

# Join and Win: The Impact of Social Comparison on Brand Alliance

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**Abstract:** In the highly competitive world of marketing, understanding how consumers evaluate themselves, and others is crucial. Social comparison is an essential component of this evaluation process, making it a vital area of study in the field of marketing. Additionally, brand alliances are an increasingly popular strategy for marketers seeking to enhance brand image and expand their customer base. Through five field and experimental studies grounded in the inspiration theory, this research examines the impact of upward social comparison on consumer preference for brand alliance products. Specifically, we investigate the role of the self-threat and the need for inspiration as serial mediating factors in this relationship. Additionally, we examine how the different types of brand alliances moderate the effects of upward social comparison on consumer preference for brand alliance products. Our findings contribute to advancing the theoretical understanding of social comparison and brand alliances, guiding marketers in developing effective brand strategies, and alleviating the negative effects of upward comparison on individuals.

**Keywords:** Social comparison, Brand alliance, self-threat

## 1. Introduction

Brand alliance strategy has become an increasingly popular promotion strategy for brand owners, with over 75% of brands utilizing this strategy in the market<sup>[1]</sup>. The use of brand alliances can provide companies with numerous benefits, such as increased access to new markets and a more diverse customer base, and can lead to enhanced brand image and loyalty<sup>[1]</sup>. Existing research on brand alliances mainly focuses on brand strategic perspectives such as brand alliance product and alliance brand evaluation<sup>[2-4]</sup>, such as the perceived quality improvement<sup>[2]</sup>, promoting product diversification<sup>[3]</sup>, and extending product protection<sup>[4]</sup>. However, there is a paucity of research that has investigated the antecedents that could enhance the efficacy of brand alliance in driving sales, especially the social contextual factors. Nevertheless, the impact of social context factors on consumer attitudes and behaviors in the marketing domain has been increasingly recognized in research<sup>[5,6]</sup>. Thus, it is imperative to explore how social context factors can be leveraged to enhance the efficacy of brand alliances in driving sales, as these factors heavily influence consumer attitudes and behaviors<sup>[7,8]</sup>.

As acknowledged as an important social contextual factor, social comparison influences various domains of human behavior<sup>[9,10]</sup>, which is a crucial social contextual factor that affects individuals' attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors in various contexts, including marketing. As stated by Festinger's social comparison theory, individuals have a natural tendency to evaluate themselves by comparing themselves to others<sup>[11]</sup>. In marketing, the social comparison has been shown to play a vital role in influencing consumers' decision-making processes, with individuals often using other consumers' opinions and actions to guide their own<sup>[11]</sup>. For instance, studies have demonstrated that social comparison affects consumers' evaluations of products<sup>[12]</sup>, purchasing behavior<sup>[11]</sup>, and brand preferences<sup>[13]</sup>. As a result, marketers frequently utilize social comparison techniques to influence consumers' attitudes and behaviors, such as by emphasizing social proof through testimonials, reviews, and endorsements<sup>[14]</sup>. Therefore, social comparison is a fundamental social contextual factor that marketers often use to promote their products and services.

Previous research has demonstrated that social comparison can impact individuals' attitudes, beliefs,

and behaviors in various contexts, such as body image<sup>[15]</sup>, health behaviors<sup>[16]</sup>, and academic performance<sup>[17]</sup>. However, to the best of our knowledge, no research has examined the influence of social comparison on the brand alliance, despite the increasing importance of brand alliances in marketing strategies<sup>[1]</sup>. Understanding the impact of social comparison on consumer behavior in the context of brand alliance could provide valuable insights for marketers to develop effective brand alliance strategies.

This study builds upon the self-threat and inspiration theories and explores the impact of upward social comparison on consumer preference for brand alliance products. The findings suggest that consumers in upward social comparison situations exhibit a stronger preference for brand alliance products compared to those in downward social comparison situations. The study also reveals that self-threat and the need for inspiration mediate the relationship between upward social comparison and brand alliance product preference in a sequential manner. Moreover, the type of brand alliance has a moderating effect on consumer preference for brand alliance products under upward social comparison situations.

By demonstrating the effect of social comparison on preference for brand alliance products, our findings make significant contributions to the existing literature. The findings suggest that upward social comparison positively influences consumer preference for brand alliance products<sup>[18,19]</sup>. The study extends the self-threat and inspiration theories by demonstrating their sequential mediating effect on the relationship between upward social comparison and brand alliance product preference<sup>[20,21]</sup>. The sequential mediation effect of self-threat and the need for inspiration highlights the importance of understanding the underlying psychological mechanisms that drive consumer preference for brand alliance products. The study highlights the need for marketers to tap into the psychological needs and motivations of consumers in their brand alliance strategies. The findings also have implications for theoretical frameworks that focus on social comparison and self-evaluation, as the study extends the current understanding of how these theories can be applied in the context of brand alliances. Additionally, this study sheds light on the moderating effect of the type of brand alliance on consumer preference for brand alliance products. The results suggest that consumers' preference for brand alliance products is more pronounced under the umbrella branding strategy than the ingredient branding strategy<sup>[22]</sup>.

Our findings offer essential insights to marketing practitioners and policymakers. Marketers should leverage upward social comparison in their brand alliance strategies. By highlighting the social status and prestige associated with the brand alliance, marketers can appeal to consumers' need for social comparison and enhance their preference for brand alliance products. This can be achieved by creating advertisements that showcase the benefits of the brand alliance and how it can elevate the social status of the consumer. Marketers should also focus on creating brand alliances that provide consumers with a sense of inspiration and empowerment. By emphasizing the unique benefits and value proposition of the brand alliance, marketers can stimulate consumers' need for inspiration and enhance their preference for brand alliance products. This can be achieved by creating advertisements that highlight the unique benefits of the brand alliance and how it can provide consumers with a sense of empowerment. Finally, marketers should consider the type of brand alliance when designing their brand alliance strategies. The results suggest that consumers' preference for brand alliance products is more pronounced under the umbrella branding strategy than the ingredient branding strategy. Therefore, marketers should carefully evaluate the benefits and drawbacks of each brand alliance type and select the most appropriate one for their product or service offering. This can be achieved by conducting consumer research to understand their preferences and motivations and by considering the competitive landscape and market trends.

## 2. Theory Background

### 2.1. Social Comparison

Social comparison is defined as the process of evaluating oneself in relation to others, and it is an important social contextual factor in marketing<sup>[23]</sup>. Marketers often use social comparison to influence consumer behavior by creating a sense of social status and the prestige associated with their products or services<sup>[24]</sup>. The impact of social comparison on consumer attitudes and behaviors has been well-documented in the literature, highlighting its importance in shaping consumer preferences<sup>[10]</sup>. There are two categories of social comparison: upward social comparison and downward social comparison. Upward social comparison occurs when individuals compare themselves to those who are perceived to be better off, while downward social comparison occurs when individuals compare themselves to those who are perceived to be worse off<sup>[25]</sup>.

Past research has extensively explored the effects of social comparison on consumer attitudes and

behaviors. Social comparison can lead to both positive and negative outcomes, depending on the direction and type of comparison <sup>[26]</sup>. For instance, upward social comparison, which involves comparing oneself with individuals who are better off, can lead to positive outcomes such as increased motivation and self-improvement<sup>[27]</sup>. On the other hand, downward social comparison, which involves comparing oneself with individuals who are worse off, can lead to negative outcomes such as decreased motivation and satisfaction<sup>[26]</sup>. Numerous studies have shown that social comparison can influence a wide range of consumer behaviors, such as product evaluation, purchase intention, and brand loyalty. For example, research has found that upward social comparison can lead to higher purchase intention for luxury products <sup>[28]</sup> and increased brand loyalty for high-end brands <sup>[29]</sup>. Downward social comparison, on the other hand, can lead to lower purchase intention for luxury products <sup>[30]</sup> and decreased brand loyalty for mainstream brands <sup>[31]</sup>. The underlying mechanisms through which social comparison affects consumer behaviors have also been explored in past research. For instance, research has shown that social comparison can activate self-enhancement motives, such as the desire for status and recognition <sup>[32]</sup>. Social comparison can also activate self-improvement motives, such as the desire to learn from others and improve oneself<sup>[4]</sup>. Additionally, social comparison can influence consumer emotions, such as envy, admiration, and satisfaction, which can in turn affect consumer attitudes and behaviors <sup>[33-34]</sup>.

## 2.2. Brand Alliance

Brand alliance refers to the collaboration between two or more brands to promote their products or services <sup>[35]</sup>. The two primary types of the brand alliance are ingredient branding and umbrella branding. In ingredient branding, the focus is on highlighting the contribution of a specific component or ingredient in a product (e.g., Intel inside). In contrast, umbrella branding involves the association of a product with a well-known brand to enhance its credibility and appeal to consumers (e.g., Marriot hotels partnering with American Express for their co-branded credit card) <sup>[36]</sup>.

Numerous studies have investigated the impact of brand alliances on various marketing outcomes, such as brand attitudes, purchase intention, and sales. Researchers have found that brand alliances can positively impact the brand image and increase the likelihood of consumers to purchase the product <sup>[37,38]</sup>. Moreover, brand alliances can benefit marketers by expanding their market reach and increasing brand awareness <sup>[15]</sup>. However, the success of a brand alliance depends on various factors, such as the compatibility between the brands, the level of fit between the products, and the degree of trust between the partners <sup>[39]</sup>. Thus, marketers need to carefully evaluate the benefits and drawbacks of brand alliances before entering into such collaborations.

Antecedents that can influence the success of a brand alliance include brand equity, congruence between the partner brands, consumer-brand relationships, and the perceived quality of the brand <sup>[16,35]</sup>. For instance, strong brand equity can enhance the credibility and appeal of a brand alliance (Keller, 2003). Similarly, the congruence between the partner brands in terms of their brand identity, values, and image is crucial for the success of the alliance <sup>[40]</sup>. Furthermore, the quality of the brands involved in the alliance can impact consumers' perceptions of the product <sup>[28]</sup>. Understanding these antecedents can help marketers design effective brand alliances that resonate with their target audience and improve their marketing outcomes.

## 2.3. Inspiration and Need for Inspiration

Inspiration is a psychological state that is characterized by positive affect, enthusiasm, and a sense of being uplifted and motivated <sup>[17]</sup>. Need for inspiration refers to an individual's desire to experience inspiration, which is often associated with a search for meaning, purpose, and self-transcendence <sup>[41]</sup>. The character of inspiration can be seen as a transformative experience that broadens individuals' horizons and provides a sense of empowerment and agency <sup>[9]</sup>.

Past research has explored the antecedents of the need for inspiration and identified various categories of stimuli that can evoke this need in individuals <sup>[13,18]</sup>. These stimuli can include personal experiences, such as exposure to new and challenging situations, achievement or failure in a task, or a personal setback or loss <sup>[6,21]</sup>. Additionally, environmental factors such as exposure to music, art, or nature, as well as social interactions, can also evoke the need for inspiration <sup>[41]</sup>. Research has also identified certain personality traits that are associated with a greater need for inspiration, such as openness to experience, extraversion, and neuroticism <sup>[11,22]</sup>. These individuals are more likely to seek out experiences that challenge their existing beliefs and offer opportunities for growth and self-discovery. Furthermore, other studies have examined the impact of specific situational factors on the need for inspiration. For example,

research has found that individuals who feel a lack of control in their lives may be more likely to experience a need for inspiration as a means of coping with their situation <sup>[42]</sup>. Similarly, exposure to existential threats or mortality salience can also evoke a need for inspiration as a means of finding meaning and purpose in life <sup>[33]</sup>.

#### **2.4. The Serial Mediation Role of Self-threat and Need for Inspiration**

Social comparison theory posits that individuals frequently engage in comparisons with others in order to evaluate their own abilities, opinions, and social status <sup>[21]</sup>. However, these upward social comparisons can often lead to feelings of inferiority, insecurity, and self-doubt, particularly when individuals perceive themselves as inferior to the comparison target <sup>[43]</sup>. This process of upward social comparison or comparing oneself to those who are perceived to be better off, can result in a self-threat, where individuals perceive their own abilities and attributes to be insufficient or inadequate <sup>[30]</sup>. This self-threat can have a negative impact on individuals' self-esteem, self-concept, and well-being <sup>[31]</sup>, and may lead to a range of maladaptive behaviors such as avoidance, defensiveness, or aggression <sup>[8]</sup>. Therefore, social comparison can be seen as a double-edged sword, as it can be a source of motivation and self-improvement but also a potential threat to one's sense of self-worth and identity.

Research has shown that self-threat resulting from the social comparison can lead to a higher need for inspiration <sup>[13]</sup>. The experience of self-threat can create a sense of psychological discomfort, which individuals seek to resolve through various means such as reassurance, distraction, or inspiration <sup>[15]</sup>. Inspiration can provide individuals with a sense of purpose, meaning, and direction and can be seen as a way to transcend the negative emotions associated with self-threat <sup>[20]</sup>. The need for inspiration can arise when individuals are faced with challenges or obstacles that threaten their sense of competence or identity and may be particularly strong when individuals are faced with significant life changes or transitions <sup>[31]</sup>. For example, individuals who experience self-threat in the context of a career setback may seek inspiration from role models or stories of successful individuals who have overcome similar challenges. Similarly, individuals who experience self-threat in the context of personal relationships may seek inspiration from romantic movies or novels that depict idealized relationships. Overall, the need for inspiration can serve as a powerful motivator and coping mechanism for individuals who experience self-threat as a result of social comparison.

Past literature suggests that certain designs and strategies of products and brands can evoke inspiration in consumers. For example, research has shown that products designed to promote well-being and happiness, such as healthy food options and eco-friendly products, can evoke feelings of inspiration in consumers <sup>[34,35]</sup>. Additionally, brands that promote social responsibility and ethical values have been found to inspire consumers to make positive changes in their lives <sup>[17]</sup>. Moreover, marketers can use storytelling as a strategy to evoke inspiration in consumers by sharing stories of people who have overcome obstacles and achieved success <sup>[45]</sup>. What's more, research has shown that brand alliance products can evoke inspiration in consumers by providing a sense of unity and empowerment. When brands join forces through a brand alliance strategy, consumers may perceive the union as stronger and more capable of achieving a shared goal <sup>[24]</sup>. For example, a study found that consumers viewed a co-branded product by Nike and Apple as a symbol of collaboration and innovation, which evoked feelings of inspiration <sup>[8]</sup>. Another study found that consumers were more likely to purchase a brand alliance product when the brands shared a common goal or mission, which increased their perceived ability to achieve that goal <sup>[14]</sup>. These findings suggest that brand alliance products can provide consumers with a sense of inspiration and empowerment by leveraging the strength of multiple brands to achieve a shared goal.

Based on the previous findings, we propose that upward social comparison induces self-threat, which in turn leads to a higher need for inspiration. The inspiration generated by the "the federation becomes stronger" and "if you can't beat them, join them" phenomenon of brand alliance products can effectively fulfill the inspiration demand generated by the ego threat brought by upward social comparison. Therefore, this study proposes the hypothesis that brand alliance products can serve as a coping strategy for individuals experiencing upward social comparison by providing them with a sense of empowerment and agency. The hypothesis posits that brand alliance products will be more preferred by individuals experiencing upward social comparison due to their ability to fulfill the need for inspiration brought on by the ego threat.

H1: Consumers in upward social comparison situations will show a higher preference for brand alliance products than those in downward social comparison situations.

H2: Self-threat and need for inspiration play a sequential mediating role in the effect of social comparison on brand alliance product preference.

### **2.5. Moderating Role of Brand Alliance Type**

Brand alliance refers to the partnership of two or more brands that come together to market a product or service [15]. The types of brand alliance are mainly composed of brand alliance assets and perceived quality and are divided into strong and weak brand alliances [33]. Strong brands refer to those with high assets and high perceived quality, such as Fortune 500 companies or industry leaders, while weak brands refer to those with low assets and low perceived quality, such as emerging or declining brands [41]. There are three types of brand alliances according to the strength of the alliance: strong-strong brand alliance, strong-weak brand alliance, and weak-weak brand alliance [36].

Previous studies have shown that when facing a strong brand alliance, individuals often have positive evaluations of the brand alliance product because they perceive more support from strong brand resources, including technology, material, and staff support from the strong brand [38]. On the other hand, when facing a weak brand alliance, individuals often cannot perceive the support from the alliance brand's resources and thus cannot feel the increase in ability, support, and competitiveness [17]. When individuals feel self-threatened due to upward social comparison, they seek ways to resolve this issue. Brand alliance products can provide inspiration to individuals threatened by upward comparison by allowing them to view brands as reflections of themselves and view the weak in the brand alliance as reflections of themselves experiencing upward comparison. By joining forces with stronger brands, they can become a part of the stronger side and compete against the source of their self-threat, thus relieving the self-threat caused by upward social comparison. However, products that form brand alliances with weak brands cannot provide inspiration to individuals experiencing upward social comparison to join forces with stronger brands and therefore cannot help individuals relieve their self-threat. Based on this, we propose the following hypotheses:

H3: The type of brand alliance moderates the preference for brand alliance products under upward social comparison.

H3a: Specifically, when facing a strong brand alliance (i.e., strong-strong brand alliance and strong-weak brand alliance), individuals in an upward social comparison context will receive inspiration to join forces with the stronger brands and increase their preference for brand alliance products compared to those not in an upward social comparison context.

H3b: When facing a weak brand alliance (i.e., weak-weak brand alliance), individuals in an upward social comparison context cannot receive inspiration to join forces with stronger brands and will not increase their preference for brand alliance products. Therefore, there is no difference in the preference for brand alliance products under social comparison.

## **3. Study 1**

The goal of Study 1 was to empirically test the hypothesis that individuals would display a preference for brand alliance products in response to upward social comparison compared to downward social comparison. To achieve this, a field experiment was conducted in a prominent chain store located in Beijing, wherein real advertising flyers were utilized to induce upward social comparison. The aim of this study was to provide a real-world context that would enable the investigation of the effect of upward social comparison on brand alliance product preference.

### **3.1. Method**

2 (social comparison: upward vs. downward) x 2 (product type: brand alliance vs. non-brand alliance) between-subjects design was conducted in a beverage store in a large chain store in one of the biggest cities in Asian for six days, and 398 participants (53.3% female;  $M_{age} = 33.48$ ,  $SD = 15.42$ ) participated in the experiment.

The experimenters used the flyers, which contained positive comments from four consumers who had tasted the cocktail, with two male and two female comments selected to ensure consistency in gender effects. To manipulate social comparison, the left side of the flyer for the upward social comparison group had attractive consumers, while the left side of the flyer for the downward social comparison group had the same consumer with a certain degree of uglification through Photoshop. The description of the brand

alliance product on the right side of the flyer was compared to that of the non-brand alliance product.

At the beginning of the experiment, the researchers posing as beverage store staff told the consumers that the cocktail was a new product priced at 30 RMB per bottle for sale (The original price was 45 RMB). Purchasing behavior was recorded, and flyers were distributed from 10:00 am to 8:00 pm, with morning and evening periods. On odd-numbered days, upward social comparison flyers were distributed in the morning and downward social comparison flyers in the evening, and on even-numbered days, the opposite was done. This ensured that the number of people in the two social comparison groups was roughly equal while avoiding the beginning and end effects of time. The experiment was conducted with the consent of the store manager, and the researchers were careful to minimize possible interfering factors in the study. Demographic information, including age and gender of participants, was gathered via a survey administered by the experimenter.

### 3.2. Results

*Purchase choice.* The chi-square test results showed that consumers were more willing to choose brand alliance cocktails when triggered by upward social comparison compared to downward social comparison (58.6% vs. 41.4%;  $X^2_{(1)}=17.610$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

### 3.3. Conclusion

This study provided initial evidence that upward social comparison is associated with a higher preference for brand alliance products than downward social comparison in real consumer settings. As an on-site experiment, there were potential confounding variables, such as participant interactions within the beverage store and sensory influences from the taste and scent of the beverages, which may have affected consumer preferences. However, the psychological mechanism underlying the observed increase in consumer preference for brand alliance products remains unclear and requires further investigation.

## 4. Study 2

Study 3 aimed to enhance the internal validity of the study by conducting online testing and controlling for variables such as brand preferences and familiarity to more accurately examine social comparison preferences for brand association products. Additionally, the study tested the psychological mechanism underlying these preferences, exploring how upward social comparisons increase self-threat, which generates a need for inspiration, ultimately leading to a stronger preference for brand association products, which embody the "can't beat it, join it" mentality.

### 4.1. Method

The experiment adopted a single factor (social comparison: upward vs. downward) between-subjects design. 132 students from a university in Hong Kong participated in the experiment in exchange for credits (73.48% female;  $M_{age} = 19.65$ ,  $SD = 1.89$ ).

In this study, a writing task was utilized to manipulate social comparison. Participants were asked to list three individuals they knew whose current situation or status was either superior or inferior to their own, depending on the experimental condition. They were then instructed to select one person from the list and provide a detailed description of how their situation or status was either better or worse than their own. To ensure consistency, descriptions were required to be between 30 and 50 words in length. Following this task, participants were shown a brand alliance product, Vaseline x Pepsi Moisturizing Lip Care, along with a brief description and advertising campaign picture. This approach aimed to provide a realistic experience for participants. The methods employed were designed to ensure participant involvement and cognitive resource consumption, with a focus on rigorously measuring the effects of social comparison on product evaluations. Participants used a 7-point scale with three items (1 = bad/unfavorable/negative/not interested at all, 7 = good/favorable/positive/very interested) to rate their attitude towards the brand alliance product (Russell, 2003). To account for familiarity and initial brand preference, participants were also asked about their attitudes towards Vaseline and Pepsi, as well as their familiarity with Vaseline x Pepsi Moisturizing Lip Care. Then, the self-threat scale (Marshall & Brown, 2006) and the need for inspiration scale (Thrash & Elliot, 2003) were completed for mediation purposes. The self-threat scale consisted of a 3-item 7-point scale, such as "What is your view of yourself at the moment?" (1=very negative, 7=very positive). The need for inspiration scale consisted of a 2-item 7-

point scale, such as “At the moment, I really need the inspiration to help me” (1=not true of me, 7=very true of me). In the end, a manipulation check of social comparison was conducted (Suls., Martin, and Wheeler, 2002). Demographic information, such as gender and age, was asked at the end.

#### 4.2. Results

*Manipulation check.* The manipulation check for the social comparison was deemed successful. Specifically, participants who listed a person as superior to themselves did not rate themselves as better than the person they listed, compared to those who listed a person as inferior to themselves ( $M_{\text{downward}} = 4.47$ ,  $SD = 1.47$ ;  $M_{\text{upward}} = 3.55$ ,  $SD = 1.56$ ,  $F(1, 130) = 2.30$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). These findings provide support for the effectiveness of the social comparison manipulation used in this study, suggesting that participants were able to engage in the intended upward and downward comparisons as directed by the experimental task.

*Product evaluation.* A one-way ANOVA was conducted to examine the main effect of social comparison on brand alliance product evaluation. The results indicate that participants who listed a person who was superior to themselves had significantly higher product evaluation scores compared to those who listed a person who was inferior to themselves ( $M_{\text{downward}} = 4.54$ ,  $SD = 1.71$ ;  $M_{\text{upward}} = 3.54$ ,  $SD = 1.95$ ,  $F(1, 130) = 9.90$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). These findings suggest that upward social comparison leads to higher preferences for brand alliance products. The main effect of social comparison on the brand attitude for Pepsi and Vaseline as well as the product familiarity of the lip care is not significant ( $p > 0.27$ ).

*Serial mediation effects of self-threat and need for inspiration.* We conducted a serial mediation analysis using the bootstrap procedure (model 6) (SPSS, Process 3.4.1 version). Validating the proposed sequential mediation, the indirect effect was significant ( $a_1 \times e \times b_2 = 0.06$ ,  $SE = .04$ ,  $95\% \text{ CI} = [0.0001, 0.1669]$ ; 5,000 resamplings; Figure 1). In this serial mediation path, the social comparison manipulation significantly influenced self-threat ( $a_1 = -0.67$ ,  $SE = 0.26$ ;  $t(1, 130) = -2.58$ ,  $P < 0.05$ ). Further, the lower self-threat led to participants' higher need for inspiration ( $e = -0.27$ ,  $SE = 0.06$ ;  $t(1, 130) = -4.01$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ). Finally, the need for inspiration increased individuals' evaluation of the brand alliance product ( $b_2 = 0.30$ ,  $SE = 1.37$ ,  $t(1, 130) = 2.18$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ). When we switched the order of self-threat and the need for inspiration, the serial mediation effect was not significant ( $p > 0.05$ ). See figure 1 for the detail information. In summary, upward social comparisons increase self-threat, which generates a need for inspiration, ultimately leading to a stronger preference for brand association products.

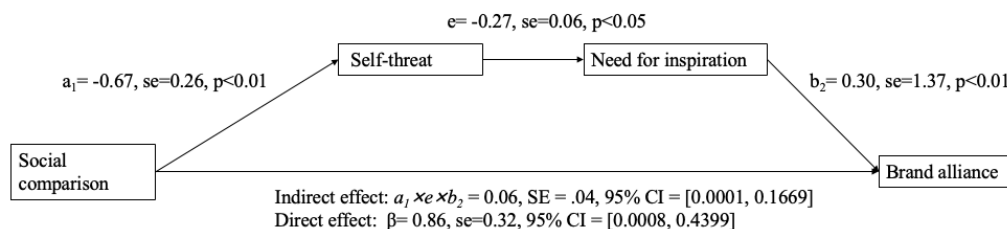


Figure 1: The serial mediation of self-threat and need for inspiration.

#### 4.3. Discussion

This study provides experimental evidence that upward social comparison increases consumers' preference for brand alliance products, with self-threat and the need for inspiration serving as mediating variables. Participants in the upward social comparison group rated the brand-alliance product higher than those in the downward social comparison group. However, this study did not compare branded and non-branded alliance products, which raises questions about whether upward social comparison preferences only apply to branded alliance products. In Study 3, non-brand alliance products were introduced to address this issue and explore potential alternative explanations.

#### 5. Conclusion

This study investigates the impact of upward social comparison on consumer preference for brand alliance products. The findings reveal that, as opposed to downward social comparison, upward social comparison enhances consumer evaluation and preference for brand alliance products (as demonstrated in Study 1 and 2). In Study 3, we verified the underlying mechanism of this study, whereby individuals

engage in social comparison with those who outperform them in different aspects, resulting in a perceived threat to their self-competence, self-perception, and self-integrity. This high self-threat triggers an inspirational need, motivating individuals to seek inspiration to overcome their current challenges. Brand alliance products, which involve the collaboration of two or more brands, create an inspiration of "if you can't beat them, join them" or "united, we are stronger". This inspiration helps individuals cope with their high self-threat, filling their need for inspiration and ultimately increasing their preference for brand alliance products relative to those who engage in downward social comparison.

### **5.1. Theoretical contributions**

This study contributes to several theories in the fields of consumer behavior, social psychology, and marketing. Firstly, it contributes to the social comparison theory, which posits that individuals compare themselves to others to evaluate their abilities, opinions, and emotions<sup>[6]</sup>. This study demonstrates that upward social comparison, in which individuals compare themselves to those who outperform them, can lead to positive outcomes, such as enhancing consumer preference for brand alliance products. This finding extends the social comparison theory by highlighting the motivational benefits of upward social comparison and its potential application in marketing and advertising.

Secondly, this study contributes to the self-threat theory, which posits that individuals can experience a threat to their self-competence, self-perception, and self-integrity when their abilities or characteristics are challenged or questioned<sup>[11]</sup>. This study demonstrates that upward social comparison can trigger high self-threat, which in turn motivates individuals to seek inspiration to overcome their challenges. This finding extends the self-threat theory by highlighting the potential of brand alliance products to fulfill individuals' inspirational needs and serve as a solution to their self-threat.

Thirdly, this study contributes to the brand alliance theory, which posits that brand alliances can benefit partner brands by enhancing their brand image, awareness, and preference<sup>[13]</sup>. This study extends the brand alliance theory by demonstrating that the effectiveness of brand alliances in increasing consumer preference depends on the strength of the brand partners. Stronger brands can provide support to individuals experiencing upward social comparison, counteracting the self-threat and increasing their evaluation and purchase intention for brand alliance products. Conversely, weaker brands may not satisfy individuals' need for inspiration and may not increase preference for brand alliance products among those experiencing upward social comparison.

Fourthly, this study contributes to the need for cognition theory, which posits that individuals differ in their motivation to engage in cognitive activities, such as information processing, learning, and problem-solving<sup>[34]</sup>. This study demonstrates that individuals experiencing high self-threat are motivated to seek inspiration, which can be fulfilled by brand alliance products that offer an inspirational message. This finding extends the need for cognition theory by highlighting the motivational benefits of inspirational messaging and its potential application in marketing and advertising.

Overall, this study contributes to several theoretical frameworks and provides new insights into the motivational processes underlying consumer behavior. These findings have important implications for marketers and advertisers seeking to promote brand alliance products and enhance consumers' motivation and evaluation of these products.

### **5.2. Limitations and Future Directions**

Despite the significant contributions of this study, there are several limitations and future directions that could be explored to extend and generalize the findings.

One limitation of this study is the use of self-reported measures, which could lead to common method bias and social desirability bias. Future research could employ objective measures of consumer behavior, such as purchase data or behavioral experiments, to validate the findings and provide a more accurate assessment of consumer behavior.

Another limitation is the focus on brand alliance products in general, rather than specific product categories or industries. It is possible that the effects of upward social comparison and brand alliance could vary across different product categories or industries. Future research could examine the moderating effects of product category or industry on the impact of upward social comparison and brand alliance on consumer behavior.

Furthermore, this study only examined the impact of brand strength on consumer behavior. Other



factors, such as the level of familiarity, trustworthiness, or innovativeness of the brands, could also impact consumer behavior. Future research could examine the impact of these factors on consumer behavior and their interaction with upward social comparison and brand alliance.

Additionally, this study did not examine the impact of individual differences, such as personality traits, self-esteem, or culture, on the relationship between upward social comparison and brand alliance. Future research could investigate how individual differences influence the impact of upward social comparison and brand alliance on consumer behavior.

In conclusion, while this study provides valuable insights into the impact of upward social comparison on consumer behavior and the role of brand alliance in fulfilling consumers' inspirational needs, there are several limitations that should be addressed in future research. By addressing these limitations and exploring future directions, researchers could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of social comparison and brand alliance on consumer behavior and its implications for marketing and advertising.

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