

ADVENTURE TOURISM: THE ROLE OF SOCIAL COMPARSION THEORY IN
SUCCESSFUL ADVERTISING IMAGES

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by

Katherine Dudley, B.S.

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Committee Members:

David Nolan, Chair

Tom Grimes

Jeremy Sierra

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iv
LIST OF TABLES.....	vi
LIST OF FIGURES.....	vii
ABSTRACT.....	viii
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION.....	1
II. LITERATURE REVIEW.....	4
III. METHODOLOGY.....	18
Stimuli Development.....	18
Experiment.....	23
IV. RESULTS.....	28
V. DISCUSSION.....	36
VI. CONCLUSION.....	38
Limitations and Future Research.....	39
APPENDIX A: SURVEY QUESTIONS.....	41
REFERENCES.....	45

LIST OF TABLES

1. Pre-test descriptive statistics	22
2. Demographics of sample.....	29
3. Descriptive statistics	31
4. Attitude toward the image.....	32
5. Attitude toward the activity	33
6. Purchase intention.....	34

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
1. Pre-test high	19
2. Pre-test low	20
3. Pre-test neutral	21
4. Low intensity	24
5. Neutral.....	24
6. High intensity.....	25
7. Supplemental images	26
8. Geographic location of respondents.....	29

ABSTRACT

This study examined the effects of intensity levels depicted in images used to represent adventure tourism activities on consumer attitude toward the images. The goal of the study was to answer four research questions: 1) Does the level of intensity portrayed in an adventure tourism activity image affect consumer attitudes toward the image? 2) Does the level of intensity portrayed in an adventure tourism activity image affect consumer attitudes toward the activity? 3) Does the level of intensity portrayed in an adventure tourism activity image affect consumer purchase intentions? 4) Does social comparison theory explain the relationship between effective advertising images and consumers? The proposed research questions were examined using a 3 (intensity level: high vs. low vs. neutral=control) x 2 (SCO: high vs. low) experimental design. Results indicate social comparison theory can explain the relationship between effective adventure tourism images. However, the level of intensity alone does not affect attitudes toward the image, activity, or purchase intention.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In 2012, nearly 42 percent of travelers reported taking part in an adventure activity while traveling, compared to 26 percent in 2009 (The George Washington University & Adventure Travel Trade Association, 2013). Today's travelers are looking for a specialized experience they can achieve through specific activities, and it has been challenging for those in the special interest segment of adventure tourism to match the wide array of adventure products and services to this changing consumer base (Sung, 2004). What is apparent is the growing popularity in taking part in adventure activities. What is not clear is which advertisements, particularly the images within those advertisements, are most appealing to consumers.

This study aims to uncover an effective approach to crafting adventure tourism advertising images by understanding what appeals to the growing consumer base and why. The central question asked is this: Does social comparison theory explain effective advertising images in regard to purchasing behavior and commercial adventure tourism activities? To answer such a question, one must investigate the cognitive process when choosing to take part in an activity that may be outside one's comfort zone and cause a level of uncertainty, but at the same time providing the opportunity to "...reinforce personal identity and cultural distinction from others through a quest for, and accrual of symbolic capital" (McGillivray & Frew, 2007, p. 55).

Adventure tourism is a \$263 billion industry, and it has grown at an average yearly increase of 65 percent from 2009-2012 (The George Washington University & Adventure Travel Trade Association, 2013). Adventure activities range from hard

adventures, which contain a high level of risk, require commitment, and an advanced skill level, to soft adventures, which have lower levels of risk, require basic skills and are usually led by experienced guides (Schott, 2007). Those who choose to take part in adventure tourism activities have traditionally been labeled sensation seekers, defined as those seeking “varied, novel, complex, and intense sensations and experiences, and the willingness to take physical, social, legal, and financial risks for the sake of such experience” (Zuckerman, 1994, p. 27). This has led marketing professionals and those in the adventure tourism industry to ignore individuals not traditionally thought to fit the above definition or to engage in high stimulation activities (Weber, 2001).

Tourism patterns are changing however, as two-income couples choose to not have children, the single adult population grows, and the expanding aging population remains active (Sung, 2004). As the adventure tourism industry has grown so has the number of commercial outfitters, providing opportunity for more people to take part in experiences that would otherwise require years of practice and expensive equipment (McGillivray & Frew, 2007). This presents an opportunity for emerging strategic communication plans to be used across all media. Various countries or geographic areas have already taken advantage of the emerging market. For example, Queenstown, New Zealand, now markets itself as ‘the adventure capital of the world,’ although it has always been a tourist destination (Cater, 2006). It changed its character to suit tourists looking for thrilling activities such as bungee jumping and canyoning, which can be provided by those willing to spend the time necessary to gain skills needed to guide others (Cater). Today’s travelers are looking for a specialized experience they can achieve through specific activities, and it has been challenging for those in adventure tourism to match the

wide array of adventure products and services to this changing consumer base with diversified demands (Sung).

Consumer research concerning today's adventure tourists as consumers of commercial goods is scarce. This study expands research into effective communication strategies by looking at adventure activity images. Specifically the level of intensity presented in images that attract average consumers to an adventure tourism activity, and the affect it has on purchasing decisions using social comparison theory as a framework.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research concerning adventure tourism consumers is scarce. This study expands the research by examining what images are effective when advertising adventure activities. Specifically, it examines the level of intensity presented in images that attract consumers to an adventure tourism activity, and the affect it has on purchase decisions. Research surrounding the adventure tourism industry has focused primarily on internal motivation (Fluker & Turner, 2000; Weber, 2001; Dickson & Dolnicar, 2004; Sung, 2004; Cater, 2006) rather than external factors such as advertising images or social pressures, and has been primarily industry-driven, focusing on empirical implications rather than theoretical frameworks (Sung, 2004). This research explores how social comparison, the tendency to compare our skills and opinions with others, influences how we view various advertisements or images using social comparison theory as a theoretical framework. Social comparison theory states “People evaluate their opinions and abilities by comparison respectively with the opinions and abilities of others” (Festinger, 1954, p. 118). At one time or another, everyone engages in social comparison; the act is universal (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999). It is used as a cue to gauge our own achievements, gain self-esteem, or develop opinions about a certain issue (Gibbons & Buunk). Knowing the motive behind purchasing a commercial adventure activity may help determine which images will appeal to a changing demographic of consumers.

Individuals set out with long-term goals of the person they want to be, and base their beliefs toward becoming that person (More & Averill, 2003). Similar to Bourdieu’s

concept of symbolic capital, in which people seek honor and prestige through the subjective opinion of those around them, emphasis is put on the outward appearance toward others, and the desire to be thought of as a certain type of person (McGillivray & Frew, 2007). We create an outward image of ourselves by comparing ourselves to those around us, shaping our ideas of how to behave (More & Averill). Commercial outfitters allow adventure tourists to fulfill this desired outward appearance much quicker than in years past by offering bite size experiences and choreographed images to share (McGillivray & Frew). When choosing to talk about a brand or engage in a community surrounding a brand, consumers are thinking of an imagined audience, and seek to fulfill social motives through social ties or their own image enhancement (Alexandrov, Lilly & Babakus, 2013). Social comparison affects both positive and negative word of mouth (WOM), and allows consumers to satisfy social needs by doing things such as bragging about a product or activity to enhance self-image (Alexandrov et al.). Breazeale and Ponder (2011) found consumers form relationships with brands they perceive to possess an image similar to their self-image. After testing consumer reactions to images of various store layouts, they found multiple respondents reported feeling the retailer was just like them; if they thought of themselves as “outdoorsy” or “rugged” they were more likely to be drawn toward images that portray that lifestyle (Breazeale & Ponder). Social comparison theory has been expanded since Festinger’s original definition to include such cognitive processes as social projection and false consensus, in which “assumptions about the characteristics of others are made on the basis of one’s own characteristics” (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007, p. 16). The two concepts within social comparison theory most relevant to this research are upward vs. downward comparisons, and social comparison

orientation.

A person's concept of self at any time depends on the views others have of them in that situation (Morse & Gergen, 1970). There are no set measurements to gauge how a person fits into a situation; therefore a person will begin to compare themselves to those around them (Morse & Gergen). Depending on the situation, the comparison can be toward someone thought of as better off (upward comparison), which can cause either an increased drive to attain such a position or result in the negative effect of lowered self-esteem (Morse & Gergen). Examples include finding oneself underdressed at an upscale event, in which an upward comparison toward those dressed appropriately may cause humiliation or lowered self-esteem (Morse & Gergen). On the contrary, upward comparisons such as striving to increase academic grades to the same level of those performing at a higher level are said to increase motivation and support the "upward mobility" notion described by Festinger in the original theory (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007). Downward comparison is used to boost self-esteem by comparing to someone deemed worse off or presenting less competition (Buunk & Gibbons). Buunk and Gibbons found those who scored lower on tests, but told of others who scored even lower, were more content with their grades than those who scored higher and told of others who did similar or better. Morse and Gergen presented job applicants waiting for an interview with a person who was either, what they termed, socially desirable or socially undesirable. They found the job applicants' self-esteem decreased in the presence of the socially desirable person (upward comparison) while it increased in the presence of the socially undesirable person (downward comparison). McGillivray and Frew (2007) suggest acquiring symbolic capital in the current social media environment, which allows for immediate

distribution of experiences, results in a culture of competition to top others' experiences creating constant upward comparisons. For example, in adventure tourism, should someone post a picture of whitewater rafting across social media profiles, the desire to put a more exciting picture of whitewater rafting or other adventure activity on one's own social media profile would arise. In this instance, Festinger's notion of upward drive, or upward comparison, appears to explain the actions taken. Surveys have shown however, that upward comparisons occur primarily when the person making the comparison faces no risk of showing their inferiority (Buunk, 1995), such as school students stating the desire to improve their grades to reach the level of those performing better, when told no one will see their grades (Buunk, Kuyper & Van der Zee, 2005). In adventure tourism, in order to achieve the desired outward appearance, the actual activity must be performed in front of an audience in which downward comparison might prove more effective in predicting purchase behavior. The lack of research surrounding upward vs. downward comparisons in the adventure tourism industry creates the opportunity to discover which cognitive action proves stronger when making the decision to purchase a commercial trip.

Literature surrounding upward vs. downward comparison provides a solid base for using the theory to explain actions; however, it does not explore the current self-esteem levels or susceptibility to compare oneself to others before being faced with the situation. While everyone takes part in social comparison at one point or another in their lives, some are more susceptible, and said to possess a high social comparison orientation (SCO) (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007). Those with a high SCO are characterized by three features: (a) a high activation of the self, meaning a heightened awareness of public and private self-image, and a tendency to focus on first person and use "I" or "me" more

often, (b) a strong interest in what others feel, and interdependence (c) uncertainty of self, low self-esteem or neuroticism (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999). People with a greater SCO tend to be higher in conformity and possess a self-concept that can vary in different social situations, and be influenced by those around them (Gibbons & Buunk). They will often counter their self-doubt or low self-esteem with an outward appearance of arrogance or narcissism (Gibbons & Buunk). Characteristics of high SCO can be found in anyone during times of uncertainty whether they have an actual higher level or not (Taylor & Lobel, 1989). It is important to look at SCO while researching adventure tourism consumers as often those taking part in an adventure activity are stepping out of their comfort zone to try something new, and are uncertain about their abilities. Social comparison allows them to learn how to adapt to challenging situations (Buunk & Gibbons). This study examines the variation between high levels of SCO and adventure activity images that appeal to consumers. According to the literature surrounding levels of SCO (Buunk & Gibbons; Gibbons & Buunk; Taylor & Lobel) those with a higher SCO will choose images that present a more favorable outward appearance, which demonstrates a heightened awareness of one's projected image, however as discussed earlier, previous research suggests the threat of showing inferiority when taking part in the activity (Buunk & Gibbons) would make downward comparison more appealing, leading the consumer to be drawn toward less favorable images. This research will answer the question of which cognitive process drives adventure tourism consumers when comparing themselves to others and provide a starting point for future research on the subject.

Specialized tourism refers to "...the provision of customized leisure and

recreational experiences driven by specific interests of individuals and groups” (Derrett 2001, p. 3). The measurement of satisfaction for such an activity is very specific, yet different for each person (Sung, 2004). Within that, adventure tourism has gone outside its traditional definitions to present specific experiences for adventure-based individuals who are adventure based (Sung). While the main focus of this study is to examine external dependent variables, research pertaining to internal motivating factors such as quest for knowledge and insight (Weber, 2001), restoring a displaced equilibrium (Fluker & Turner, 2000), and the perception of risk (Dickson & Dolnicar, 2004; Cater, 2006) create an important base when determining what images will appeal to consumers and the perceived characteristics of traditional adventure tourists. Long before social media, the idea of an “imagined audience,” has been thought to guide our actions (Litt, 2012, p. 330). People rely on what they envision to be their audience, and they change their behavior based on what they perceive to be characteristics of the group (Litt), but one’s perception of adventure depends on a variety of past experiences (Weber). Using overland trips as her focus, Weber assessed a broader definition of adventure tourism and looked at factors such as quest for knowledge and insight. She found “individuals’ subjective experience of adventure and their self-perception may not be consistent with researchers’ and practitioners’ classifications” (Weber p. 373). Before Weber’s research, risk theory was the main foundation of adventure tourism, which she argued, was a mere extension of adventure or outdoor recreation leaving out the tourism concept entirely. Completing a challenge for self-satisfaction may have been at one time a driving force behind taking part in adventure activities, but creating a visual representation of adventure to share with members of a virtual audience has overtaken the desires of self-

actualization (McGillivray & Frew, 2007).

Traveler characteristics, and consumer and travel behavior, open a window to analyzing the decision-making process (Sung, 2004). In an effort to better explain the two, Sung created a classification system of subgroups of adventure tourists with a focus on traveler characteristics, trip-related factors in the decision-making process, and perception of the adventure components. Using information collected by distributing a survey to a sample of 2,000 names from the Adventure Club of North America's 60,000 person mailing list, she broke the adventure travel consumer base into six groups consisting of (a) general enthusiasts (b) budget youngsters (c) soft moderates (d) upper high naturalists (e) family vacationers (f) active soloists. Of the six, the group with the largest market share and market potential was the general enthusiasts followed by the upper high naturalists. The latter are willing to pay more for novelty trips, while the former were concerned more with high adventure. She found family vacationers tend to be satisfied as long as there is something for everyone to enjoy, and active soloists are looking for organized trips offering an element of socialization. Budget youngsters are quite different from the other subgroups, and cannot afford organized trips therefore are content to plan their own adventures. Sung's classification of subgroups allows us to categorize for more targeted messaging of what is important to each group. The next step for the findings is to expand upon it looking at what specific marketing efforts appeal to each group and why, which is what this research aims to achieve.

Baumgartner, Sujan, and Bettman (1992) researched appealing to different versions of the self by examining ways to elicit an emotional reaction from consumers through advertisements by triggering autobiographical memories. Autobiographical

memories are those related to the self, and while not representative of exact dates and times, representative of a unique frame of a person's life (Baumgartner et al.). They almost always contain visual imagery, and consumers use them to make connections between their own lives and a product or service being mentioned. Products that often create the strongest connections are those where affect is in the product itself (souvenirs), in the function of the product (capturing memories with a camera), or can be linked to an event (holidays) (Baumgartner et al.). The researchers found that triggering autobiographical memories is an effective way to create empathy toward the ad or the characters within it. The memories are affectively charged, and such emotions were found to influence ad evaluations, and when autobiographical memories are evoked, consumers pay less attention to product features or information (Baumgartner et al.). Adventure tourism advertising is about creating the experience in consumers' minds rather than offering a tangible product. Evidence that autobiographical memories can affect attitudes toward a brand provides a strong starting point in connecting with the audience. Advertisements provide the tools necessary for consumers to project themselves into a situation and live vicariously through the ad (Walters, Sparks, & Herington, 2010). Walters et al. found when consumers project themselves into an ad, situation, or future consumption, their consumption vision (vision of themselves in a future vacation) is increased, and an emotional response occurs. Consumers internalize the lifestyle portrayed, convert the images into goals they wish to achieve as a result of the purchase, and the purchase immediacy is heightened (Walters et al.). They found this has significant influence on someone looking to purchase a tourism product or service to the point of immediate purchase. The way in which a consumer views an ad is

determined by how the elements of the ad are viewed within the context of background and characteristics (Meyers, 2010). Each person views an ad through a personal lens to find significance (Meyers). While other studies have broken down a growing and changing demographic into more manageable subgroups (Sung, 2004), the success of targeted marketing toward those groups still depends on triggering a feeling of similarity between the company or activity, and the individual (Meyers). For example, Whittler (1989) found African-American consumers prefer advertisements featuring African-Americans. The challenge for those in the adventure tourism industry is to convey not only a feeling of similarity between the models and the audience, but the skill level as well. The message needs to feel like it is specifically for them (Meyers). Returning to the concept of self and the imagined audience, "...the cultural relevance of a consumer good to its audience is directly related to their self identity" (Meyers, p. 3). People will seek out consumer goods, or in this instance, activities that will enhance their standing in a desired social group and determine how they interpret cues found in the advertisements (Meyers). "When a message or product is meant to speak to the needs of a consumer's social identity, it would be vital to include the audience using cues that highlight the importance of this group membership" (Meyers, p.3). Meyers's research consisted of a web-based survey, examining race as a cultural reference group, and how the product was to be consumed, privately or publicly. A sample of 480 students from both a large southwestern university and a historically black university was given the survey. The dependent variables included attitude toward the ad, attitude toward the product, attitude toward the model, and purchase intention. Results showed significance between the realm of consumption and the cultural relevance of the elements of the ad. Therefore, should the

product or activity be consumed publicly, the ad needs to feature elements the consumer sees as fitting with the characteristics of the intended group. Aaker, Brumbaugh, and Grier (2000) conducted a similar study but focused on those outside the target market when using targeted marketing. Excluding a group of potential consumers through exclusive ads is more than leaving out potentially new consumers; the effects run deeper (Aaker et al.). Negative, non-target market effects are not marked as simply failing to achieve favorable results, but rather decreased preferences of the brand (Aaker et al.). These effects can occur when the cues in the advertisement are not in line with a need, belief, or value of the consumer (Aaker et al.). The study consisted of three experiments: the first one examining targeting distinct groups (white, black, gay and lesbian); the second addressed the question of how to appeal to those outside of the distinctive group while targeting that group; and the third looked at the extent to which internalization and identification in both distinctive and non-distinctive groups drive target market effects. Each experiment used consumer responses to targeted advertising among both the target and non-target market. The results revealed that favorable target market effects are stronger within distinctive groups rather than non-distinctive groups due to a heightened sense of similarity between self, the ad, and the group. Negative, non-target effects occur when members of a distinct group feel excluded from the target market as a whole, or when members of a non-distinct group cannot relate to the brand or product. This also presents a challenge for those in the adventure tourism industry as, according to the study, those in a smaller, more distinct group will have a stronger brand affiliation should they feel included in the targeted marketing but will actually have a decrease in preference should they feel excluded. Adventure tourism consumers are not broken down

by race, sexual orientation, or other easily distinguishable traits, but rather a broad spectrum of demographics, yet they want to feel they are a part of a distinct group of people (McGillivray & Frew, 2007). The challenge lies in making each person feel similar to the group, yet special. One way to do this is to appeal to the desires or internal needs of the group.

Spending all week in a cubicle, or an unsatisfying home life can create a sense of unbalance in our lives (Fluker & Turner, 2000). Taking part in an adventure activity restores a sense of balance, thus an adventure activity is not a lifelong competition with nature, but rather a quick trip to reset an unbalanced equilibrium (Fluker & Turner). Fluker and Turner analyzed the needs, motivations, and expectations of adventure activity consumers by surveying customers at a whitewater rafting company. Surveys were submitted before and after customers completed the trip to assess whether the level of expectations for the trip was met. Results revealed significant differences in needs and motivations among consumers of whitewater rafting trips, but few differences in expectations of the trip (Fluker & Turner). Those with no prior rafting experience were drawn to the action of the whitewater trip itself and were willing to take more risks to achieve the experience, while those with prior experience focused on other benefits of rafting such as being with friends or being in nature (Fluker & Turner). Therefore, it can be said that images portraying an adventure activity are not viewed literally, but as symbol of a different time in one's life or a different version of oneself. The psychological self is made up of concepts of who we are, and it determines how we relate to the world (More & Averill, 2003). Consumers use certain brands or activities to express who they wish to be (desired self), strive to be (ideal self), or believe they should

be (ought self), to step outside more consistent roles such as boss or parent (Aaker, 1999). Aaker describes the self as malleable, having various versions activated to match different situations, and encompasses many conceptions including good self, bad self, hoped self, feared self, not-me self, ideal self, possible self, and ought self. These are influenced by both personality and situational factors and can be activated at any time (Aaker). This is all part of creating one's social identity, which includes not only actions taken by the individual, but the audience witnessing those actions (McGillivray & Frew, 2007). Social comparison cues are taken from others in similar situations to gauge prominent personality traits of the strived for self, and used to manage one's outward impressions to gain approval and increase self-esteem (Aaker). When creating marketing materials, those in the industry need to focus on the attributes that allow consumers to assume any identity they choose (Walters, Sparks, & Herrington, 2010).

Risk also plays a role in images representing adventure tourism, and while a consumer might enjoy living vicariously through a high-risk image in an ad (Breazeale & Ponder, 2011), the consumer in this case must physically take part in the activity should they choose to purchase it. This again presents the internal struggle of upward vs. downward comparison. The desire to be the person in the high risk situation might appeal to a consumer in the privacy of his or her own home, however knowing the potential of others witnessing the consumption may result in images portraying those with similar or less skills (downward comparison) to be more successful in affecting purchase decisions (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999). This creates the challenge of matching the perceived risk level with the consumer's comfort level. Dickson and Dolnicar (2004) found desired risk level varies with a person's perception of risk, and conclude it would be beneficial for those in

the adventure tourism industry to portray risk in a way that appeals to audiences with varying levels of desired risk. According to Cater (2006), handing over the element of risk to skilled guides automatically lowers the level of perceived risk, and when consumers perceive controlled risk as a challenge it enhances the overall enjoyment of the activity. Therefore, consumers will be drawn toward activities above their skill level to maintain the thrills they are seeking when taking part in adventure activities (Cater). Through a series of interviews with adventure tourism outfitters and customers, Cater found the most successful outfitters are those who reduce the actual risk while maintaining the thrilling feeling that surrounds it. Using the perception of risk to enhance the outward appearance of skills in an activity is also a characteristic of high (SCO) as discussed earlier (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999). As McGillivray and Frew (2007) point out, many of the goals of today's adventure tourist include the ability to create an outward image of a person possessing the characteristics of a thrill seeking adventurer.

More people are taking part in adventure activities for the first time (The George Washington University & Adventure Travel Trade Association, 2013), and more people who do not fit the traditional adventure tourist definition (Sung, 2004). The influx of adventure tourism companies offering more opportunity for tourists to take part with less personal risk has opened up the consumer base for the industry. Past research on social comparison theory and the adventure tourism industry creates a strong foundation for understanding the personal motivation of choosing to take part in an adventure (Fluker & Turner, 2000; Weber, 2001; Dickson & Dolnicar, 2004; Cater, 2006), the subgroups of adventure tourists (Sung, 2004), and how social comparison affects our feelings and actions (Buunk, 1995; Buunk & Gibbons, 2007; Gibbons & Buunk, 1999), but none has

looked at each aspect in an attempt to understand the adventure tourist for what they truly are today, and that is a consumer of a commercial good in a growing industry with rising competition. Research is lacking when it comes to these consumers, the images used in adventure tourism advertising, and the variation between intensity level and purchasing behavior. My research aims to provide insight into what drives someone to be drawn to a specific adventure activity package using the framework of social comparison theory to explain the cognitive process behind choosing a specific adventure activity. Those in the adventure tourism industry may be able to utilize this research to create and use images that appeal to a wider audience in website, social media, and traditional marketing efforts. The questions to be answered by this research are:

- R1:** Does the level of intensity portrayed in an adventure tourism activity image affect the consumers' attitude toward the image?
- R2:** Does the level of intensity portrayed in an adventure tourism activity image affect the consumers' attitude toward the activity?
- R3:** Does the level of intensity portrayed in an adventure tourism activity image affect the consumers' purchase intentions?
- R4:** Does social comparison theory explain the relationship between effective advertising images and consumers?
- R5:** Are consumers of adventure tourism activities driven by upward or downward comparisons when shown adventure images?

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The experimental design tested the affects of high, low or neutral intensity levels represented in adventure activity images on attitudes toward the image, the adventure activity represented in the image, and the intention to purchase a commercial trip of the activity shown. The activity represented in the images was whitewater rafting.

Stimuli Development

The purpose of the research was to test the affect of the level of intensity represented, therefore, it was necessary to design a set of images representative of high intensity, low intensity, and neutral activity. A pre-test was designed to select one image to represent each level.

Procedure

Three whitewater rafting images representing high intensity, e.g. large water splashes, serious facial expressions (see Figure 1), low intensity, e.g. some waves visible, smiling (see Figure 2), and neutral e.g. focus on the people themselves, no water, not moving (see Figure 3) were chosen. Within each level of intensity, the three images and testing scale were randomly arranged in an online survey using the online tool Google Forms.



Figure 1. Pre-test high.



Figure 2. Pre-test low.



Figure 3. Pre-test neutral.

Sample and data collection

A sample (n=75) was chosen randomly from neighborhood email lists encompassing residents of three Austin, Texas regions including Downtown (Old West Austin Neighborhood Association), North (Scofield Ridge), and South (South Lamar Neighborhood Association & Zilker Neighborhood Association). Each participant was randomly assigned one survey consisting of three images representing the same level: high (n=25), low (n=25), or neutral (n=25). Participants rated their perceptions of the image using four 7-point differentials: not fun/fun, dull/exciting, not thrilling/thrilling, unenjoyable/enjoyable (Voss, Spangenberg, & Grohmann, 2003).

Results

Responses were recorded and averaged using an Excel spreadsheet. The image in the high intensity survey with the highest average score was chosen to represent high intensity in the main experiment, the image in the low intensity survey with the lowest average score was chosen to represent low intensity, and the image in the neutral survey with the most central average score was chosen to represent the neutral, or constant variable in the main experiment. Table 1 further explains the results of the pre-test.

Table 1. Pre-test descriptive statistics.

Pre-Test Descriptive Statistics			
	Trip 1 (High Intensity)	Trip 2 (Neutral)	Trip 3 (Low Intensity)
Image 1	5.38 (1.11)	4.7 (1.33)	3.54 (1.25)
Image 2	5.56 (1.13)	3.65 (.98)	6.39 (.54)
Image 3	3.38 (1.03)	4.1 (1.43)	4.11 (1.25)

Note: Standard deviations are in parenthesis. Images used in the experiment are bold.

Experiment

The purpose of the experimental study was to examine the effects of visual images and social comparison orientation on attitude toward adventure activity images. The proposed research questions were examined using a 3 (images: high vs. low vs. neutral = control) x 2 (social comparison orientation: high vs. low) experimental design, with activity involvement as the confounding variable. The sample was created by collecting email addresses through neighborhood email lists from Texas, Virginia, and Ohio, and the social networking sites LinkedIn and Facebook (n=510). The main experiment utilized the stimuli chosen through the pre-test that resulted in one image representing each level of intensity: low (see Figure 4), neutral (see Figure 5), and high (see Figure 6). Three additional filler images (see Figure 7) were used to accompany each stimuli resulting in four images per survey. Participants were chosen randomly from the sample to fill out a questionnaire containing a high intensity image (n=170), low intensity image (n=170), or neutral image (n=170). For control purposes, the three additional images were the same for each survey, with the order randomized to reduce ordinal causation (Reynolds, 1977). Surveys were created using Google Forms, and responses were collected anonymously.



Figure 4. Low intensity.



Figure 5. Neutral.



Figure 6. High intensity.



Figure 7. Supplemental images.

Procedure

The experimental procedure was split into four stages. In the first stage, participants were exposed to the four images assigned to them containing an image representing one condition of the 3x2 design plus three additional images, and told to examine each closely. In the second stage, participants were asked to provide answers about their attitude toward the image, and attitude toward the activity using eight seven-point semantic differential scales anchored with not appealing/appealing, not interesting/very interesting, dislike/like (Ang & Lim, 2006) not fun/fun, dull/exciting, not thrilling/thrilling, unenjoyable/enjoyable, not delightful, delightful (Voss et al. 2003) in response to the stimuli on the previous page (see Figure 8). Participants were instructed to complete this section without returning to the image page. In the third stage, purchase intention and activity involvement were measured by answering ten questions using Likert scales anchored with strongly disagree/ strongly agree (see Figure 9), and again instructed to not return to the first page. In the fourth stage, participants were asked to complete the Iowa-Netherlands comparison (INCOM) orientation measure to gauge social comparison orientation levels (see Figure 10) (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999). The format of the survey attempted to reduce common method variance (CMV), and limiting false assumptions through keeping the survey short, varying the anchor labels, ensuring anonymity and reverse wording questions to break response patterns (MacKenzie & Podsakoff, 2012).

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

The purpose of the experimental study was to examine the effects of intensity levels represented in images depicting adventure tourism activities on consumer attitudes. The proposed research questions were examined using a 3 (intensity level: high vs. low vs. neutral=control) x 2 (SCO: high vs. low) experimental design with experience participating in the activity as the confounding variable. A total of 144 surveys were completed and returned. Survey one (high intensity) returned 54 responses, survey two (low intensity) returned 44, and survey three (neutral) returned 46. The respondents consisted of 62 percent (n=89) female, 36 percent (n=52) male, and 2 percent (n=3) chose not to disclose that information. Table 2 provides a full list of income, ethnicity, and race of respondents. The geographic location of respondents spanned 19 states (see Figure 11). To create even samples for each survey, the same number of participants (n=44) per survey were chosen randomly

Table 2. Demographics of sample.

		18-24		25-34		35-44			45-54		54-65			65+	
		Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Blank	Female	Male	Female	Male	Blank	Female	Male
Asian	Hispanic or Latino														
	Not Hispanic or Latino				1	1									
African American	Latino				1										
	Not Hispanic or Latino			1											
Other	Hispanic or Latino			3	1						1				
	Not Hispanic or Latino			1	1	1			1						
White	Hispanic or Latino			2	2	1			1						
	Not Hispanic or Latino	4	1	22	17	11	13	1	12	6	14	5	1	3	2
Blank	Hispanic or Latino														
	Not Hispanic or Latino				1										

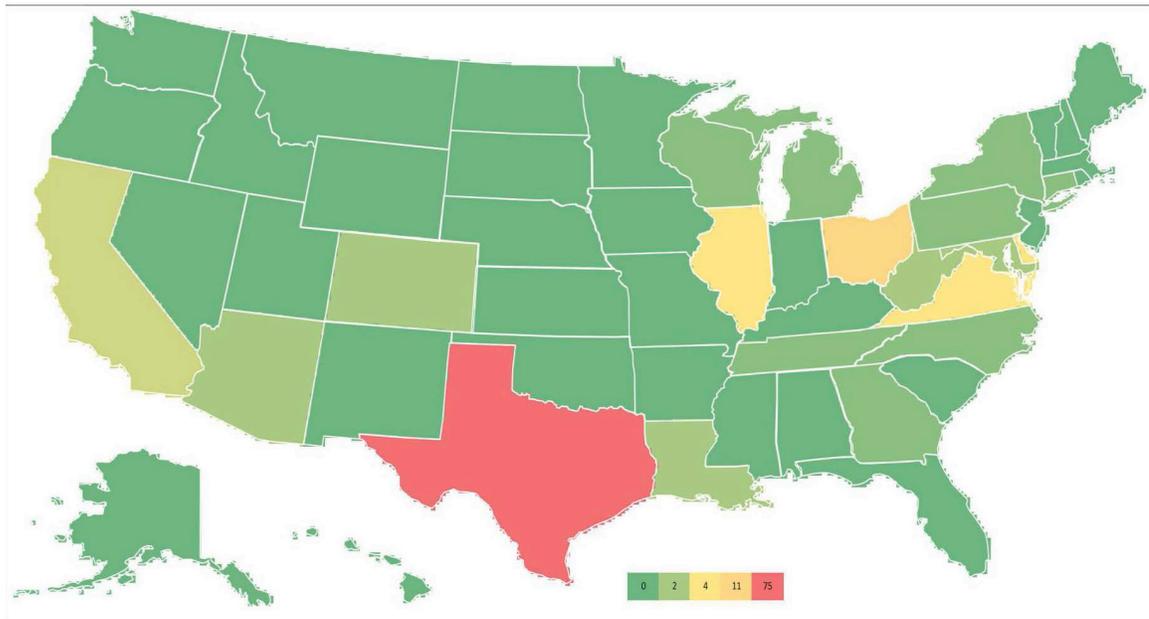


Figure 8. Geographic location of respondents.

To answer the proposed research questions, a one-way ANOVA was performed for the three dependent variables: attitude toward the activity, attitude toward the image, and purchase intention to test the significance of intensity level (see Table 3). Two separate two-way ANOVA tests were then performed to examine the relationship between SCO level and intensity level, and also the relationship between experience and intensity level. High and low SCO and experience levels were determined using the top 25 percent (n=11) and bottom 25 percent (n=11) of the results of the INCOM scale (see Figure 10), and questions asking participants to rate their experience with the activity (see Figure 9).

Table 3. Descriptive statistics.

	Descriptive Statistics								
	High Intensity Picture (n = 44)			Low Intensity Picture (n = 44)			Neutral Picture (n = 44)		
Attitude toward the ad	4.77	(1.18)		4.30	(1.35)		4.47	(1.21)	
Attitude toward the activity	5.72	(1.00)		5.45	(1.08)		5.34	(1.27)	
Purchase Intention	3.74	(1.39)		3.40	(1.59)		3.04	(1.48)	
Experience	3.04	(1.14)		2.68	(1.23)		2.80	(1.31)	
SCO	4.81	(0.94)		4.48	(1.00)		4.31	(0.83)	

	Anova											
	Attitude toward the ad			Attitude toward the activity			Purchase Intention					
	df	MS	F	p	df	MS	F	p	df	MS	F	p
Intensity	1	4.85	3.02	0.090	1	1.50	1.39	0.240	1	2.49	1.11	0.290
Experience	1	1.34	0.69	0.411	1	12.29	11.69	0.001	1	21.84	9.96	0.003
Intensity x Experience	1	0.06	0.03	0.858	1	0.02	0.02	0.884	1	1.11	0.51	0.480
SCO	1	6.57	4.09	0.050	1	11.13	11.98	0.001	1	16.08	7.39	0.010
Intensity x SCO	1	1.34	0.83	0.367	1	0.16	0.17	0.684	1	0.20	0.09	0.761

Note: ANOVA = analysis of variance. Standard deviations are in parentheses.

* Significant results ($p \leq .05$) are in boldface.

Attitude toward image. In the one-way ANOVA test, the effect of intensity level was not significant on attitude toward the image, $F(1, 86) = 3.02, p = .086$. The two-way ANOVA test revealed there was no significant two-way interaction between SCO and intensity level $F(1, 40) = .83, p = .37$. In the two-way ANOVA testing SCO and attitude toward the image, SCO effects were observed $F(1, 40) = 4.08, p = .04$, and more positive attitudes toward the image resulted from high SCO levels ($M = 4.76$) than low SCO levels ($M = 3.98$) (see Table 4). Cohen's effect size value ($d = .63$) suggests a moderate to high practical significance (Cohen, 1988).

Table 4. Attitude toward the image.

Two-way ANOVA						
Summary						
Response	Attitude (ad)					
Factor #1	Intensity	Fixed				
Factor #2	SCO	Fixed				
Descriptive Statistics						
Factor	Group	Sample size	Mean	Variance	Standard Deviation	
Intensity x SCO	1 x 1	11	3.84848	1.05253	1.02593	
Intensity x SCO	1 x 2	11	4.9697	1.78788	1.33712	
Intensity x SCO	2 x 1	11	4.12121	0.60606	0.7785	
Intensity x SCO	2 x 2	11	4.54545	2.98384	1.72738	
Intensity	1	22	4.40909	1.68182	1.29685	
Intensity	2	22	4.33333	1.75661	1.32537	
SCO	1	22	3.98485	0.80928	0.8996	
SCO	2	22	4.75758	2.31938	1.52295	
ANOVA						
Source of Variation	SS	d.f.	MS	F	p-level	F crit
Factor #1	0.06313	1	0.06313	0.03927	0.84392	4.08475
Factor #2	6.56818	1	6.56818	4.08577	0.04997	4.08475
Factor #1 + #2	1.33586	1	1.33586	0.83098	0.36745	4.08475
Within Groups	64.30303	40	1.60758			
Total	72.2702	43	1.6807			

Attitude toward activity. Using the one-way ANOVA test, intensity level did not prove a significant effect on respondents' attitude toward the activity $F(1, 86) = 1.38, p = .24$, again, there was no significant two-way interaction between SCO and intensity level with regard to attitude toward the activity $F(1, 40) = .17, p = .68$. In the two-way ANOVA test, SCO proved significant in affecting the attitude toward the activity $F(1, 40) = 11.98, p = .001$, and more positive attitudes toward the activity were observed when SCO levels were high ($M = 5.98$) rather than low ($M = 4.98$) (see Table 5). Cohen's effect size value ($d = 1.08$) suggests a high practical significance (Cohen).

Table 5. Attitude toward the image.

Two-way ANOVA						
Summary						
Response	Attitude (activity)					
Factor #1	Intensity	Fixed				
Factor #2	SCO	Fixed				
Descriptive Statistics						
Factor	Group	Sample size	Mean	Variance	Standard Deviation	
Intensity x SCO	1 x 1	11	5.19318	1.57926	1.25669	
Intensity x SCO	1 x 2	11	6.07955	0.84148	0.91732	
Intensity x SCO	2 x 1	11	4.76136	0.78267	0.88469	
Intensity x SCO	2 x 2	11	5.88636	0.5108	0.7147	
Intensity	1	22	5.63636	1.3585	1.16555	
Intensity	2	22	5.32386	0.94741	0.97335	
SCO	1	22	4.97727	1.17357	1.08331	
SCO	2	22	5.98295	0.65371	0.80853	
ANOVA						
Source of Variation	SS	d.f.	MS	F	p-level	F crit
Factor #1	1.07422	1	1.07422	1.15688	0.28856	4.08475
Factor #2	11.12536	1	11.12536	11.98141	0.00129	4.08475
Factor #1 + #2	0.15661	1	0.15661	0.16866	0.6835	4.08475
Within Groups	37.14205	40	0.92855			
Total	49.49822	43	1.15112			

Purchase intention. In the one-way ANOVA test, the effect of intensity level was not observed on purchase intentions $F(1, 40) = 1.11, p = .29$. There was also no significant two-way interaction between SCO and intensity level $F(1, 32) = .01, p = .91$. The two-way ANOVA test found that SCO had significant effects on purchase intentions $F(1, 40) = 7.39, p = .009$, with high SCO resulting in higher intent to purchase ($M = 4.09$) than low SCO ($M = 2.88$) (see Table 6). Cohen's effect size value ($d = .85$) again suggests a high practical significance (Cohen).

Table 6. Purchase intention.

Two-way ANOVA						
Summary						
Response	Purchase Intention					
Factor #1	Intensity	Fixed				
Factor #2	SCO	Fixed				
Descriptive Statistics						
Factor	Group	Sample size	Mean	Variance	Standard Deviation	
Intensity x SCO	1 x 1	11	3.16364	2.31055	1.52005	
Intensity x SCO	1 x 2	11	4.23636	1.82255	1.35002	
Intensity x SCO	2 x 1	11	2.6	1.368	1.16962	
Intensity x SCO	2 x 2	11	3.94545	3.20073	1.78906	
Intensity	1	22	3.7	2.26952	1.50649	
Intensity	2	22	3.27273	2.6497	1.62779	
SCO	1	22	2.88182	1.83489	1.35458	
SCO	2	22	4.09091	2.4142	1.55377	
ANOVA						
Source of Variation	SS	d.f.	MS	F	p-level	F crit
Factor #1	2.00818	1	2.00818	0.92311	0.34243	4.08475
Factor #2	16.08091	1	16.08091	7.39198	0.00964	4.08475
Factor #1 + #2	0.20455	1	0.20455	0.09402	0.76071	4.08475
Within Groups	87.01818	40	2.17545			
Total	105.31182	43	2.44911			

Experience. There was no significant two-way interaction between experience and intensity level on any of the three dependent variables: attitude toward the ad $F(1, 40) = .03, p = .86$, attitude toward the activity $F(1, 40) = .88, p = .88$, or purchase intention $F(1, 40) = .51, p = .48$. There was a significance between experience and attitude toward the activity $F(1, 40) = 11.69, p = .001$, with more experience resulting in more favorable attitude toward the activity ($M = 6.15$) than less experience ($M = 5.10$). Cohen's effect size value ($d = 1.07$) suggests a high practical significance (Cohen). There was also significance between experience level and purchase intention $F(1, 40) = 9.96, p = .003$, with more experience resulting in higher intent to purchase ($M = 4.28$) than less experience ($M = 2.87$). Cohen's effect size value ($d = .99$) suggests a high practical significance (Cohen). There was not a significance between experience and effects on attitude toward the ad $F(1, 40) = .69, p = .411$.

Neutral (control). SCO did not prove significant on attitude toward the ad $F(1, 20) = .04, p = .84$, attitude toward the activity $F(1, 20) = 1.71, p = .21$, or purchase intention $F(1, 20) = .56, p = .46$ for those presented the neutral image survey.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

The experimental study was conducted to answer five research questions: 1) Does the level of intensity portrayed in an adventure tourism activity image affect consumers' attitude toward the image? 2) Does the level of intensity portrayed in an adventure tourism activity image affect consumers' attitude toward the activity? 3) Does the level of intensity portrayed in an adventure tourism activity image affect the consumers' purchase intentions? 4) Does social comparison theory explain the relationship between effective advertising images and consumers? 5) Are consumers of adventure tourism activities driven by upward or downward comparisons when shown adventure images?

The results of the experiment indicate there is not a significance between intensity level and attitude toward the ad, attitude toward the activity, or purchase intentions providing an answer for research questions (1), (2), and (3). To answer whether or not SCO explains the relationship between effective adventure tourism images and consumer attitudes, it is important to look at the significance of SCO on attitudes as well as the control and confounding variables. Experience level proved significant on attitude toward the activity and purchase intention, but not attitude toward the image suggesting those with more experience will be drawn toward the activity no matter the image in the advertisement confirming Fluker and Turner's (2000) research in which experienced rafters cared more about benefits such as spending time with friends or being outdoors. The fact that SCO proves to be a significant effect on both the high and low intensity images, but not the neutral image suggests that while the intensity level of the image might not prove a factor in affecting consumer attitudes, an image of the activity taking place does trigger a cognitive response. This is similar to Baumgartner, Sujan, and

Bettman's (1992) findings of effective advertisements eliciting autobiographical memories from a unique, positive frame of a person's life, causing consumers demonstrating high levels of SCO to have a more favorable response toward the image, activity, and purchase. Because the experience level does not affect the attitude toward the image, it can be said that those responding more favorably toward the image are either naturally higher in SCO, or placed in an unfamiliar situation exhibiting the characteristics of those with high SCO (Taylor & Lobel, 1989). Therefore, social comparison theory does explain the relationship between effective adventure tourism images and consumer attitudes. As discussed earlier, more research is needed to determine whether upward or downward comparison plays a larger role in choosing an adventure activity, however, the current study provides a base for such research as those exposed to high intensity images identified as less experienced, while those exposed to low intensity images identified as more experienced. This supports earlier research stating Festinger's (1954) notion of upward drive is used only when the threat of showing inexperience does not exist (Buunk, 1995). Those shown the low intensity images took part in downward comparison boosting their self-esteem and inflating their confidence in their skills (Morse & Gergen, 1970), while those shown high intensity images took part in upward comparison, not in an attempt to better themselves, but rather in a way that lowered their self-esteem and confidence in their skills (Morse & Gergen).

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

Adventure tourism is a \$263 billion industry, and shows no signs of slowing down (The George Washington University & Adventure Travel Trade Association, 2013).

Before the current study, there has been little research focusing on the images that appeal to consumers of this growing specialized segment of tourism. As with other segments of tourism, it is important to develop sophisticated strategic communication and digital media plans in order to remain competitive within the industry. Companies need to understand not only the demographics of this changing consumer base, but their motivations and behaviors. Social comparison theory has explanatory power in the industry as more people are using their experiences as a way to create a self-image displayed through social media and the Internet (McGillivray & Frew, 2007). Unlike the arguments made by McGillivray and Frew however, that the strived for public self-image is outside the realm of what a person is actually capable of, this study revealed the intensity level does not play a significant role in affecting consumer attitudes, simply an image of the activity taking place. The results are important when looking at targeted marketing and the chance of creating negative attitudes toward the brand by alienating a segment of the audience (Meyers, 2010). Knowing that those with more experience are not affected by the intensity level represented in the image while the drive to compare oneself to others taking part in the activity does, suggests it could be beneficial for those in the industry to choose images that represent activities suitable for those with less experience. This will aid in creating a feeling of inclusion in the target audience, and appeal to an audience that encompasses a variety of skill levels. As discussed earlier,

creating images that represent activities above the audience skill level, can lead to upward comparison that lowers self-esteem. Even though the mean was higher for the high intensity images, it was not significant enough to counteract negative feelings toward those images, which may exclude a part of the target audience.

Similar to Weber's (2001) findings that traditional definitions of adventure tourism focused around risk are outdated due to a lack of consideration of the tourism aspect, the results suggest today's adventure tourists are not looking for extreme trips, but rather benefits that accompany the activity such as being with friends or in nature (Fluker & Turner, 2000). Even though there was not a significant effect between intensity level and SCO level, the fact that a high level of SCO resulted in a positive attitude toward the image, attitude toward the activity, and purchase intention suggests that taking part in an adventure activity is enough to display the characteristics of high SCO regardless of the intensity level of the images. Knowing this allows those in the industry to further understand the cognitive processes taking place when consumers consider an adventure activity, such as a heightened awareness of self-image coupled with low-self-esteem (Buunk & Gibbons), and use it to create advertisements that speak to such thoughts and allow for consumers to live vicariously through them (Walters, Sparks, & Herington, 2010).

Limitations and Future Research

The current study did not examine consumers' attitude toward adventure activities in general or current tourism habits. It also only looked at images depicting one adventure activity (whitewater rafting) and while results showed significant practical implications, the research could benefit from the use of a larger sample size. Moving forward, research

on the topic needs to expand into the effects of images accompanied by text as well as the presence of brand names. Future studies might examine a mixture of activities to provide more general results for the industry as a whole.

APPENDIX A

SURVEY QUESTIONS

The following pages contain the three segments of the survey used in the experiment accompanied by the information sought to gain from each segment.

Consumer attitude. Hedonic scale of consumer attitude toward the image, activity, and purchase intention (Voss et al., 2003)

This advertising image is

not appealing (1)---(2)---(3)---(4)---(5)---(6)---(7) very appealing.
not interesting (1)---(2)---(3)---(4)---(5)---(6)---(7) very interesting.
dislike (1)---(2)---(3)---(4)---(5)---(6)---(7) like.

This activity is

not appealing (1)---(2)---(3)---(4)---(5)---(6)---(7) very appealing.
not interesting (1)---(2)---(3)---(4)---(5)---(6)---(7) very interesting.
dislike (1)---(2)---(3)---(4)---(5)---(6)---(7) like.

I believe this activity to be

not Fun (1)---(2)---(3)---(4)---(5)---(6)---(7) fun
dull (1)---(2)---(3)---(4)---(5)---(6)---(7) exciting
not delightful (1)---(2)---(3)---(4)---(5)---(6)---(7) delightful
not thrilling (1)---(2)---(3)---(4)---(5)---(6)---(7) thrilling
unenjoyable (1)---(2)---(3)---(4)---(5)---(6)---(7) enjoyable

Activity involvement. This segment was used to determine participants' attitude toward the activity as well as experience.

Strongly disagree/Strongly agree

I am eager to check out the trip because of this advertisement.
(1)---(2)---(3)---(4)---(5)---(6)---(7)

I will definitely purchase a trip similar to this.
(1)---(2)---(3)---(4)---(5)---(6)---(7)

I intend to try this trip.
(1)---(2)---(3)---(4)---(5)---(6)---(7)

It is likely that I will buy this trip if presented the opportunity.
(1)---(2)---(3)---(4)---(5)---(6)---(7)

I am willing to buy this trip
(1)---(2)---(3)---(4)---(5)---(6)---(7)

I participate in adventure activities through the use of commercial outfitters.
(1)---(2)---(3)---(4)---(5)---(6)---(7)

Iowa-Netherlands comparison orientation (INCOM). This segment of the survey was used to gauge an individual's social comparison orientation level (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999).

I participate in whitewater rafting on my own.

①---②---③---④---⑤---⑥---⑦

I am a whitewater rafting expert.

①---②---③---④---⑤---⑥---⑦

I am interested in adventure activities, relative to other people.

①---②---③---④---⑤---⑥---⑦

Adventure activities are very important to me.

①---②---③---④---⑤---⑥---⑦

I often compare how my loved ones (boy or girlfriend, family members, etc.) are doing with how others are doing.

①---②---③---④---⑤---⑥---⑦

I always pay a lot of attention to how I do things compared with how others do things.

①---②---③---④---⑤---⑥---⑦

If I want to find out how well I have done something, I compare what I have done with how others have done.

①---②---③---④---⑤---⑥---⑦

I often compare how I am doing socially (e.g., social skills, popularity) with other people.

①---②---③---④---⑤---⑥---⑦

I am not the type of person who compares often with others.*

①---②---③---④---⑤---⑥---⑦

I often compare myself with others with respect to what I have accomplished in life.

①---②---③---④---⑤---⑥---⑦

I often like to talk with others about mutual opinions and experiences.

①---②---③---④---⑤---⑥---⑦

I often try to find out what others think who face similar problems as I face.

①---②---③---④---⑤---⑥---⑦

I always like to know what others in a similar situation would do.

①---②---③---④---⑤---⑥---⑦

If I want to learn more about something, I try to find out what others think about it.

①---②---③---④---⑤---⑥---⑦

I never consider my situation in life relative to that of other people.*

①---②---③---④---⑤---⑥---⑦

*Reverse coded

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