison target, they demonstrated a weaker preference for Lexus when it was easy to imagine ($M = 62.37$), compared to when it was moderately difficult ($M = 70.5$) or difficult ($M = 82.29$) to imagine, $F(1, 247) = 10.02$, $p < .005$. Again, reading about the success of another person had opposite effects on product preferences depending on the ease with which participants imagined themselves in the story. When the story was easy to imagine, participants demonstrated a stronger preference for Lexus after reading a success story than after reading a failure story ($M = 76.7$ vs. $62.37$), $F(1, 247) = 8.16$, $p < .005$. The opposite effect, however, occurred when the story was difficult to imagine. Under these circumstances, participants demonstrated a weaker preference for Lexus after reading a success story than after reading a failure story ($M = 68.1$ vs. $82.3$), $F(1, 247) = 8.23$, $p < .005$. Again, in the moderately difficult condition, there was no significant difference in preference for Lexus after the success story versus after the failure story

($M = 77.39$ vs. $70.5$), $F(1, 247) = 1.82$, *ns*. These results provide converging evidence that when individuals find it easy to imagine themselves in a success story, they become increasingly interested in luxury brands, whereas when they find it easy to imagine themselves in a failure story, they become less interested in luxury brands. Indeed, the transportation scale appears to mediate our results. When we substituted participants' scores on the transportation scale for the ease of imagination manipulation in the model, a highly significant comparison direction × transportation interaction in regard to product preferences emerged: watches, $F(1, 252) = 17.31$, $p < .0001$; cars, $F(1, 252) = 23.21$, $p < .0001$. Furthermore, when controlling for participants' scores on the transportation scale, the significance of the interaction between comparison direction and ease of imagination was reduced, from $F(2, 247) = 13.85$, $p < .0001$, to $F(2, 241) = 7.90$, $p < .001$, but was still significant. Therefore, the transportation score appears to account for some, but not all, of the variation in our model.

*Expected future income and materialism.* The effects of comparison direction and ease of imagination on participants' expected future income and materialism followed the same pattern as described earlier. The interaction of comparison direction and ease of imagination significantly influenced participants' expected income in 10 years, $F(2, 252) = 11.44$, $p < .0001$. A success story that was easy to imagine lead to a higher expected salary ($M = \$118,600$) than a success story that was moderately difficult ($M = \$102,600$) or difficult ($M = \$93, 600$) to imagine, $F(1, 247) = 11.78$, $p < .001$. In contrast, a failure story that was easy to imagine elicited a lower expected salary ($M = \$87,500$) than a failure story that was moderately difficult ($M = \$106,900$) or difficult ($M = \$107,300$) to imagine, $F(1, 247) = 10.09$, $p < .005$. Furthermore, expected future income mediated the relation among comparison direction, ease of imagination, and brand preference. When expected income was added to the brand preference model, it showed a highly significant effect on brand preference across both categories, $F(1, 241) = 10.54$, $p < .001$, whereas the direction of comparison × ease of imagination interaction became nonsignificant, $F(2, 241) = 1.26$, *ns*.

The interaction of comparison direction and ease of imagination also impacted participants' materialism scores, $F(2, 247) = 8.01$, $p < .0005$. When it was easy for individuals to imagine themselves in a success story, they scored higher on materialism ($M = 4.62$ out of 7) than when it was moderately difficult ($M = 4.31$) or difficult ($M = 3.83$) to imagine, $F(1, 247) = 7.56$, $p < .01$. When it was easy for them to imagine themselves in a failure story, they scored marginally lower on materialism ($M = 3.82$) than when it was moderately difficult ($M = 4.01$) or difficult ($M = 4.33$), but this simple effect did not reach significance, $F(1, 247) = 2.90$, $p < .10$. Furthermore, expected future income mediated the relation among comparison direction, ease of imagination, and participants'

level of materialism. When expected income was added to the materialism model, it yielded a highly significant effect on materialism, $F(1, 241) = 9.63$, $p < .005$, whereas the direction of comparison × ease of imagination interaction became nonsignificant, $F(2, 241) = 1.30$, $p = .27$. The highly consistent pattern of results among the dependent variables of brand preferences, materialism, and income expectations provides mounting evidence that exposure to success stories can have a profound impact on our consumption preferences.

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

This research provides a necessary examination of how consumers' purchasing habits are influenced by comparisons with individuals who are wealthier and more successful than themselves. Reading a story about a successful fellow business major caused our participants to forecast higher annual salaries for themselves and made them more likely to desire luxury brands such as Rolex and Lexus, presumably because they felt that they would be able to afford such luxury items in the future. In contrast, reading a story about an unsuccessful fellow business student caused participants to forecast lower annual salaries, resulting in a decreased preference for luxury brands. However, our results were reversed when participants read stories about biology majors, with whom they did not perceive the same shared destiny. After reading a story about a successful biology student, participants lowered their expectations about their future prospects. Consequently, when compared to those who read about an unsuccessful biology student, they forecasted lower future salaries for themselves, and thus displayed decreased interest in luxury brands. This research demonstrates that comparisons to successful others are likely to increase luxury brand preferences only when the depicted success is easy to imagine, a factor that was manipulated by varying the college major of the comparison target (Study 1), varying the feasibility of the depicted success (Study 2), measuring the perceived interconnectedness with the comparison target (Study 2), and including distracting numerical information in the story (Study 3). When the story portrayed a success that was difficult for the participant to imagine, it did not increase desire for luxury brands, and in many cases actually decreased desire for such brands.

Our research contributes to the existing literature in several ways. Although some prior research has established assimilation effects of social comparisons (e.g., Mills et al., 2002), these researchers did not establish the cognitive processes underlying their effects. Other researchers (e.g., Mussweiler, 2003; Mussweiler & Strack, 2000a) proposed and tested a selective accessibility explanation, in which individuals select evidence in memory that is consistent with their initial judgment of whether the target is similar or dissimilar. We propose a related mechanism, in which individuals test the similarity or dissimilarity hypothesis by trying to

imagine themselves in a similar, future situation, and making subsequent judgments based on the ease of imagining. Whereas Lockwood (2002) suggested ease of imagination as an explanation for why downward comparisons might threaten one's own self-esteem, she did not explicitly measure or test the mediating role of this variable. In addition, our studies differ from most prior research on social comparison (e.g., Mussweiler & Strack, 2000a) in that we do not explicitly ask participants to make a comparative judgment between themselves and the comparison target prior to subsequent evaluations. When reading a newspaper or magazine article, individuals usually compare themselves with others in an implicit and spontaneous manner, without being instructed to do so (Stapel & Suls, 2004). Finally, this research also expands on Richins's (1991) and others' findings by investigating whether social comparisons impact not only one's feelings of self-satisfaction, but also one's brand preferences, particularly for luxury brands. Moreover, we find that exposure to success or failure stories can temporarily influence one's level of materialism (Richins, 2004), a measure typically assumed to remain stable over time and across situations.

An alternative explanation for our results, not discussed previously, is that business students in the study liked to see themselves as similar to successful business people and consequently modeled their behavior by increasing their preferences for luxury brands. That is, successful business professionals are expected to own such brands as Lexus and Rolex, and although these brands were never mentioned in the stories, it is possible that activation spread automatically in participants' memories to constructs frequently associated with business professionals. However, this possibility would not explain the reversed effects of a story of success versus failure when the character was a different major. In other words, a simple activation (or modeling) explanation would not account for the increased preference for luxury brands after reading about an unsuccessful biology major (in Studies 2 and 3).

A possible limitation of this research is that it only examines the effects of a single medium, the newspaper article, whereas consumers might be more heavily influenced by social comparisons with television characters. Future studies might examine the effect of social comparison in other common marketing contexts, such as television or the Internet. Moreover, participants were all undergraduate students who have not yet embarked on their careers and thus have had unlimited opportunities for success. Our results might be limited to situations in which exposure to successful others activates an image of the participant's future self, rather than an ideal (yet unattained) present self. In other words, if the comparison target were a current colleague who had achieved a higher level of success, participants might feel more threatened than encouraged, possibly reversing our results. Furthermore, our participants were limited to business majors, who may have a more market-driven definition of success

than biology majors, not to mention students of the arts, social work, nursing, or theology. Nonbusiness majors might have an entirely different model of success, measured in personal or emotional terms rather than financial terms, which might lead to the purchase of a vehicle such as the environmentally friendly Prius, rather than the status-enhancing Lexus. In addition, another line of research might examine the effect of social comparison not only on expectations of success, but also on the motivation to work hard or make sacrifices to achieve the high standards reflected in comparisons to successful others.

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