Media Exposure, Social Comparison and Self-Discrepancy: A Model of Prediction of Fashion Clothing Involvement

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Abstract: The current study theoretically connects media exposure and fashion clothing involvement within a predictive model that positions social comparison as mediator and self-discrepancy as moderator. A sample of 500 people aged between 18 and 30 was randomly selected in a southern metropolis in China. Analysis results have teased out the net contribution of media exposure to fashion clothing involvement. They also show that social comparison processes mediate the relationship between media exposure and fashion clothing involvement; self-discrepancy moderates the relationship which in turn is mediated by social comparison. Individuals with high levels of self-discrepancy experience more negative emotions from comparison to thin-ideal image in fashion media than those with low levels. Theoretical implications on mechanisms underlying internalization and the use of social norms are discussed in relation to self-related theories.

Keywords: Fashion clothing involvement, media exposure, social comparison, self-discrepancy, mediated moderation effect

1. Introduction

Involvement as a meta-construct has been defined by scholars across diverse levels of analysis, disciplines, and research contexts. And one of the most popular domains for theorizing is fashion (O'Cass, 2000, 2004) where individuals' social anchoring and psychological attributes are intimately connected.

For most people, knowledge about fashion and designer products comes primarily from mass media and secondarily from members in their social network. For instance, exposure to thin-ideal content on media, whether in the form of visual image or words, tends to drive social comparison with real and imagined others (e.g., Bessenoff, 2006; Festinger, 1954; Jung et al., 2001). In this sense, one can argue that the criteria for publicly-acknowledged self-image are a major source of frustration stemming from discrepancies between the actual and socially constructed ideal self (e.g., Higgins, 1987, 1989). And the rapid development of new media technology has obliterated national boundaries so that similar ideal-real dissonance can be observed in both Chinese and western societies (Thompson & Haytko, 1997).

In their research, Kher et al. (2003) have noted an inverse correlation between the actual average size of females in America and ideal image as portrayed by fashion media (cited in Kim, 2008). The fashion industry, being part of the process of social creation of the ideal body (Tate & Edwards, 1982), joins the mass media in a chorus of celebration of the "good looks," thus inducing shame and even depression for people, especially women, who perceive

themselves as failing to live up to the standard (Jung et al., 2001; Higgins, 1987).

The intricate relationships between fashion and fashion consumption in the modern Chinese society are conceivably different from what one may have observed in the West (Davis, 1992; McCracken, 1988; Simmel, 2001). In China, the unequal pace of development for consumerism and consumption results in the concentration of identity and taste within a relatively small minority of high-income people who are vanguard consumers of fashion, especially imported luxury goods (Zhao, 1997). Chinese consumers, particularly the young, affluent and well-educated segment, have been shown to have a strong preference for western brands, most of which are abundantly available in any major metropolis (e.g., Sin et al., 2000; Zhang, 1996).

Perhaps unlike their Western counterparts who are likely pursuers of individual identity, young Chinese tend to express their group membership with fashion (Schmitt, 1997). Consumption (e.g., brands favored, time and money committed, and research done, etc.) therefore is mainly driven by one's social class anchoring. Owning luxury symbolizes success and high-brow taste. In their study of everyday practice, scholars have found that Chinese young people are particularly susceptible to pressures from approval or more importantly disapproval from others when it comes to fashion, either in consciousness or conduct (Han et al., 2009).

Questions abound, then, about conceptual ties among a person's social demographic characteristics, patterns of message consumption, social comparison, self-other image comparison, and aspects of fashion clothing involvement. For example: 1) Does media exposure make a positive contribution (or the lack of which) to fashion adoption; 2) are social and image comparisons mediator or moderator variables; 3) what are the main dimensions of fashion clothing involvement; and 4) what are the criteria for effects? To address these questions, we contextualize our research in a southern metropolis in mainland China, focusing particularly on the younger generation on account of their relatively active role in fashion clothing involvement.

2. Conceptualization

2.1. Fashion Clothing Involvement

According to the now classic definition by Rothschild (1979), "involvement" refers to the motivational fettles of arousal and interest of an individual caused by both external factors such as situation, product, and communication and internal factors such as ego, beliefs and values. Zaichkowsky (1985), however, sees involvement more as internally driven than externally determined, as "a person's perceived relevance of an object based on inherent needs, values, and interests" (p. 42). Researchers of consumer behavior seem to have developed a special liking for that concept in understanding product possessions and psychological attachment to possessions (Mittal & Lee, 1989; Ohanian, 1989). Despite ambiguities surrounding the concept, some even identify involvement as the single most important predictor of purchase behavior (Evrard & Aurier, 1996; Martin, 1998). In Kim's study (2008), involvement is conceptualized as a determinant for prioritized attention to particular products or which in turn leads to product acquisition activities.

Given the purpose of this research, we adopt the definition of involvement as the extent

to which the consumer views fashion clothing as a central part of their life, "a meaningful and engaging activity in their life" (O'Cass, 2004, p. 870). This definition places an implicit emphasis on people's internalized values and beliefs which can motivate and guide individuals' cognitive elaboration, impression management and purchasing behaviors. People who are drawn to fashion tend to think of fashion frequently and are likely to dwell on fashion related self-references (cited in Sun & Guo, 2013, p. 118).

2.2. Social Comparison

The ideas of "*self*" have developed over time, mainly through comparing with others. The theory of Festinger (1954) explains how and why social comparison takes place. That is, "people have a need for self-evaluation. They use a stable source of self-reference against which to assess their attitudes and compare their opinions and abilities with similar others" (Cited in Chan, 2008, p. 316). Comparison usually occurs within groups and in face-to-face situations (Festinger, 1954). Individuals use other people as references to validate their own attitudes and actions when objective sources are not available (Jones & Gerard, 1967). Kruglanski and Mayseless (1990) define social comparison as "comparative judgments of social stimuli on particular content dimensions" (p. 196). There are two types of comparisons: downward comparison, which involves looking down on people who look worse than one's self; and upward comparison, which involves looking up onto others who are more blessed in appearance than one's self (Olson & Evans, 1999). These two types of comparison result in different emotions, downward comparisons usually lead to positive moods (Wills, 1981, 1991) and high self-esteem (Morse & Gergen, 1970), while upward comparisons often result in negative emotions (Bower, 1991) and low self-esteem (Morse & Gergen, 1970).

2.3. Self-discrepancy

The discrepancies in the beliefs about people themselves can cause vulnerabilities in their motivations and specific emotions (Higgins, 1987). The self-discrepancy theory hypothesized two cognitive dimensions: the domains and standpoints of the self. The domains of the *self* include the actual self, ideal self, and ought self. Previous studies (Higgins, 1987, 1989; Rosenberg, 1979) claim that individuals develop objective self-relevant cognitions (*actual self)*, ideas regarding how they would ideally like to be (*ideal self*), and how they believe others would like them to be (*ought self*) through the process of social comparison.

The actual self refers to an individual's presentation of the characters that this individual and others think he or she actually possesses. The ideal self involves the individual's presentation of the attributes that the individual or others would like him or her, ideally, to possess. This process includes the individual's hopes, aspirations and wishes for himself or herself. The ought self refers to a person's representation of the attributes that the person or others think he or she should or ought possess. This indicates the sense of duty, obligations, or responsibility for herself or himself (Kim, 2008).

Among the three selves, the ideal self plays an important role in shaping how an individual feels about the actual self. When the actual self is discrepant from the ideal self, an ideal

discrepancy occurs. Ideal discrepancy is the lack of a desired positive outcome (Higgins, et al., 1986). The ought self varies depending on the individual. For example, the ought self contributes to the formation of the ideal self for many individuals, while it has more attributes of social norms for many other individuals. When the actual self is discrepant from the ought self, ought discrepancy happens (Higgins et al., 1986).

The self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987) also suggests the distinction between two perspectives on the self: one's own standpoint and that of the significant others. Six basic types of self-state representation are determined by combining each of the domains of the self with different standpoints of the self, such as actual/own, actual/other, ideal/own, ideal/other, ought/own, and ought/other. The disparities of an individual with respect to the different self lead to different self-discrepancies, each of which is related to particular negative emotional and motivational problems (Higgins, 1987).

For example, if the actual characteristics of a person from his or her standpoint are not consistent with the ideal self that he or she hopes to achieve, the individual will experience negative emotions, such as dissatisfaction and disappointment, and even shame, embarrassment and the like. Low self-esteem involves the actual self including the actual/own and actual/other, while the ideal self consists of the ideal/own and ideal/other. Previous studies find that exposure to ideal images is associated with body image self-discrepancies in various contexts, such as TV ads (Lavine et al., 1999) and advertisements (Bessenoff, 2006).

To extend the idea to self image in fashion communication research, the more discrepant the actual self is from the ideal self, the more likely an individual would experience discomfort and dissatisfaction. According to Higgins et al. (1986), "the greater the magnitude and accessibility of a particular type of self-discrepancy possessed by an individual, the more the individual will experience the type of discomfort associated with that self-discrepancy" (p. 7).

2.4. Media Exposure

In the majority of media use studies, *use* means "exposure", most often measured by asking respondents how many times (usually in a week) they make use of a specific medium (Hollander, 2006). Other scholars have proposed other concepts such as attention (Drew & Weaver, 1990), reliance (McLeod, Glynn, & McDonald, 1983), and dependence (Miller & Reese, 1982; McLeod & McDonald, 1985).

Audiences are active rather than passive, which means that media users prefer to deliberately choose certain messages over others and retain certain messages while forgetting others. Audiences would like to select a message in accordance with their preexisting attitudes to protect the integrity of their belief structures (cited in Hollander, 2006). On the other hand, audiences would also preferentially choose certain media and give others up in order to obtain the information they are interested in.

2.5. Media Exposure and Social Comparison

When individuals compare to higher standard, people are motived to change the self to be more like the compared standard. Upward comparison enhances the self through eliciting oneself

improvement behaviors (Higgins, 1987). Prior study suggests that the social comparison process mediates the effect of exposure to thin-ideal advertising on symptoms of depression, weight-related thoughts, and weight-regulatory thoughts (Bessenoff, 2006). When individuals compare themselves to the thin ideal models, social comparison mediates the relationship between media exposure and negative effect and increases weight concerns (Tiggemann & McGill, 2004). In this study, we examine social comparison as a possible mediator in the relation between media exposure and fashion clothing involvement.

2.6. Hypotheses and Research Questions

2.6.1. Hypotheses:

H1: Media exposure will be positively correlated to fashion clothing involvement.

H2: Social comparison will be positively correlated to fashion clothing involvement.

2.6.2. Research Questions:

RQ1: What is the relationship between media exposure and social comparison when involving in fashion clothing? Does social comparison mediate the relationship between media exposure and fashion clothing involvement?

RQ2: What is the relationship between media exposure and self-discrepancy when involving in fashion clothing? Does the self-discrepancy moderate the relationship between media exposure and fashion clothing involvement?

RQ3-1: What is the relationship between self-discrepancy, social comparison, media exposure and fashion clothing involvement?

RQ3-2: Does social comparison mediate the moderating effect of self-discrepancy from exposure to fashion media?

Based on Higgins' theory (1989), high levels of self-discrepancy are linked to various types of emotional distress, such as disappointment and dissatisfaction (e.g., Strauman & Higgins, 1988), low esteem (e.g., Moretti & Higgins, 1990), and even social phobias (e.g., Strauman, 1989). Previous studies suggest the link between self-discrepancy and emotional vulnerabilities (e.g. Strauman et al., 1991; Szymanski & Cash, 1995). Other prior studies show a causal relation between long-time exposure to thin ideal image and self-discrepancy, leading to eating-related behavior. This current study proposes first, the moderation effect: a self-discrepancy may moderate the likelihood of exposing to ideal image and fashion clothing involvement. Second, the mediation effect: social comparison processes mediate the relationship between exposing to fashion media and involving in fashion clothing. Third, the possible mediated moderation effect: a high level of self-discrepancy may increase the likelihood of comparison from fashion media.
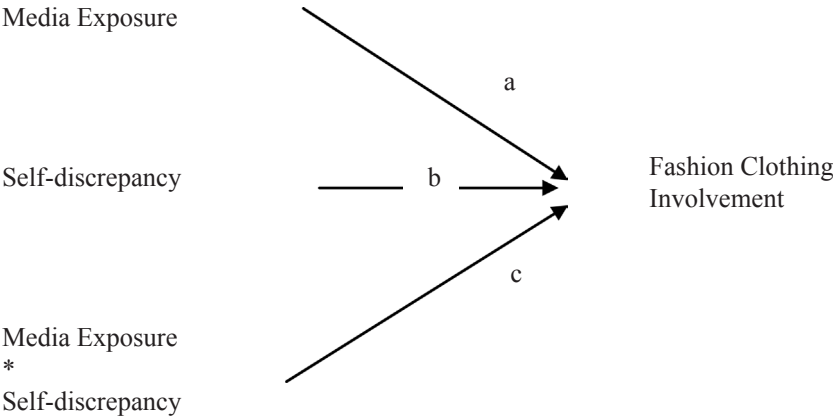
Media Exposure

a

Self-discrepancy   b

Fashion Clothing
Involvement

c

Media Exposure
*
Self-discrepancy

Figure 1. Moderation Effect

Social
Comparison

a   b

Media
Exposure

Fashion Clothing
Involvement

c

Figure 2. Mediation Effect

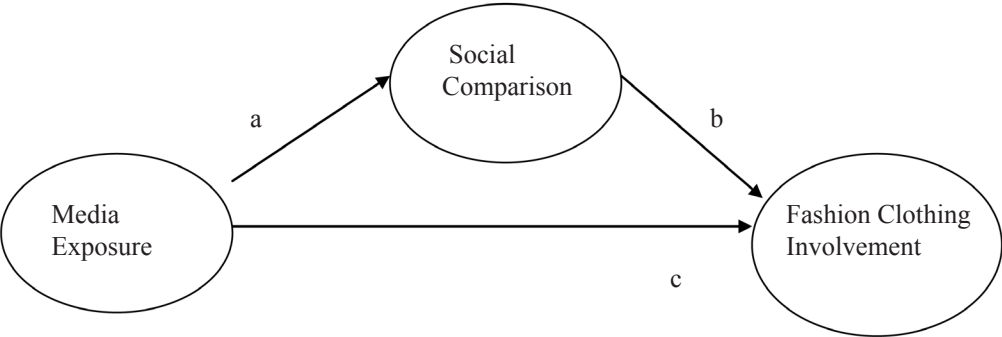Media Exposure   Social Comparison   Fashion Clothing
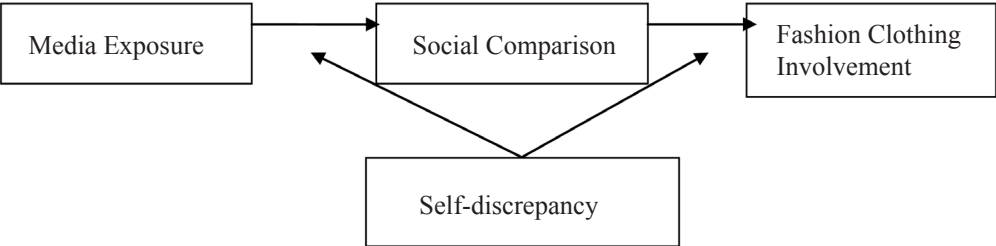Involvement

Self-discrepancy

Figure 3. Mediated Moderation Effect

Figure 3 shows the proposed mediated moderation model, suggesting self-discrepancy as a moderator of the mediation of the relationship between media exposure and fashion clothing involvement by social comparison.

3. Methods

3.1. Sample and Sampling Procedure

We commissioned a professional survey organization to conduct the telephone interviews in July 2011 using random digit dialing (RDD) methods where only existing telephone prefixes were used and the remaining four digits were computer generated in corresponding proportions with the prefixes to ensure representativeness. A total of 500 young residents in Guangzhou, a large southern metropolis, were selected. The interviews were conducted in Chinese (Either Putonghua or Cantonese depending on respondents). We selected this border town as our research site for several reasons: 1) Guangzhou is the southernmost of the well-known "three biggies" (the other two being the capital city of Beijing in the north and Shanghai in the middle of the east coast); 2) Partly due to its past of being a colonial port city nearly 200 years ago and partly due to its close vicinity to Hong Kong, the city has a long history of western exposure and its reputation as the country's most economically advanced and politically open metropolis has earned itself both admirers and adversaries; and 3) Guangdong Province, of which Guangzhou is the capital city, is the only region in entire China where access to Hong Kong television is allowed by the central government. And local residents have taken full advantage of this green light.

Young residents in this study included all those who are between 18 and 30 years old and have lived in Guangzhou for two years or more. Within the sample, slightly over half (53.8 percent) were males and 46.2 percent females. A total of 59 percent of the respondents were between the ages of 18 and 24, whereas the 25-30 age group was slightly smaller and constituted 41 percent of the respondents. Respondents with junior college or college education accounted for 63.6 percent of the total. The unmarried occupied a much bigger percentage than the married, 75 and 25 percent respectively. The following table shows the statistical details.

Table 1. Sample Statistics

Demographics	%
Sex	
Male	53.80
Female	46.20
Age	
18-24	59.00
25-30	41.00
Education	
High School	22.40

Junior College and College	63.60
Postgraduate and above	2.20
Others	11.80
Annual Household Income	
Below 40,000 (include 40,000)	19.40
40,001-80,000 (include 80,000)	25.00
80,001-100,000 (include 100,000)	7.60
100,001-140,000 (include 140,000)	36.80
140,001-200,000 (include 200,000)	6.00
Above 200,000	5.20
Marital status	
Unmarried	75.00
Married	25.00

Note: N = 500

3.2. Measurements

3.2.1. Fashion Clothing Involvement

Fashion clothing involvement was measured using four 5-point Likert-scale items (1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree) based on the measurement constructed by O'Cass (2000). The four questions are: "Fashion clothing is a significant part of my life," "I am very much involved in fashion clothing," "I would say that fashion clothing is central to my identity as a person," and "I pay a lot of attention to fashion clothing." Reliability across the four items was adequate (Cronbach's α = .72). A factor analysis (principal component Oblimin rotation, eigenvalue > 1) generated one single factor which we labeled the fashion clothing involvement scale (see Appendix 1). This factor rather than the individual items it subsumed is used in subsequent analyses. The scale accounted for 70% of the variance in the factor.

3.2.2. Media Exposure

Media exposure was measured by asking respondents' frequency in using two forms of media: fashion magazines and fashion websites. A 3-point Likert-scale item (1 = never; 2 = sometimes; and 3 = often) was used. This was followed by other media consumption questions such as "How many fashion magazines do you often read?", "How much time do you spend on website browsing every time?", "How many fashion websites do you often browse?"

3.2.3. Social Comparison

Social comparison was measured developing four items from Krcmar, Giles and Helme (2008) and using 5-point Likert-scale items (1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree). Questionnaire items were: "I compare my body and looks to actors' and celebrities' bodies and looks that I see in magazines or website," "I compare my dress and adornments to actors' and celebrities' dress and adornments that I see in magazines or website," "At parties or other social events, I compare my body and physical appearance to the bodies and physical appearance of others," and "At parties or other social events, I compare my dress and adornments to dress and adornments of others." Reliability across the four items was adequate (Cronbach's α = .76). A factor analysis generated one single factor which was labeled the social comparison scale (Appendix 2). The scale accounted for 58% of the variance in this factor.

3.2.4. Self-discrepancy

Self-discrepancy was measured using seven 5-point Likert-scale items (1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree) based on self-concept discrepancy theory (Higgins et al., 1985). The seven questions are: 1) Generally, I am satisfied with my appearance. 2) I think I am a dressing decent person. 3) I think that my appearance is plain. 4) I wish that my appearance can be more attractive. 5) I think that I am not slim enough. 6) I think that I am not tall enough. 7) It would be better if I am more fashionable.

For self-discrepancy, responses to the 7-item questionnaire were subjected to an exploratory factor analysis using squared multiple correlations as prior communality estimates. The principal factor method was used to extract the factors, and this was followed by a Varimax rotation. A scree test suggested three meaningful factors, so only these factors were retained for rotation. In interpreting the rotated factor pattern, an item was said to load on a given factor, if the factor loading was .40 or greater for that factor, and was less than .40 for the other. Using these criteria, two items were found to load on the first factor, which was subsequently labeled the "Self-improve" factor (Cronbach's α = .60). Two items on the second factor, which was labeled the "Self-confidence" factor (Cronbach's α = .55). Three items loaded also loaded on the third factor, which was labeled the "Self-abasement" factor (Cronbach's α = .40). The three factors account for 60.3% of the total variance (Table 2).

Table 2. Factor Analysis (Principal Component with Varimax Rotation) on Self-discrepancy Indicators

	Self-improve	Self-confidence	Self-abasement
It would be better if I am more fashionable.	**.85**		
I wish that my appearance can be more attractive.	**.81**		
I think I am a dressing decent person		**.86**	
Generally, I am satisfied with my appearance.		**.79**	

I think that I am not tall enough.			**.69**
I think that I am not slim enough.			**.69**
I think that my appearance is plain.			**.63**
Variance accounted for (%)	**24.46**	**21.22**	**14.63**

Note: Loadings on the three factors are sufficiently clean that no cross-loaders at or larger than .25 are observed. Actual cross loading figures are therefore omitted for ease of reading (*N = 500*).

3.2.5. Demographics

For controlling purpose, social demographic variables include gender (1 = male; 2 = female), age (measured in two-year increments), education (ordinal measures from primary school, junior high school, senior high school to junior college, college and graduate school), annual household income (total income from all members of the family), marital status (1 = unmarried; 2 = married), and occupation.

4. Results

4.1. Hypothesis Testing (H1, H2)

Two regression analyses were performed to examine the predictive power of magazine and website exposure on the fashion clothing involvement, both controlling for demographics. Results show that the predictive structure across the two predictors is strikingly in similar patterns (Table 3). Exposure to fashion websites demonstrated a slightly, albeit not significantly, higher impact on fashion clothing involvement than magazine reading ($\beta_{website}$ = .25, $p < .001$; $\beta_{magazine}$ = .21, $p < .001$). Given the two independent variables are highly correlated (r = .52, $p < .001$), it seems like that the need for fashion information takes precedence over the channel through which that information is disseminated.

Across demographics, women are more likely than men to pay close attention to fashion clothing (β =.17; $p < .001$), consistent with previous studies (Auty & Elliott, 1998; Browne & Kaldenberg, 1997; Goldsmith et al., 1996; Tigert et al., 1980). Marital status is significantly but negatively related to fashion clothing (β =-.10; $p < .05$). The particular finding is that the rest of the three demographic attributes are completely absent from the significant prediction.

Turning to social comparison, we found that social comparison carries special weight in the Chinese society in connection with fashion clothing involvement (β = .32; $p < .001$). People compare upward with high standard and get close to the standard through wearing fashion clothes. All results show that H1 and H2 are fully supported.

Table 3. Predicting Fashion Clothing Involvement

Demographics	
Gender	.17***
Age	.03
Education	-.07
Marital status	-.10*
Income	.05
R^2 (%)	3.60**
Social Comparison	.32***
Incremental R^2 (%)	10.50***
Media exposure	
Magazine	.21***
Website	.25***
Incremental R^2 (%)	14.30***

Notes: Entries are standardized OLS regression beta coefficients *(N = 500)*. All figures controlled for demographics. # $p < .10$; *$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$

4.2. Results of Research Question 1 (Mediation Effect)

Prior studies of social research suggest that exposure to thin-ideal would elicit a comparing process, resulting in different negative effects (e.g. Field et al., 1999; Tiggemann & McGill, 2004). Social comparison is expected to mediate the relationship between media exposure and fashion clothing involvement in this research question. Responses from the social comparison questions were used as the mediator in the regression analyses. Demographics were controlled in all analyses.

As needed to test for mediation (Baron & Kenny, 1986), media exposure was found to be a significant predictor of social comparison (β= .23, *p* < .001 for magazine; and β= .27, *p* < .001 for website). Social comparison was a significant predictor of fashion clothing involvement (β= .32, *p* < .001). After social comparison entered into the model, the effect of magazine exposure was reduced (from β = .31, *p* < .001, to β= .24, *p* < .001); while the effect of website exposure was also reduced (from β = .33, *p* < .001, to β= .25, *p* < .001). However, the reduction effects were still significant. Social comparison was found to partially mediate the relationships between exposure to media and fashion clothing involvement. In other words, media exposure acts on fashion clothing involvement partly through social comparison. The partial mediation model is in the following:
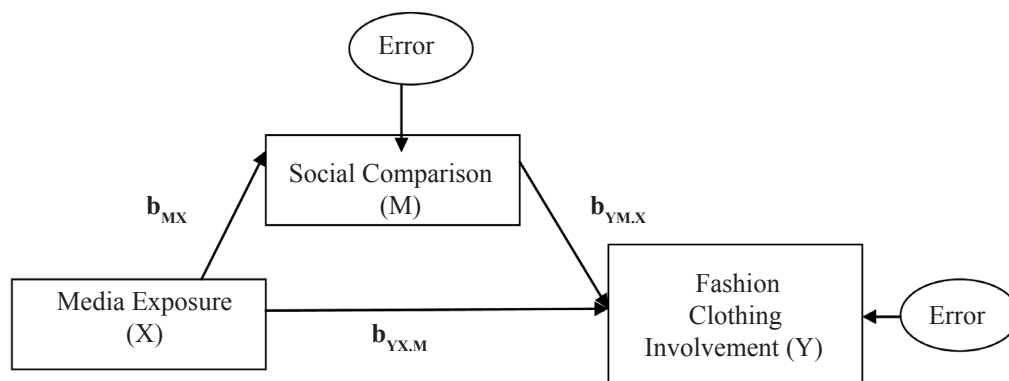
Figure 4. Partial Mediation Model

4.3. Results of Research Question 2 (Moderation Effect)

Research Question 2 is mainly concerned with the possibility of a joint effect between media exposure and self-discrepancy on fashion clothing involvement. With previous research as the frame of reference, we empirically tested a model of moderation effect. In the process, an interaction term was created by multiplying the three factors of self-discrepancy with magazine and website exposure respectively. Controlling for demographics for the six interaction terms, both "Self-improve" and "Self-confidence" factors with media exposure were identical (β= .25, p < .001 for magazine and "Self-improve" factor; β= .28, p < .001 for magazine and "Self-confidence" factor; β= .24, p < .001 for website and "Self-improve" factor; and β= .27, p < .001 for website and "Self-confidence" factor). The interaction terms were significant and indicated a moderation effect except for the "Self-abasement" factor (see Table 4).

Table 4. OLS Regression: Joint Effect of Self-discrepancy and Media Exposure on Fashion Clothing Involvement

Demographics		
R^2 (%)	**3.60****	
Self-discrepancy		
"Self-improve" factor	.28***	
"Self-confidence" factor	.28***	
"Self-abasement" factor		.10*
Incremental R^2 (%)	**16.10*****	

Media exposure	
Incremental R²(%)	**14.30***

Interaction term	
Self-improve* Magazine	.25***
Self-abasement*Magazine	.06
Self-confidence*Magazine	.28***
Incremental R²(%)	**14.1***
Self-improve*Website	.24***
Self-abasement*Website	.06
Self-confidence*Website	. 27***
Incremental R²(%)	**13.4***

Notes: Entries are standardized OLS regression beta coefficients *(N = 500)*. All figures controlled for demographics.

# *p* < .10; **p* < .05; ***p* < .01; ****p* < .001

4.4. Results of Research Questions 3-1 & 3-2 (Mediated Moderation Effect)

Research Questions 3-1 & 3-2 are concerned with the mediating process that is responsible for that moderation. Regression analyses were conducted to examine whether social comparison mediated the moderation of self-discrepancy in the relationship between media exposure and fashion clothing involvement. That is, the effect of media exposure on fashion clothing involvement would depend on the level of individuals' self-discrepancy. And individuals further predicted that this moderation would be mediated by comparing with others. Social comparison mediation is stronger for individuals with high level of self-discrepancy as compared to individuals with low level of self-discrepancy. We adopt the original and classic approaches as outlined by previous studies (e.g. Baron & Kenny, 1986; Judd & Kenny, 1981; Muller et al., 2005). There are three models that underlie for mediated moderation in the following: in which, X_i is independent variable, Y_i is outcome variable, *Me* is mediator and *Mo* is moderator.

$$Y = \beta_{10} + \beta_{11}X + \beta_{12}Mo + \beta_{13}XMo + e_1 \qquad \text{(Step 1)}$$
$$Me = \beta_{20} + \beta_{21}X + \beta_{22}Mo + \beta_{23}XMo + e_2 \qquad \text{(Step 2)}$$
$$Y = \beta_{30} + \beta_{31}X + \beta_{32}Mo + \beta_{33}XMo + \beta_{34}Me + \beta_{35}MeMo + e_3 \qquad \text{(Step 3)}$$

The Step 1 regression is a simple 2 X 2 ANOVA on the fashion involvement. Controlling for demographics, then media exposure, self-discrepancy, and the media exposure × self-discrepancy interaction were entered. The interaction term was significant and indicated a moderation effect. In Step 2, social comparison was regressed on media exposure, self-discrepancy and

media exposure × self-discrepancy interaction. In Step 3, fashion involvement was regressed on media exposure, self-discrepancy, the media exposure × self-discrepancy interaction, social comparison and the social comparison × self-discrepancy interaction.

In Step 1, media exposure × self-discrepancy interaction significantly affect fashion involvement (β= .25, $p < .001$ for magazine and "Self-improve" factor; β= .28, $p < .001$ for magazine and "Self-confidence" factor; β= .24, $p < .001$ for website and "Self-improve" factor; and β= .27, $p < .001$ for website and "Self-confidence" factor), indicating a moderation. In Step 2 and 3, as a result, the moderation of the residual treatment effect, the interaction ($β_{33}$) was not significant (see Table 5a & 5b). Based on the prior studies (e.g. Baron & Kenny, 1986), this is a mediated moderation effect. Then the interpretation was that social comparison has mediated the media exposure × self-discrepancy effect on fashion clothing involvement.

Table 5a. Regression Results for Mediated Moderation Effect (X=Magazine Exposure)

Predictor	Step 1 b	Step 1 t	Step 2 b	Step 2 t	Step 3 b	Step 3 t
X: magazine exposure	.44	5.983***	.31	4.167***	.39	5.237***
Mo: self-discrepancy						
Self-improve	.36	2.540*	.26	1.814	.32	2.175*
Self-confidence	.18	1.148	-.15	-.909	.23	1.439
Self-abasement	.12	.855	-.10	-.641	.13	.852
*X*Mo*: magazine exposure*self-discrepancy						
Magazine*Self-improve	-.05	-.822	.05	730	-.06	-.907
Magazine*Self-confidence	.03	.443	.09	1.276	-.00	-.018
Magazine*Self-abasement	-.01	-.126	.15	1.936	-.01	-.211
Me: social comparison					.15	3.364**
MeMo: social comparison*self-discrepancy						
Compare*Self-improve					-.00	-.082
Compare*Self-confidence					.03	.773
Compare*Self-abasement					-.02	-.429

Notes: All figures controlled for demographics. *(N = 500)*.
*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$

Table 5b. Regression Results for Mediated Moderation Effect (X=Website Exposure)

Predictor	Step 1 b	Step 1 t	Step 2 b	Step 2 t	Step 3 b	Step 3 t
X: website exposure	.40	6.480***	.30	4.786***	.35	5.628***
Mo: self-discrepancy						
Self-improve	.38	2.971**	.30	2.315*	.35	2.670**
Self-confidence	.25	1.928	-.20	-1.476	.32	2.332*
Self-abasement	.28	2.077*	-.17	-1.253	.29	2.130*

X*Mo: website exposure*self-discrepancy						
Website*Self-improve	-.07	-1.230	.02	.412	-.08	-1.403
Website*Self-confidence	.00	.014	.17	2.752**	-.04	-.642
Website*Self-abasement	-.077	-1.341	.11	1.939	-.09	-1.476
Me: social comparison					.15	3.213**
MeMo: social comparison*self-discrepancy						
Compare*Self-improve					.02	.461
Compare*Self-confidence					.03	.788
Compare*Self-abasement					-.02	-.443

Notes: All figures controlled for demographics. *(N = 500)*.
 *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001

5. Conclusion and Discussion

5.1. Conclusion

Our findings mainly point to a predictive structure where young people's fashion clothing involvement is closely connected to surveillance of environment via fashion media exposure, social comparison and self-discrepancy, all of which in turn contribute, albeit to varying degrees, to fashion self-consciousness. On the whole, the results indicate that the channel of information is less relevant to fashion clothing involvement than the content of information, suggesting that people who are in need of fashion information are not picky about where they get it. Again, the observed pattern has little to do with forms of media and sources of information. The strong conditional effect diminishes the main effect stemming from both media use and the internal achievement drive. Unfortunately, existing literature on significant interaction between media use and between media use and various social and psychological factors is too skimpy to be of guidance value in this particular empirical analysis.

Not surprisingly, women pay more attention to what others think of their appearance, which explains the high salience of fashion clothing among this gender group. Interestingly, the other demographic factors, namely income, education, age, and marital status, fail to produce any significant associations with fashion clothing involvement. Individuals who are avid users of fashion magazines are also likely to be regular browsers of fashion websites.

We found that social comparison is anchored deep in the Chinese mind when it comes to fashion. The young, whose rank keeps swelling in major urban areas, are both willing and able to keep abreast of the latest in the vogue. Given that fashion, or more precisely being fashion-able, needs not be prohibitively expensive for many people, it appears that one's membership in various social strata matters more in terms of mentality than resources for fashion-oriented impression management.

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5.2. Theoretical Implications

5.2.1. Developing Theoretically Instructed Measurement

We have developed several theoretically informed measurements in this study. First, fashion clothing involvement combines four indicators of emotional and cognitive commitment to socially desirable values of fashion and fashion clothing. This factorial scale provides a summary account for what might be termed a total predisposition toward fashion. Second, this study extends the three dimensions of self-discrepancy from Higgins et al. (1985). "Self-abasement" focuses on inferiority complex in regards to body image. "Self-improvement" relates to expectations for betterment of appearance, while "self-confidence" refers more or less exclusively to the sense of self appreciation. The weight of self in the equation outperforms all other variables, suggesting a rather solid line of inquiry for future studies.

5.2.2. Developing Theoretical Effect Models

The current study considers the role of the *self* in the fashion clothing involvement from exposure to the different media depicting the thin ideal and extends the key construct-related literatures, such as social comparison, body image and self-discrepancy. The psychological and behavioral complexity associated with unattainable norms, such as relating to appearance and body shape, make obvious that it is very important to get to know the mechanisms through which those norms can influence the *self*.

As predicted, social comparison processes partially mediate the effect of exposure to ideal image of media and fashion clothing involvement (RQ1). People experience the lowering of mood from comparison to the thin-ideal image and get more fashionable clothes to improve their image. Interestingly, reactions of people after viewing thin-ideal images depend on degree of self-discrepancy. Gender is a significant factor for self-discrepancy. This corresponds with findings from previous studies (e.g. Bessenoff, 2006) where women with high levels of body image self-discrepancy reported higher levels of dejection/agitation-related emotion, self-abasement in the domain of appearance, and depression when they are exposed to thin-ideal advertisements (Bessenoff, 2006). When they watch pictures of conventionally slender models, women feel challenged, become more concerned about their own weight and even go so far as to experience reduced self-esteem (Wilcox & Laird, 2000). Being activated by the social context, individuals may have emotional discomfort and the negative emotion will in turn influence their self-evaluation (Strauman, 1989). Women are much more involved in body related issues than men. Women with high levels of self-discrepancy, such as worrying about their body shape and wishing to have a better image, experience the predicted lowering mood of self-dissatisfaction. Women with a low level of self-discrepancy, who think their image is not that bad, feel better after exposing to thin-ideal image. Other studies also demonstrate such self-enhancement effects (e.g. Wilcox & Laird, 2000; Mussweiler & Strack, 2000). The main effects of self-discrepancy suggest that people with high self-discrepancy have lower self-confidence and greater body-related concerns in general than people with low self-discrepancy. This finding is also consistent with prior studies (Higgins, 1989; Strauman, 1989).

This study examines the mediated moderation effect. Exposure to thin ideals affects fashion clothing involvement. As predicted, the social comparison process mediates the relation between media exposure and fashion clothing involvement. Self-discrepancy generally moderates the effect of exposure to media on fashion clothing involvement. Individuals with high-levels of self-discrepancy are highly involved in fashion issues. Notably, social comparison mediates this moderation effect. People with high levels of self-discrepancy experience the worse mood from comparing to the thin ideals, while persons with low levels of self-discrepancy feel not that bad after the comparison. Scheier and Carver (1988) argue that the self may induce social comparison and self-enhancement processes. This study supports their argument. When worrying and caring about their body image, individuals are motivated to change their behaviors and take more actions to reduce the discrepancy, for example, shopping for new clothes or doing exercise.

This research provides support for an individual different variable, self-discrepancy, which moderates the exposure to thin-ideal images and fashion clothing involvement and this effect is mediated by social comparison. Individuals highly involved in self-discrepancy are more likely to engage in comparing processes from media exposure, as well as tend more to experience self-directed behaviors.

This finding of mediated moderation effect will enrich the knowledge of self-discrepancy theory. This also can provide an advance in understanding the mechanisms underlying internalization and the use of social norms, such as comparison and behavioral issues, for example, changing behavior in fashion clothing involvement.

5.3. Limitations

This study has a number of limitations. First, measurement of media use focuses on exposure only rather than tapping the more latent measure of focal attention, which would enhance validity of measurement. Second, the way we explicated the concept of fashion involvement ran the risk, more or less, of oversimplification with the chosen dimensions. Third, the reliability test (i.e., Cronbach's alpha) is not high enough for some of the measures. The study design could benefit from improved measurement of the self-discrepancy variables with more items for the questionnaire, which could be applied in various fields.

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Appendix 1

Factor Analysis (Principal Component with Oblimin Rotation) on Fashion Clothing Involvement Indicators

	Fashion Clothing Involvement
Fashion clothing is a significant part of my life	**.76**
I am very much involved in fashion clothing	**.78**
I would say that fashion clothing is central to my identity as a person	**.80**
I pay a lot of attention to fashion clothing	**.63**
Variance accounted for (%)	**70.00**

Note: Loadings on the factor are sufficiently clean that no cross-loaders at or larger than .25 are observed. (*N = 500*).

Appendix 2

Factor Analysis (Principal Component with Oblimin Rotation) on Social Comparison Indicators

	Social Comparison
I compare my body and look to actors' and celebrities' bodies and looks that I see in magazines or website.	**.73**
I compare my dress and adornments to actors' and celebrities' dress and adornments that I see in magazines or website.	**.76**
At parties or other social events, I compare my body and physical appearance to the bodies and physical appearance of others.	**.81**
At parties or other social events, I compare my dress and adornments to dress and adornments of others.	**.78**
Variance accounted for (%)	**58.98**

Note: Loadings on the factor are sufficiently clean that no cross-loaders at or larger than .25 are observed. (*N = 500*).