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Reflection of Attention to the Social Comparison Information (ATSCI) Consumption Habit on Facebook (FB) Status Updates: An Empirical Investigation in Rural India

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Abstract

The presentstudy seeks to understand attention to the social comparison information (ATSCI) consumption habits among rural Indian consumers focusing on Tripura as the specific state and investigates its relation with Facebook (FB) status updates. The study analysed findings gathered from 213 consumers selected randomly from the Facebook 'Friends' list of the author. Results indicate that, ATSCI is positively related with age and negatively related with Facebook status updates. Gender and education do not have any significant relation with FB status updates as well as ATSCI whereas occupation and category have significant relation with both ATSCI and FB status updates. A significant negative relation was also found among FB status updates and ATSCI score.

Keyword: ATSCI, FB Status Updates, Demographic variables, Rural India, Tripura

Introduction

Social comparison is the comparison between self and others. It is a psychological mechanism which influences people's judgments, experiences and behaviour. People constantly engage in comparisons with themselves whenever they are challenged with information about how others are, what others can and cannot do, or what others have achieved and failed to achieve (Dunning & Hays, 1996). In the same manner, whenever people want to know how they themselves are, what they themselves can and cannot do, they do so by comparing their own characteristics, fortunes and weakness to others (Festinger, 1954). Social comparisons are even engaged with others also who are unlikely to yield relevant information concerning the self (Gilbert, Giesler, & Morris, 1995). Social comparisons are also done with others who are not even there and perceived outside of conscious awareness (Mussweiler, Rüter, & Epstude, 2004; Stapel & Blanton, 2004). The primary goal of social comparison is to acquire information about the self. A generally accepted summary of the recent theoretical discussions on the comparison process by social science researchers have identified three underlying motives for comparison (Taylor, Wayment & Carillo, 1995; Wood, 1989) as Self-evaluation, Self-improvement, and Self-enhancement. Some research have identified certain types of individuals, for whom the probability of inclining into social comparisons are more compared to those for whom these traits are absent (Gilbert, Giesler & Morris, 1995; Hemphill & Lehman, 1991; Steil & Hay, 1995; Taylor *et al*., 1992). Individuals with low self-esteem, unstable or uncertain self-concepts (Campbell, 1990; Swallow & Kuiper, 1988) are thought to be especially interested in social comparison (Wayment & Taylor, 1995). Depressed persons have shown to be more sensitive to and more interested in comparison with others (Ahrens & Alloy, 1997; Swallow & Kuiper, 1990). The reason for their interest towards social comparison can be attributed to their uncertainty about themselves (Weary, Marsh & McCormick, 1994). Again, people with high uncertain mood states also exhibit high social comparison tendency (Marsh & Webb, 1996). Personality traits such as stress level (Hemphill & Lehman, 1991) and coping strategy (Affleck &Tennen, 1991) were also addressed from the increased social comparison interest perspective. These studies (Hemphill & Lehman, 1991; Affleck

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&Tennen, 1991) failed to establish any correlation among stress level and coping strategy with social comparison information.

Background of the Study

Social media have revolutionised the way people interact with each other. Facebook with more than one billion members is the world's strongest social network and has become an important part in many people's daily routines. Facebook, which was set up in 2004, had 1.23 billion users across the world as of December 31, 2013.Within ten years of its existence; it is the most dominant social networking platform, way ahead of other networking platforms available all over the world. India is also not an exception in this regard. As per Javier Olivan, the company official in charge of global growth of Facebook, the world's largest social media company, it has crossed 100 million active users in India — the second country, after the United States (Economic Times, March 31, 2014).The interesting statistics about Facebook users in India by March 30, 2014 (Khan, 2014) is nearly 90% Facebook users in India are younger than 35 years of age. 71% users on Facebook (in India) belong to 19 to 35 years age group. Surprisingly, a little over than 19% users on Facebook in India is below the age of 19 years. Classifying Facebook users by gender, male Internet users in India are more fascinated towards Facebook than females. Three in every four Facebook users in India are male, while young age female Internet users in India are using Facebook more than other age groups.It's because of Facebook and other social media, the communication style and pattern of the consumers got transformed. The kind and amount of information accessible regarding consumers has also increased manifold because of social networking penetration. According to Nadkarni and Hoffman (2012), people are motivated to use Facebook for two primary reasons: 1) a need for belongingness, and 2) a need for self-presentation.Facebook users are often exposed to details about their peers' status. This exposure to other people's social activities can lead to users' comparing their own social lives with that of their friends. Facebook profiles help satisfy individuals' need for self-worth and self-integrity (Toma & Hancock, 2013). One of the popular uses of Facebook is to organize and plan events for groups (Ross, Orr, Sisic, Arseneault, Simmering & Orr, 2009; Spiliotopoulos & Oakley, 2013; Yang & Brown, 2013). According to Yang and Brown (2013), Facebook use is integrated in the life of the users in such a way that it is mare an extension of the users' offline activities. Several researches were carried out to link Facebook use with positive and negative effects. For instance, Knittinger *et al*. (2013) tried to correlate strong attachment to Facebook with Internet addiction and opined that, individual with strong attachment to Facebook who used Facebook excessively, were more likely to report that, it has caused them problem and it would be difficult for them stop using Facebook. On the positive side, studies also found that use of Facebook is beneficial for individuals with low self-esteem by helping these individuals bridge social capital, gain social acceptance, and adapt to a new culture and in some cases also enhance subjective wellbeing (Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe, 2007; Kim & Lee, 2011; Yu, Hsu, Yu& Hsu, 2010). Individuals who use Facebook may experience sense of belonging and social support from others (Kim & Lee, 2011; Liu & Ye, 2013).Social comparison is a natural phenomenon and the pattern of that comparison by human may be upward or downward. Individuals desire to improve their own abilities through comparison with more superior individuals is upward comparison (Festinger, 1954) whereas individual's comparison of themselves with less competent individuals is downward comparison (Wills, 1981). Both types of social comparison can act as motivating factor. Downward comparison may be motivated by one's desire to improve self-esteem or protect self-esteem that is threatened (Pomery, 2012). Social comparison is not only downward or upward;it may be among perceived similar individuals also (Pomery, 2012). Regarding gender and social comparison, study by Gibbons and Buunk (1999) concluded that, women are more likely to compare then men. The same study also concluded that more self-conscious and highly self-reflective people tend to make more social comparisons compared to others.Attention to the Social Comparison Information (ATSCI) refers to a person's degree of sensitivity towards social comparison clues. ATSCI helps a person in presenting herself in a social setting based on how others behave (Calder &Burnkrant, 1977). The need for social comparison and others' behaviours vary across individuals (Lennox & Wolfe, 1984). Bearden and Rose (1990) in their work demonstrated how the study of ATSCI is important in the context of consumed behaviour. According to them, high ATSCI individuals believe that others are more likely to

judge them by their purchases compared to low ATSCI consumers. High ATSCI customers value interpersonal considerations more in buying branded products and conform more to peers' preferences in making their product choices compared to the low ATSCI customers. High ATSCI individuals are more likely to be influenced by social validation appeals (Deval, Mantel, Kardes & Posavac, 2013). People engaging in high attention to the social comparison information behaviour are likely to stand out, attracting the attention and curiosity of others (Berlyne, 1960; Mandler, 1982).The logic behind linking consumers'ATSCI and Facebook status updates can be described as follows: since people are motivated to use Facebook primarily for a need of belonging and a need for self-presentation (Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2012) and high ATSCI, individuals are likely to standout, attracting the attention of others (Berlyne, 1960; Mandler, 1982), theoretically, there will be a possible positive correlation between the Facebook status activities and ATSCI score of the individuals. No significant study in this regard had carried out in India in general and in Rural India in particular. Hence, this study will be of significant importance to find out whether in case of rural consumers in India, Facebook status updates and ATSCI score has any significant correlation or not. Revealing this aspect of consumer behaviour will be of great support for the marketers in the context of formulating Facebook communication strategy targeting the rural consumers in India.

Objectives of the Study

The following objectives will be fulfilled by this study in the context of rural consumers in India.

- How do various demographics affect rural consumers' Attention to Social Comparison Information (ATSCI)?
- How do various demographics affect rural consumers' Facebook status updates?
- Is there any correlation among ATSCI score and Facebook status updates in the context of rural India?

Proposed Hypotheses of the Study

H_1: ATSCI Scale (Lennox & Wolfe, 1984) is a suitable instrument for measuring rural consumers' attention to the social comparison information.

H_2: ATSCI Scale is one-dimensional in the context of measuring rural consumers' attention to the social comparison information in India.

H_3: Age of the respondents will be positively correlated with the rural consumers' attention to the social comparison information.

H_4: Age of the respondents will be negatively correlated with the rural consumers' FB Status updates.

H_5: Women consumers will exhibit greater tendency towards ATSCI than male consumers' in rural India.

H_6: Gender will not have any significance in the FB Status updates of the rural consumers in India.

H_7: Educational qualification of the consumers will be positively correlated with ATSCI score.

H_8: Educational qualification will be positively correlated with FB status updates of the consumers.

H_9: Tribal consumers will exhibit less ATSCI than non-tribal consumers in rural India.

H_{10}: Tribal consumers will update less status on FB compared to the non-tribal consumers in rural India.

H_{11}: ATSCI score will vary across different occupation.

H_{12}: FB Status updates will vary across different occupation.

H_{13}: Consumers' Facebook status update will be positively correlated with ATSCI score.

Research Methodology

Overall Research Process

Samples of 213 respondents were selected randomly from the 'Friends list' of the author, a list consisting of more than 700 active friends. The updates in the form of 'status' published by the respondents in their 'Facebook Timeline'were assessed and recorded for six months (Feb.2014- Aug.2014). The recorded status were categorised under the following heads: total profile picture changed, total timeline picture changed, total sharing of quotes (friendship, love, moral), total photos of acquired possessions, total status upload regarding activity at a point of time, uploading others special moments, sharing

other friend's posts, expressing love with the loved one, wishing others on various occasions, results of funny apps involving self, liking the comments of others on own post, sharing various news updates, uploaded photos of enjoying moments with friends/relatives, total selfies uploaded etc. The same respondents were contacted personally with the questionnaire to measure their attention to the social comparison information (ATSCI) score. The demographic profiles of the samples were given in Table2.

Research Instrument

To record the ATSCI score of the respondents, ATSCI Scale (Lennox & Wolfe, 1984) was used. The respondents' agreement/disagreement with the statements in the ATSCI scale was collected by survey method. Prior to using the scale, the reliability and consistency of the scale was measured by a pilot research comprising of 91 samples randomly selected.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed by using various statistical analysis techniques like independent sample 't' test, one way ANOVA, bivariate correlation, factor analysis, and scale reliability by using Cronbach's Alpha (α). Data were analysed by using statistical package SPSS.

Results

The analysis was structured into three parts. The first part is the analysis of the consistency of the ATSCI scale for measuring rural consumers' attention to the social comparison information in India. Pilot study with 91 samples reveals overall Cronbach's Alpha for the scale as .983 and an improved alpha of .995 (omitting statement number 13). Thus, though the original construct (Lennox & Wolfe, 1984) has 13 statements, total 12 statements were taken for the study. The actual scale consistency (Cronbach's Alpha) stood at .996 indicating that the scale is reliable enough to measure rural customers' ATSCI score. Factor analysis extracted a single factor with 96.07% variance explained by the factor. Thus, it was concluded that, the scale is a one-dimensional scale in the context of measuring ATSCI score for the rural Indian consumers. Thus, hypotheses one and two (H1, H2) are accepted. The second part of the study is the investigation of rural consumers ATSCI and FB status activities with regard to various demographic variables such as Age (H_3, H_4), Gender (H_5, H_6), Education (H_7, H_8), Category (H_9, H_{10}) and occupation (H_{11}, H_{12}). For hypothesis 3, correlation between Age and ATSCI is found to be positive (r=.689) and significant (p<.01). In case of hypothesis 4, correlation between Age and FB status updates was negative (r=-.435) and significant (p<.01).Thus, hypothesis 3 (H_3) and hypothesis 4 (H_4) were accepted. For hypotheses 5 and 6 (H_5 & H_6), independent sample't' test was used to compare the mean between male and female. The results indicate that the mean differences were not significant (p>.05) for both ATSCI and FB status update scores. Thus, hypothesis 5 (H_5) was rejected and hypothesis 6 (H_6) was accepted. Bivariate correlation was employed for testing the correlation between education of the respondents and ATSCI scores (H_7), as well as education & Facebook status update scores (H_8). Correlation analysis does not reveal any significance (p>.05) for both ATSCI score and FB status updates. Thus, hypothesis 7 (H_7) and hypothesis 8 (H_8) were rejected. For hypotheses 9 & 10 (H_9& H_{10}), independent sample't' test was used. Test results found that, both ATSCI score and FB status updates were significant (p<.05) across categories. The mean value of ATSCI score for tribal consumers (27.72) was less compared to the mean value for non-tribal consumers (47.318), but the mean value for FB status updates (267.48) was more for tribal consumers compared to the non-tribal consumers (219.36). Thus, hypothesis 9 (H_9) was accepted and hypothesis 10 (H_{10}) was rejected. For hypotheses 11&12 (H_{11} & H_{12}), one way ANOVA was used to compare mean scores across occupational groups. The results were found to be significant (p<.05) for both ATSCI score and FB status updates. Thus hypothesis 11 (H_{11}) and hypothesis 12 (H_{12}) were accepted. The third part of the study is the investigation of possible correlation between ATSCI scores and FB status updates. The correlation was found to be negative (r=-.552) and significant (p<.01) rejecting the formulated hypothesis (H_{13}) for the study. A summarised presentation of the acceptance/rejection of the hypotheses drawn for the study is shown in Table 1.:

Table 1: Results of Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	Relation	Result
H1	ATSCI scale suitability	Accepted
H2	ATSCI scale dimensionality	Accepted

H3	ATSCI with Age	Accepted
H4	FB status updates with Age	Accepted
H5	ATSCI with Gender	Rejected
H6	FB status updates with Gender	Accepted
H7	ATSCI with Education	Rejected
H8	FB status updates with Education	Rejected
H9	ATSCI with Category	Accepted
H10	FB status updates with Category	Rejected
H11	ATSCI with Occupation	Accepted
H12	FB status updates with Occupation	Accepted
H13	ATSCI with FB status Updates	Rejected

Discussion

One of the objectives of the study was to investigate the relationship between rural consumers Attention to the Social Comparison Information (ATSCI) consumption habit, demographic variables (age, gender, occupation, education and category) and FB status updates. Based on the results of the study on two hundred and thirteen (213) samples it was found that age as a demographic variable has positive correlation with ATSCI score and negative correlation with FB status updates. One way ANOVA analysis shows that, above 40 age group consumers (traditionalists) are more positive to ATSCI scores followed by 24-39 (Gen X) age groups and up to 23 (Gen Y) age group is least positive, which supports the fact that teenagers and college students have greater desire to uniqueness and less attention to pay to social comparison information as they are less influenced by others (Solomon, 2003). In case of FB status updates, Gen Y has maximum updates followed by Gen X and least by traditionalists supporting the fact that youth enjoys

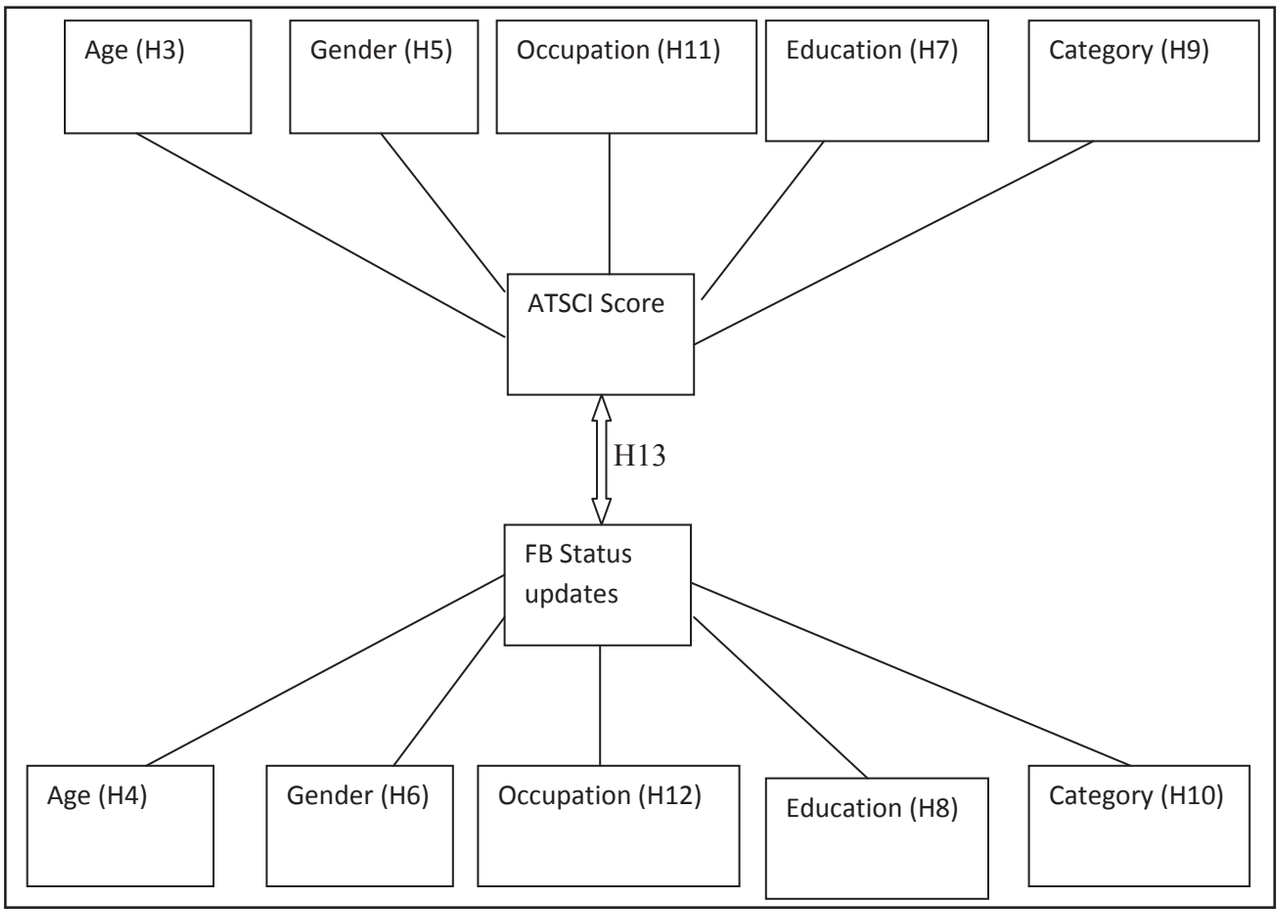
Table 2: Demographic Characteristics of the Participants

Demographic	***Frequency***	***Percent***
Age		
Under 23 (Gen Y)	75	35.2
24-39 (Gen X)	78	36.6
above 40 (Traditionalist)	60	28.1
Gender		
Female	84	39.4
Male	129	60.5
Category		
Tribal	75	35.2
Non-Tribal	138	64.7
Occupation		
Farmers and others	36	16.9
Business	27	12.6
Service	69	32.3
Unemployed	81	38.0
Education		
Up to senior secondary	51	23.9
Graduate	90	42.4
Post-graduate and above	72	33.8

Table 3: Measures used in the Study

Variable	***Construct***	***No. of Items in the Actual***	***No. Of Items Adopted***	***Resource of Measure***	***Cronbach's alpha***
Attention to the social comparison information	ATSCI Scale	Thirteen (13)	12 (Twelve)	Developed by Lennox & Wolfe (1984) to measure the extent to which individuals are sensitive to social comparison cues regarding their product choices.	.996

Figure 1: Conceptual Model of the Research



maximum active usage of Facebook. The insignificance of mean score across male and female for both ATSCI scores and FB status updates reveal the fact that both genders are equally active on Facebook in rural India and incase of ATSCI score also, gender does not have any role to play; which contradicts that women are more likely to compare than men (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999). Across occupational groups, farmers and others are high on ATSCI scores and FB status updates followed by business people, service holders and finally unemployed consumers. Education as a demographic variable does not have any role to play in the rural consumers ATSCI scores as well as FB status updates. In case of category, tribal consumers pay less attention towards social comparison information compared to non-tribal consumers, which means they are less influenced by social validation appeals compared to non-tribal consumers. In case of FB status updates, it is evident that, tribal people are more active than the non-tribal people in rural India. In case of FB status updates and ATSCI scores, there exists a significant negative correlation meaning that High ATSCI consumers are less active in FB status updates compared to low ATSCI score consumers rejecting the logic used for forming the concerned hypothesis taking clue from the study of Nadkarni and Hofmann (2012), Berlyne (1960) and Mandler (1982). Further analyses of the type of status updates by the low ATSCI consumers reveal that majority of the updatesare related to their own profile picture change, time line photo change, photos' of various possessions owned by them and time enjoyed with friends and family. It means, low ATSCI consumers in rural India wants to enhance their social image by expressing themselves in the social media platforms rather than knowing more about others, accepting the reason for using Facebook (Nadkarni & Hoffman, 2012).

Limitations

These findings are subject to certain limitations. Though, the samples selected for the study is large enough, all the

samples were drawn from the Facebook 'Friends' list of the author. Since, the author is engaged in one specific type of profession (teaching), this may lead to certain limitations in generalizing the findings of the study to the rural as a whole. From demographic point of view, rural India is one of the most complex and diverse. This complex and diverse nature itself is one of the limitations to generalise the findings in other parts of rural India. Again, questionnaire based approach for measuring ATSCI score may lead to certain limitation for the study.

Future Scope

This study can be extended in other parts of the rural India by considering samples from diverse peoples' FB friends list to examine the results. Another extension of the study in rural India may be how FB status and ATSCI is correlated with other consumption habits, ethnocentric tendencies and acculturation to the global consumer culture.

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