

# **AN EXAMINATION OF THE USE OF TELEVISION ADVERTISING AND PROGRAMMING FOR SOCIAL COMPARISON**

*Sandra K. Smith Speck, Idaho State University, College of Business, 921 South 8<sup>th</sup> Ave. Stop 8020, Pocatello, Idaho 83209-8020, 208-282-4344, specsand@isu.edu*

*Teri Peterson, Idaho State University, College of Business, 921 South 8<sup>th</sup> Ave., Stop 8020, Pocatello, Idaho 83209-8020, 208-282-4861, peteteri@isu.edu*

*Yue Long, Chengdu University of Technology, No.1, Dongsan Road, Er Xianqiao, Chenghua District, Chengdu, P.O. Box 610059, Sichuan Province, PRC, longyue2200@yahoo.com*

## **ABSTRACT**

The present research examines the antecedent factors which influence the relative effectiveness of television programming and advertising as sources for social comparison. Specifically, we look at the demographic variables of gender, regional subculture, and standard of living, as well as materialism, cultivation theory and general life satisfaction using a cross-cultural sample including college students in the U.S. and China. The dependent factors on which we focus are the degree to which respondents use programming and advertising images in assessing their appearance (looks and dress) and their satisfaction with life accomplishments through the various stages of the social comparison process.

A review of the literature on this topic suggests that there is a gender difference in terms of the effectiveness of television programming and advertising in setting standards of comparison, the act of comparison, and the outcomes of comparison, in particular with regard to their appearance, with women being more affected. We're also examining regional differences, as there are those who suggest that part of the difficulty with interpreting results in cross-cultural research is that many differences lie within regions of the country, as opposed to or in addition to differences between countries. The third demographic variable that we include is that of standard of living, with the literature indicating that those with a higher perceived standard of living will be more satisfied with their perceived life accomplishment relative to those they see in television programs and ads. Beyond that, general life satisfaction should also positively influence the outcomes of the social comparison process, with positive outcomes both in terms of appearance and life accomplishment comparisons. In addition, materialism has been linked to the social comparison process as a consequence, but this research considers it as an antecedent to the process. Those higher in materialism are projected to rely more on television programming and advertising for social comparison regarding appearance and life accomplishments than those lower in materialism. Elements of cultivation theory, specifically the quantity of television viewed as well as the perceived realism of programming and advertising content, are included in this research as well, with greater hours of viewership and higher levels of perceived realism linked to more social comparison and more significant outcomes of that process.

Multiple regression was used to assess the statistical significance of the antecedent factors listed above in predicting setting standards of comparison, the act of comparison, and the outcomes of comparison.

Backwards selection was used in model selection. Standardized partial regression coefficients were calculated and used to compare the relative magnitude of the predictors. Materialism ( $p < .01$ ), gender ( $p < .01$ ), and region ( $p < .05$ ) were consistently significant in predicting setting standards and the act of comparison. In addition, perceived realism ( $p = .006$ ) was significant in predicting setting standards. Perceived realism interacted with high amount of TV watched ( $p = .031$ ), and interactions of region and materialism ( $p < .05$ ) were significant in predicting the outcomes of the comparisons. Regression models resulted in coefficients of determination ranging from .121 to .273. General evaluation of life satisfaction and standard of living ( $p < .001$ ), as well as amount of television watched, ( $p < .05$ ), perception of above average income ( $p = .003$ ) and region ( $p < .01$ ) were significant in predicting perceived life accomplishments ( $R^2 = .537$ ).