

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL COMPARISON IN EMOTIONAL RESPONSES AND EXPOSURE  
TO REALITY AND SCRIPTED TELEVISION PROGRAMS

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Submitted to the faculty of the University Graduate School

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree

Doctor of Philosophy

in The Media School,

Indiana University

July 2015

Accepted by the Graduate Faculty, Indiana University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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June 3, 2015

## Acknowledgments

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to the following individuals, without whose support the completion of this dissertation and doctoral degree would not have been possible.

Thank you to John, for being my best friend and partner in crime, and for reminding me to ‘trust the process.’ Thank you to my parents, Bob and Cindy, for being a constant source of love and encouragement. Thank you to my brothers, Josh and Steve, for always making me laugh and, more importantly, being there when I needed you. Thank you to Christy and Paula, for being the sisters I never had. To my niece and nephews, thank you for bringing unexpected joy into my life.

I would like to thank my mentors, who have provided me with the skills and tools by which I am able to embark on my career in academia. First, to my advisor - Andrew Weaver, thank you for sharing your knowledge with me, challenging me, and for being a constant source of guidance. Thank you to Walter Gantz, who gave me many research, teaching, and service opportunities. You have always looked out for me. Thank you to Nicole Martins, for including me in multiple research collaborations and for willingly sharing your honest and open advice whenever I needed it. To Ed Hirt, thank you for accepting me into your lab and exposing me to research projects and ideas outside of my comfort zone. Thank you to the professors whose teaching inspired me to pursue a Ph.D.: Annie Lang, Betsi Grabe, Rob Potter, Julie Fox, and Mark Deuze.

To my friends, thank you for being there. From my hometown, Jessica Mueller, Jenna Langevin, and Heather Zins. From my department, Irene Van Driel, Teresa Lynch, Alexis Ovitt, and Nic Matthews. From Bloomington, Bryant and Cheryl Paul. Your friendship and support made this place my second home.

Nicky Lewis

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The goal of this dissertation was to examine how social comparisons with entertainment television cast members influence emotional responses to reality television programming. Two studies were employed to examine social comparison processes and the relevant factors that influence those comparisons. Both studies were similar in design in that participants viewed a reality or scripted television program and then reported their emotional responses to it. However, the first study utilized a forced exposure environment and the second study implemented a selective exposure environment. There were similarities among the emotional responses to the content across both studies, where generally, viewers experienced stronger social comparison-related emotional responses to scripted programs as compared to reality programs. However, several important differences regarding exposure settings emerged. Negative emotional responses were generally stronger for those in a forced exposure environment than those in a selective exposure environment. Accordingly, positive emotional responses were stronger for those in a selective exposure environment as compared to those in a forced exposure environment. Some participants selected programs for the experience of ‘guilty pleasure,’ choosing programs featuring cast members who were clearly worse off than them and engaging in downward social comparisons with those characters. Individual differences including perceived realism of television and perceived similarity to the characters also demonstrated to be relevant factors that influenced social comparison processes, where stronger emotional responses to the content were experienced when it was either more realistic (Study One) or when the viewers felt highly similar to the cast members (Study Two). Overall, the presented findings

provide evidence that directional social comparisons occur with mediated television characters during and after viewing. The findings here serve to inform future research in social comparison theory's application in mediated contexts and to illustrate how individual differences, content factors, and exposure can influence emotional responses to mediated characters in an entertainment environment.

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## CHAPTER ONE: Literature Review

### Introduction

Reality television programming has experienced tremendous growth in the last decade. By combining relatively low production costs and a quick turnaround for broadcast, these types of programs have been made widely available to media audiences worldwide. In the last several years, it has increasingly become one of the most popular genres of television programming (Ferris, Smith, Greenberg, & Smith, 2007). However, what makes these programs engaging to mass audiences is still uncertain. Although several researchers have explored the relevant features of reality programs and viewers' perceptions of those programs (Hall, 2006; Hill, 2005; Potter et al., 1997), little is known about the psychological processes at work among the viewers themselves. This dissertation aims to examine how social comparisons with cast members influence emotional responses to reality television programming.

When placing reality programming in the larger scheme of television genres, it defies traditional categorization. Nabi (2007) explained that reality programs are marked by two distinct features: ordinary people and unscripted activity. Hall (2006) determined that audiences define reality programming as unscripted expressions of cast members' character, skills, and personality. These conceptualizations allow for the inclusion of a wide range of programming material. Indeed, in recent years reality television has expanded to include a variety of program types, including the documentation of various social and cultural groups (*Breaking Amish, Mob Wives*), interesting professions (*Deadliest Catch, Ice Road Truckers*), and celebrities' lives (*Keeping Up with the Kardashians, T.I. and Tiny: The Family Hustle*), among others.

Another defining characteristic of reality television is that it does not follow traditional narrative conventions. When audiences watch scripted television programs, they assume what

they are viewing was created by others for entertainment purposes. Accordingly, certain plot and character developments are expected. This is not so in reality television. McCracken (2012) argued that television audiences have a desire for unpredictability. Reality television satisfies that desire because there is a perception that no one, not even the producer, necessarily knows how things will end. This is perhaps one of the greatest draws of reality television: namely, that the ending is still to be determined. Although there are debates as to how much reality television programs are actually ‘unscripted,’ previous research has demonstrated that exposure to reality television results in certain emotional reactions due to its unpredictable nature, including enhanced feelings of superiority and identification because the cast members are real people and not following a script (Hall, 2006).

The appeal of reality television may be explained in part because audiences are watching real people on the screen, not paid actors or actresses (Nabi, Stitt, Halford, & Finnerty, 2006). I argue that viewers are also more likely to engage in comparative processes between themselves and reality television show cast members, as opposed to scripted characters, because they are real people who are not following a script. These comparison processes likely affect the emotional responses that audiences have to both reality and scripted television programs. As a result, the focus of this dissertation is two-fold: first, to identify the comparative processes that occur with reality cast members and scripted characters (including associated emotional responses to the content) and second, to examine the relevant factors that influence television program choice behavior (both for reality and scripted programs).

Two studies will be employed to assess the social comparison processes that occur in an entertainment media context. The first study will utilize a forced exposure environment to understand the social comparison-related emotional responses that occur when watching



entertainment television. The second study will incorporate a selective exposure environment to understand the role that choice behavior has on social comparison-related emotional responses to entertainment content. In utilizing both forced and selective exposure experiments, the similarities and differences among the exposure environments can be addressed in the subsequent analyses. In both studies, participants will be experience a self-image manipulation. Afterwards, participants will either be assigned to view (Study One) or choose to view (Study Two) an episode from a scripted or reality television program and report their emotional reactions to it. The manipulation of self-image should affect both the directions of comparisons made to the characters and their associated emotional responses. Relevant individual differences among the participants themselves, including perceived realism of television and perceived similarity to the characters, will also be considered as influencing factors in the social comparison process.

These two experiments will serve to achieve the fundamental aim of this dissertation, which is to interpret media consumption behavior through the lens of social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954). In the following sections, the development of social comparison theory will be outlined, from its early beginnings to extensions in communication and media research, including recent applications in reality television. The role of motivations, emotions, and individual differences in social comparisons will also be described, including how they influence media choice behavior. It is through this investigation that I hope to extend the current body of research on the social psychological processes and effects involved in television consumption, and more specifically, reality television consumption.

## **Social Comparison Theory**

Social comparison theory was first proposed in 1954 by Leon Festinger as a theory of informal communication. He was interested in how people communicated with each other within social groups and the resulting outcomes of those communications. The theory summarizes that individuals are driven to evaluate their own abilities and opinions in order to reduce uncertainty about the self. That drive is satisfied through comparison. Accordingly, some types of social influence behavior (changing others' abilities and opinions) and competitive behavior (changing one's own abilities and opinions) can be conceptualized together, as a process of social comparison.

Since its original conception, the theory has undergone several major alterations and extensions that include social comparison's effects on emotions, beliefs, and attitudes (Buunk & Mussweiler, 2001). Early work on social comparison mostly focused on the choice of comparison targets, but now involves the influence that social comparisons have on cognition, affect, motivation, and behavior (Corcoran, Crusius, & Mussweiler, 2011). Social comparison processes have demonstrated to be an increasingly important mechanism to our general psychological functioning. Indeed, it is doubtful even Festinger himself could have predicted the broad expansion of social comparison theory from its social psychological beginnings, including forays into interpersonal communication (e.g., Berger & Calabrese, 1975; Wert & Salovey, 2004) and mass communication (e.g., Knobloch-Westerwick & Hastall, 2006; Mares & Cantor, 1992).

### **The Motivations of Social Comparisons**

Social comparison theory is based on an individual's desire to gain accurate evaluations about the self (Festinger, 1954). It posits that people determine their own abilities and opinions

by comparing themselves to specific targets so that uncertainty about the self is reduced. In turn, they learn how to define who they are as individuals. This basic need to maintain an accurate perception of the self often leads to comparisons with other individuals (Corcoran, Crusius, & Mussweiler, 2011) and these comparisons are generally driven by one of three motivations: self-evaluation, self-improvement, or self-enhancement (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999). In turn, these motivations lead to three types of comparisons: lateral, upward, and downward.

Self-evaluation, i.e., the desire to know information about the self, was clearly explained in Festinger's (1954) original theory and generally relates to lateral comparisons to similar others for the benefit of self-knowledge. The desire for self-improvement serves to explain the selection of upward comparison targets, where people aspire to be someone better than their current self so as to improve their own self-perception. Individuals making upward comparisons perceive themselves as similar to the superior other or at least desire to make themselves more similar to the upward comparison target (Suls, Martin, & Wheeler, 2002). Alternatively, the desire for self-enhancement is what motivates downward comparisons, where individuals try to maintain a positive self-image by comparing themselves to worse off others. They disassociate themselves from those individuals or groups so as to feel better about themselves. Subsequently, this comparison increases one's subjective well-being (Wills, 1981).

There is evidence that directional comparisons become increasingly relevant in times of self-image enhancement and threat. Individuals experiencing a situation of self-image enhancement may be more likely to select upward comparison standards in order to maintain or improve their self-perception. In a study by Spencer, Fein, and Lomore (2001), individuals who were self-affirmed chose upward comparison targets, whereas those who were not self-affirmed

selected downward comparison targets. The information and affiliation provided by upward standards satisfies the need for self-improvement (Taylor & Lobel, 1989; Wood, 1989).

Conversely, those with a threatened self-image are especially likely to engage in downward social comparisons for purposes of self-protection or enhancement and do so in order to increase self-esteem (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007; Wills, 1981). Although Festinger (1954) originally postulated that choice of comparison target would largely be associated with superior others, Brickman and Bulman (1977) proposed that comparisons with superior targets can be threatening at times and thus individuals may choose inferior targets with which to compare. This area of research, specifically called downward comparison theory, has been extended to victimized populations and their mechanisms of coping. For instance, studies involving breast cancer victims demonstrated that women who had experienced the threat of breast cancer chose comparison targets whose medical condition was worse than their own (Taylor, Wood, & Lichtman, 1984; Wood, Taylor, & Lichtman, 1985).

### **The Emotional Responses to Social Comparisons**

Social comparison theory considers the impact of perceivers, their comparison standards, and the context in which comparisons take place (Corcoran, Crusius, & Mussweiler, 2011). Similarly, Smith (2000) developed a model of social comparison-based emotions using two distinctions: (1) the direction of comparison (upward or downward) and (2) the assimilative and contrastive processes that occur, where the individual perceives themselves as either similar to or different from the comparison target. Based on these distinctions, social comparisons can be categorized into one of four types: upward assimilative, downward contrastive, upward contrastive, and downward assimilative.

Each of the four types of social comparisons result in either desirable or undesirable outcomes for the perceiver (Smith, 2000). Upward assimilative comparisons have a desirable outcome because when making an upward assimilative comparison, the perceiver is looking up to a superior comparison target and sees that he or she could be like them. Downward contrastive comparisons also have a desirable outcome because the perceiver is looking down on an inferior comparison target and sees themselves as dissimilar to them. Alternatively, upward contrastive and downward assimilative comparisons have undesirable outcomes for the perceiver. When upward contrastive comparisons occur, the perceiver looks up to a better off target but feels he or she could not be like them. When downward assimilative comparisons occur, the perceiver looks down on a worse off other whom they see as similar to themselves.

Each of the four types of social comparisons also have specific emotional reactions associated with them. The specific emotions associated with upward assimilative processes include admiration, inspiration, and optimism - admiration for the comparison target, inspiration to be like them, and optimism for attaining a better self. The emotions affiliated with downward contrastive processes involve pride, *Schadenfreude* (a feeling of pleasure from another's misfortune), and contempt. Pride is a pleasant emotion that results from the perceiver believing he or she has a positive internal attribute or characteristic. *Schadenfreude* is a pleasant feeling the perceiver experiences because of another's worse off situation and contempt is a scornful emotion directed towards the downward comparison target because the perceiver believes that individual's situation is deserved. As for upward contrastive emotions, the three emotions include resentment, envy, and depression - resentment towards an upward comparison target whom the perceiver believes received an unfair advantage, envy to be similar to that upward comparison target without having the means to do so, and depression because the perceiver feels

inferior. Finally, the emotions associated with downward assimilative processes are pity, fear, and sympathy – pity for the downward comparison target’s situation, fear that the perceiver’s own situation may worsen, and sympathy combines both the perceiver’s concern for the downward target and fear that they could become like them. Although discrete emotional responses (e.g., hope, envy) have been examined in previous entertainment media research (Nabi & Keblusek, 2014), by utilizing Smith’s (2000) framework, we can understand the specific types of social comparison processes that occur with mediated characters based on the groupings of emotional responses outlined above (i.e., upward, downward, assimilative, contrastive).

### **The Role of Perceived Similarity in Social Comparisons**

Social comparison theory’s application in communication research began with Berger and Calabrese’s (1975) work on interpersonal communication that suggested people become anxious when they are uncertain of their environment. As a result, they postulated that individuals seek out similar, proximate others to determine the appropriateness of their behavior. By doing this, they reduce the uncertainty of their environment. This work has been extended to examine uncertainty reduction in relationships (Courtois, All, & Vanwynsberghe, 2012; White, 2010). Further explorations by Wert and Salovey (2004) applied social comparison theory to gossip behavior, suggesting that all gossip involves social comparison.

Previous examinations of social comparison theory as it relates to media consumption have traditionally revolved around women and their perceptions of self, compared to images of women on television, in movies, and in magazines (Bessenoff, 2006; Irving, 1990; Nabi & Keblusek, 2014; Tiggemann & McGill, 2004; Wilcox & Laird, 2000). The altered and unrealistic body types of these women have infiltrated the mass media and as a result, are deemed to be the societal ideal of what is attractive. Mares and Cantor (1992) provided the first study of selective

exposure and social comparison in television by examining the effects of television programming on lonely and non-lonely elderly individuals. They found that lonely individuals preferred televised portrayals of other lonely individuals and were happier afterwards. Alternatively, non-lonely individuals preferred portrayals of other non-lonely individuals and were happier afterwards as well. The authors suggested that downward comparisons among the lonely and upward comparisons among the non-lonely served to explain these effects.

Recently, social comparison has been examined through selective exposure to online news content, where younger readers preferred stories about other young individuals and readers overall preferred stories featuring same-gender characters (Knobloch-Westerwick & Hastall, 2006). The findings suggest that individuals perceive same-age and same-gender comparison targets as similar to themselves. These results were examined through social cognitive (or learning) theory, social comparison theory, and social identity theory; proposing that all three theories were similar in their predictions of the results. The authors explained that social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2001) involves the selection of similar targets for social learning, social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) involves the selection of similar targets for comparison purposes, and social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978) involves the selection of positive representations of similar targets (ingroup) and negative representations of dissimilar targets (outgroup).

Knobloch-Westerwick & Hastall (2006) proposed social comparison theory to be the best explanatory vehicle for same-age and same-gender media selections because the participants were selecting individual targets to compare to, whereas social identity theory relies the comparative dynamics between groups (see Hogg, 2006 for an overview). Until recently, social identity theory, although rooted in social comparison processes, has largely been examined

outside of the social comparison theory umbrella. There have been movements to consider both of these theories in tandem, with social identity theory mostly reading as a plural of social comparison theory (Buunk & Mussweiler, 2001). Instead of individual comparisons with specified targets, social identity involves comparisons between ingroups and outgroups and the effects those comparisons may have on self-evaluations. Of interest is how closely related the processes of downward comparisons and establishment of social identity appear to be.

Downward comparisons with worse off others are motivated by desires of self-enhancement (Wills, 1981). Correspondingly, individuals establish membership with social ingroups and derogate outgroups for those same desires of self-enhancement (Knobloch-Westerwick & Hastall, 2010; Reid & Hogg, 2005).

Knobloch-Westerwick and colleagues (Knobloch-Westerwick, Appiah, & Alter, 2008) later examined the characteristic of race in selective exposure to news content using three frameworks: social cognitive theory, social comparison theory, and the distinctiveness principle. The distinctiveness principle (McGuire, McGuire, Child, & Fujioka, 1978) suggests that those in the minority will select content related to their minority, while those in the majority will show no preference. The results of Knobloch-Westerwick, Appiah, & Alter's (2008) study demonstrated that Black individuals preferred other news about Black targets while White individuals showed no race-related preference – in line with the tenets of the distinctiveness principle. The authors tempered these findings by stating that although social cognitive and social comparison theories would also suggest that individuals select similar targets based on similar characteristics, the concept of “similarity” is different for minority groups as compared to majority groups. More concretely, this explanation suggests that minority members are more likely to find similarity by race, whereas majority members do not. In this study, the news content stimulus featured targets



of different ages and genders, just as in the previous Knobloch-Westerwick and Hastall (2006) study; however, no gender or age effects were discussed. To this point, social comparison theory was the best explanatory vehicle to explain age and sex related character preferences in the first study (2006), but not in this study (2008).

In a follow-up to Knobloch-Westerwick and Hastall's (2006) study, these same authors (2010) conducted a secondary data analysis examining valence of the featured news stories. Young targets in the news stories were labeled as having high perceived group status and high uncertainty in identity, and older targets in the news stories were labeled as having low perceived group status and low uncertainty in identity. Results demonstrated that young individuals generally preferred young positive portrayals overall. Older individuals preferred young negative portrayals as compared to young positive portrayals and reported more self-esteem after selecting negative young portrayals. Here, the results were presented in light of social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978), where those high in identity uncertainty seek positive, similar targets to align with and those low in identity uncertainty seek negative, dissimilar targets to derogate against.

These studies demonstrate some of the first experimental forays into how social comparison theory and the selective exposure paradigm can be applied in mediated contexts. To that end, there are several ways in which this work can be expanded upon. Although using multiple theoretical frameworks in a selective exposure environment does allow for greater explanatory opportunities of the findings, grouping social comparison, social identity, social cognitive, and distinctiveness theories into predicting similar outcomes short sells the relative strengths of each of these theories. It cannot be assumed that the selection of news targets, whether old, young, Black, or White, equated to social comparison, social learning, social identity, or distinctiveness. These studies did not assess whether participants felt they compared

to a specific target, learned behavior from an ideal, or identified with a specific group. For example, social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2001) suggests that individuals gain knowledge through the observation of others and that the outcomes of that behavior influence whether or not it will be modeled. Fully testing participants on measures such as information gained from the targets presented in the news story or participants' likelihood to behave similarly to the targets would provide greater clarity as to what social psychological processes were engaged during exposure. Alternatively, if the selection of news targets was driven by social comparison, it must be determined what attributes of the mediated characters were used for evaluation and subsequent comparison.

In several recent studies (Appiah, Knobloch-Westerwick, & Alter, 2013; Knobloch-Westerwick & Hastall, 2010), social identities were assigned to the participants either by age or race, suggesting that individuals always socially identify with individuals of a similar age or race. However, the distinctiveness principle postulates that minority members are more likely to find similarity by race as compared to majority members, as stated above (Knobloch-Westerwick, Appiah, & Alter, 2008; McGuire, McGuire, Child, & Fujioka, 1978). Assigning social identities to participants becomes a limitation when social identities appear to be mutable across populations. Brewer (1991) proposed that social identity is self-determined and varies across the life cycle. Participants in these studies did not express what attributes they socially identified by or whether they felt as though the selected news targets represented members of their ingroup or outgroup. As mentioned above, both downward comparison and social identity processes are motivated by the same desires of self-enhancement (Reid & Hogg, 2005; Wills, 1981). It is possible that the older individuals in Knobloch-Westerwick and Hastall's (2010) study selected negative stories about younger individuals for purposes of downward comparison

and not because they identified as an ‘older’ person and wanted to derogate against a ‘younger’ outgroup. Without assessing what specific processes the participants engaged in, it cannot be concretely determined whether one or a combination of social psychological mechanisms were at work. As a result, direct measures of perceived similarity and post-hoc assessments of the reasoning behind individuals’ media choice behavior will be fruitful in explicating these specific social psychological processes.

### **Social Comparisons in Reality and Scripted Television Programs**

The first scholarly explorations into reality television came out of traditional uses and gratifications studies conducted by Nabi and colleagues (Nabi, Biely, Morgan, & Stitt, 2003; Nabi, Stitt, Halford, & Finnerty, 2006). In 2003, they found reality television to be wide, varied, and to have no cohesive genre. Reasons for enjoyment differed among periodic and regular viewers. A follow up study in 2006 found happiness, parasocial interaction, and social comparison to be generally related to enjoyment of reality television programs, whereas negative outcomes of the program, anger, and self-awareness were negatively related to enjoyment. These two studies operationalized social comparison in different ways. In the 2003 study, social comparison was part of a larger measure of overall self-awareness. In the 2006 study, social comparison was part of a larger measure related to judgment of others’ behavior. Of note is that in the 2006 study, social comparison was positively related to enjoyment, whereas self-awareness (of which social comparison was operationalized under in the 2003 study) was negatively related to enjoyment. These first two studies were ambitious efforts into better understanding reality television’s appeal, but as is often the case with exploratory studies and large typographical uses and gratifications examinations, proper conceptualization and operationalization of meaningful variables presents a major challenge. To this point, Festinger’s

(1954) original work was not cited in either study, suggesting that social comparison theory's application was restrained.

Other studies have examined reality television's appeal and found that people watch it to pass time, for entertainment (Papacharissi & Mendelson, 2007), and for voyeurism (Baruh, 2009). Baruh's follow up study in 2010 found that after controlling for demographics and hours of viewing, social comparison no longer positively related to enjoyment. One explanation for this is that although a propensity for social comparison is likely to be related to reality television consumption, it is not necessarily related to enjoyment of those programs. Indeed, there is some tentative evidence that social comparison processes occur when viewers watch reality television programming. Reiss and Wiltz (2004) determined that reality television consumption was both correlated with individuals who had motivations of self-importance and those who valued status highly. Hall (2006) found that viewers had feelings of identification when a reality television character behaved well and feelings of superiority when a character behaved poorly. Both of these studies suggest that comparative processes are at work, either through comparison tendencies of the viewers themselves (Reiss and Wiltz) or in the form of the emotional responses that occur as a result of exposure to reality programming (Hall).

A study by Lewis and Weaver (in press) extended this previous work by examining both the direction of social comparisons that occur during reality television viewing and the specific emotional ramifications those comparisons had for viewers. When individuals were cued with age as a comparison target group and their self-image was threatened, they experienced emotions associated with downward comparisons after viewing a reality television program. This was because the program featured characters of the viewers' same age group behaving inappropriately and characters of a different age group behaving responsibly. These findings

align with past social comparison research that demonstrates those with a threatened self-image engage in downward comparison for purposes of self-enhancement or protection in order to increase self-esteem (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007; Wills, 1981). Cueing for age in this instance instigated a sense of perceived similarity between the viewer and the young, poor behaving comparison targets, drawing attention to their appearance and behavior and resulting in emotional reactions associated with downward comparison. Viewers perceived the young reality television cast members to be ‘worse off’ than them, which emphasized their own positive self-identity.

There were also differences in social comparison-related emotional responses among male and female viewers (Lewis & Weaver, in press). Males generally experienced stronger emotional responses to the reality television program than females, but these stronger emotional responses did not correlate with increased enjoyment. These findings reinforce the notion that although an orientation for social comparison may be related to reality television consumption in general, the emotional responses that occur during viewing are not necessarily related to enjoyment. This study was able to identify specific social comparison-related emotional responses to a reality television program, but it was unable to compare the affective reactions to reality television programs with those of scripted programs. This dissertation will overcome that shortcoming by utilizing both scripted and reality programs in order to determine whether the social comparisons that occur in reality television consumption are inherently unique as compared to other types of programming.

Further challenges are presented in the selection of specific scripted and reality programs as stimuli, as previous examinations of reality television have found this type of programming to have no cohesive genre (Nabi, Biely, Morgan, & Stitt, 2003; Nabi, Stitt, Halford, & Finnerty,

2006). For the purposes of this dissertation, the selection of reality programs will revolve around ‘surveillance’ programming (Aubrey, et al., 2012; Riddle & De Simone, 2013). ‘Surveillance’ programming is a documentary-style genre of reality programs that focuses on the daily lives of featured cast members. Surveillance reality television programs tend to document the lifestyles of a particular social or cultural group and do not necessarily focus on competition or occupations. These types of programs focus on content similar to well-known scripted dramas and sitcoms on television. I propose that these types of reality programs will elicit authentic social comparisons, in that the documentation of the cast members featured within them is presented in a way to make viewers believe this is how they live and interact with others in real life. Furthermore, these mediated representations mimic real interpersonal interactions in which individuals seek out similar others to compare to (Berger & Calabrese, 1975).

Using reality and scripted television programs that feature similar settings will aid in explaining the differences between these types of programs, both in the social comparisons made and their associated emotional responses. In general, viewers report a preference for traditional scripted programming and have a negative view of the impact of reality television, yet admit to watching it sometimes or frequently (Nabi, Stitt, Halford, & Finnerty, 2006). Perhaps it is the directional social comparisons that come easier with cast members in reality television programs than characters in scripted programs that help to explain this paradox, not that reality programs result in greater enjoyment than scripted programs.

### **The Role of Individual Differences in Social Comparisons with Mediated Characters**

Assessing theoretically relevant individual difference characteristics among the audience members themselves is another important factor that likely influences the directions of social comparisons and their resulting effects on viewers. Indeed, the roles of individual differences

such as self-uncertainty, global self-esteem, neuroticism, and depression tendencies in social comparison processes have received scholarly attention in recent years (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007; Buunk & Mussweiler, 2001; Gibbons & Buunk, 1999). Although all of the individual difference variables listed above are worthy of exploration, in a mediated context, several other individual differences deserve attention as well. Considering that media representations in both scripted and reality television emphasize certain characteristics and that viewers have varying levels of both social comparison propensities and media consumption patterns, five explicit individual difference variables are examined in this dissertation – gender, participants’ social class, perceived realism of television, social comparison orientation, and media use.

Findings related to Gibbons and Buunk’s (1999) measure of social comparison orientation, the Iowa-Netherlands Comparison Orientation Measure (INCOM), provide some insight here. They found that those higher in social comparison orientation are more likely to seek downward comparisons (targets of which are easily found in reality television), but are more likely to experience negative emotional reactions associated with those comparisons. It is possible that those high in social comparison orientation seek out reality television because it provides a context in which many downward comparisons can be readily made, but after experiencing those comparisons, it results in negative affect.

Beyond this, those high in social comparison orientation tend to be highly communal and interpersonal; they also demonstrate higher neurotic tendencies (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999). These three psychological correlates rank higher for women than men and, in general, females have an increased comparison orientation as compared to males (Costa, Terracciano, & McCrae, 2001; Cross & Madson, 1997; Guimond and Chatard, 2014). To date, scholars have suggested that

gender is likely to be related to motivations for social comparisons, but rarely has it been specifically examined.

Another relevant individual difference variable is the concept of social class among viewers. Many scripted programs and 'lifestyle' reality television shows involve explicitly high social class or, in more recent years, low social class individuals. It is likely that one's own social class influences the emotional responses and evaluations made about the characters represented in television programming. A social psychological perspective of social class, as opposed to traditional measures of social class or social-economic status, has demonstrated to be a relevant factor in the construction of class identity (Bullock & Limbert, 2003). This perspective is pertinent because the evaluations made about television characters and cast members are reliant on the viewers' perceptions of self and others.

Media consumption behavior in general, including perceptions of scripted and reality television, is also likely to be an influencing factor in the types of social comparisons made and their resulting effects. Cultivation theory (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1986) proposes that television exposure helps to shape one's view of social reality. Individuals who spend more time watching television are likely to perceive the world in a way that is consistent with the messages that are portrayed on television as compared to those who spend less time watching television. Gerbner (1998) argues that television is a centralized system of storytelling and while the actors, plots, and production styles may change, the program structure and perspective remain the same.

However, since the theory's first development, one critique has involved concern over its emphasis on overall exposure to television versus specific programming channels and genres (Potter, 1993). Indeed, several investigations have provided evidence that cultivation effects



occur after exposure to specific genres, specifically reality television (Ferris, Smith, Greenberg, & Smith, 2007; Martins & Jensen, 2014; Ward & Carlson, 2013). Perhaps most interesting about these examinations is that perceived realism demonstrated to be a relevant factor in the responses to reality television programming. These effects occurred despite the common assumption that audience members know that reality programs are somewhat scripted and heavily edited, save for some evidence that suggests not all viewers subscribe to this notion (Hill, 2005).

### **Considering Selective Exposure versus Forced Exposure to Media Messages**

Media consumption behavior, including preferences, habits, and routines, is largely driven by choice, either by the individual or the individual acting within a larger social context. Considering that media audiences can generally choose media messages for consumption, especially in an entertainment context, the selective exposure paradigm of media effects serves as an appropriate way to assess both choice behavior and the social comparison processes that occur with mediated characters. The selective exposure paradigm, which involves the choice of one type of programming over another (e.g., Cantor, 1998; Weaver, 2011), proposes that audiences do not choose media equally or spend equal time with media messages (Knobloch-Westerwick, Appiah, & Alter, 2008; Zillmann & Bryant, 1985). This results in specific media preference and avoidance patterns. In turn, these behavioral patterns reveal the biases that exist in media message selection. The selective exposure approach is an excellent way both to observe natural media consumption behavior and to present a more ecologically valid experimental environment, as opposed to situations of forced exposure to content.

Recent theoretical developments regarding the selective exposure paradigm (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2014) suggest that individuals select media messages to regulate their self-concept, including emotional and cognitive states. The selective exposure for self- and affect-management

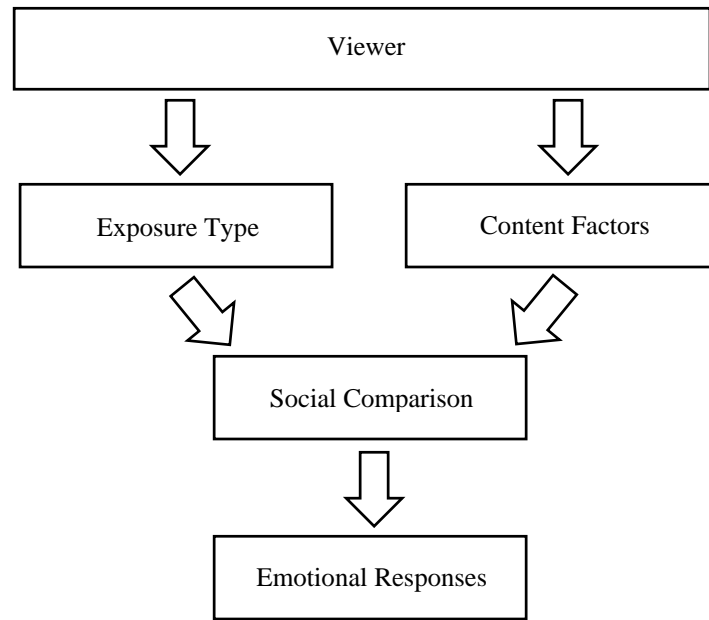
model (SESAM) postulates that motivations for media exposure result from one's working self-concept and emotional state, affecting the subsequent interpretation of media messages. This interpretation has effects on the individual's working self-concept and changes the individual, at least in the short term.

Knobloch-Westerwick (2014) tested the SESAM using a secondary data analysis of a previous study (Knobloch-Westerwick, Appiah, & Alter, 2008). The authors (2008) stated that group membership is more salient for minorities and hypothesized that minority group members, as opposed to those in the majority, would spend more time with positive messages featuring members of their ingroup. This, in turn, would result in increased self-esteem. Results demonstrated Black individuals preferred both positive and negative news stories about their ingroup more than White individuals did, but only exposure to positive messages about one's ingroup increased self-esteem. Selective exposure to negative messages about one's ingroup did not have the same effect. Furthermore, the indirect effect of race and self-esteem through selective exposure to positive news messages about one's ingroup was significant. Minority individuals motivated by desires of self-enhancement selectively exposed themselves to certain (positive) media messages in order to enhance self-esteem, as the SESAM suggests.

Aspects of the SESAM (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2014) will be tested in this dissertation to determine whether exposure to a media message selected by viewers, as opposed to a media message being assigned to viewers, has resulting effects on one's state self-esteem. As the motivations of social comparison theory suggest (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999), comparisons are driven by three motivations: self-evaluation, self-improvement, and self-enhancement. The desire for self-improvement is largely associated with upward social comparison (Suls, Martin, & Wheeler, 2002), whereas the desire for self-enhancement is generally associated with

downward social comparison (Wills, 1981). In this vein, those experiencing self-image enhancement are likely to make upward social comparisons (Spencer, Fein, & Lomore, 2001) and those experiencing self-image threat are likely to make downward social comparisons (Brickman & Bulman, 1977; Buunk & Gibbons, 2007).

Considering the above, a portrait of the viewers' media experience can be outlined that incorporates the three major factors that influence social comparisons to mediated content and their subsequent emotional responses: relevant individual difference variables among the viewers, exposure type, and factors of the content (see Figure 1). Influential individual differences among the viewers themselves include the variables outlined above (e.g., gender, media use) and overall perceptions of self, including self-image. Exposure type includes the two different exposure environments previously described: forced exposure to content and selective exposure to content. Content factors such as whether the programs are reality or scripted are the final components that influence both the types of social comparisons made when watching media entertainment and their associated emotional responses.



*Figure 1.* Model of influential factors on social comparisons in entertainment media experiences.

## **CHAPTER TWO: Study One**

### **Introduction of Study One**

Based on the literature review outlined above, two studies were developed to assess specific research questions and hypotheses. Study One was developed to examine social comparison processes in a forced exposure environment. Study Two was developed as both a replication to Study One and as an examination of the role of selective exposure on social comparison processes. Both studies assessed the presented research questions and hypotheses below.

#### **The Role of Self-Image**

As described above, different emotional responses to the program should occur as a result of being placed in a situation of self-image enhancement or threat. Accordingly, the following hypotheses and research question were presented:

H<sub>1</sub>: Individuals with an enhanced self-image, as compared to individuals with a threatened self-image, will experience stronger emotions associated with upward comparisons after viewing the program.

H<sub>2</sub>: Individuals with a threatened self-image, as compared to individuals with an enhanced self-image, will experience stronger emotions associated with downward comparisons after viewing the program.

#### **The Role of Perceived Similarity**

This dissertation overcomes previous limitations by considering individuals' perceptions of similarity to comparison targets, which has demonstrated to be an important factor in social comparison processes (Brown, Novick, Lord, & Richards, 1992; Lewis & Weaver, in press; Papiés & Nicolaije, 2012). This study uses both self-perceptions of lifestyle and social class and

also measures perceived similarity to the mediated characters post-viewing. As a result, it is possible to concretely determine the role that perceived similarity plays in social comparisons.

One way to do this is by using television programs that feature cast members and scripted characters of varying lifestyles and social classes. The television programs in this study clearly emphasized either youth lifestyles or family oriented lifestyles. Furthermore, the programs either featured high social class or low social class characters. To the author's knowledge, there have been no specific examinations of the role of individuals' social class on the resulting effects of exposure. Accordingly, the following research question was proposed:

RQ<sub>1</sub>: What influence does the participants' social class have on social comparison-related emotional responses to the programs?

In this same vein, the attributes of lifestyle and social class likely instigate assimilative or contrastive processes among the viewers based on how similar or dissimilar the characters appear to be. As a result, the following hypotheses were posed:

H<sub>3</sub>: Assimilative social comparison-related emotional responses to programs will be stronger for viewers with high perceived similarity to the characters, as compared to viewers with low perceived similarity to the characters.

H<sub>4</sub>: Contrastive social comparison-related emotional responses to programs will be stronger for viewers with low perceived similarity to the characters, as compared to viewers with high perceived similarity to the characters.

### **Differences between Reality and Scripted Programs**

I argue that reality television programming, in general, provides easier and more realistic social comparison targets than scripted television programming does. Indeed, social comparisons have been described as an efficient way to learn about oneself without investing too many

cognitive resources (Corcoran, Crusius, & Mussweiler, 2011), and scripted programs likely require greater cognitive investment in order to understand the plot, setting, and characters. Alternatively, reality television provides unpredictability through unscripted demonstrations of human behavior. Reality television cast members are likely to be perceived as more realistic comparison targets in their appearance and behavior than scripted characters, even if the scenarios are somewhat staged. Because the cast members featured in reality television programs are real people, the social comparisons made with those cast members should result in stronger emotional reactions than social comparisons with characters featured in scripted programs. Accordingly, the following hypothesis and research questions were suggested:

H5: Reality television programs will initiate stronger emotional responses associated with social comparisons than scripted television programs.

RQ2: What is the difference between reality and scripted programs on feelings of perceived similarity?

### **The Role of Individual Differences**

Assessing the role of relevant individual differences, including gender and social comparison orientation, provides insight into media consumption patterns among these individuals, including documented discrepancies regarding reality television preferences among men and women. Currently, reality television shows make up a large portion of top television programming for adult women, but the same pattern does not hold for men (Adalian, 2012). These reported differences between males and females are likely to be reflected both in their emotional responses to television programming and in their general media choice behavior. Considering that females generally demonstrate a higher social comparison orientation and tend

to show a greater preference for reality television programs than males, the following hypotheses and research question were presented:

H<sub>6</sub>: Females will report greater consumption of reality television than males.

H<sub>7</sub>: Individuals with a high social comparison orientation will report greater consumption of reality television than individuals with a low social comparison orientation.

H<sub>8</sub>: Those high in reality television consumption will report greater perceived realism of reality television programs than those low in reality television consumption.

### **The Relationship between Desirable and Undesirable Social Comparisons and Enjoyment**

Enjoyment has been defined as a pleasurable feeling as the result of an experience (Tan, 2008) and media enjoyment, in turn, has been conceptualized as an overall positive disposition toward content (Raney, 2003; Zillmann & Bryant, 1994). As previously mentioned, specific types of social comparisons have either desirable or undesirable outcomes for the perceiver, where upward assimilative and downward contrastive comparisons are desirable and upward contrastive and downward assimilative comparisons are undesirable (Smith, 2000). It is likely that the desirability or undesirability of these outcomes influence overall enjoyment of the programs. Thus, the following hypotheses were suggested:

H<sub>9</sub>: Emotional responses associated with desirable social comparisons (upward assimilative and downward contrastive) will be positively related to enjoyment of the television program.

H<sub>10</sub>: Emotional responses associated with undesirable social comparisons (upward contrastive and downward assimilative) will be negatively related to enjoyment of the television program.



## **Method**

### **Participants**

Undergraduate students ( $N = 240$ ) were recruited from several classes at Indiana University to participate in this study in exchange for extra credit. Fifty-one of those participants were excluded from the study because they reported issues with viewing the program, leaving an  $N$  of 189. The age of participants ranged from 17 to 32 ( $M = 19.35$ ) with 114 females and 74 males. One participant did not report their gender.

### **Procedure**

During recruitment, participants were told that this was a study about personality characteristics and television consumption. A link to the online experiment was posted on corresponding course websites. Once they followed the link, they were provided with an informed consent form, and filled out a questionnaire with demographic, media consumption, and personality items. Participants were then given a thought experiment about a time they outperformed or were outperformed by their peers. The goal of the thought experiment was to instigate an experience of self-image enhancement or threat.

Afterwards, participants watched an episode from a television program lasting approximately 40 minutes. This episode was randomly assigned out of 8 possible programs. The goal of the random assignment was to ensure that each episode was viewed an appropriate number of times for the purposes of data analysis. Once the viewing session was finished, they completed a questionnaire that included items addressing emotional reactions to the content. Finally, they were debriefed and thanked for their participation in the study.

## Materials

**Autobiographical Memory Task.** A written task was used to instigate an instance of self-image enhancement or threat similar to that of D'Argembeau and Van der Linden (2008), where participants had to either recount an instance where they outperformed or were outperformed by their peers. They were told to recount as much detail as possible and to mentally “re-experience” the event (see Appendix A).

**Television Programs.** A selection of eight programs was used in this study (see Table 1). Four of those programs were scripted and four were reality television programs. The reality television programs selected for this study served as examples of the ‘surveillance’ subgenre of reality television programs described above. The scripted programs were traditional sitcom and drama programs common to television schedules. Each episode selected was the second episode of the first season. For programs whose running length was near 20 minutes, the second and third episode of the first season was edited together as one episode to equal the running time of programs whose length neared 40 minutes. These episodes were selected for two reasons, first, several of the programs only had one season on air and second, the pilot episode is often devoted to setting up characters and settings instead of representing the general plot narrative. The episodes from these programs either specifically featured youth lifestyles or family-focused lifestyles and either represented high social class individuals or low social class individuals. Participants were assigned to view a program at random.

Table 1

*Television Programs by Condition*

<u>Title (Episode)</u>	<u>Type</u>	<u>Age/Status</u>	<u>Social class</u>
Gossip Girl (2)	Scripted	Youth-focused	High
I Just Want My Pants Back (2 & 3)	Scripted	Youth-focused	Low
Trophy Wife (2 & 3)	Scripted	Family-focused	High
Raising Hope (2 & 3)	Scripted	Family-focused	Low
NYC Prep (2)	Reality	Youth-focused	High
Party Down South (2)	Reality	Youth-focused	Low
Chrisley Knows Best (2 & 3)	Reality	Family-focused	High
Here Comes Honey Boo (2 & 3)	Reality	Family-focused	Low

**Measures**

**Perceived Similarity.** Perceived similarity to the characters was assessed after viewing by asking the participants how similar they felt to the cast members/characters featured in the program (Papies & Nicolaije, 2012, see Appendix B) and were answered using 7-point Likert type scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much).

**Perceived Lifestyle.** A measure of the participants' perceived lifestyle was created by asking them how strongly they identified with two particular social groups, one being 'young and single,' the other as 'family-oriented' (See Appendix C). Items were assessed using 5-point Likert scales ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much).

**Viewer Social Class.** The social class of the participants was measured using an item asking participants to assess class standing, adapted from Bullock and Limbert (2003, see Appendix D). Participants were asked to identify their current status from a list of traditional class categories that included: poor, working poor, working class, lower middle class, middle class, upper middle class, and upper class. Ratings of poor, working poor, and working class

were consolidated to a ranking of 'lower class,' and ratings of lower middle class, middle class, and upper middle class were consolidated to a ranking of 'middle class.' Upper class remained a standalone category.

**Perceived Realism.** In order to gauge perceived realism of the television programs, a 21-item measure adapted from Cho, Shen, and Wilson's (2014) perceived realism scale was used (see Appendix E) to assess perceived realism of both reality television and scripted television. This was rated on a 7-point Likert type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree), and ratings were averaged across the 21 items. Chronbach's alpha for reality programs was .90 and Chronbach's alpha for scripted programs was .87. Sample reality television items included: "Reality television programs show things that could possibly happen in real life," and "Reality television programs portray events that happen to a lot of people." The scripted television items included: "Scripted television programs show things that could possibly happen in real life," and "Scripted television programs portray events that happen to a lot of people."

**Social Comparison Orientation.** The general propensity for comparing oneself to others was measured using the 11-item Iowa-Netherlands Social Comparison Scale, or INCOM (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999, see Appendix F). Participants responded using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (I disagree strongly) and 5 (I agree strongly). Items were collapsed and averaged to determine overall scores. Individuals with higher rankings demonstrate a stronger social comparison orientation (Chronbach's  $\alpha = .74$ ). Sample items included: "I often compare myself with others with respect to what I have accomplished in life" and "I always like to know what others in a similar situation would do."

**Media Use.** Two media use indices were created to assess daily viewing of reality and scripted programs (see Appendix G). The reality index asked participants to rate their viewing of

this type of television for both weekdays and weekends (similar to Martins & Jensen, 2014; Nabi, 2009). Participants indicated the number of hours they watch scripted programs during four time periods – 6 a.m. to noon, noon to 6 p.m., 6 p.m. to midnight, and midnight to 6 a.m. A scripted index was developed in the same manner. The weekday totals were weighted by a factor of 5 and the weekend totals were weighted by a factor of 2 for both the reality and scripted indices. This created an average of reality television viewed per day and an average of scripted television viewed per day.

**State Self-Esteem.** The State Self-Esteem Scale (SSES; Heatherton & Polivy, 2001) serves to measure how an individual feels about themselves in that particular moment, independent of their global self-esteem (see Appendix H). It is a commonly used measure that is sensitive to experimental manipulations and is intended to gauge temporary fluctuations in self-evaluation (Heatherton & Wyland, 2003). It includes 20 items on a 5-point Likert scale that range from 1 (not at all) and 5 (extremely). It contains elements related to academic performance, social evaluation, and appearance. Individual ratings were averaged and collapsed across all 20 items. Sample items included: “I feel confident about my abilities” and “I feel good about myself.” Chronbach’s alpha for this measure after viewing the program was .92.

**Emotional Responses.** Emotional responses to the television program were measured in two ways (see Appendix I). The first measure was based on Smith’s (2000) model of social comparison-based emotions. Upward assimilative emotions included: admiration, inspiration, and optimism (Chronbach’s  $\alpha = .90$ ). Downward contrastive emotions included: pride, *Schadenfreude*, contempt, and scorn (Chronbach’s  $\alpha = .69$ ). Upward contrastive emotions included: depression, shame, envy, and resentment (Chronbach’s  $\alpha = .74$ ). Downward assimilative emotions included: pity, sympathy, fear, and worry (Chronbach’s  $\alpha = .76$ ). Each

emotion was measured on a 5-point Likert scale with responses ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much) and was prefaced with the following statement: “Please indicate how much you felt the following emotions after watching the television program.”

The second measure of emotional responses aimed to assess a variety of other discrete emotional states that may occur from engaging in social comparisons with mediated characters and was similar to one used in previous research (Nabi & Keblusek, 2014). This 18-item scale included the hedonic tone/valence portion of the mood adjective checklist (Matthews, Jones, & Chamberlain, 1990) and asked participants about their emotional responses to the program using items answered on a 5-point Likert scale. Items were rated as 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) and were prefaced with the following statement: “Please indicate how much you agree with the following statement: This television program made me feel...” There were four items from the mood adjective checklist that assessed positive tone/valence: cheerful, content, satisfied, and happy (Chronbach’s  $\alpha = .94$ ). The four items from the mood adjective checklist that assessed negative tone/valence included: dissatisfied, sad, sorry, and depressed (Chronbach’s  $\alpha = .77$ ). Additional discrete emotion items relevant to social comparisons included: envious, jealous, hopeful, inspired, upset, disappointed, anxious, disgusted, embarrassed, and angry.

**Enjoyment.** Enjoyment was measured using six items developed by Oliver and Bartsch (2010) and adapted by Hall and Zwarun (2012) that assessed the fun and meaningfulness of media entertainment experiences (see Appendix J). Three scale items for each factor were answered using 7-point Likert type scales, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Sample items included: “It was fun for me to watch this program,” and “I found this program to be very meaningful.” Individual ratings were averaged across the two factors.

Chronbach's alpha for the fun and entertainment of the programs was .97. Chronbach's alpha for appreciation and meaningfulness of the programs was .92.

## Results

### The Role of Self-Image

H<sub>1</sub> predicted that individuals with an enhanced self-image, as compared to those with a threatened self-image would experience stronger emotions associated with upward social comparisons after viewing the television program. Correspondingly, H<sub>2</sub> predicted that individuals with a threatened self-image, as compared to individuals with an enhanced self-image, would experience stronger emotions associated with downward social comparisons after viewing the television program. Unfortunately, the self-image manipulation failed to create significant differences in the self-image enhancement condition in the expected direction. Those in the enhancement condition reported a non-significant change in state self-esteem from time one ( $M = 3.36, SD = .54$ ) to time two ( $M = 3.37, SD = .54$ ),  $t(96) = -.52, p = .60$ . Those in the threat condition reported a significant change in state self-esteem from time one ( $M = 3.41, SD = .64$ ) to time two ( $M = 3.34, SD = .56$ ),  $t(91) = 3.12, p = .002$ . However, including self-image as an independent factor in a factorial analysis of variance (ANOVA) that had six between-subjects factors: self-image (threat, enhancement), perceived realism of television (low, high), program social class (low, high), program lifestyle (young and single, older and family oriented), program type (reality, scripted), and perceived similarity to the characters (low, high) did not produce consistent significant effects on upward comparison emotions (see Tables 2 and 3) or downward comparison emotions (see Tables 4 and 5).

It is likely that the self-image manipulation did not work because the thought experiment, which asked people to think about a time in which they outperformed or were outperformed by

their peers, may have been too vague of a manipulation to successfully instigate a situation of self-image enhancement or threat. Other self-image manipulations, such as providing false feedback on a performance task, may be more direct in their manipulation of state self-esteem. Accordingly, self-image was not included as a between-subjects factor in subsequent analyses.

Table 2

*ANOVA Summary for Self-Image (Image), Perceived Realism (Real), Program Social Class (Class), Program Lifestyle (Life), Program Type (Type), and Perceived Similarity (Sim) on Upward Assimilative Emotions*

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	$\eta^2$	<i>p</i>
Image	1	.34	.001	.56
Image x Real	1	6.38	.02	.01
Image x Class	1	.80	.003	.37
Image x Life	1	.45	.001	.50
Image x Type	1	.002	< .001	.96
Image x Sim	1	.26	< .001	.61
Image x Real x Class	1	.002	< .001	.96
Image x Real x Life	1	2.50	.008	.12
Image x Real x Type	1	.30	< .001	.59
Image x Real x Sim	1	.50	.002	.48
Image x Class x Life	1	.30	< .001	.59
Image x Class x Type	1	.17	< .001	.68
Image x Class x Sim	1	.10	< .001	.75
Image x Life x Type	1	.04	< .001	.85
Image x Life x Sim	1	.62	.002	.43
Image x Type x Sim	1	1.27	.004	.26
Error	130			

*Note.* *N* = 189.



Table 3

*ANOVA Summary for Self-Image (Image), Perceived Realism (Real), Program Social Class (Class), Program Lifestyle (Life), Program Type (Type), and Perceived Similarity (Sim) on Upward Contrastive Emotions*

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	$\eta^2$	<i>p</i>
Image	1	.26	.001	.61
Image x Real	1	6.08	.03	.02
Image x Class	1	.22	.001	.64
Image x Life	1	.42	.002	.52
Image x Type	1	.02	< .001	.90
Image x Sim	1	.07	< .001	.80
Image x Real x Class	1	.36	< .001	.55
Image x Real x Life	1	1.18	.007	.28
Image x Real x Type	1	.48	.003	.49
Image x Real x Sim	1	.69	.004	.41
Image x Class x Life	1	1.67	.009	.20
Image x Class x Type	1	.41	.002	.53
Image x Class x Sim	1	2.61	.01	.11
Image x Life x Type	1	.03	< .001	.86
Image x Life x Sim	1	1.39	.008	.24
Image x Type x Sim	1	.07	< .001	.79
Error	130			

*Note.*  $N = 189$ .

Table 4

*ANOVA Summary for Self-Image (Image), Perceived Realism (Real), Program Social Class (Class), Program Lifestyle (Life), Program Type (Type), and Perceived Similarity (Sim) on Downward Assimilative Emotions*

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	$\eta^2$	<i>p</i>
Image	1	.02	< .001	.90
Image x Real	1	.79	.004	.38
Image x Class	1	2.39	.01	.13
Image x Life	1	.01	< .001	.93
Image x Type	1	.16	< .001	.69
Image x Sim	1	.08	< .001	.78
Image x Real x Class	1	.001	< .001	.93
Image x Real x Life	1	.02	< .001	.89
Image x Real x Type	1	.66	.003	.42
Image x Real x Sim	1	.62	.002	.43
Image x Class x Life	1	.80	.003	.37
Image x Class x Type	1	.09	.002	.77
Image x Class x Sim	1	.38	< .001	.54
Image x Life x Type	1	.50	< .001	.48
Image x Life x Sim	1	1.15	.003	.29
Image x Type x Sim	1	.62	.003	.43
Error	130			

*Note.* *N* = 189.

Table 5

*ANOVA Summary for Self-Image (Image), Perceived Realism (Real), Program Social Class (Class), Program Lifestyle (Life), Program Type (Type), and Perceived Similarity (Sim) on Downward Contrastive Emotions*

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	$\eta^2$	<i>p</i>
Image	1	.76	.004	.39
Image x Real	1	1.41	.01	.24
Image x Class	1	5.14	.03	.03
Image x Life	1	.10	< .001	.75
Image x Type	1	1.04	.01	.31
Image x Sim	1	.36	.002	.55
Image x Real x Class	1	.01	< .001	.94
Image x Real x Life	1	.32	.002	.57
Image x Real x Type	1	.71	.004	.40
Image x Real x Sim	1	.10	< .001	.76
Image x Class x Life	1	.004	< .001	.95
Image x Class x Type	1	.21	.01	.65
Image x Class x Sim	1	1.30	.01	.26
Image x Life x Type	1	.28	.001	.60
Image x Life x Sim	1	1.15	.01	.29
Image x Type x Sim	1	.62	.01	.43
Error	130			

*Note.*  $N = 189$ .

### The Role of Viewer Social Class

RQ<sub>1</sub> asked what influence the participants' social class had on social comparison-related emotional responses to the programs. Including viewer social class (lower, middle, upper) as an independent factor in the ANOVA (replacing self-image) did not produce consistent significant effects on upward comparison emotions (see Tables 6 and 7) or downward comparison emotions (see Tables 8 and 9), suggesting that the influence of viewer social class on social comparison-related emotional responses was limited. As a result, the role of viewer social class was not included as a between-subjects factor in the analyses that follow.

Table 6

*ANOVA Summary for Viewer Social Class (ViewClass), Perceived Realism (Real), Program Social Class (Class), Program Lifestyle (Life), Program Type (Type), and Perceived Similarity (Sim) on Upward Assimilative Emotions*

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	$\eta^2$	<i>p</i>
ViewClass	1	3.27	.02	.04
ViewClass x Real	2	.63	.004	.53
ViewClass x Class	2	.82	.01	.44
ViewClass x Life	1	1.25	.004	.27
ViewClass x Type	2	.47	.01	.63
ViewClass x Sim	2	3.39	.02	.04
ViewClass x Real x Class	0	.	.	.
ViewClass x Real x Life	1	< .001	< .001	.99
ViewClass x Real x Type	1	.78	.002	.38
ViewClass x Real x Sim	0	.	.	.
ViewClass x Class x Life	1	.02	< .001	.88
ViewClass x Class x Type	0	.	.	.
ViewClass x Class x Sim	0	.	.	.
ViewClass x Life x Type	0	.	.	.
ViewClass x Life x Sim	1	2.68	.01	.10
ViewClass x Type x Sim	0	.	.	.
Error	133			

*Note.*  $N = 189$ . . = Could not be calculated.

Table 7

*ANOVA Summary for Viewer Social Class (ViewClass), Perceived Realism (Real), Program Social Class (Class), Program Lifestyle (Life), Program Type (Type), and Perceived Similarity (Sim) on Upward Contrastive Emotions*

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	$\eta^2$	<i>p</i>
ViewClass	1	.33	.003	.72
ViewClass x Real	2	3.60	.03	.03
ViewClass x Class	2	.48	.01	.62
ViewClass x Life	1	.08	< .001	.78
ViewClass x Type	2	.53	.01	.59
ViewClass x Sim	2	.59	.01	.56
ViewClass x Real x Class	0	.	.	.
ViewClass x Real x Life	1	.90	.004	.34
ViewClass x Real x Type	1	.52	.003	.47
ViewClass x Real x Sim	0	.	.	.
ViewClass x Class x Life	1	2.17	< .001	.14
ViewClass x Class x Type	0	.	.	.
ViewClass x Class x Sim	0	.	.	.
ViewClass x Life x Type	0	.	.	.
ViewClass x Life x Sim	1	1.60	.01	.21
ViewClass x Type x Sim	0	.	.	.
Error	133			

*Note.*  $N = 189$ . . = Could not be calculated.

Table 8

*ANOVA Summary for Viewer Social Class (ViewClass), Perceived Realism (Real), Program Social Class (Class), Program Lifestyle (Life), Program Type (Type), and Perceived Similarity (Sim) on Downward Assimilative Emotions*

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	$\eta^2$	<i>p</i>
ViewClass	1	1.05	.01	.35
ViewClass x Real	2	3.70	.03	.03
ViewClass x Class	2	2.17	.02	.12
ViewClass x Life	1	.38	.002	.54
ViewClass x Type	2	.10	< .001	.91
ViewClass x Sim	2	.88	.01	.42
ViewClass x Real x Class	0	.	.	.
ViewClass x Real x Life	1	.87	.004	.35
ViewClass x Real x Type	1	.02	< .001	.89
ViewClass x Real x Sim	0	.	.	.
ViewClass x Class x Life	1	.27	.001	.60
ViewClass x Class x Type	0	.	.	.
ViewClass x Class x Sim	0	.	.	.
ViewClass x Life x Type	0	.	.	.
ViewClass x Life x Sim	1	.55	.003	.46
ViewClass x Type x Sim	0	.	.	.
Error	133			

*Note.*  $N = 189$ . . = Could not be calculated.

Table 9

*ANOVA Summary for Viewer Social Class (ViewClass), Perceived Realism (Real), Program Social Class (Class), Program Lifestyle (Life), Program Type (Type), and Perceived Similarity (Sim) on Downward Contrastive Emotions*

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	$\eta^2$	<i>p</i>
ViewClass	1	.93	.01	.49
ViewClass x Real	2	2.71	.02	.07
ViewClass x Class	2	1.37	.01	.26
ViewClass x Life	1	1.24	.01	.27
ViewClass x Type	2	.48	.01	.62
ViewClass x Sim	2	.10	.002	.91
ViewClass x Real x Class	0	.	.	.
ViewClass x Real x Life	1	1.70	.01	.20
ViewClass x Real x Type	1	.002	< .001	.96
ViewClass x Real x Sim	0	.	.	.
ViewClass x Class x Life	1	.82	.004	.37
ViewClass x Class x Type	0	.	.	.
ViewClass x Class x Sim	0	.	.	.
ViewClass x Life x Type	0	.	.	.
ViewClass x Life x Sim	1	2.69	.01	.10
ViewClass x Type x Sim	0	.	.	.
Error	133			

*Note.* *N* = 189. . = Could not be calculated.

### **Smith's Framework of Social Comparison-Related Emotional Responses**

To assess H<sub>3</sub>, H<sub>4</sub>, and H<sub>5</sub>, data analysis was conducted on social comparison-related emotional responses using two frameworks. The first was based on Smith's (2000) broad groupings of assimilative and contrastive emotional responses and then specifically examined Smith's four categories: upward assimilative (admiration, inspiration, optimism), upward contrastive (depression, shame, envy, resentment), downward assimilative (pity, fear, worry, sympathy), and downward contrastive (contempt, scorn, Schadenfreude, pride). The second was based on Nabi and Keblusek's (2014) research on discrete emotions in social comparison processes to reality television cast members. This 18-item measure included the hedonic tone/valence portions of the mood adjective checklist (Matthews, Jones, & Chamberlain, 1990)

and several other social comparison-related emotional responses. The positive hedonic tone/valence items included: cheerful, content, satisfied, and happy (Chronbach's  $\alpha = .94$ ). The negative hedonic tone/valence items included: dissatisfied, sad, sorry, and depressed (Chronbach's  $\alpha = .77$ ). Additional social comparison-related discrete emotions included: jealous, hopeful, upset, disappointed, anxious, disgusted, embarrassed, and angry. Two of the emotional responses used by Nabi and Keblusek overlapped with Smith's framework, envy and inspiration.

For the purposes of analysis, the ANOVA tested the emotional responses using Smith's (2000) framework first, followed by the hedonic tone/valence portions of the mood adjective checklist (Matthews, Jones, & Chamberlain, 1990), and finally by the discrete emotions previously researched by Nabi and Keblusek (2014). Measures of enjoyment (Hall & Zwarun, 2012; Oliver & Bartsch, 2010) assessed both fun (3-items, Chronbach's  $\alpha = .97$ ) and meaningfulness (3-items, Chronbach's  $\alpha = .92$ ) of the programs. Thus, the organization of the analyses are presented below in the following order: assimilative, contrastive, upward assimilative, upward contrastive, downward assimilative, downward contrastive, hedonic positive, hedonic negative, discrete emotions, and enjoyment (fun and meaningfulness). The presentation of the analyses based on these groupings was employed in favor of conceptual clarity over strength of individual reliabilities of the groupings outlined above (i.e., reports of Chronbach's alphas).

As outlined above, self-image and viewer social class were not included as predictors in the analyses below. The final testing ANOVA had five between-subjects factors: perceived realism of television (low, high), program social class (low, high), program lifestyle (young and single, older and family oriented), program type (reality, scripted), and perceived similarity to the characters (low, high). This ANOVA was structured not only for assessment of H<sub>3</sub>, H<sub>4</sub>, and



H<sub>5</sub>, but to also determine the role of relevant individual differences (perceived realism, perceived similarity) and program factors (program social class, program lifestyle, program type) on all emotional responses to the content. In the ANOVAs below, Fisher's least significant difference (LSD) post-hoc tests ( $p < .05$ ) were conducted to determine mean differences for significant interactions. Means reported below with different subscripts were significantly different at  $p < .05$ .

**Assimilative.** H<sub>3</sub> posited that assimilative social comparison-related emotional responses would be stronger for viewers with high perceived similarity to the characters, as compared to viewers with low perceived similarity to the characters. Per Smith (2000), the emotions of inspiration, optimism, admiration, pity, fear, worry, and sympathy were combined to form assimilative emotions (Chronbach's  $\alpha = .79$ ). The ANOVA demonstrated a significant main effect of perceived similarity, where assimilative social comparison-related emotional responses were stronger for those who had high perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 2.32, SD = .74$ ) as compared to those who had low perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 1.81, SD = .73$ );  $F(1, 158) = 9.69, p = .002, \eta^2 = .04$ . Considering this, H<sub>3</sub> was supported. For a summary of all effects concerning perceived similarity and assimilative emotions, see Table 10.

Table 10

ANOVA Summary for Perceived Similarity (Sim), Perceived Realism (Real), Program Social Class (Class), Program Lifestyle (Life), and Program Type (Type) on Assimilative Emotions

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	$\eta^2$	<i>p</i>
Sim	1	9.69	.04	.002
Sim x Real	1	2.50	.01	.12
Sim x Class	1	.93	.004	.34
Sim x Life	1	1.48	.01	.23
Sim x Type	1	.54	.002	.46
Sim x Real x Class	1	.01	< .001	.92
Sim x Real x Life	1	3.21	.01	.08
Sim x Real x Type	1	1.12	.004	.29
Sim x Class x Life	1	.25	< .001	.62
Sim x Class x Type	1	2.30	.01	.13
Sim x Life x Type	1	.92	.003	.34
Error	158			

Note. *N* = 189.

**Contrastive.** H<sub>4</sub> suggested that contrastive social comparison-related emotional responses to programs would be stronger for viewers with low perceived similarity to the characters as compared to viewers with high perceived similarity to the characters. Per Smith (2000), the emotions of depression, shame, envy, resentment, contempt, scorn, *Schadenfreude*, and pride were combined to form contrastive emotions (Chronbach's  $\alpha = .82$ ). The ANOVA again demonstrated a significant main effect of perceived similarity, though not in the expected direction. Contrastive social comparison-related emotional responses were stronger for those who had high perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 2.09$ ,  $SD = .71$ ) as compared to those who had low perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 1.79$ ,  $SD = .73$ );  $F(1, 158) = 4.29$ ,  $p = .04$ ,  $\eta^2 = .02$ . As a result, H<sub>4</sub> was not supported. Alternatively, this finding supported the notion that perceived similarity to the featured cast members was instrumental in instigating stronger emotional responses to the content in general, no matter whether those emotions were

assimilative or contrastive in nature. For a summary of all effects concerning perceived similarity and contrastive emotions, see Table 11.

Table 11

ANOVA Summary for Perceived Similarity (Sim), Perceived Realism (Real), Program Social Class (Class), Program Lifestyle (Life), and Program Type (Type) on Contrastive Emotions

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	$\eta^2$	<i>p</i>
Sim	1	4.29	.02	.04
Sim x Real	1	.44	.002	.51
Sim x Class	1	.58	.003	.45
Sim x Life	1	.64	.003	.43
Sim x Type	1	.53	.003	.47
Sim x Real x Class	1	.55	.003	.46
Sim x Real x Life	1	.22	.001	.64
Sim x Real x Type	1	1.33	.01	.25
Sim x Class x Life	1	.003	< .001	.96
Sim x Class x Type	1	.88	.004	.35
Sim x Life x Type	1	1.09	.005	.30
Error	158			

Note. *N* = 189.

**Upward Assimilative.** The ANOVA compared the differences in upward assimilative emotional responses (admiration, inspiration, optimism) based on the predictor variables. Multiple significant main effects emerged. First, individuals with high perceived realism of television ( $M = 2.86, SD = 1.12$ ) experienced significantly stronger upward assimilative emotions than those with low perceived realism of television ( $M = 1.81, SD = .89$ );  $F(1, 158) = 8.02, p = .005, \eta^2 = .03$ . Those who watched programs featuring older, family focused lifestyles ( $M = 2.21, SD = 1.04$ ) experienced significantly stronger upward assimilative emotions than those who watched programs featuring young and single lifestyles ( $M = 1.86, SD = 1.00$ );  $F(1, 158) = 7.62, p = .006, \eta^2 = .03$ . Individuals experienced significantly stronger upward assimilative emotions after watching scripted programs ( $M = 2.41, SD = 1.05$ ) as compared to reality programs ( $M = 1.65, SD = .87$ );  $F(1, 158) = 9.63, p = .002, \eta^2 = .03$ . There was also a

significant main effect for perceived similarity, where those high in perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 2.62, SD = .95$ ) experienced stronger upward assimilative emotions than those low in perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 1.62, SD = .88$ );  $F(1, 158) = 26.75, p < .001, \eta^2 = .09$ .

There were no significant interaction effects for upward assimilative emotional responses (see Table 12 for a summary). In sum, this suggests that viewers engaged in upward social comparisons with mediated characters (and felt they could be like them) when perceived realism was high, when they watched family oriented programs, when they watched scripted programs, and when they felt similar to the characters. This analysis provided evidence that multiple factors can instigate upward social comparisons. Individual differences of perceived realism and perceived similarity, feeling the content to be real, and feeling similar to those on the screen worked to initiate upward comparisons. Regarding program factors, the findings here suggest that audiences engaged in upward social comparisons with characters of scripted programs as compared to cast members of reality programs. This could be because scripted representations offer more sanitized versions of human interaction and filter out the kinds of behaviors regularly portrayed on reality programs (e.g., real life observations of people eating, sleeping, and engaging in day-to-day activities). Representations of family oriented characters also instigated upward social comparisons. It is possible that the family oriented programs featured more positive character representations than the youth oriented programs did, which would result in upward social comparisons with the mediated characters.

Table 12

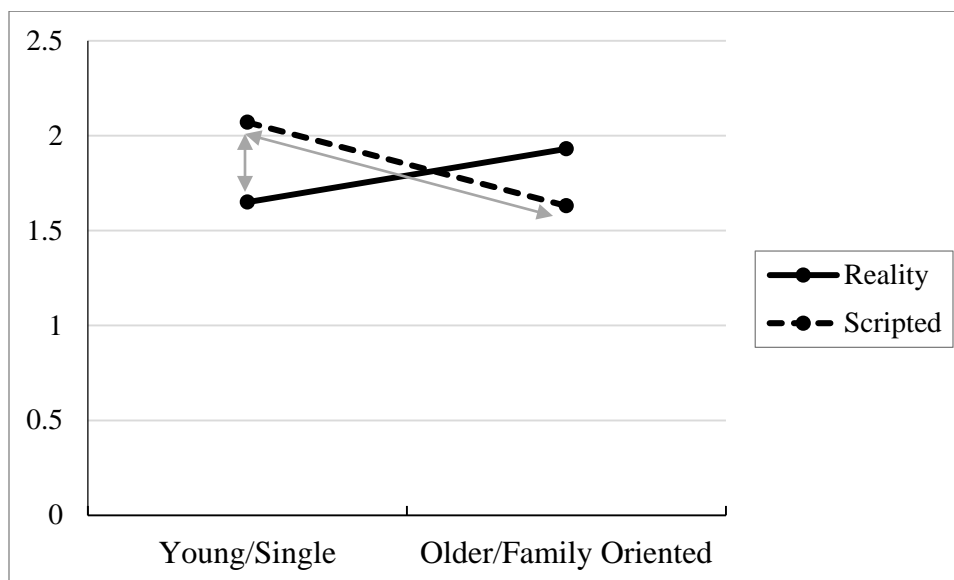
*ANOVA Summary for Perceived Realism (Real), Program Social Class (Class), Program Lifestyle (Life), Program Type (Type), and Perceived Similarity (Sim) on Upward Assimilative Emotions*

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	$\eta^2$	<i>p</i>
Real	1	8.02	.03	.005
Class	1	.21	< .001	.65
Life	1	7.62	.03	.006
Type	1	9.63	.03	.002
Sim	1	26.75	.09	< .001
Real x Class	1	.80	.003	.37
Real x Life	1	.68	.002	.41
Real x Type	1	2.10	.01	.15
Real x Sim	1	.68	.003	.41
Class x Life	1	2.31	.01	.13
Class x Type	1	.15	< .001	.70
Class x Sim	1	.85	.003	.36
Life x Type	1	1.16	.004	.28
Life x Sim	1	1.16	.004	.28
Type x Sim	1	1.82	.01	.18
Real x Class x Life	1	3.07	.01	.08
Real x Class x Type	1	.12	< .001	.73
Real x Class x Sim	1	.06	< .001	.80
Real x Life x Type	1	.73	.002	.39
Real x Life x Sim	1	2.26	.01	.14
Real x Type x Sim	1	1.59	.01	.21
Class x Life x Type	1	2.71	.01	.10
Class x Life x Sim	1	< .001	< .001	.99
Class x Type x Sim	1	.92	.003	.34
Life x Type x Sim	1	.82	.003	.37
Error	158			

Note. *N* = 189.

**Upward Contrastive.** The ANOVA then tested upward contrastive emotional responses (depression, shame, envy, resentment) based on the predictor variables. There were no significant main effects (see Table 13 for a summary), but there was a significant two-way interaction involving program lifestyle and program type  $F(1, 158) = 6.12, p = .01, \eta^2 = .03$ , where those who watched scripted programs featuring young and single characters ( $M = 2.07_b$ ,

95% CI = [1.84, 2.31]) experienced stronger upward contrastive emotional responses than those who watched a reality program featuring young and single cast members ( $M = 1.65_a$ , 95% CI = [1.37, 1.92]), and those who watched a scripted program featuring older and family oriented characters ( $M = 1.63_a$ , 95% CI = [1.39, 1.88]). There was no significant difference among those who watched a reality program featuring older, family oriented cast members ( $M = 1.93_{ab}$ , 95% CI = [1.59, 2.28]) and the other groups. See Figure 2 for the interaction.



*Figure 2.* Interaction between program lifestyle and program type on upward contrastive emotional responses after watching the program.

It is of importance that scripted programs featuring young and single characters initiated stronger upward contrastive emotional responses (e.g., envy, resentment) in a way that scripted programs featuring family oriented characters and reality programs featuring young and single cast members did not. This suggests that the fictional nature of these programs, in addition to

prominently featuring characters of a young and single lifestyle, initiated upward contrastive social comparisons, where viewers looked up to these characters but felt they could not be like them. Of note, scripted programs and family oriented characters elicited the strongest upward assimilative emotional responses, in that viewers looked up to those characters and thought they could be like them. Here, it is clear that although viewers looked up to scripted, young and single characters, they felt contrastive emotional responses, i.e., they were envious of the characters but saw themselves as different. Again, this suggests that the character representations in youth oriented programs were less positive than ones that were portrayed in family oriented programs. The family oriented programs presented characterizations that were optimistic, while the youth oriented programs presented characterizations that were more depressing.

Table 13

*ANOVA Summary for Perceived Realism (Real), Program Social Class (Class), Program Lifestyle (Life), Program Type (Type), and Perceived Similarity (Sim) on Upward Contrastive Emotions*

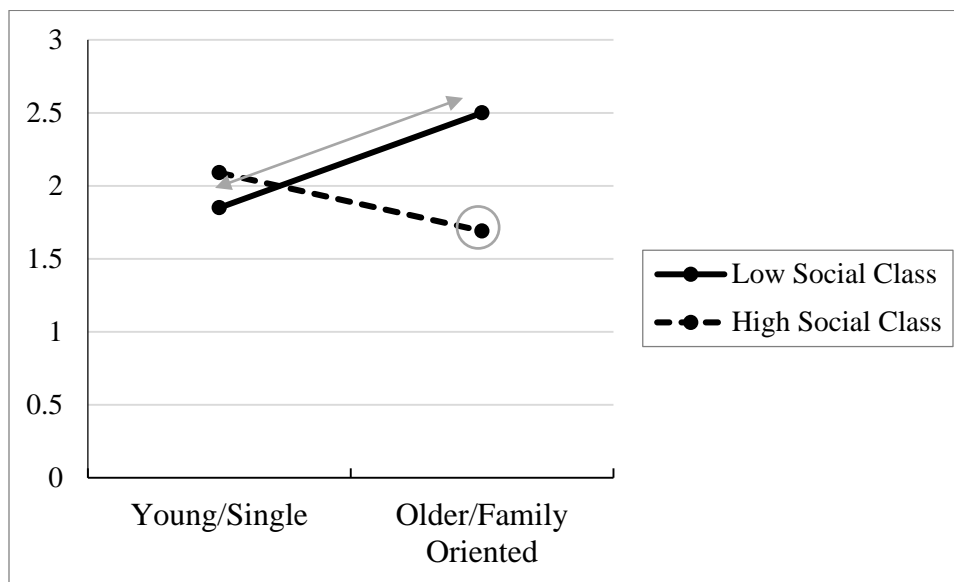
Source	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	$\eta^2$	<i>p</i>
Real	1	.88	.004	.35
Class	1	.10	< .001	.76
Life	1	.52	.003	.47
Type	1	.12	< .001	.73
Sim	1	1.50	.01	.22
Real x Class	1	3.47	.02	.06
Real x Life	1	1.52	.01	.22
Real x Type	1	.44	.002	.51
Real x Sim	1	.48	.002	.49
Class x Life	1	2.22	.01	.14
Class x Type	1	.45	.002	.50
Class x Sim	1	.62	.003	.43
Life x Type	1	6.12	.03	.01
Life x Sim	1	.28	.001	.60
Type x Sim	1	.02	< .001	.90
Real x Class x Life	1	.76	.004	.39
Real x Class x Type	1	.01	< .001	.93
Real x Class x Sim	1	.60	.003	.44
Real x Life x Type	1	.84	.004	.36
Real x Life x Sim	1	1.01	.01	.32
Real x Type x Sim	1	3.20	.02	.08
Class x Life x Type	1	.49	.003	.49
Class x Life x Sim	1	.06	< .001	.82
Class x Type x Sim	1	.08	< .001	.78
Life x Type x Sim	1	.92	.01	.34
Error	158			

Note. *N* = 189.

**Downward Assimilative.** The ANOVA then tested the emotional responses related to downward assimilative social comparisons to mediated characters (pity, fear, worry, sympathy). There was a main effect of perceived realism,  $F(1, 158) = 6.33, p = .01, \eta^2 = .04$ , where those with greater perceived realism of television ( $M = 2.20, SD = .95$ ) experienced stronger downward assimilative emotions than those with low perceived realism of television ( $M = 1.81,$



$SD = .77$ ). There was also a significant two-way interaction between program lifestyle and program social class, where programs with low social class, family oriented characters ( $M = 2.50_c$ , 95% CI = [2.11, 2.88]) instigated stronger downward assimilative emotional responses than programs featuring high social class, young and single characters ( $M = 2.09_b$ , 95% CI = [1.80, 2.38]), and low social class, young and single characters ( $M = 1.85_b$ , 95% CI = [1.60, 2.09]). High social class, family oriented characters ( $M = 1.69_a$ , 95% CI = [1.43, 1.95]) instigated the weakest downward assimilative emotional responses. See Figure 3 for the interaction. For a summary of effects, see Table 14.



*Figure 3.* Interaction between program lifestyle and program social class on downward assimilative emotional responses after watching the program.

Here, participants with high perceived realism of television and participants who viewed programs featuring low social class, family oriented characters experienced the strongest

downward assimilative emotions to the content. This suggests that viewers engaged in downward social comparisons with low social class, family oriented characters. The viewers deemed the low social class, family oriented characters to be worse off than them and as a result, experienced feelings like sympathy and pity for those characters. It is reasonable that viewers would make downward comparisons based on social class and it is possible that generally positive portrayals of family oriented characters were more successful in instigating these strong downward assimilative responses as compared to portrayals of youth oriented characters. As outlined above, family oriented programs elicited strong upward assimilative emotional responses as well, suggesting that family oriented characters were effective in getting viewers to feel they could be like them, no matter the direction of the comparison.

Table 14

*ANOVA Summary for Perceived Realism (Real), Program Social Class (Class), Program Lifestyle (Life), Program Type (Type), and Perceived Similarity (Sim) on Downward Assimilative Emotions*

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	$\eta^2$	<i>p</i>
Real	1	6.33	.03	.01
Class	1	3.42	.02	.07
Life	1	.60	.003	.44
Type	1	1.30	.01	.26
Sim	1	.03	< .001	.87
Real x Class	1	1.29	.01	.26
Real x Life	1	< .001	< .001	.99
Real x Type	1	2.16	.01	.14
Real x Sim	1	2.71	.01	.10
Class x Life	1	11.66	.06	.001
Class x Type	1	1.78	.01	.19
Class x Sim	1	.36	.002	.55
Life x Type	1	1.06	.01	.31
Life x Sim	1	.71	.003	.40
Type x Sim	1	.03	< .001	.87
Real x Class x Life	1	.04	< .001	.84
Real x Class x Type	1	.17	< .001	.68
Real x Class x Sim	1	.01	< .001	.93
Real x Life x Type	1	.43	.002	.51
Real x Life x Sim	1	1.74	.008	.19
Real x Type x Sim	1	.18	< .001	.68
Class x Life x Type	1	.08	< .001	.78
Class x Life x Sim	1	.57	.003	.45
Class x Type x Sim	1	2.00	.01	.16
Life x Type x Sim	1	.37	.002	.55
Error	158			

Note. *N* = 189.

**Downward Contrastive.** The ANOVA was tested on downward contrastive emotional responses (contempt, scorn, *Schadenfreude*, pride), where viewers engaged in downward contrastive social comparisons with the characters. There was a main effect of perceived realism,  $F(1, 158) = 11.66, p = .001, \eta^2 = .06$ , where those with greater perceived realism of television ( $M = 2.24, SD = .89$ ) experienced stronger downward contrastive emotional responses than those

with low perceived realism of television ( $M = 1.80, SD = .67$ ). There was also a main effect of perceived similarity,  $F(1, 158) = 6.53, p = .01, \eta^2 = .03$ , where those with high perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 2.29, SD = .82$ ) experienced stronger downward contrastive emotions than those with low perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 1.84, SD = .78$ ).

There was also a significant interaction for program lifestyle and program social class,  $F(1, 158) = 4.10, p = .04, \eta^2 = .02$ . Individuals who viewed programs featuring low social class, family oriented programs ( $M = 2.42_{\text{b}}, 95\% \text{ CI} = [2.07, 2.77]$ ) experienced stronger downward contrastive emotions than those who viewed programs featuring low social class young and single characters ( $M = 1.96_{\text{a}}, 95\% \text{ CI} = [1.74, 2.19]$ ). There were no significant differences among those who viewed programs featuring high social class young and single characters ( $M = 2.08_{\text{ab}}, 95\% \text{ CI} = [1.82, 2.35]$ ) and programs featuring high social class family oriented characters ( $M = 2.01_{\text{ab}}, 95\% \text{ CI} = [1.77, 2.25]$ ). See Figure 4 for the interaction and Table 15 for a summary of all effects.

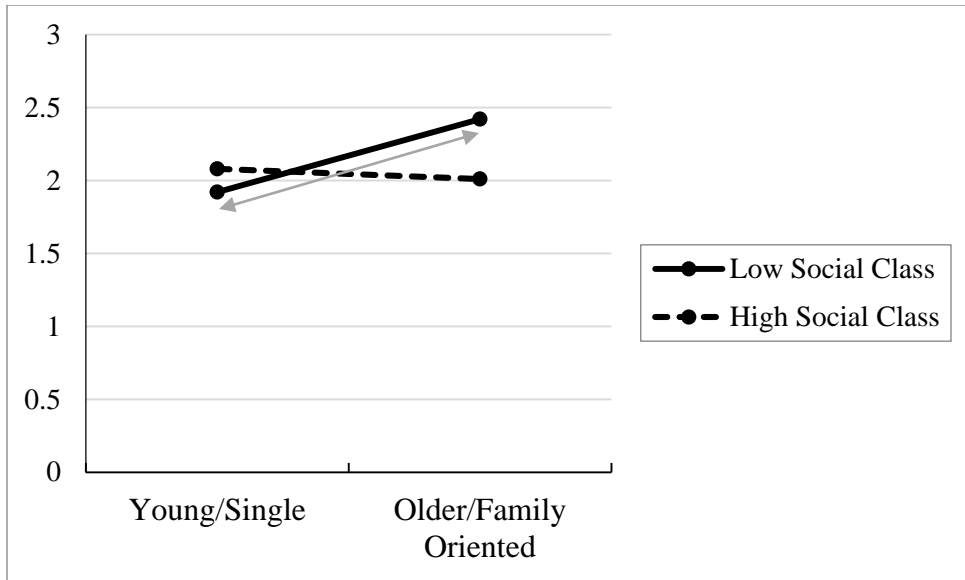


Figure 4. Interaction between program lifestyle and program social class on downward contrastive emotional responses after watching the program.

These main effects suggest that individuals with greater perceived realism of television and individuals with high perceived similarity to the characters engaged in downward social comparisons with the characters, more so than those with low perceived realism of television and low perceived similarity to the characters. The interaction suggests that low social class, family oriented programs initiated strong downward social comparisons based on social class. Experiencing feelings like contempt and scorn could be a defensive response from viewers who perceived the portrayals on television as realistic or perceived themselves to be similar to the featured characters. It is also possible the content could have been more engaging and meaningful because of these factors, thus eliciting stronger emotional responses. As outlined above, downward assimilative emotional responses were also strong for low social class, family oriented programs as well. This finding suggests that contrastive and assimilative processes were not mutually exclusive in social comparison, as in, viewers experienced both downward

contrastive and downward assimilative emotional responses when watching entertainment television programs.

Program social class was relevant for both types of downward comparison responses, which suggests individuals attended to this specific program factor when making downward social comparisons. Indeed, it was easy for viewers to assess the social class of most television characters, as depictions of their home, vehicles, and lifestyle made it clear to the viewer whether the characters were of a high or low social class. Alternatively, scripted programs, as compared to reality programs, elicited the strongest upward social comparison responses (both assimilative and contrastive), which suggests viewers attended to program type when making upward comparisons. The glamorized portrayals of scripted characters as compared to the 'real life' portrayals of reality cast members are what likely instigated these upward comparisons.

Table 15

*ANOVA Summary for Perceived Realism (Real), Program Social Class (Class), Program Lifestyle (Life), Program Type (Type), and Perceived Similarity (Sim) on Downward Contrastive Emotions*

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	$\eta^2$	<i>p</i>
Real	1	11.66	.06	.001
Class	1	1.50	.01	.22
Life	1	1.86	.01	.18
Type	1	1.12	.01	.29
Sim	1	6.53	.03	.01
Real x Class	1	1.57	.01	.21
Real x Life	1	.25	.001	.62
Real x Type	1	.40	.002	.53
Real x Sim	1	.25	.001	.61
Class x Life	1	4.10	.02	.04
Class x Type	1	.02	.004	.90
Class x Sim	1	.35	.01	.55
Life x Type	1	.88	.004	.35
Life x Sim	1	.86	.004	.36
Type x Sim	1	1.49	.01	.22
Real x Class x Life	1	.36	.002	.55
Real x Class x Type	1	.36	.002	.55
Real x Class x Sim	1	.32	.002	.57
Real x Life x Type	1	.03	< .001	.86
Real x Life x Sim	1	.03	< .001	.86
Real x Type x Sim	1	.08	< .001	.78
Class x Life x Type	1	.25	.001	.62
Class x Life x Sim	1	.12	< .001	.73
Class x Type x Sim	1	2.07	.01	.15
Life x Type x Sim	1	.88	.004	.35
Error	158			

*Note.* *N* = 189.

**Smith's Framework: A Summary.** Implementing Smith's (2000) framework of social comparison-related emotional responses in an entertainment media context brought to bear the directional social comparisons that take place when watching reality and scripted programs. Scripted programs, as compared to reality programs, were associated with stronger upward assimilative and upward contrastive emotional responses, in contrast to what was predicted by

H<sub>5</sub>, which hypothesized that reality programs would instigate stronger social comparison-related emotions than scripted programs. It is likely that even though reality television cast members presented more realistic comparison targets for viewers than scripted programs did, the representations of characters in scripted programs elicited stronger emotions associated with upward social comparisons. That is, glamorized character representations in scripted programs trumped the ‘real world’ portrayals of reality television cast members and were more effective in eliciting upward social comparison emotions, at least as they relate to Smith’s (2000) framework.

Upward assimilative emotional responses were stronger for family oriented programs and scripted programs. Alternatively, youth oriented, scripted programs initiated the strongest upward contrastive emotional responses. This suggests that family oriented programs presented more optimistic character portrayals, while youth oriented programs presented more depressing character portrayals. These representations resulted in viewers feeling inspired by the family oriented characters, likely because they were more positive, and resentful of the youth oriented characters, likely because they were more negative.

Downward assimilative and downward contrastive emotional responses demonstrated a similar pattern of results, where low social class, family oriented programs instigated these reactions most strongly. It is clear that downward social comparisons were made based on social class and engaged both assimilative and contrastive processes. It is possible that the representations of low social class, family oriented characters were generally mocking in nature, which would instigate compassionate feelings for their situation (sympathy), and allow viewers to delight in the characters’ misfortunes (*Schadenfreude*). Again, this suggests that assimilative and contrastive processes were not mutually exclusive and can occur in tandem.



Regarding individual difference variables, high perceived realism of television resulted in stronger upward assimilative, downward assimilative, and downward contrastive emotional responses to the content. This suggests that when viewers perceived the programs to be realistic, the social comparison targets presented within them were more engaging and meaningful and in turn, instigated stronger social comparison-related responses to the content. High perceived similarity to the characters resulted in stronger upward assimilative and downward contrastive emotional responses to the content, which were the two types of social comparisons deemed by Smith (2000) to be beneficial. When perceived similarity to the characters was high, viewers engaged in these advantageous social comparisons that resulted in feelings like optimism (upward assimilative) and pride (downward contrastive).

### **Hedonic Valence**

**Hedonic Positive.** The next step in the ANOVA process involved the testing of the between-subjects factors on hedonic positive emotions (cheerful, content, satisfied, and happy) in order to see how they related to other social comparison-related emotional responses. There was a significant main effect for perceived realism,  $F(1, 158) = 15.72, p < .001, \eta^2 = .05$ , where those high in perceived realism of television ( $M = 3.05, SD = 1.05$ ) experienced stronger positive emotional responses to the content than those low in perceived realism of television ( $M = 2.40, SD = 1.03$ ). There was also a significant main effect for program lifestyle,  $F(1, 158) = 14.38, p < .001, \eta^2 = .05$ , where those who watched programs featuring older, family oriented characters ( $M = 3.01, SD = .1.03$ ) experienced more positive emotions than those who watched programs featuring young and single characters ( $M = 2.44, SD = 1.07$ ). There was another main effect for perceived similarity,  $F(1, 158) = 29.67, p < .001, \eta^2 = .09$ , where those who had high perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 3.36, SD = .79$ ) experienced stronger positive emotions than

those who had low perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 2.29, SD = 1.05$ ). A significant main effect emerged for program type,  $F(1, 158) = 4.43, p = .04, \eta^2 = .01$ , where scripted programs ( $M = 3.05, SD = .99$ ) initiated stronger positive emotions than reality programs ( $M = 2.40, SD = 1.09$ ). For a summary of all effects, see Table 16. In all, positive emotional responses to the content were strongest for those with high perceived realism of television, those who viewed programs featuring older, family oriented characters, those who watched scripted programs, and those who had high perceived similarity to the characters.

In general, these findings mimic those of upward assimilative emotional responses, where high perceived realism of television, high perceived similarity to the characters, scripted programs, and family oriented programs all resulted in stronger upward assimilative emotional responses. Those high in perceived realism of television and high in perceived similarity to the characters predicted strong downward contrastive emotional responses. This reinforces the notion by Smith (2000), that upward assimilative and downward contrastive social comparisons were beneficial to the individual. Here, in a mediated context, it is clear that beneficial social comparison-related emotional responses shared strong similarities with more general positive responses to content. This suggests that when media content is perceived as realistic, features characters that viewers see themselves as similar to, and presents characters that elicit upward assimilative and downward contrastive social comparisons, it will be evaluated positively by viewers.

Table 16

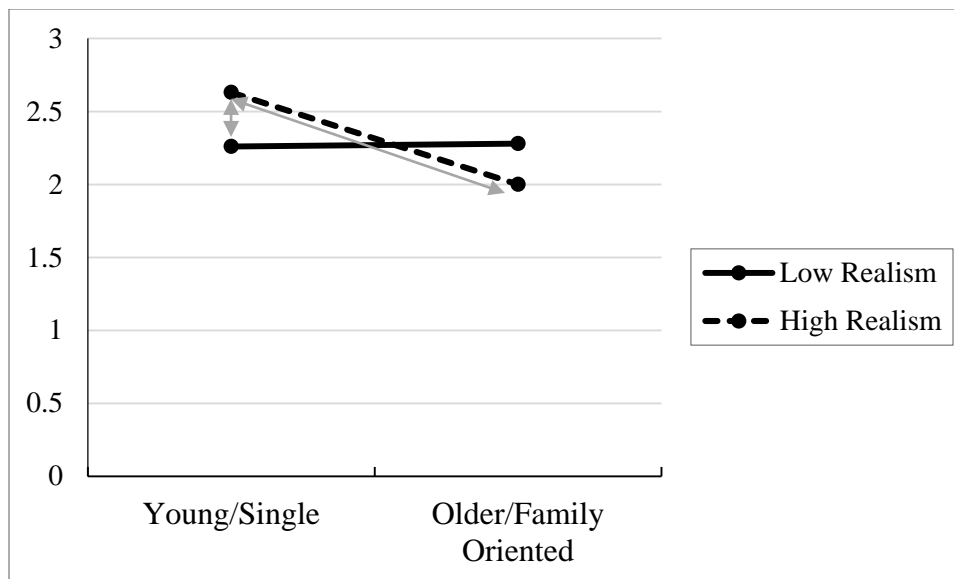
*ANOVA Summary for Perceived Realism (Real), Program Social Class (Class), Program Lifestyle (Life), Program Type (Type), and Perceived Similarity (Sim) on Hedonic Positive Emotions*

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	$\eta^2$	<i>p</i>
Real	1	15.72	.05	< .001
Class	1	.01	< .001	.92
Life	1	14.38	.05	< .001
Type	1	4.43	.01	.04
Sim	1	29.67	.09	< .001
Real x Class	1	.47	.001	.49
Real x Life	1	.02	< .001	.89
Real x Type	1	.79	.003	.38
Real x Sim	1	1.30	.004	.26
Class x Life	1	.96	.003	.33
Class x Type	1	.16	< .001	.69
Class x Sim	1	2.44	.01	.12
Life x Type	1	.53	.002	.47
Life x Sim	1	.39	.001	.53
Type x Sim	1	1.44	.01	.23
Real x Class x Life	1	2.44	.01	.12
Real x Class x Type	1	.003	< .001	.96
Real x Class x Sim	1	1.142	.004	.29
Real x Life x Type	1	.03	< .001	.86
Real x Life x Sim	1	1.48	.01	.23
Real x Type x Sim	1	1.71	.01	.19
Class x Life x Type	1	1.36	.004	.25
Class x Life x Sim	1	.12	< .001	.73
Class x Type x Sim	1	.96	.003	.33
Life x Type x Sim	1	.03	< .001	.86
Error	158			

Note. *N* = 189.

**Hedonic Negative.** The ANOVA tested the between-subjects factors on hedonic negative emotions (dissatisfied, sad, sorry, depressed) to determine what relevant predictor variables influenced negative responses to the content. There were no significant main effects (see Table 17 for a summary), but there were several significant interactions. First, there was a significant two-way interaction for perceived realism and program lifestyle  $F(1, 158) = 3.92, p = .05, \eta^2 =$

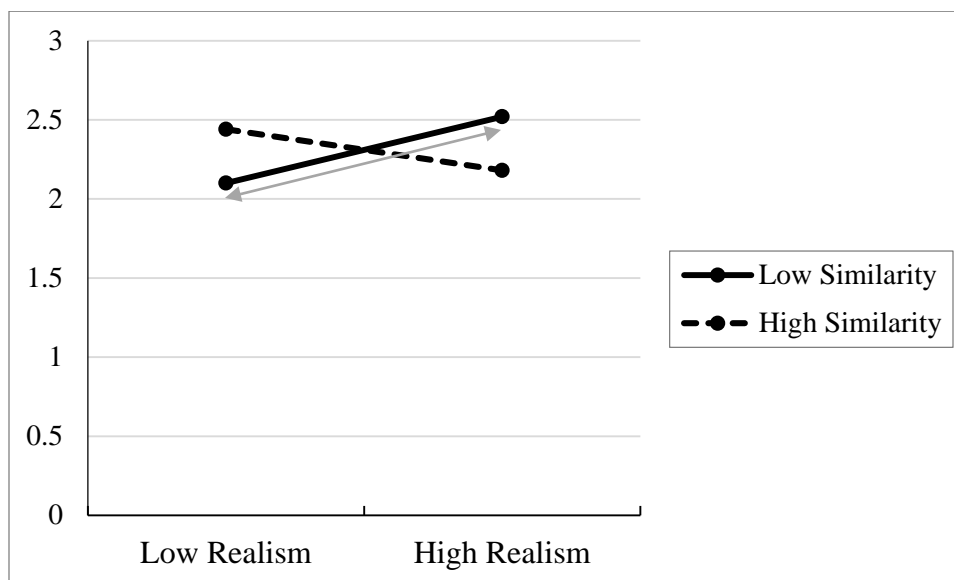
.01, where those who viewed programs featuring young and single characters and had high perceived realism of television ( $M = 2.63_b$ , 95% CI = [2.38, 2.89]) experienced the strongest negative emotional responses to the content as compared to those who viewed programs with young and single characters and had low perceived realism of television ( $M = 2.26_a$ , 95% CI = [2.01, 2.51]), and those who viewed family oriented programs and had high perceived realism of television ( $M = 2.00_a$ , 95% CI = [1.68, 2.31]). There were no significant differences among those who viewed programs featuring family focused characters and had low perceived realism of television ( $M = 2.28_{ab}$ , 95% CI = [1.99, 2.57]). See Figure 5 for the interaction.



*Figure 5.* Interaction between program lifestyle and perceived realism of television on hedonic negative emotional responses after watching the program.

There was also a significant two-way interaction for perceived realism and perceived similarity,  $F(1, 158) = 5.65$ ,  $p = .02$ ,  $\eta^2 = .02$ , where those with high perceived realism of television and low perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 2.52_b$ , 95% CI = [2.28, 2.76])

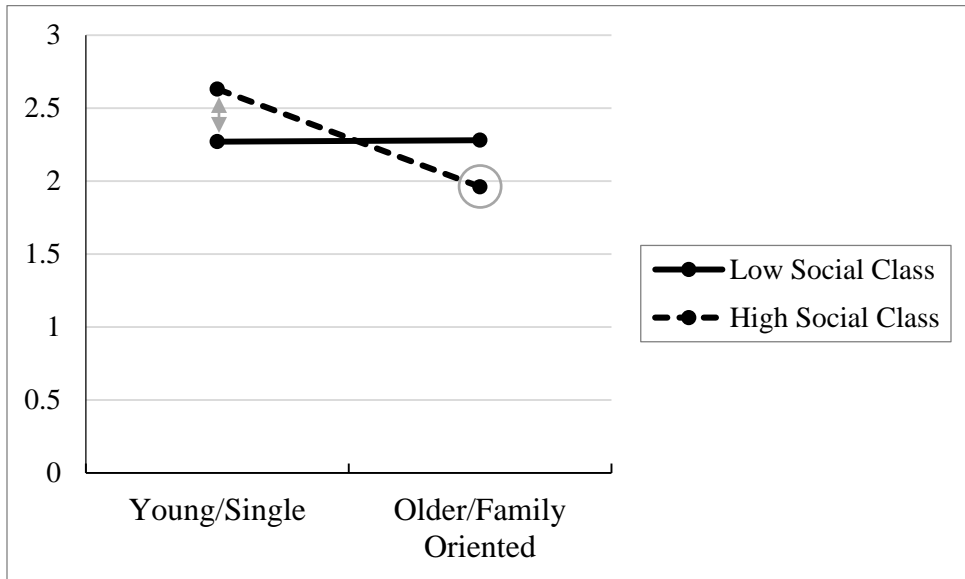
experienced the strongest negative emotions to the content as compared to those with low perceived realism and low perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 2.10_a$ , 95% CI = [1.89, 2.31]). There were no significant differences among those with low perceived realism and high perceived similarity ( $M = 2.44_{ab}$ , 95% CI = [2.12, 2.76]) and those with high perceived realism and high perceived similarity ( $M = 2.18_{ab}$ , 95% CI = [1.86, 2.49]). See Figure 6 for the interaction.



*Figure 6.* Interaction between perceived realism and perceived similarity on hedonic negative emotional responses after watching the program.

Finally, there was a significant two-way interaction for program social class and program lifestyle,  $F(1, 158) = 8.45$ ,  $p = .004$ ,  $\eta^2 = .02$ , where those watching a youth oriented program featuring high social class characters ( $M = 2.63_c$ , 95% CI = [2.36, 2.91]) experienced the strongest negative emotions as compared to those who watched a youth oriented program with low social class characters ( $M = 2.27_b$ , 95% CI = [2.03, 2.50]). These individuals and those who

watched a family oriented program featuring low social class characters ( $M = 2.37_{bc}$ , 95% CI = [2.00, 2.73]), experienced stronger hedonic negative emotional responses as compared to those who watched a family oriented program with high social class characters ( $M = 1.96_a$ , 95% CI = [1.71, 2.20]). See Figure 7 for the interaction.



*Figure 7.* Interaction between program lifestyle and social class on hedonic negative emotional responses after watching the program.

To summarize, several interactions revealed significant effects on hedonic negative emotional responses to the content. The first, involving program social class and perceived realism, demonstrated that when perceived realism of television was high, negative emotional responses were strongest for young and single characters, as compared to older, family oriented characters. Again, it is possible that the youth oriented programs had more negative portrayals of characters than the family oriented programs did. As a result, for those who perceived television

programs to be highly realistic, programs featuring negative portrayals of young and single characters instigated stronger negative responses to the content.

The second significant interaction, involving perceived realism and perceived similarity, determined that those with high perceived realism of television and low perceived similarity to the characters experienced the strongest negative emotional responses as compared to those with low perceived realism of television and low perceived similarity to the characters. This suggests that for those with low perceived similarity to the characters, their overall perceptions of television realism mattered. When viewers did not see themselves as similar to characters, but believed that television programs were representative of real life, negative emotional responses were elevated. This could be because when perceived realism was high, viewers wanted the content to be meaningful and engaging, but if there were no character representations to feel similar to, they experienced negative emotions as a result. For those with low perceived realism of television and low perceived similarity to the characters, they likely experienced weakened negative responses because they did not find the content to be realistic or see themselves as similar and thus, they were not as engaged with it.

The final significant interaction involved program social class and program lifestyle, where youth oriented programs featuring high social class characters initiated the strongest negative responses. Family oriented programs with high social class characters initiated the weakest negative responses. Once again, as in the first interaction, it is likely that the youth oriented programs presented more negative portrayals than the family oriented programs did, which resulted in stronger negative emotional responses. Among these interactions, however, there were no significant differences between reality and scripted programs on negative emotional responses.

It is important to consider that viewers did not choose their own program for viewing, which likely influenced the negative reactions to the content they were exposed to. This notion could serve to explain the interaction involving perceived realism and perceived similarity, where negative emotions were strongest when perceived realism was high and perceived similarity to the characters was low. When agency was removed from the viewers and they were exposed to content that featured realistic portrayals of characters that were dissimilar to them, they responded negatively. The interaction involving high social class, youth oriented programs (which initiated the strongest negative reactions) spoke to the relationship between hedonic negative responses and upward contrastive emotions (envy, resentment, depression, shame). Upward contrastive emotions were all negatively valenced and strongest for youth oriented programs in the above analyses. This residual negativity was expressed in this hedonic measure as well.

These similarities provide partial support for Smith's (2000) notion that upward contrastive and downward assimilative emotional responses were detrimental to individuals. The negative hedonic emotional responses demonstrated a similar pattern to upward contrastive emotional responses, but they did not demonstrate a similar pattern to downward assimilative emotional responses. This relationship was complicated in that downward assimilative emotions like sympathy and pity were not necessarily negative in nature, and as such, cannot be directly associated with other negative responses. Furthermore, as outlined above, assimilative and contrastive processes in social comparisons were not mutually exclusive. Viewers can activate them in combination, resulting in varying emotional effects.



Table 17

*ANOVA Summary for Perceived Realism (Real), Program Social Class (Class), Program Lifestyle (Life), Program Type (Type), and Perceived Similarity (Sim) on Hedonic Negative Emotions*

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	$\eta^2$	<i>p</i>
Real	1	.53	.003	.47
Class	1	.16	< .001	.69
Life	1	3.30	.02	.07
Type	1	1.05	.01	.31
Sim	1	.09	< .001	.76
Real x Class	1	1.21	.01	.27
Real x Life	1	3.92	.02	.05
Real x Type	1	1.14	.01	.29
Real x Sim	1	5.65	.03	.02
Class x Life	1	8.45	.04	.004
Class x Type	1	.01	< .001	.94
Class x Sim	1	.14	< .001	.70
Life x Type	1	.12	< .001	.73
Life x Sim	1	.05	< .001	.83
Type x Sim	1	1.29	.01	.26
Real x Class x Life	1	3.44	.02	.07
Real x Class x Type	1	.80	.004	.37
Real x Class x Sim	1	1.78	.01	.19
Real x Life x Type	1	1.60	< .001	.21
Real x Life x Sim	1	1.41	.01	.24
Real x Type x Sim	1	.02	< .001	.90
Class x Life x Type	1	1.01	.01	.32
Class x Life x Sim	1	1.16	.01	.28
Class x Type x Sim	1	1.06	.01	.31
Life x Type x Sim	1	.10	< .001	.75
Error	158			

*Note.* *N* = 189.

### Discrete Social Comparison-Related Emotional Responses

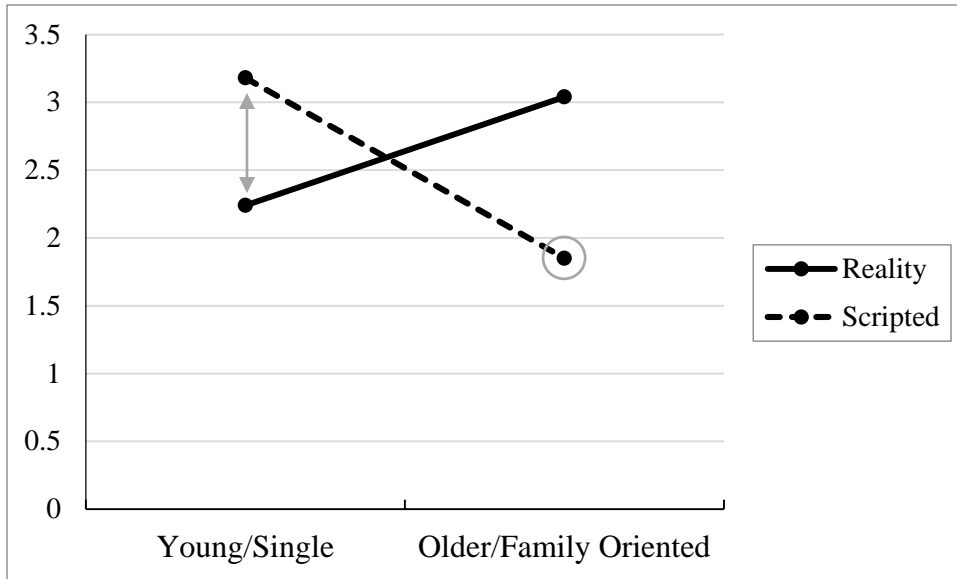
In addition to Smith's (2000) framework of social comparison-related emotional responses, additional discrete emotions were examined, similar to Nabi and Keblusek's (2014) previous work. The goal of these analyses was to determine which of these discrete emotional responses were specifically related to social comparison processes and if there were distinct

differences between reality and scripted programs regarding these emotional responses. The analyses below are presented in the following order: jealousy, hope, being upset, disappointment, anxiousness, disgust, embarrassment, and anger. A summary of results is provided following the individual analyses.

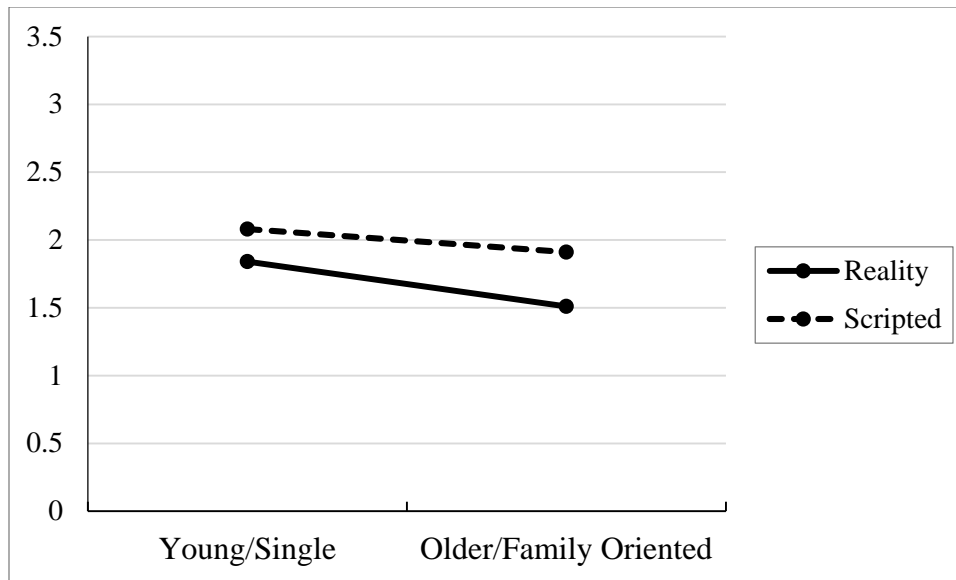
**Jealousy.** The ANOVA first tested the between-subjects factors on feelings of jealousy after watching the program. There was a significant main effect for perceived realism,  $F(1, 158) = 4.09, p = .05, \eta^2 = .07$ , where those high in perceived realism of television ( $M = 2.33, SD = 1.14$ ) experienced stronger feelings of jealousy than those low in perceived realism of television ( $M = 1.89, SD = 1.00$ ). There was another significant main effect for program social class,  $F(1, 158) = 17.98, p < .001, \eta^2 = .05$ , where those who watched programs featuring high social class characters ( $M = 2.42, SD = .1.07$ ) experienced more jealousy than those who viewed programs featuring low social class characters ( $M = 1.81, SD = 1.03$ ). Another significant main effect emerged for perceived similarity,  $F(1, 158) = 6.68, p = .01, \eta^2 = .03$ , where individuals with high perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 2.45, SD = 1.04$ ) experienced more jealousy than individuals with low perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 1.87, SD = 1.07$ ). For a summary of effects, see Table 18.

There was a significant two-way interaction for program lifestyle and program type,  $F(1, 158) = 6.11, p = .02, \eta^2 = .02$ . This interaction was subsumed by a significant three-way interaction of program social class, program lifestyle, and program type,  $F(1, 158) = 10.59, p = .001, \eta^2 = .04$ . The significant portion of this interaction involved programs featuring high social class characters, where scripted programs with young and single characters ( $M = 3.18_c, 95\% \text{ CI} = [2.76, 3.60]$ ) initiated the strongest feelings of jealousy as compared to reality programs with young and single characters ( $M = 2.24_{ab}, 95\% \text{ CI} = [1.73, 2.74]$ ) and scripted programs with

family oriented characters ( $M = 1.85_a$ , 95% CI = [1.45, 2.25]). Reality programs with family oriented characters ( $M = 3.04_{bc}$ , 95% CI = [2.61, 3.47]) also initiated stronger feelings of jealousy as compared to scripted programs with family oriented characters. See Figures 8.1 and 8.2 for the interaction.



*Figure 8.1.* Interaction between program lifestyle and program type for high social class programs on feelings of jealousy after watching the program.



*Figure 8.2.* Interaction between program lifestyle and program type for low social class programs on feelings of jealousy after watching the program.

In all, participants were most jealous after watching scripted programs with high social class, young and single characters. These feelings of jealousy dropped significantly for high social class scripted programs with older, family oriented characters. Correspondingly, feelings of jealousy for reality programs trended in the opposite pattern as scripted programs. These findings for jealousy were similar to those found for upward contrastive emotions (depression, shame, envy, resentment) where scripted programs featuring young and single characters initiated the strongest upward contrastive emotional responses as compared to scripted programs featuring older, family oriented characters. For feelings of jealousy, program social class played a significant role, as this pattern only held for high social class programs. Viewers upwardly compared to young and single, scripted characters. Again, it is likely that the glamorized portrayals of scripted, youth oriented characters elicited stronger feelings of jealousy among viewers than the ‘real life’ portrayals of reality cast members. Feelings of jealousy were also

stronger for high social class reality programs with family oriented characters as compared to high social class scripted programs with family oriented characters. Perhaps representations of the wealthy lifestyle in reality programs were more explicit as compared to those in scripted programs. Based on these results, jealousy could be considered as another upward contrastive emotional response, similar to envy, resentment, depression, and shame.

Table 18

*ANOVA Summary for Perceived Realism (Real), Program Social Class (Class), Program Lifestyle (Life), Program Type (Type), and Perceived Similarity (Sim) on Jealousy*

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	$\eta^2$	<i>p</i>
Real	1	4.09	.02	.05
Class	1	17.98	.07	< .001
Life	1	2.23	.01	.14
Type	1	.62	.003	.43
Sim	1	6.68	.03	.01
Real x Class	1	1.04	.004	.31
Real x Life	1	.01	< .001	.94
Real x Type	1	.89	.004	.35
Real x Sim	1	2.05	.01	.15
Class x Life	1	.001	< .001	.98
Class x Type	1	2.30	.01	.13
Class x Sim	1	.54	.002	.47
Life x Type	1	6.11	.02	.02
Life x Sim	1	.12	< .001	.73
Type x Sim	1	2.91	.01	.09
Real x Class x Life	1	.19	< .001	.67
Real x Class x Type	1	.29	.001	.59
Real x Class x Sim	1	.005	< .001	.94
Real x Life x Type	1	.12	< .001	.73
Real x Life x Sim	1	.01	< .001	.92
Real x Type x Sim	1	.58	.002	.45
Class x Life x Type	1	10.59	.04	.001
Class x Life x Sim	1	1.03	.002	.31
Class x Type x Sim	1	1.55	.01	.22
Life x Type x Sim	1	1.06	.004	.31
Error	158			

Note. *N* = 189.

**Hope.** The ANOVA then tested the between-subjects factors on feelings of hope after watching the program (see Table 19 for a summary). There was a significant main effect for perceived realism of television,  $F(1, 158) = 6.08, p = .02, \eta^2 = .02$ , where individuals with high perceived realism ( $M = 2.53, SD = 1.23$ ) had stronger feelings of hope as compared to those with low perceived realism ( $M = 2.13, SD = 1.18$ ). There was also a significant main effect for program type,  $F(1, 158) = 7.03, p = .009, \eta^2 = .03$ , where participants felt more hopeful after watching scripted programs ( $M = 2.77, SD = 1.19$ ) as compared to reality programs ( $M = 1.87, SD = 1.08$ ). There was another main effect for perceived similarity,  $F(1, 158) = 18.13, p < .001, \eta^2 = .07$ , where those with high perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 2.92, SD = 1.09$ ) experienced stronger feelings of hope after watching the program as compared to those with low perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 1.91, SD = 1.13$ ).

There were several significant interactions as well. A significant two-way interaction emerged for program class and program type,  $F(1, 158) = 3.79, p = .05, \eta^2 = .01$ , where scripted programs with low social class characters ( $M = 3.04_b, 95\% \text{ CI} = [2.74, 3.33]$ ), initiated the strongest feelings of hope as compared to scripted programs with high social class characters ( $M = 2.52_a, 95\% \text{ CI} = [2.22, 2.83]$ ), reality programs with high social class characters ( $M = 2.40_a, 95\% \text{ CI} = [2.05, 2.75]$ ), and reality programs with low social class characters ( $M = 2.10_a, 95\% \text{ CI} = [1.67, 2.53]$ ). See Figure 9 for the interaction.

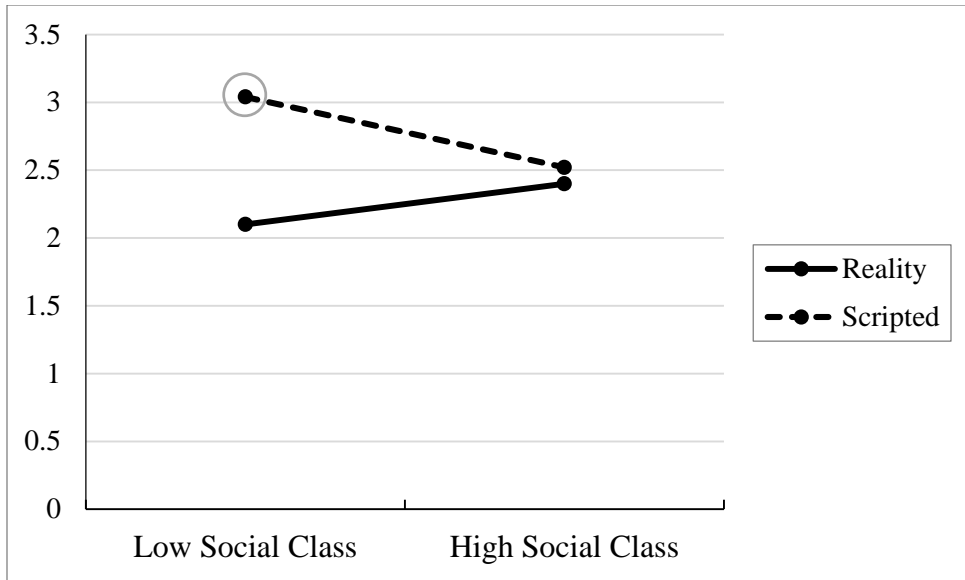


Figure 9. Interaction between program social class and program type on feelings of hope after watching the program.

A significant two-way interaction also emerged for program lifestyle and perceived similarity,  $F(1, 158) = 4.39, p = .04, \eta^2 = .02$ , where individuals who watched family oriented programs and had high perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 3.25_c, 95\% \text{ CI} = [2.80, 3.70]$ ), experienced the strongest feelings of hope as compared to those who watched programs with young and single characters and had high perceived similarity to them ( $M = 2.56_b, 95\% \text{ CI} = [2.20, 2.92]$ ). These individuals had stronger feelings of hope than those who watched programs with young and single characters and had low perceived similarity to them ( $M = 2.11_a, 95\% \text{ CI} = [1.82, 2.40]$ ) and those who watched family oriented programs and had low perceived similarity to them ( $M = 2.01_a, 95\% \text{ CI} = [1.72, 2.30]$ ). See Figure 10 for the interaction.

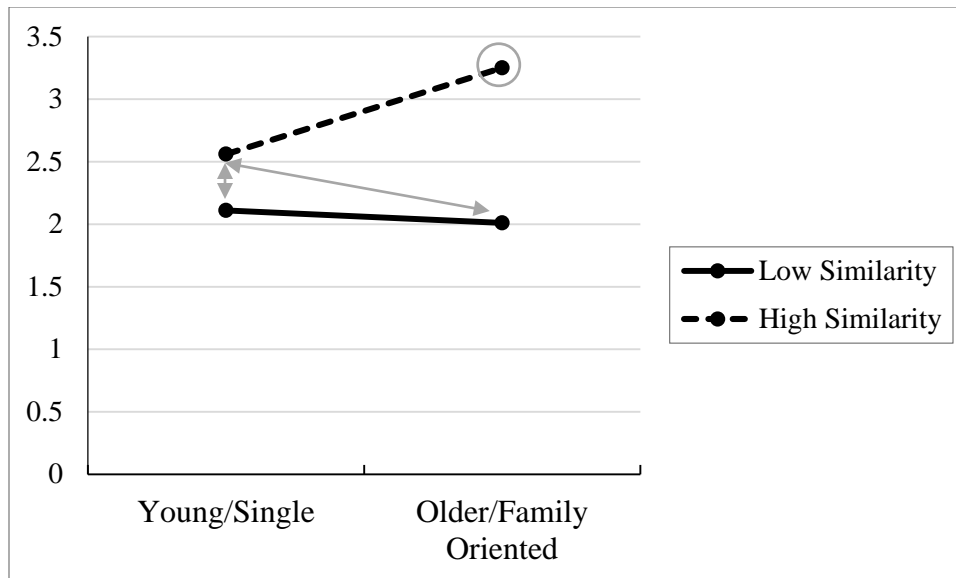


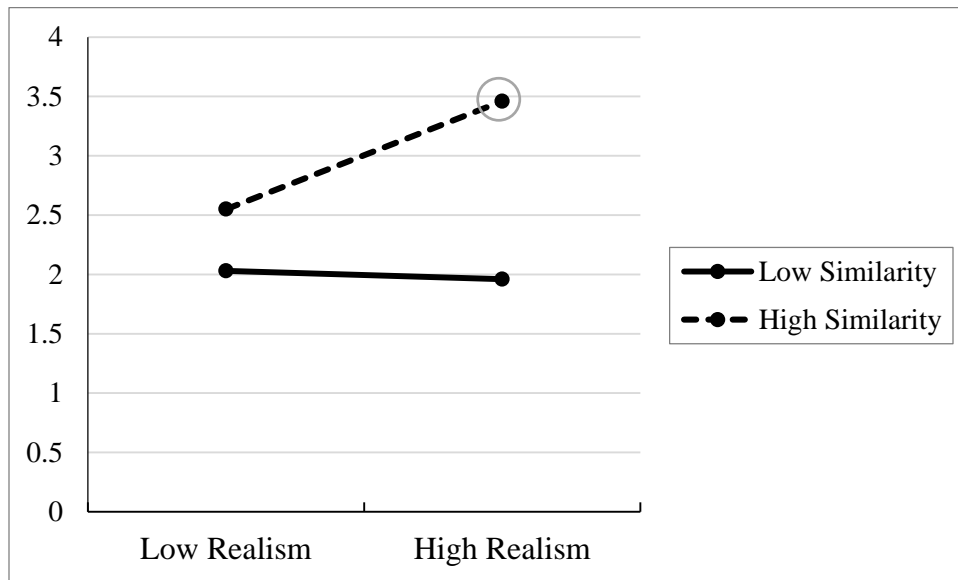
Figure 10. Interaction between program lifestyle and perceived similarity on feelings of hope after watching the program.

Finally, there was a significant three-way interaction for perceived realism, perceived similarity, and program social class,  $F(1, 158) = 4.16, p = .04, \eta^2 = .02$ . For programs featuring low social class characters, feelings of hope were strongest for those with high perceived realism of television and high perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 3.46_b, 95\% \text{ CI} = [2.84, 4.09]$ ), in comparison to those with low perceived realism of television and high perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 2.55_a, 95\% \text{ CI} = [1.93, 3.18]$ ), those with low perceived realism of television and low perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 2.03_a, 95\% \text{ CI} = [1.64, 2.43]$ ), and those with high perceived realism of television and low perceived similarity of television ( $M = 1.96_a, 95\% \text{ CI} = [1.57, 2.34]$ ). See Figure 11.1 for the interaction.

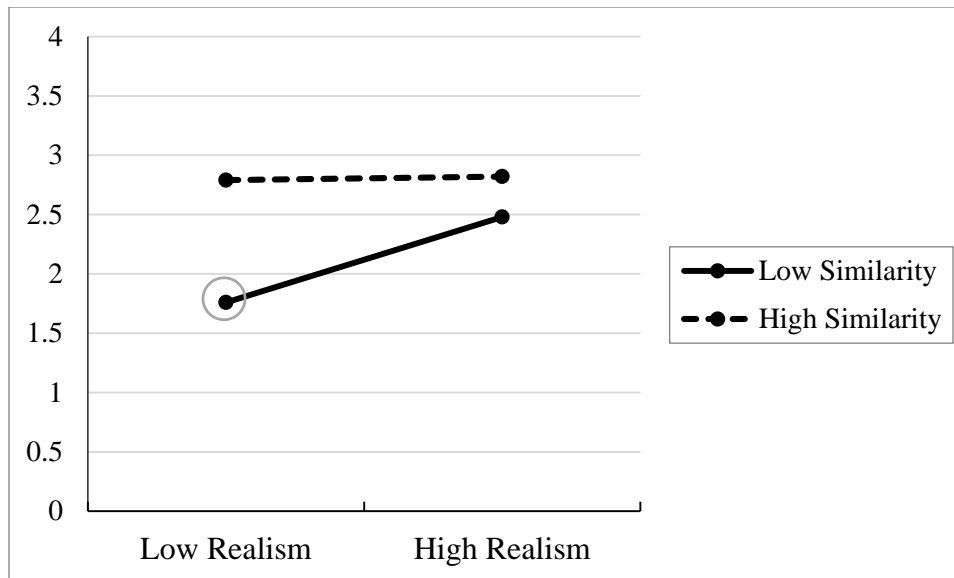
For programs featuring high social class characters, feelings of hope were lowest for those with low perceived realism of television and low perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 1.76_a, 95\% \text{ CI} = [1.38, 2.14]$ ) as compared to those with high perceived realism of television



and high perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 2.82_b$ , 95% CI = [2.32, 3.32]), those with low perceived realism of television and high perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 2.79_b$ , 95% CI = [2.26, 3.32]), and those with high perceived realism of television and low perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 2.48_b$ , 95% CI = [2.02, 2.93]). See Figure 11.2 for the interaction.



*Figure 11.1.* Interaction between perceived realism and perceived similarity for low social class programs on feelings of hope after watching the program.



*Figure 11.2.* Interaction between perceived realism and perceived similarity for high social class programs on feelings of hope after watching the program.

The significant main effects regarding feelings of hope were similar to those of upward assimilative emotional responses (admiration, inspiration, optimism), where those with high perceived realism of television, those who watched scripted programs, and those with high perceived similarity to the characters experienced these feelings (hope and upward assimilative emotions) at an elevated level. The significant interactions regarding feelings of hope revealed more nuanced findings. First, in the interaction between social class and program type, low social class scripted programs, as compared to low social class reality programs, initiated the strongest feelings of hope. This suggests that viewers felt hope for worse off, lower social class scripted characters because their portrayals were more sympathetic than those in reality programs. Regarding the interaction between program lifestyle and perceived similarity, family oriented characters with whom viewers felt highly similar to, initiated the strongest feelings of hope as compared to youth oriented characters. The positivity of the family oriented portrayals

like emphasized these feelings as compared to the negativity of youth oriented portrayals. The interaction between perceived realism, perceived similarity, and program social class demonstrated that for both low and high social class programs, high perceived similarity to the characters and high perceived realism of television generally initiated the strongest feelings of hope. These findings suggest that hope may not be effective in determining whether directional (upward, downward) social comparisons occurred, but that feelings of hope were more telling of how engaged viewers were with the content. Indeed, feelings of hope were strongest when they felt that the content was realistic, positive, and that they were similar to the portrayed characters. These factors allowed the viewers to feel closer to the characters, increasing empathic responses.

Table 19

*ANOVA Summary for Perceived Realism (Real), Program Social Class (Class), Program Lifestyle (Life), Program Type (Type), and Perceived Similarity (Sim) on Hope*

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	$\eta^2$	<i>p</i>
Real	1	6.08	.02	.02
Class	1	.14	< .001	.71
Life	1	2.70	.01	.10
Type	1	7.03	.03	.009
Sim	1	18.13	.07	< .001
Real x Class	1	.08	< .001	.78
Real x Life	1	.18	< .001	.67
Real x Type	1	.30	.001	.58
Real x Sim	1	.08	< .001	.78
Class x Life	1	.08	< .001	.78
Class x Type	1	3.79	.01	.05
Class x Sim	1	.56	.002	.46
Life x Type	1	2.27	.01	.13
Life x Sim	1	4.39	.01	.04
Type x Sim	1	3.45	.01	.07
Real x Class x Life	1	3.18	.01	.08
Real x Class x Type	1	.25	< .001	.62
Real x Class x Sim	1	4.16	.02	.04
Real x Life x Type	1	.22	< .001	.64
Real x Life x Sim	1	1.14	.004	.29
Real x Type x Sim	1	1.51	.01	.22
Class x Life x Type	1	1.47	.01	.23
Class x Life x Sim	1	.11	< .001	.74
Class x Type x Sim	1	.82	.003	.37
Life x Type x Sim	1	.009	< .001	.92
Error	158			

Note. *N* = 189.

**Being Upset.** Similar to hedonic negative emotional responses, the ANOVA next tested the between-subjects factors on feelings of being upset after watching the program. There were no significant main effects (Table 20 for a summary), but several significant two-way interactions emerged. There was a significant interaction for perceived realism of television and perceived similarity to the characters,  $F(1, 158) = 4.37, p = .04, \eta^2 = .02$ , where those with low perceived realism of television and high perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 2.62_b, 95\%$

CI = [2.17, 3.07]) experienced the strongest feelings of being upset as compared to those with low perceived realism of television and low perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 1.87_a$ , 95% CI = [1.57, 2.17]). There were no significant differences to those with high perceived realism of television and low perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 2.22_{ab}$ , 95% CI = [1.88, 2.56]) or those with high perceived realism of television and high perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 2.07_{ab}$ , 95% CI = [1.63, 2.51]), and. See Figure 12 for the interaction.

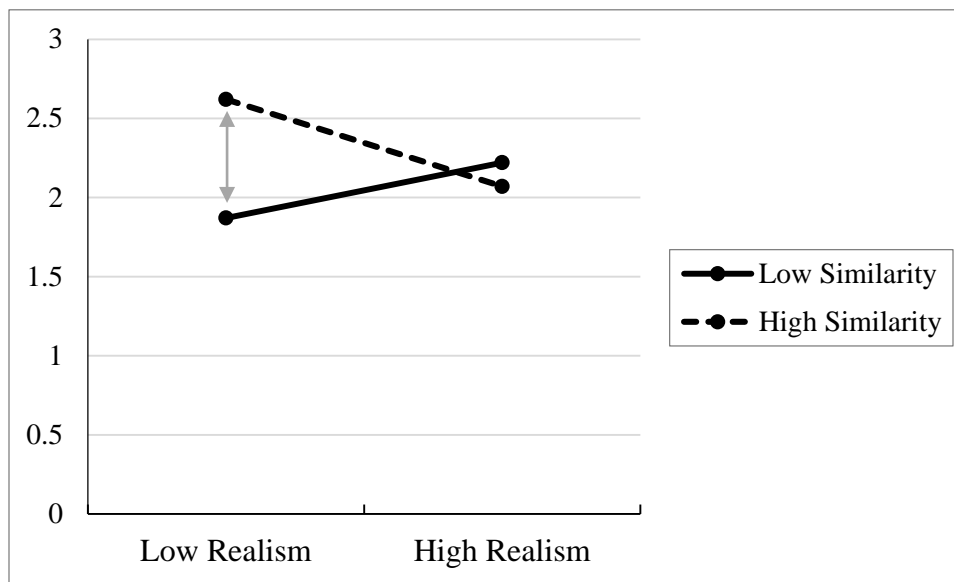
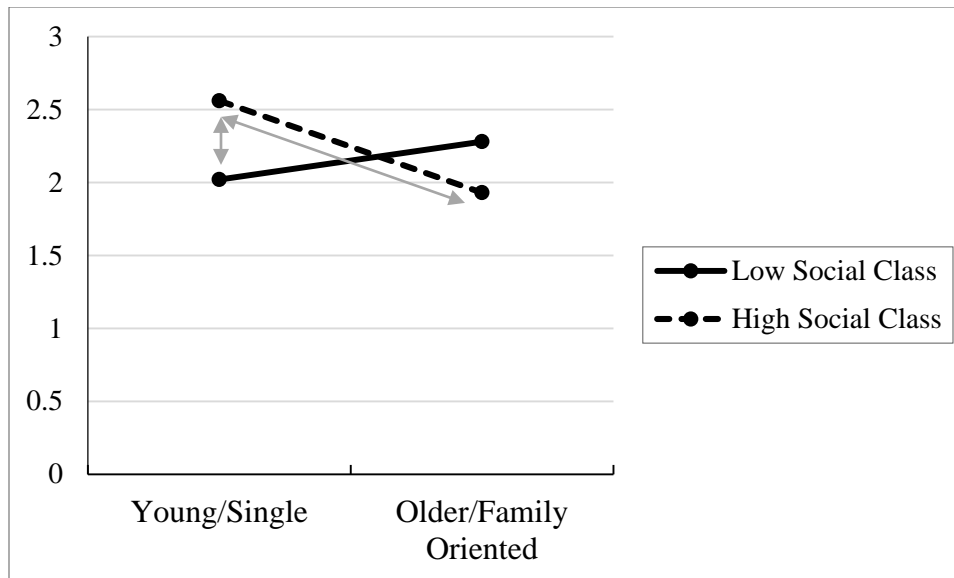


Figure 12. Interaction between perceived realism and perceived similarity on being upset after watching the program.

There was also a significant interaction for program social class and program lifestyle,  $F(1, 158) = 6.24, p = .01, \eta^2 = .03$ , where those who watched high social class programs with young and single characters ( $M = 2.56_b$ , 95% CI = [2.17, 2.94]) experienced the strongest feelings of being upset, as compared to those who watched low social class programs with young and single characters ( $M = 2.02_a$ , 95% CI = [1.69, 2.35]) and high social class programs with

family oriented characters ( $M = 1.93_a$ , 95% CI = [1.59, 2.28]). There were no significant differences among those who watched low social class programs with family oriented characters ( $M = 2.28_{ab}$ , 95% CI = [1.76, 2.79]), See Figure 13 for the interaction.



*Figure 13.* Interaction between program lifestyle and program social class on being upset after watching the program.

To summarize, for those with low perceived realism of television, feelings of being upset were stronger when individuals felt similar to the represented characters. It is possible that viewers with low perceived realism of television responded negatively when they found themselves feeling similar to the characters, but that the portrayals were unrealistic. Similar to the findings related to hedonic negative responses, those with low perceived realism of television and low perceived similarity to the characters experienced weakened negative responses to the content because they felt dissimilar to the characters and found the content to be unrealistic. As a result, they were less engaged with the content. In addition, those who watched high social class

programs featuring young and single characters experienced the strongest feelings of being upset after watching the program. These patterns were also similar to the findings related to hedonic negative emotional responses, where high social class, youth oriented programs initiated strong negative reactions to the content. This, again, spoke to the negative way in which young and single characters are represented in entertainment programs.

Table 20

*ANOVA Summary for Perceived Realism (Real), Program Social Class (Class), Program Lifestyle (Life), Program Type (Type), and Perceived Similarity (Sim) on Being Upset*

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	$\eta^2$	<i>p</i>
Real	1	.16	< .001	.69
Class	1	.09	< .001	.77
Life	1	.56	.003	.46
Type	1	.13	< .001	.72
Sim	1	1.67	.01	.20
Real x Class	1	.82	.004	.37
Real x Life	1	2.08	.01	.15
Real x Type	1	1.35	.01	.25
Real x Sim	1	4.37	.02	.04
Class x Life	1	6.24	.03	.04
Class x Type	1	.004	< .001	.95
Class x Sim	1	.16	< .001	.69
Life x Type	1	.07	< .001	.79
Life x Sim	1	.05	< .001	.83
Type x Sim	1	.18	< .001	.68
Real x Class x Life	1	2.59	.01	.11
Real x Class x Type	1	1.88	.01	.17
Real x Class x Sim	1	1.13	.01	.29
Real x Life x Type	1	1.69	.01	.20
Real x Life x Sim	1	.57	.003	.45
Real x Type x Sim	1	.06	< .001	.80
Class x Life x Type	1	.20	.001	.66
Class x Life x Sim	1	.09	< .001	.76
Class x Type x Sim	1	1.19	.01	.28
Life x Type x Sim	1	.55	.003	.46
Error	158			

*Note.* *N* = 189.

**Disappointment.** The testing ANOVA addressed feelings of disappointment after watching the program based on the relevant between-subjects factors. There were no significant main effects, but there were several significant interactions (See Table 21 for all effects). There was a significant two-way interaction on program social class and program lifestyle,  $F(1, 158) = 4.33, p = .04, \eta^2 = .02$ , but this interaction was subsumed by a significant three-way interaction of perceived realism, program social class, and program lifestyle,  $F(1, 158) = 7.86, p = .006, \eta^2 = .04$ , where for low social class programs, feelings of disappointment were strongest for individuals with low perceived realism of television who watched family focused programs ( $M = 3.02_b, 95\% \text{ CI} = [2.30, 3.73]$ ), as compared to individuals with high perceived realism who watched family focused programs ( $M = 1.82_a, 95\% \text{ CI} = [.89, 2.74]$ ). There were no significant differences for individuals with high perceived realism who watched programs with young and single characters ( $M = 2.75_{ab}, 95\% \text{ CI} = [2.27, 3.23]$ ) or for individuals with low perceived realism who watched programs with young and single characters ( $M = 2.17_{ab}, 95\% \text{ CI} = [1.62, 2.72]$ ), See Figure 14.1 for the interaction.

For high social class programs, feelings of disappointment were highest for individuals with low perceived realism of television who watched programs with young and single characters ( $M = 3.28_b, 95\% \text{ CI} = [2.722, 3.84]$ ), as compared to those with low perceived realism of television who watched family focused programs ( $M = 2.11_a, 95\% \text{ CI} = [1.54, 2.67]$ ) and those with high perceived realism who watched family focused programs ( $M = 2.05_a, 95\% \text{ CI} = [1.53, 2.56]$ ). There were no significant differences for those with high perceived realism who watched programs with young and single characters ( $M = 2.55_{ab}, 95\% \text{ CI} = [1.91, 3.20]$ ). See Figure 14.2 for the interaction.



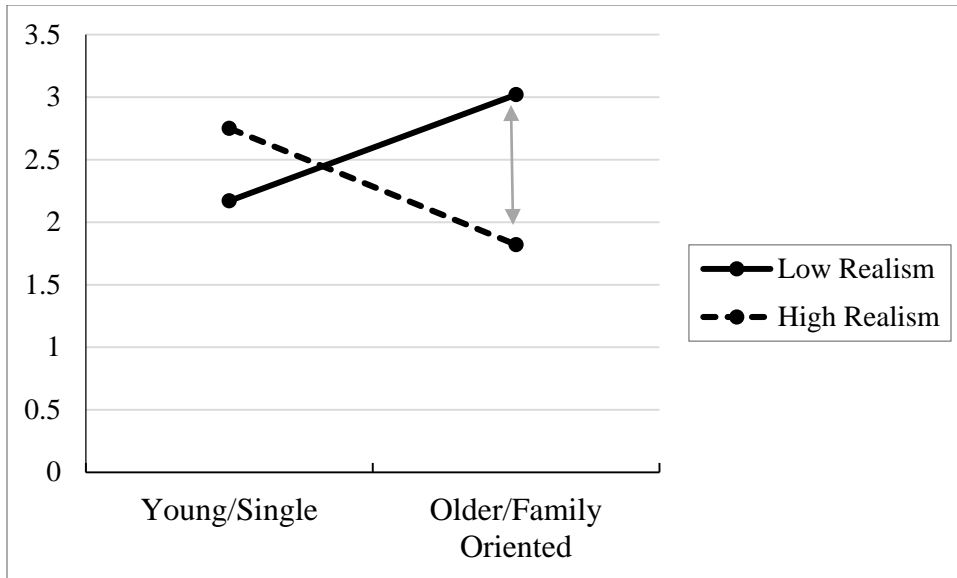


Figure 14.1. Interaction between program lifestyle and perceived realism for low social class programs on feelings of disappointment after watching the program.

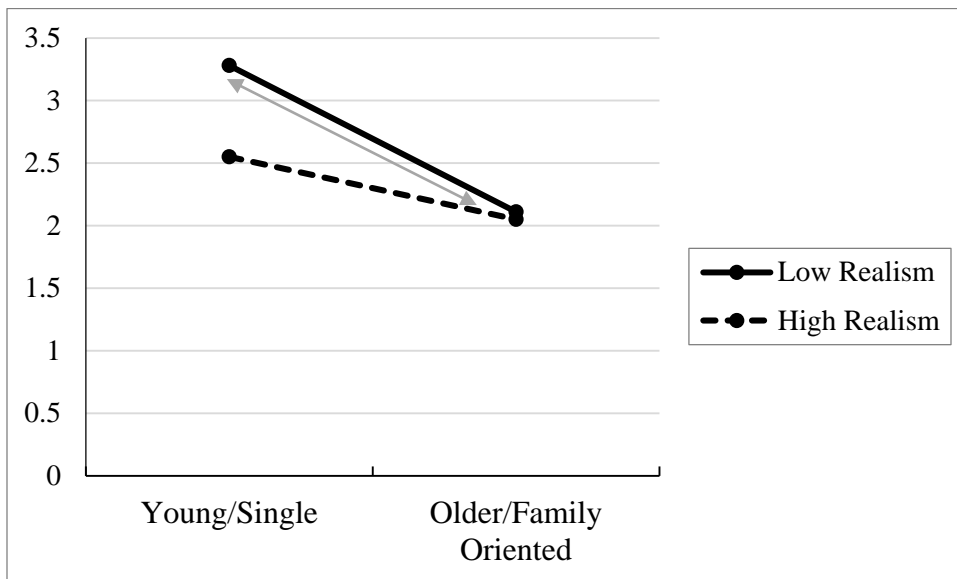


Figure 14.2. Interaction between program lifestyle and perceived realism for high social class programs on feelings of disappointment after watching the program.

In sum, for low social class programs, feelings of disappointment were strongest for those who had low perceived realism to television and viewed older, family oriented programs as compared to those who had high perceived realism of television and viewed older, family oriented programs. For high social class programs, feelings of disappointment were strongest for those who had low perceived realism of television and viewed young and single programs as compared to those who had high perceived realism of television and viewed older, family oriented programs and those who had low perceived realism of television and viewed older, family oriented programs. This suggests that for low social class programs, viewers who perceived television to be unrealistic were disappointed in the portrayals of older, family oriented characters. Alternatively, for high social class programs, viewers who perceived television to be unrealistic were disappointed in the portrayals of young and single characters. Considering that the viewers were largely middle class, young, and single themselves, feelings of disappointment could have resulted from both downward and upward comparisons. More concretely, viewers who viewed low social class, family oriented programs and did not perceive the content as realistic may have engaged in downward social comparisons based on social class. Feelings of disappointment emerged because of these worse off social comparison targets. For viewers who viewed high social class, young and single programs and did not perceive the content as realistic, they may have engaged in upward comparisons based on social class. The resulting feelings of disappointment may have stemmed from looking up to these better off individuals and feeling bad about their own situation. In all, feelings of disappointment may have not been effective in explaining directional social comparisons (upward, downward) but they were clearly related to general affective reactions to the content.

Table 21

*ANOVA Summary for Perceived Realism (Real), Program Social Class (Class), Program Lifestyle (Life), Program Type (Type), and Perceived Similarity (Sim) on Disappointment*

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	$\eta^2$	<i>p</i>
Real	1	2.14	.01	.15
Class	1	< .001	< .001	.99
Life	1	3.00	.02	.09
Type	1	.03	< .001	.86
Sim	1	.11	< .001	.74
Real x Class	1	.12	< .001	.73
Real x Life	1	1.36	.01	.25
Real x Type	1	< .001	< .001	.99
Real x Sim	1	1.72	.01	.19
Class x Life	1	4.33	.02	.04
Class x Type	1	.001	< .001	.98
Class x Sim	1	.09	< .001	.76
Life x Type	1	< .001	< .001	.99
Life x Sim	1	.12	< .001	.73
Type x Sim	1	.23	.001	.63
Real x Class x Life	1	7.86	.04	.006
Real x Class x Type	1	< .001	< .001	.99
Real x Class x Sim	1	1.23	.01	.27
Real x Life x Type	1	1.57	< .001	.21
Real x Life x Sim	1	.50	.003	.48
Real x Type x Sim	1	.10	< .001	.76
Class x Life x Type	1	.11	< .001	.74
Class x Life x Sim	1	.11	< .001	.74
Class x Type x Sim	1	.84	.004	.36
Life x Type x Sim	1	.42	.002	.52
Error	158			

*Note.* *N* = 189.

**Anxiousness.** The testing ANOVA assessed feelings of anxiousness after watching the program based on the relevant between-subjects factors (Table 22 for a summary). There was a significant main effect for program type,  $F(1, 158) = 4.39, p = .04, \eta^2 = .02$ , where people who viewed scripted programs ( $M = 2.35, SD = 1.11$ ) experienced more anxiousness than those who viewed reality programs ( $M = 1.89, SD = .96$ ). There was a significant two-way interaction between perceived realism and perceived similarity,  $F(1, 158) = 5.26, p = .02, \eta^2 = .02$ , where individuals with low perceived realism of television and high perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 2.47_b, 95\% \text{ CI} = [2.08, 2.86]$ ) and those with high perceived realism and low perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 2.39_b, 95\% \text{ CI} = [2.09, 2.68]$ ) experienced the strongest feelings of anxiousness as compared to those with low perceived realism and low perceived similarity ( $M = 1.68_a, 95\% \text{ CI} = [1.42, 1.94]$ ). There was no significant difference among those with high perceived realism and high perceived similarity ( $M = 2.30_{ab}, 95\% \text{ CI} = [1.92, 2.68]$ ). See Figure 15 for the interaction.

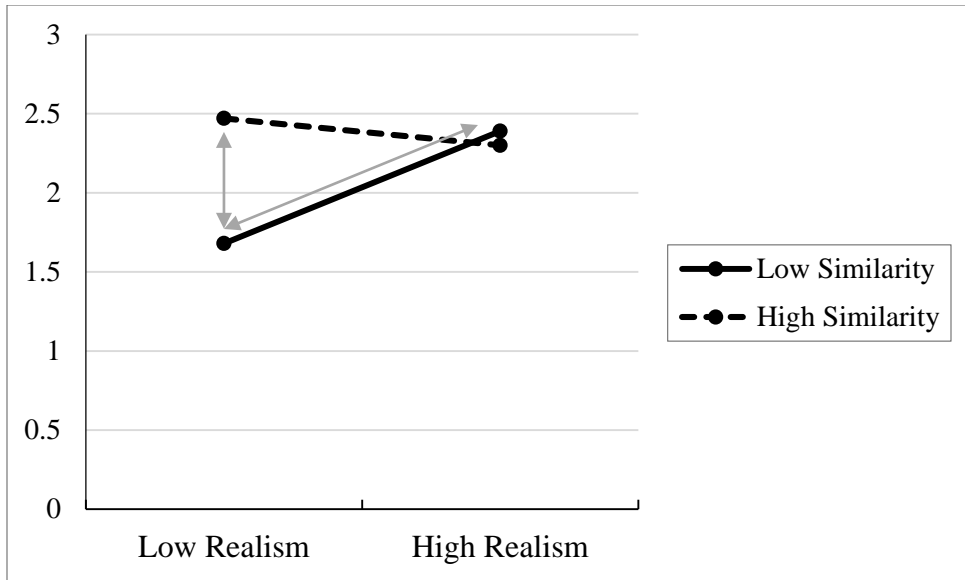
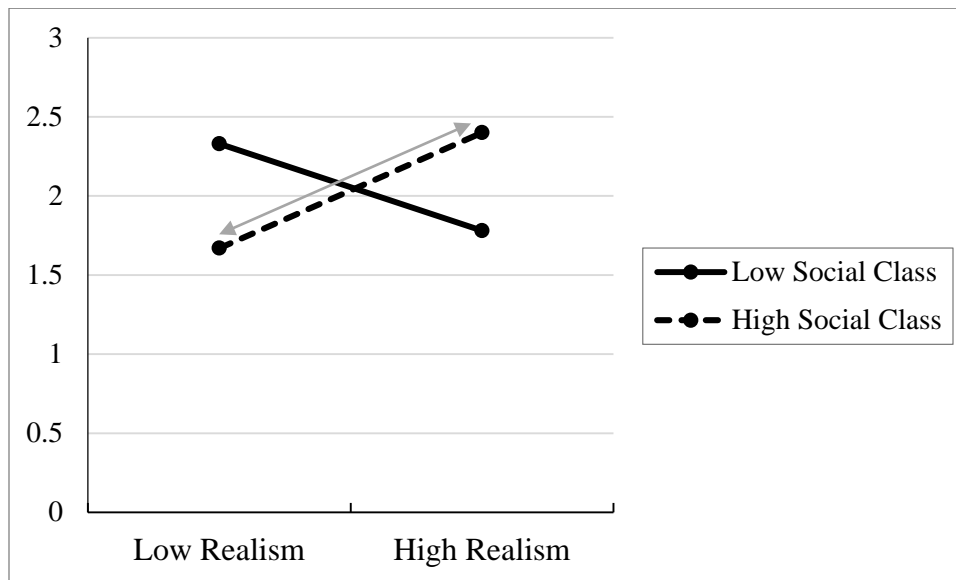


Figure 15. Interaction between perceived realism and perceived similarity on feelings of anxiousness after watching the program.

There were also several significant three-way interactions, including one of perceived realism, program social class, and program type,  $F(1, 158) = 5.93, p = .02, \eta^2 = .03$ . For reality programs, individuals with high perceived realism of television who viewed high social class programs ( $M = 2.40_b, 95\% \text{ CI} = [1.90, 2.90]$ ) experienced the strongest feelings of anxiousness as compared to those with low perceived realism of television who viewed high social class characters ( $M = 1.67_a, 95\% \text{ CI} = [1.22, 2.13]$ ). There were no significant differences among those with low perceived realism of television who viewed low social class programs ( $M = 2.33_{ab}, 95\% \text{ CI} = [1.74, 2.92]$ ) and those with high perceived realism of television who viewed low social class programs ( $M = 1.78_{ab}, 95\% \text{ CI} = [1.21, 2.35]$ ). See Figure 16.1 for the interaction.

For scripted programs, those with high perceived realism of television who viewed low social class programs experienced the strongest feelings of anxiousness ( $M = 2.83_b, 95\% \text{ CI} = [2.40, 3.25]$ ) as compared to those with low perceived realism of television who viewed low

social class programs ( $M = 2.03_a$ , 95% CI = [1.65, 2.41]). There were no significant differences among those with high perceived realism of television who viewed high social class programs ( $M = 2.47_{ab}$ , 95% CI = [2.06, 2.89]) and those with low perceived realism of television who viewed high social class programs ( $M = 2.27_{ab}$ , 95% CI = [1.85, 2.69]). See Figure 16.2 for the interaction.



*Figure 16.1.* Interaction between perceived realism and program social class for reality programs on feelings of anxiousness after watching the program.

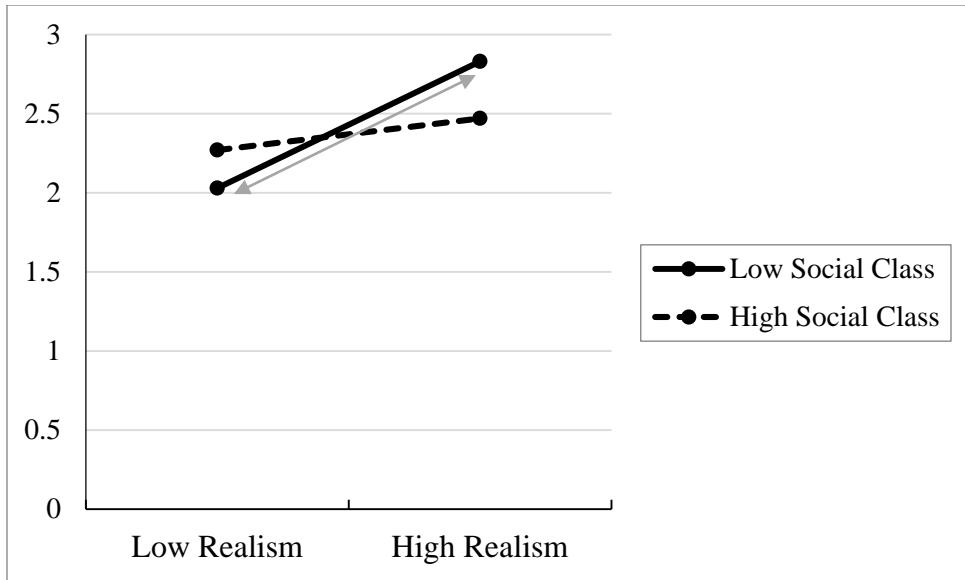


Figure 16.2. Interaction between perceived realism and program social class for scripted programs on feelings of anxiousness after watching the program.

There was a significant three-way interaction of program social class, program lifestyle, and program type,  $F(1, 158) = 5.05, p = .03, \eta^2 = .02$ . The significant portion of this interaction involved scripted programs, where feelings of anxiousness were strongest for those who viewed high social class, young and single characters ( $M = 2.91_b, 95\% \text{ CI} = [2.48, 3.33]$ ), as compared to high social class family oriented characters ( $M = 1.84_a, 95\% \text{ CI} = [1.43, 2.24]$ ). There were no significant differences among those who viewed low social class, family oriented characters ( $M = 2.40_{ab}, 95\% \text{ CI} = [1.97, 2.83]$ ) and those who viewed low social class, young and single characters ( $M = 2.35_{ab}, 95\% \text{ CI} = [1.97, 2.73]$ ). See Figures 17.1 and 17.2 for the interaction.

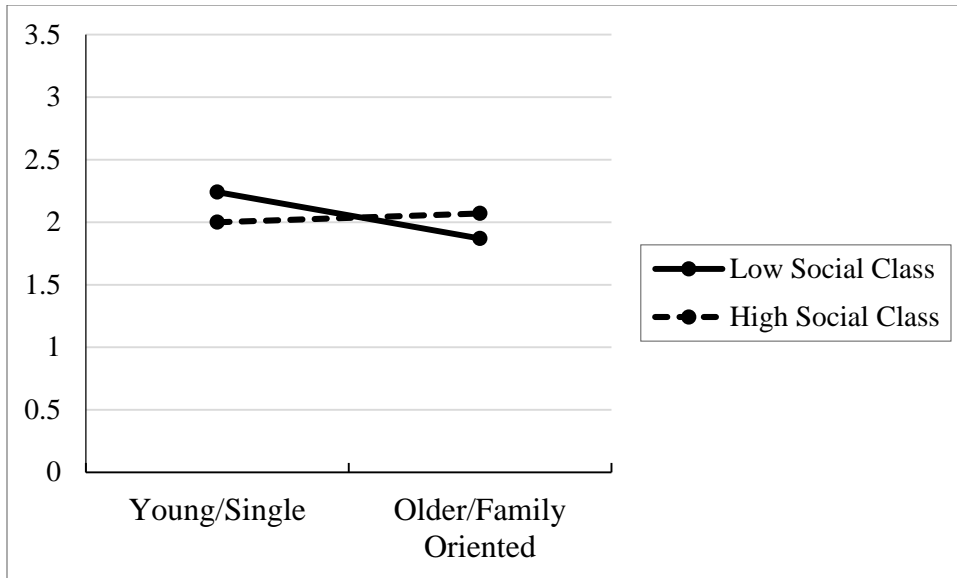


Figure 17.1. Interaction between program lifestyle and program social class for reality programs on feelings of anxiousness after watching the program.

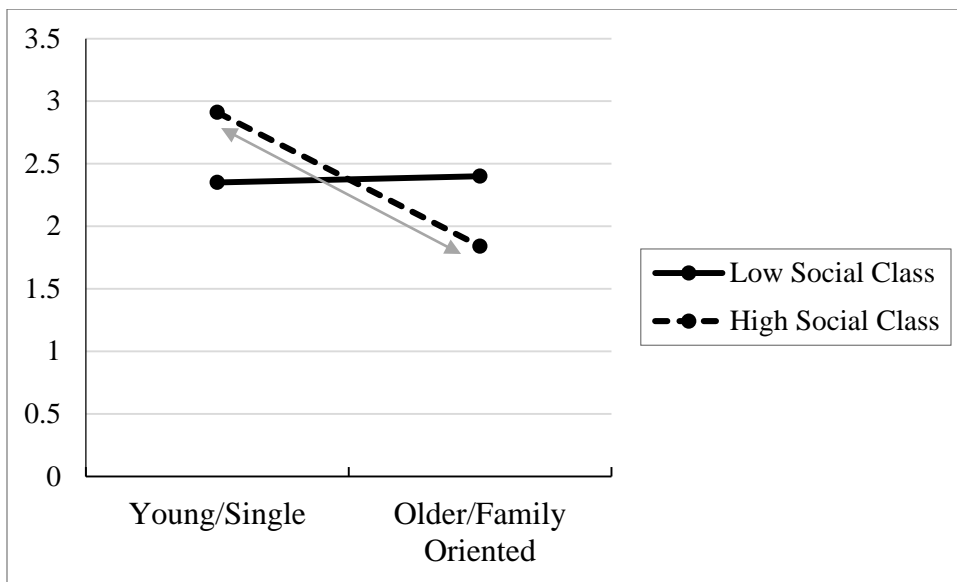


Figure 17.2. Interaction between program lifestyle and program social class for scripted programs on feelings of anxiousness after watching the program.



To summarize, feelings of anxiousness were influenced by a variety of relevant factors. First, those with low perceived realism of television and high perceived similarity to the characters likely had the strongest feelings of anxiousness because they felt similar to the represented characters, but believed the portrayals to be unrealistic. Second, similar to hedonic negative emotional responses and feelings of being upset, individuals with low perceived realism of television and low perceived similarity to the characters experienced significantly weaker feelings of anxiousness. This could be a result of not engaging with the content, both because it was not realistic and because the viewers did not perceive themselves as similar to the characters. Third, for reality programs, feelings of anxiousness were strong after viewing high social class programs and perceived realism of television was high. These feelings were significantly weaker for high social class reality programs when perceived realism was low. Viewers may have experienced feelings of anxiousness because they were not as well off as the reality cast members, whom they perceived to be realistic. Again, the lifestyles of high social class reality programs may have been highly emphasized, and for those with high perceived realism of television, it made the social class of the cast members of those represented within them that much more explicit.

For scripted programs, feelings of anxiousness were strongest for low social class programs when perceived realism was high and weakest for low social class programs when perceived realism was low. This suggests that viewers were anxious because they were looking down at worse off characters, whom they perceived to be realistic. In the final interaction, feelings of anxiousness were significantly stronger for high social class programs with youth oriented characters as compared to high social class programs with family oriented characters. This suggests that viewers were anxious of their own situation when looking up to the youth

oriented characters of a higher social class or that they experienced anxiousness because the high social class youth oriented characters were portrayed more negatively than high social class family oriented characters. These interactions suggest that the relationship between anxiousness and directional social comparisons (upward, downward) was complicated, as the effects demonstrated here spoke to both kinds of comparisons.

Table 22

*ANOVA Summary for Perceived Realism (Real), Program Social Class (Class), Program Lifestyle (Life), Program Type (Type), and Perceived Similarity (Sim) on Anxiousness*

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	$\eta^2$	<i>p</i>
Real	1	3.15	.01	.08
Class	1	.008	< .001	.93
Life	1	3.04	.01	.08
Type	1	4.39	.02	.04
Sim	1	3.39	.02	.07
Real x Class	1	1.16	.01	.28
Real x Life	1	1.62	.01	.21
Real x Type	1	1.55	.01	.22
Real x Sim	1	5.26	.02	.02
Class x Life	1	.94	.04	.34
Class x Type	1	.04	< .001	.85
Class x Sim	1	.18	< .001	.67
Life x Type	1	.40	.002	.53
Life x Sim	1	.10	< .001	.75
Type x Sim	1	2.03	.01	.16
Real x Class x Life	1	1.51	.01	.22
Real x Class x Type	1	5.93	.03	.02
Real x Class x Sim	1	.20	< .001	.66
Real x Life x Type	1	.17	< .001	.68
Real x Life x Sim	1	.14	< .001	.71
Real x Type x Sim	1	.20	< .001	.66
Class x Life x Type	1	5.05	.02	.03
Class x Life x Sim	1	.42	.002	.52
Class x Type x Sim	1	.21	< .001	.65
Life x Type x Sim	1	.08	< .001	.78
Error	158			

*Note.* *N* = 189.

**Disgust.** Feelings of disgust after viewing the program were tested with the relevant between-subjects factors. There was a main effect for program lifestyle,  $F(1, 158) = 4.64, p = .03, \eta^2 = .02$ , where those who watched programs featuring young and single characters ( $M = 2.91, SD = 1.38$ ) experienced stronger feelings of disgust than those who viewed programs featuring older and family oriented characters ( $M = 2.43, SD = 1.30$ ). See Table 23 for a summary of effects.

There was a significant two-way interaction between program lifestyle and program social class,  $F(1, 158) = 7.49, p = .007, \eta^2 = .03$ , that was subsumed by a significant three-way interaction between program lifestyle, program social class, and perceived realism,  $F(1, 158) = 8.36, p = .004, \eta^2 = .04$ , where the significant portion of the interaction involved those with low perceived realism of television. Feelings of disgust were strongest for those who watched high social class programs featuring young and single characters ( $M = 3.48_c, 95\% \text{ CI} = [2.94, 4.02]$ ), as compared to programs with low social class, young and single characters ( $M = 2.20_{ab}, 95\% \text{ CI} = [1.67, 2.73]$ ), and programs with high social class, family oriented characters ( $M = 1.87_a, 95\% \text{ CI} = [1.32, 2.41]$ ). Programs with low social class, family oriented characters ( $M = 2.86_{bc}, 95\% \text{ CI} = [2.17, 3.55]$ ) also instigated stronger feelings of disgust than programs with high social class, family oriented characters See Figures 18.1 and 18.2 for the interaction.

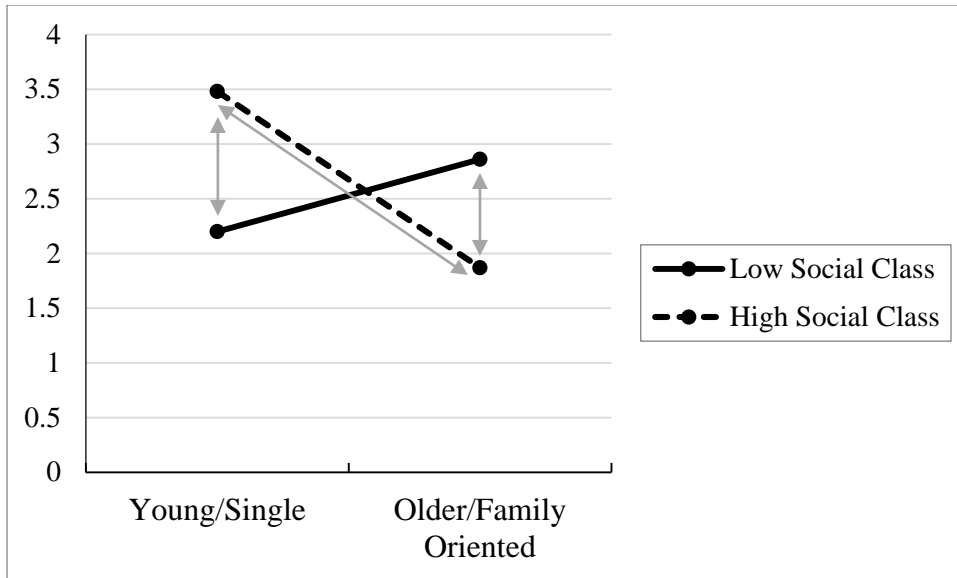


Figure 18.1. Interaction between program lifestyle and program social class for individuals with low perceived realism of television on feelings of disgust after watching the program.

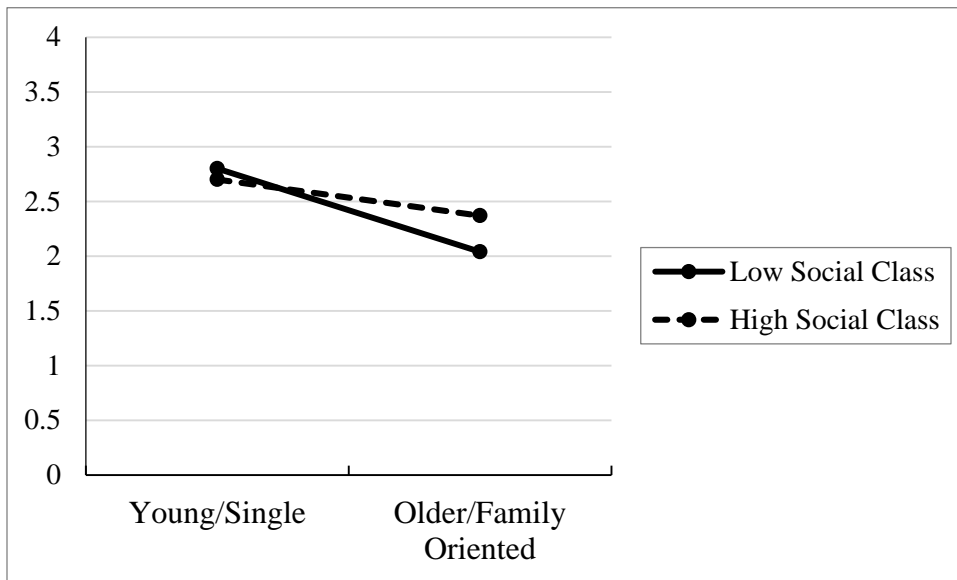


Figure 18.2. Interaction between program lifestyle and program social class for individuals with high perceived realism of television on feelings of disgust after watching the program.

In sum, feelings of disgust mattered significantly when perceived realism of television was low, that is, for viewers who did not perceive the content as realistic. For those individuals, feelings of disgust were strong for two types of programs: high social class programs with young and single characters and low social class programs with older, family oriented characters. It is possible that feelings of disgust were elicited as a result of both downward comparisons based on social class and as a result of the negative portrayals of young and single characters.

These findings suggest that feelings of disgust are strongly influenced by how realistic viewers deem the content to be. It is possible that because the viewers were less engaged with the content and considered it to be unrealistic, they were more likely to be disgusted by the featured characters. In this vein, disgust could be considered to be a downward contrastive social comparison response. Of consideration is that because viewers were not able to select their own content for viewing, programs considered to be unrealistic could have also initiated strong disgust responses because viewers were forced to watch something they would not select for themselves.

Table 23

*ANOVA Summary for Perceived Realism (Real), Program Social Class (Class), Program Lifestyle (Life), Program Type (Type), and Perceived Similarity (Sim) on Disgust*

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	$\eta^2$	<i>p</i>
Real	1	.40	.002	.53
Class	1	.04	< .001	.85
Life	1	4.64	.02	.03
Type	1	2.80	.01	.10
Sim	1	1.85	.01	.18
Real x Class	1	.11	< .001	.74
Real x Life	1	.06	< .001	.81
Real x Type	1	.03	< .001	.86
Real x Sim	1	1.59	.01	.21
Class x Life	1	7.50	.03	.007
Class x Type	1	.61	.003	.44
Class x Sim	1	1.69	.01	.20
Life x Type	1	.73	.003	.39
Life x Sim	1	.37	.002	.55
Type x Sim	1	.82	.003	.37
Real x Class x Life	1	8.36	.03	.004
Real x Class x Type	1	.01	< .001	.91
Real x Class x Sim	1	.57	.002	.45
Real x Life x Type	1	1.51	.01	.22
Real x Life x Sim	1	1.24	.01	.27
Real x Type x Sim	1	2.23	.01	.14
Class x Life x Type	1	.01	< .001	.91
Class x Life x Sim	1	.58	.002	.45
Class x Type x Sim	1	.03	< .001	.87
Life x Type x Sim	1	.07	< .001	.80
Error	158			

*Note.*  $N = 189$ .

**Embarrassment.** The testing ANOVA on feelings of embarrassment did not result in any significant effects in the model. See Table 24 for a summary.

Table 24

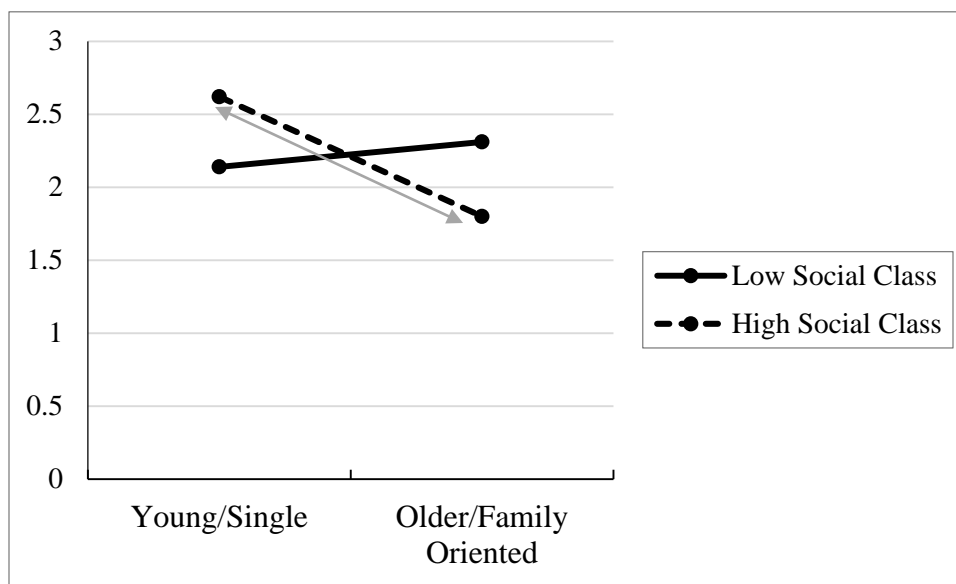
*ANOVA Summary for Perceived Realism (Real), Program Social Class (Class), Program Lifestyle (Life), Program Type (Type), and Perceived Similarity (Sim) on Embarrassment*

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	$\eta^2$	<i>p</i>
Real	1	.08	< .001	.78
Class	1	.07	< .001	.79
Life	1	1.51	.01	.22
Type	1	2.39	.01	.12
Sim	1	.72	.004	.40
Real x Class	1	.03	< .001	.87
Real x Life	1	.17	< .001	.68
Real x Type	1	.03	< .001	.86
Real x Sim	1	.68	.004	.41
Class x Life	1	.33	.002	.57
Class x Type	1	.62	.003	.43
Class x Sim	1	.04	< .001	.84
Life x Type	1	2.89	.03	.09
Life x Sim	1	.88	.01	.35
Type x Sim	1	.41	.002	.53
Real x Class x Life	1	.09	< .001	.77
Real x Class x Type	1	.04	< .001	.84
Real x Class x Sim	1	.85	.01	.36
Real x Life x Type	1	.08	< .001	.78
Real x Life x Sim	1	.06	< .001	.80
Real x Type x Sim	1	1.70	.01	.20
Class x Life x Type	1	.34	.002	.56
Class x Life x Sim	1	.57	.003	.45
Class x Type x Sim	1	.51	.003	.48
Life x Type x Sim	1	.41	.002	.52
Error	158			

*Note.*  $N = 189$ .

**Anger.** There were no significant main effects of anger, but the ANOVA demonstrated a significant two-way interaction between program social class and program lifestyle on feelings of anger,  $F(1, 158) = 5.75, p = .02, \eta^2 = .03$ , where those who viewed high social class programs featuring young and single characters ( $M = 2.62_b, 95\% \text{ CI} = [2.20, 3.05]$ ) experienced stronger feelings of anger as compared to those who viewed high social class programs featuring family oriented characters ( $M = 1.80_a, 95\% \text{ CI} = [1.42, 2.18]$ ). There were no significant differences

among those who viewed low social class programs featuring family oriented characters ( $M = 2.31_{ab}$ , 95% CI = [1.74, 2.88]) and those who viewed low social class programs featuring young and single characters ( $M = 2.14_{ab}$ , 95% CI = [1.78, 2.50]). See Figure 19 for the interaction and Table 25 for a summary of effects. This suggests that viewers likely felt anger toward the negative portrayals of the high social class, young and single characters as compared to the more positive portrayals of high social class, family oriented characters.



*Figure 19.* Interaction between program lifestyle and program social class on feelings of anger after watching the program.



Table 25

*ANOVA Summary for Perceived Realism (Real), Program Social Class (Class), Program Lifestyle (Life), Program Type (Type), and Perceived Similarity (Sim) on Anger*

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	$\eta^2$	<i>p</i>
Real	1	.43	.001	.51
Class	1	.02	< .001	.89
Life	1	1.94	.01	.17
Type	1	.55	.003	.46
Sim	1	.008	< .001	.93
Real x Class	1	2.19	.01	.14
Real x Life	1	.88	.01	.35
Real x Type	1	1.01	.01	.32
Real x Sim	1	3.27	.02	.07
Class x Life	1	5.75	.03	.02
Class x Type	1	.04	< .001	.85
Class x Sim	1	.12	< .001	.73
Life x Type	1	.001	< .001	.97
Life x Sim	1	.001	< .001	.97
Type x Sim	1	.34	.002	.56
Real x Class x Life	1	.51	.003	.48
Real x Class x Type	1	.50	.003	.48
Real x Class x Sim	1	1.24	.01	.27
Real x Life x Type	1	1.40	.01	.24
Real x Life x Sim	1	.54	.003	.46
Real x Type x Sim	1	.13	< .001	.72
Class x Life x Type	1	.03	< .001	.87
Class x Life x Sim	1	.17	< .001	.68
Class x Type x Sim	1	.34	.002	.56
Life x Type x Sim	1	.78	.004	.38
Error	158			

*Note.* *N* = 189.

**Discrete Social Comparison-Related Emotional Responses: A Summary.** The discrete social comparison-related emotions outlined above provided further insight into the relationship between social comparisons and emotional responses to mediated characters. Here, features of the content itself demonstrated to be relevant. There were several consistent main effects for program social class, where high social class programs resulted in strong feelings of jealousy and disappointment. Programs featuring young and single lifestyles, in combination with portraying

high social class characters, resulted in strong feelings of jealousy, disappointment, anger, and being upset. It is possible viewers experienced these strong negative emotional responses because they both engaged in upward social comparisons based on social class and responded to the largely negative portrayals of the young and single characters. Regarding H<sub>5</sub>, which predicted that reality programs would initiate stronger social comparison-related emotional responses than scripted programs, here it was largely unsupported.

The findings associated with the discrete emotions of hope, disappointment, and anxiousness were reflective of both upward and downward social comparisons. It is likely that these ambiguous results were partly influenced by forced exposure to the content, where the random forced exposure resulted in different directional social comparisons and emotional responses among the viewers, dependent on a variety of factors. Indeed, further support of this notion was reflected in the hedonic positive responses to the content. When perceived realism of television was high or perceived similarity to the characters was high, viewers experienced stronger hedonic positive emotional responses to the program. Alternatively, feelings of disgust toward the featured characters were stronger when perceived realism of television was low. This suggests that being forced to watch content that viewers would not select for themselves influences the subsequent emotional responses to that content. In the situation that viewers were assigned a program they found to be realistic or one that featured characters they felt similar to, they responded more positively. When they were assigned a program they did not find to be realistic, they responded more negatively.

## **Enjoyment**

**Fun and Entertainment.** Beyond social comparison-related emotional responses to the content, the ANOVA tested the between-subjects factors on how fun and entertaining the

program was. Several significant main effects emerged (see Table 26 for a summary). There was a main effect for perceived realism of television,  $F(1, 158) = 9.73, p = .002, \eta^2 = .08$ , where those who had high perceived realism of television ( $M = 4.74, SD = 1.70$ ) considered the program to be more fun and entertaining than those with low perceived realism of television ( $M = 3.59, SD = 1.85$ ). There was also a main effect for perceived similarity,  $F(1, 158) = 19.38, p < .001, \eta^2 = .03$ , where those who had high perceived similarity ( $M = 5.15, SD = 1.36$ ) to the characters considered the program to be more fun and entertaining than those who had low perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 3.47, SD = 1.86$ ).

In general, high perceived realism of television and high perceived similarity to the characters resulted in greater experiences of fun and entertainment after watching the program. This suggests that perceiving the content to be realistic and experiencing a sense of similarity with the featured characters were strong predictors as to whether mediated content was enjoyed by viewers. Again, these findings suggest that when the content was engaging to viewers, enjoyment was increased. Furthermore, high perceived realism of television and high perceived similarity to the characters predicted hedonic positive responses to content, and also upward assimilative and downward contrastive social comparison emotional responses, deemed by Smith (2000) to be beneficial. The findings here were in line with both hedonic positive and beneficial social comparison responses.

Table 26

ANOVA Summary for Perceived Realism (Real), Program Social Class (Class), Program Lifestyle (Life), Program Type (Type), and Perceived Similarity (Sim) on Fun/Entertainment

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	$\eta^2$	<i>p</i>
Real	1	9.73	.04	.002
Class	1	.14	< .001	.71
Life	1	.15	< .001	.70
Type	1	2.18	.01	.14
Sim	1	19.38	.08	< .001
Real x Class	1	.71	.003	.40
Real x Life	1	.42	.002	.52
Real x Type	1	.80	.003	.37
Real x Sim	1	.06	< .001	.80
Class x Life	1	1.35	.01	.25
Class x Type	1	.02	< .001	.89
Class x Sim	1	.02	< .001	.89
Life x Type	1	.12	< .001	.63
Life x Sim	1	.37	.001	.55
Type x Sim	1	1.95	.01	.17
Real x Class x Life	1	.17	< .001	.68
Real x Class x Type	1	.001	< .001	.97
Real x Class x Sim	1	.07	< .001	.80
Real x Life x Type	1	.001	< .001	.97
Real x Life x Sim	1	.21	< .001	.65
Real x Type x Sim	1	.33	< .001	.57
Class x Life x Type	1	2.35	.001	.13
Class x Life x Sim	1	.13	< .001	.72
Class x Type x Sim	1	.27	.001	.60
Life x Type x Sim	1	.07	< .001	.79
Error	158			

Note. *N* = 189.

**Appreciation and Meaningfulness.** The ANOVA tested the between-subjects factors on appreciation and meaningfulness of the program. Several significant main effects emerged (see Table 27 for a summary). There was a main effect for program type,  $F(1, 158) = 16.30, p < .001, \eta^2 = .06$ , where those who watched scripted programs ( $M = 3.22, SD = 1.54$ ) found them to be more meaningful than those who watched reality programs ( $M = 1.96, SD = 1.23$ ). There was also a significant main effect for perceived similarity,  $F(1, 158) = 18.60, p < .001, \eta^2 = .06$ ,

where those who had high perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 3.49$ ,  $SD = 1.57$ ) found the program to be more meaningful than those who had low perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 1.98$ ,  $SD = 1.15$ ).

There was a significant three-way interaction between perceived realism, program social class, and program type,  $F(1, 158) = 4.14$ ,  $p = .04$ ,  $\eta^2 = .01$ . The significant portion of this interaction involved those who had high perceived realism of television, where those who watched scripted programs featuring low social class characters ( $M = 4.15_b$ , 95% CI = [3.61, 4.69]) had higher appreciation for the program than those who watched scripted programs featuring high social class characters ( $M = 3.08_a$ , 95% CI = [2.56, 3.60]), reality programs featuring high social class characters ( $M = 2.67_a$ , 95% CI = [2.04, 3.29]), and reality programs featuring low social class characters ( $M = 1.82_a$ , 95% CI = [1.10, 2.54]). See Figures 20.1 and 20.2 for the interaction and Table 23 for a summary of effects.

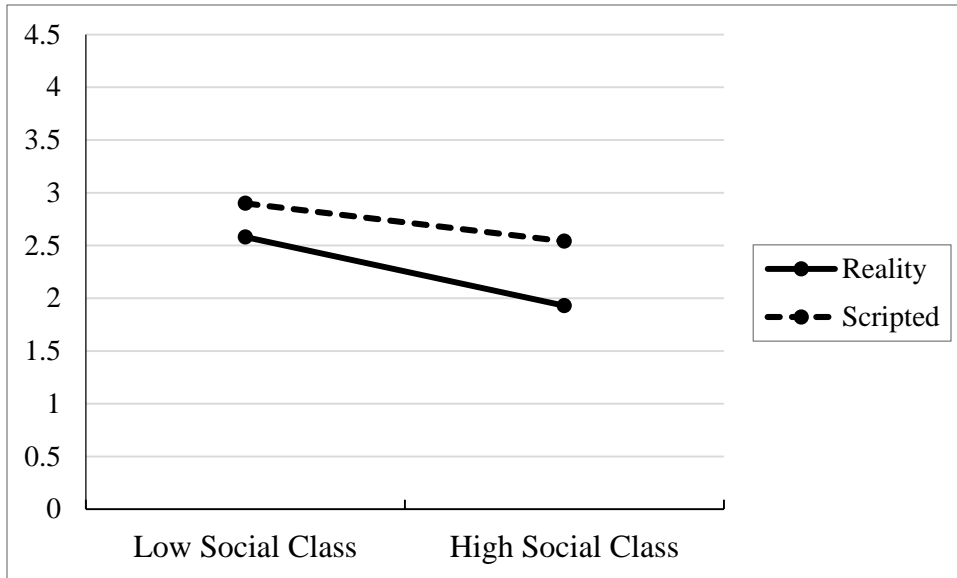


Figure 20.1. Interaction between program social class and program type for individuals with low perceived realism of television on appreciation and meaningfulness of the program.

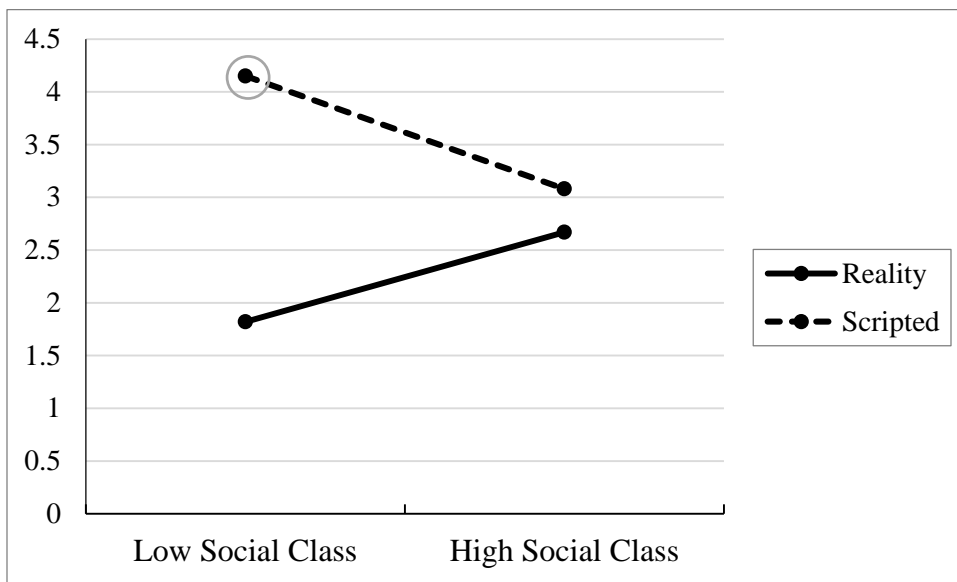


Figure 20.2. Interaction between program social class and program type for individuals with high perceived realism of television on appreciation and meaningfulness of the program.

Similar to the findings of fun and entertainment, high perceived similarity to the characters predicted increased appreciation and meaningfulness of the program. The interaction suggests that for those with high perceived realism of television, scripted programs with low social class characters instigated stronger feelings of appreciation to the content than any other program social class or program type. These findings revealed the distinct differences between entertainment and meaningfulness of mediated content when understanding overall enjoyment. Both fun/entertainment and appreciation/meaningfulness of mediated content were predicted by high perceived similarity to the characters, suggesting that this factor made the content more engaging, thus increasing enjoyment. When perceived realism of television was high, viewers likely found the scripted representations of low social class characters as more meaningful, but not necessarily as fun and entertaining. It is possible when low social class portrayals were perceived as realistic, meaningfulness and appreciation were increased, but not fun and entertainment, because this content may have been more difficult to watch.

Table 27

ANOVA Summary for Perceived Realism (Real), Program Social Class (Class), Program Lifestyle (Life), Program Type (Type), and Perceived Similarity (Sim) on Appreciation/Meaningfulness

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	$\eta^2$	<i>p</i>
Real	1	3.66	.01	.06
Class	1	1.10	.004	.30
Life	1	.71	.002	.40
Type	1	16.30	.06	< .001
Sim	1	18.60	.06	< .001
Real x Class	1	1.78	.01	.18
Real x Life	1	.005	< .001	.94
Real x Type	1	3.46	.01	.07
Real x Sim	1	.15	< .001	.70
Class x Life	1	.18	< .001	.67
Class x Type	1	2.67	.01	.10
Class x Sim	1	.12	< .001	.74
Life x Type	1	1.15	.003	.29
Life x Sim	1	.004	< .001	.95
Type x Sim	1	.92	.003	.34
Real x Class x Life	1	.09	< .001	.76
Real x Class x Type	1	4.14	.01	.04
Real x Class x Sim	1	1.95	.01	.17
Real x Life x Type	1	.53	.002	.47
Real x Life x Sim	1	1.45	.01	.23
Real x Type x Sim	1	1.97	.01	.16
Class x Life x Type	1	1.21	.004	.27
Class x Life x Sim	1	.13	< .001	.72
Class x Type x Sim	1	.05	< .001	.82
Life x Type x Sim	1	.26	< .001	.61
Error	158			

Note. *N* = 189.

### The Role of Individual Differences

**Viewer Gender.**  $H_6$  posited that females would report greater consumption of reality television than males. An independent samples t-test determined there was no significant difference between consumption of reality television between males ( $M = .24$ ,  $SD = .41$ ) and females ( $M = .38$ ,  $SD = .61$ );  $t(186) = -1.76$ ,  $p = .08$ .  $H_6$  was not supported.



**Social Comparison Orientation.** H<sub>7</sub> posed that individuals with a high social comparison orientation would report greater consumption of reality television than individuals with a low social comparison orientation. An independent samples t-test determined that there was no significant difference in the consumption of reality television among those with a high social comparison orientation ( $M = .39, SD = .54$ ) and those with a low social comparison orientation ( $M = .26, SD = .53$ );  $t(187) = -1.75, p = .08$ . As a result, H<sub>7</sub> was not supported.

**Perceived Realism.** H<sub>8</sub> suggested that those high in reality television consumption would report greater perceived realism of reality television than those low in reality television consumption. An independent samples t-test determined that those who were high in reality television consumption ( $M = 4.13, SD = .57$ ) reported significantly greater perceived realism of reality television as compared to those low in reality television consumption ( $M = 3.55, SD = .87$ );  $t(187) = -5.18, p < .001$ . H<sub>8</sub> was supported.

**Perceived Similarity.** RQ<sub>2</sub> asked whether there would be a difference between reality and scripted programs on feelings of perceived similarity to the characters. A chi-square analysis was performed and there was a significant association between the participants' feelings of perceived similarity to characters in the program (low, high) and the type of programs they watched (reality, scripted),  $X^2(1, N = 189) = 23.44, p < .001$ . Of those who watched a reality television program, 76.3 percent reported low perceived similarity to the characters. Of those who watched a scripted program, only 41.7 percent reported low perceived similarity to the characters, suggesting that viewers experienced greater perceived similarity to scripted characters as opposed to reality cast members.

## The Relationship between Desirable and Undesirable Social Comparisons and Enjoyment

H<sub>9</sub> posited that emotional responses associated with desirable social comparisons (upward assimilative and downward contrastive) would be positively related to enjoyment of the television program. Per Smith (2000), individual emotions were combined into appropriate categories of social comparison-related groupings. The emotions of inspiration, optimism, and admiration were combined to form upward assimilative emotions (Chronbach's  $\alpha = .89$ ). The emotions of contempt, scorn, *Schadenfreude*, and pride constituted the downward contrastive emotions (Chronbach's  $\alpha = .70$ ). Enjoyment<sup>1</sup> was positively correlated with upward assimilative emotions,  $r(189) = .70, p < .001$ . Enjoyment was also positively correlated with downward contrastive emotions,  $r(189) = .41, p < .001$ . H<sub>9</sub> was supported.

H<sub>10</sub> suggested that emotional responses associated with undesirable social comparisons (upward contrastive and downward assimilative) would be negatively related to enjoyment of the television program. The emotions of depression, shame, envy, and resentment comprised the upward contrastive emotions (Chronbach's  $\alpha = .74$ ). The emotions of pity, fear, worry, and sympathy were combined to form the downward assimilative emotions (Chronbach's  $\alpha = .80$ ). Enjoyment was not significantly correlated with upward contrastive emotions,  $r(189) = .13, p = .08$ . Enjoyment was positively correlated with downward assimilative emotions,  $r(189) = .20, p = .01$ . H<sub>10</sub> was not supported. In general, all four groupings of emotional responses (upward assimilative, downward contrastive, upward contrastive, downward assimilative) were correlated with enjoyment, although the correlation between upward contrastive emotions and enjoyment was not significant.

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<sup>1</sup> For the correlational analyses of H<sub>9</sub> and H<sub>10</sub>, an overall measurement of enjoyment was used, with items consisting of both fun and appreciation (Chronbach's  $\alpha = .93$ ).

## Discussion

The overarching goal of Study One was to examine the social comparisons that occur with reality and scripted television characters in entertainment television. The findings here lend insight to the types of emotional responses that occur during and after watching reality and scripted television programs, how they relate to directional social comparisons, and in turn, how they relate enjoyment. In general, it can be concluded that social comparisons do indeed occur when watching entertainment television and that these social comparisons are influenced by individual differences among the viewers and specific features of the content itself.

Although the self-image manipulation was not effective, it was the content features of the programming itself that provided strong evidence that upward and downward social comparisons were instigated during and after exposure to the programs. By using Smith's (2000) groupings of social comparison-related emotions, it was revealed that scripted programs, as compared to reality programs, initiated stronger upward assimilative (inspiration, optimism, admiration) and upward contrastive emotional responses (depression, shame, envy, resentment). This suggests that viewers engaged in upward social comparisons with scripted characters, as compared to reality television cast members, seeing them to be better off than themselves and feeling both inspired to be like them and feeling envious that they never could.

It was originally hypothesized that reality television programs would provide easier and more realistic social comparison targets than scripted programs and as a result, lead to stronger social comparison-related emotional reactions to the content. Here, scripted programs initiated stronger emotional responses associated with upward social comparisons than reality programs did. In hindsight, it is reasonable to expect that viewers would look up to scripted characters more than reality characters because they are fictionalized representations of people.

Accordingly, in scripted programs, the actuality of real, human behavior is never seen. These types of programs offer glossier, and in some ways, more glamorized portrayals of characters than reality programs do. Thus, in this context, the narrative and character development of scripted programs elicited stronger social comparison-related emotional responses than the unscripted and unpredictable portrayals of reality television cast members did. Those who viewed scripted programs also felt more similar to scripted characters than those who viewed reality programs felt towards reality cast members. These perceptions of perceived similarity were assessed after viewing, which suggests that viewers may have wanted to see themselves as similar to scripted characters, much more so than reality cast members, because they looked up to them as upward social comparison targets.

Program social class was another relevant content feature providing evidence that directional social comparisons took place during and after viewing. Low social class programs, as compared to high social class programs, initiated stronger downward assimilative (pity, fear, worry, sympathy) and downward contrastive (contempt, scorn, *Schadenfreude*, pride) emotional responses, suggesting that viewers engaged in downward social comparisons with mediated characters based on social class. This is a plausible outcome considering that most of the sample was middle class and therefore, engaged in downward comparisons with mediated characters of a lower social class.

The findings related to discrete social comparison-related responses, outside of Smith's (2000) framework, further illustrated the ways in which characters are portrayed on television and, in turn, how viewers respond to those representations. Similar to upward contrastive emotions (depression, shame, envy, resentment), feelings of jealousy were stronger for scripted programs than reality programs. Jealousy demonstrated a pattern that suggested upward social

comparisons were made based on program type, where the glamorized portrayals of scripted programs were more effective in instigating jealous feelings than the real world representations of reality cast members. Additional discrete emotional responses, including those of disappointment, anger, and being upset, were stronger for youth oriented programs featuring high social class characters. Here, viewers likely experienced negative emotional reactions because the characters were not only of a higher social class than them, but also because the portrayals of those young and single characters were negative in nature.

Other results associated with the discrete emotions of disappointment and disgust suggested that forced exposure to the content negatively influenced how viewers reacted to that content. Feelings of disappointment were strong for both family oriented and youth oriented programs, but only when perceived realism of television was low. This suggests that viewers were disappointed in the content because they did not perceive it as realistic, and as a result, were less engaged with it. Feelings of disgust demonstrated a similar pattern, where both high social class, youth oriented programs and low social class, family oriented programs elicited strong feelings of disgust, but only when perceived realism of television was low. This suggests that viewers disapproved of these characters, whether they were better or worse off than them, again, because they did not find the content to be realistic. Further support for the notion that forced exposure to the content influenced the emotional responses that followed was provided in the findings associated with anxiousness. Feelings of anxiousness were strong for high social class reality programs and low social class scripted programs, but only when perceived realism was high. Perceived realism appears to be a driving force here; anxiousness increased when perceived realism was high, which suggests that viewers reacted more strongly to the plot development and storyline because they believed the content to be realistic. In sum, when forced

to view content, participants likely experienced disappointment and disgust if they found it to be unrealistic and something they would not choose for themselves. Alternatively, when by random chance viewers were assigned to view content that they did find to be realistic, feelings of anxiousness were enhanced because they were more engaged with the presented material.

In general, participants who were high in reality television consumption reported significantly greater perceived realism of reality television as compared to those who were low in reality television consumption. This finding leads to several implications. First, there is a common assumption that reality television audiences generally know that reality programs are somewhat staged and heavily edited. However, Hill (2005) noted that not all viewers subscribe to this idea and the data here concur with that notion. It also supports previous scholarship that has demonstrated cultivation effects related to exposure to specific genres and channels as compared to overall exposure to television (Ferris, Smith, Greenberg, & Smith, 2007; Martins & Jensen, 2014; Ward & Carlson, 2013). The findings here suggest that reality television viewers are not discerning whether reality television programs are “staged” or not. Rather, the more they watch, the more they consider the programming to be real and representative of the social world.

Perceived similarity to the featured characters also proved to be an extremely relevant factor in social comparison related responses to the content, as demonstrated in previous research (Brown, Novick, Lord, & Richards, 1992; Lewis & Weaver, in press; Papies & Nicolaije, 2012). The findings here revealed that high perceived similarity to the mediated characters instigated stronger social comparison-related emotional responses to the content than those with low perceived similarity to the characters, no matter whether those emotional responses were assimilative or contrastive in nature. This suggests that feeling highly similar to the characters featured in reality and scripted programs makes the content more engaging and meaningful to the

viewer, and in turn, instigates stronger social comparison-related emotional responses to it, despite their assimilative or contrastive connotations.

Findings related to other individual differences, including gender and reality television use, inform the larger picture of entertainment television consumption patterns. In general, reality television programs make up a large part of top television programming for women, but not men (Adalian, 2012). In this study, there was no significant difference between consumption of reality television between males and females. This may relate to the college-aged sample employed in this study, as many reality television programs are marketed towards young and single audiences. In addition, the widespread prevalence of reality television is a relatively new phenomenon – within the last decade or so – and therefore, young audiences, including men and women, are more accustomed to reality programs on their television screens.

Beyond the relationship between social comparisons and their related emotional responses, this study examined the relationship between desirable and undesirable social comparisons and enjoyment. As Smith (2000) proposed, specific types of social comparisons have either desirable or undesirable outcomes for the perceiver. Upward assimilative and downward contrastive are deemed to be beneficial, while upward contrastive and downward assimilative are considered to be undesirable. It was suggested that the desirable social comparisons would be related to enjoyment and undesirable social comparisons would not. Interestingly, enjoyment was positively correlated with the hypothesized upward assimilative and downward contrastive emotional responses and it was also positively correlated with undesirable downward assimilative emotional responses. These findings intimate that assimilative emotional responses, whether upward or downward in nature, were an important component of media enjoyment in this context. It was not detrimental for viewers to engage in

downward assimilative social comparisons with worse off mediated characters. Alternatively, experiencing feelings like pity and sympathy were positively associated with enjoyment. Considering that enjoyment was measured using components of both fun/entertainment and appreciation/meaningfulness, it is likely that experiencing these downward assimilative emotional responses increased appreciation for the characters and meaningfulness of the programs. Overall, these findings speak to the complicated relationship between hedonic and eudaimonic gratifications and enjoyment of mediated content (Oliver & Bartsch, 2010; Oliver & Raney, 2011), where entertainment media can both be perceived as hedonically motivated (for fun and entertainment) and eudaimonically motivated (for higher meaning and appreciation).

In further understanding the relationship between specific content features and enjoyment, family oriented programs, as compared to youth oriented programs, initiated stronger upward assimilative, downward contrastive, and downward assimilative emotional responses – the same groupings that were correlated with enjoyment. This suggests that family oriented programs, although they portrayed characters of a different lifestyle, were more enjoyable for young audiences than youth oriented programs. It could be that youth oriented entertainment programs featured negative portrayals of the characters, e.g., selfishness, gossip, fighting. Alternatively, family oriented programs may have emphasized the interactions among family members and portrayed themes like care and forgiveness. Although there were no specific hypotheses that predicted that viewers would react differently to programs featuring a family oriented lifestyle as compared to programs featuring a young and single lifestyle, it is reasonable to expect that the valence of these portrayals (i.e., positive, negative) would influence the subsequent emotional responses to the content. Indeed the programs selected for this study reflect current programming trends, where programs featuring young and single characters often



portray a party lifestyle engaging in poor behavior with little regard for authority (e.g., *Jersey Shore*, *Pretty Little Liars*).

Furthermore, viewers with high perceived realism of television, as compared to those with low perceived realism of television, experienced stronger upward assimilative, downward contrastive, and downward assimilative emotional responses – emotional responses related to enjoyment. Perceived realism of television also predicted several other emotional reactions to the content. Those with high perceived realism of television, as compared to those with low perceived realism of television, experienced stronger hedonic positive and negative emotional responses to the content. This demonstrates that for viewers, feeling the programs and characters featured within them are real likely makes the programs more engaging and meaningful for them, in turn, resulting in enjoyment.

From the findings above, a portrait of the viewers' media experience can be drawn that consists of influential individual differences, social comparison-related emotional responses, overall valenced responses, and enjoyment to the content. The findings of H<sub>3</sub> and H<sub>4</sub> determined that when viewers felt highly similar to the mediated characters, as compared to dissimilar, both assimilative and contrastive social comparison emotions to the content were stronger. This reinforces the notion that assimilative and contrastive social comparison processes are not mutually exclusive and can occur in tandem. In all, upward assimilative emotional responses, downward contrastive emotional responses, positive hedonic valenced responses to the content, and feelings of fun and enjoyment were all predicted by high perceived realism of television and high perceived similarity to the characters. Furthermore, overall enjoyment was positively correlated with upward assimilative and downward contrastive emotional responses. As

mentioned above, upward contrastive and downward assimilative social comparisons are considered to be beneficial (Smith, 2000).

Alternatively, negative hedonic valenced responses to the content demonstrated patterns similar to upward contrastive responses, which are social comparisons that are deemed to be detrimental (Smith, 2000). Furthermore, overall enjoyment was not significantly correlated with upward contrastive emotional responses. Downward assimilative responses were positively correlated with overall enjoyment, which speaks to the appreciation and meaningfulness dimension of enjoyment. When viewers with high perceived realism of television viewed low social class, scripted programs, feelings of meaningfulness and appreciation were increased. This suggests that downward assimilative social comparisons are not explicitly negative in nature, in that feelings like sympathy and pity are not necessarily detrimental to viewer. Instead, they create increased engagement and empathic tendencies with the characters, which make the content more meaningful.

What these patterns suggest is that beneficial social comparisons are related to positive responses to media content, and in turn, enjoyment. Alternatively, upward contrastive social comparisons (which are undesirable) are not significantly related to enjoyment, demonstrating similar patterns to negative responses to the content. Downward assimilative responses were more complicated, in that, viewers felt sympathy for worse off others' situations, increasing meaningfulness and appreciation of the content. To be sure, the emotional responses that occurred as a result of directional social comparisons with mediated characters were related to overall affective responses to the content.

To conclude, this first study demonstrated both the directional social comparisons that take place when viewing reality and scripted television, the relevant factors that influence those

social comparisons, and their resulting affective responses, including enjoyment. However, this study was conducted using a forced exposure environment, where participants were randomly assigned a program for viewing. The second study overcame that limitation by creating a natural, selective exposure environment, where individuals were free to choose their own entertainment media. It was the hope with Study Two to not only replicate the findings presented here in Study One, but to elucidate the differences between forced and selective exposure experimental environments.

## **CHAPTER THREE: Study Two**

### **Introduction of Study Two**

Study Two was developed as both a replication to Study One and as an examination of the role of selective exposure in social comparison processes. In this study, participants were given the opportunity to choose a program for viewing, as compared to being placed in a forced exposure environment. Study Two assessed the same hypotheses and research questions presented in Study One: the role of self-image, the role of perceived similarity, the differences between reality and scripted programs, the role of individual differences, and enjoyment. In addition, Study Two added several hypotheses and research questions specifically related to media choice behavior in a selective exposure environment.

#### **The Role of Selective Exposure**

Because this study employed selective exposure, several new hypotheses and research questions specifically regarding media choice behavior were developed. The first relates to the function of perceived similarity in social comparisons, as previous research has demonstrated that emphasizing similarities between the comparer and social comparison target leads to assimilative effects (Brown, Novick, Lord, & Richards, 1992; Lewis & Weaver, in press; Papiés & Nicolaije, 2012). Thus, the following hypothesis was presented:

H<sub>11</sub>: Viewers will be more likely to select programs that feature characters of a similar lifestyle and social class than programs that feature characters of a dissimilar lifestyle and social class.

As also described above, the selective exposure for self- and affect-management model (SESAM; Knobloch-Westerwick, 2014) posits that individuals select media messages to regulate

their self-concept, including self-esteem. Accordingly, a hypothesis and research question were posed to test this aspect of the SESAM:

H<sub>12</sub>: Individuals who select programs featuring low social class characters, as compared to individuals who select programs featuring high social class characters, will report greater state self-esteem after viewing.

RQ<sub>3</sub>: Will individuals who select reality television programs featuring low social class characters report greater state self-esteem than those who select scripted programs featuring low social class characters?

The selective exposure design of this study also allowed for a research question related to the overall media choice behavior among individuals:

RQ<sub>4</sub>: What preferences do individuals have for televised media entertainment?

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Undergraduate students ( $N = 345$ ) were recruited from several classes at Indiana University to participate in this study in exchange for extra credit. Fifty-one of those participants were excluded from the study because they reported issues with viewing the program, leaving an  $N$  of 294. The age of participants ranged from 18 to 46 ( $M = 19.93$ ) with 115 males and 178 females. One participant did not report their gender.

### **Procedure**

The procedure was nearly identical to Study One except in this case, participants chose an episode of a television program for viewing, lasting approximately 40 minutes (the same length as programming in Study One).

## Materials

**Television Programs.** Following the same structure of Study One, a selection of eight programs was used in this study (see Table 28). The eight programs were presented with a screen capture of the cast, the title of the show, the type of show (i.e., scripted, reality), and a short description similar to ones seen on IMDb.com, a reliable television and film database (see Appendix K). The description emphasized the cast's type of lifestyle (young and single or family oriented) and their social class (low or high). The presentation of the program descriptions was randomized.

Table 28

### *Television Programs by Condition*

<u>Title (Episode)</u>	<u>Type</u>	<u>Age/Status</u>	<u>Social class</u>
The O.C. (2)	Scripted	Youth-focused	High
I Just Want My Pants Back (2 & 3)	Scripted	Youth-focused	Low
Trophy Wife (2 & 3)	Scripted	Family-focused	High
Raising Hope (2 & 3)	Scripted	Family-focused	Low
NYC Prep (2)	Reality	Youth-focused	High
Party Down South (2)	Reality	Youth-focused	Low
Chrisley Knows Best (2 & 3)	Reality	Family-focused	High
Here Comes Honey Boo Boo (2 & 3)	Reality	Family-focused	Low

## Measures

The measures implemented in these study were the same as in Study One. See Table 29 for reports of the measures' reliabilities.

Table 29

### *Reliability for Measures*

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<u>Measure</u>	<u>Chronbach's <math>\alpha</math></u>
Perceived Realism of Reality TV	.86
Perceived Realism of Scripted TV	.84
Social Comparison Orientation	.71
State Self-Esteem	.92
Upward Assimilative Emotions	.88
Upward Contrastive Emotions	.74
Downward Assimilative Emotions	.82
Downward Contrastive Emotions	.70
Hedonic Positive Emotions	.91
Hedonic Negative Emotions	.80
Enjoyment: Fun	.96
Enjoyment: Meaningfulness	.92

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## **Results**

### **The Role of Perceived Realism**

Similar to Study One, data analysis was completed using a factorial analysis of variance (ANOVA), this time including four between-subjects factors: program social class (low, high), program lifestyle (young and single, older and family oriented), program type (reality, scripted), and perceived similarity to the characters (low, high). Unlike Study One, perceived realism of television was not included in the factorial ANOVA because it did not demonstrate to be a relevant between-subjects factor on social comparison-related emotional responses to the content (see Tables 30 and 31 for upward comparison emotions and Tables 32 and 33 for downward comparison emotions). Furthermore, follow up chi-square analyses were performed and there were no significant associations between perceived realism of television (low, high) and program social class (low, high),  $X^2(1, N = 293) = .03, p = .91$ , program lifestyle (youth oriented, family

oriented),  $X^2(1, N = 293) = .49, p = .55$ , or program type (reality, scripted),  $X^2(1, N = 293) = 3.00, p = .09$ .

This suggests that when individuals were placed in a selective exposure environment (Study Two), they did not choose programs based on their overall perceived realism of television. It is more likely that they selected the programs based on other factors, including perceived similarity to the characters. This is because participants were presented with a screen capture of the each program's cast, a short description of the program, and whether it was a reality or scripted program. Perceptions of how realistic the content might be did not play a significant role in the selection of the programs or the subsequent emotional responses them. Alternatively in Study One, once participants were forced to view a specific program and because choosing content for consumption was not an option, high perceptions of realism of the content did play a significant role, engaging the viewer and resulting in stronger emotional responses after viewing. To be clear, perceived realism of television was not a driving factor in the selection of content in this study, but as demonstrated in Study One, it was a relevant predictor of emotional reactions to the content.

Table 30



ANOVA Summary for Perceived Realism (Real), Program Social Class (Class), Program Lifestyle (Life), Program Type (Type), and Perceived Similarity (Sim) on Upward Assimilative Emotions

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	$\eta^2$	<i>p</i>
Real	1	.33	< .001	.57
Real x Class	1	4.49	.01	.04
Real x Life	1	.15	< .001	.70
Real x Type	1	3.63	.01	.06
Real x Sim	1	.60	.001	.44
Real x Class x Life	1	< .001	< .001	.99
Real x Class x Type	1	.54	.001	.46
Real x Class x Sim	1	.53	.001	.43
Real x Life x Type	1	.62	.001	.84
Real x Life x Sim	1	.04	< .001	.76
Real x Type x Sim	1	.10	< .001	.36
Error	261			

Note. *N* = 293.

Table 31

ANOVA Summary for Perceived Realism (Real), Program Social Class (Class), Program Lifestyle (Life), Program Type (Type), and Perceived Similarity (Sim) on Upward Contrastive Emotions

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	$\eta^2$	<i>p</i>
Real	1	.08	< .001	.78
Real x Class	1	.92	.003	.34
Real x Life	1	.78	.003	.38
Real x Type	1	.004	< .001	.95
Real x Sim	1	.18	< .001	.67
Real x Class x Life	1	.86	.003	.36
Real x Class x Type	1	.23	< .001	.63
Real x Class x Sim	1	.21	< .001	.65
Real x Life x Type	1	.91	.003	.34
Real x Life x Sim	1	.03	< .001	.87
Real x Type x Sim	1	.46	.002	.50
Error	261			

Note. *N* = 293.

Table 32

*ANOVA Summary for Perceived Realism (Real), Program Social Class (Class), Program Lifestyle (Life), Program Type (Type), and Perceived Similarity (Sim) on Downward Assimilative Emotions*

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	$\eta^2$	<i>p</i>
Real	1	1.01	.003	.32
Real x Class	1	.15	< .001	.70
Real x Life	1	.06	< .001	.80
Real x Type	1	.16	< .001	.68
Real x Sim	1	.11	< .001	.74
Real x Class x Life	1	1.16	.04	.28
Real x Class x Type	1	.11	< .001	.74
Real x Class x Sim	1	.29	< .001	.60
Real x Life x Type	1	.05	< .001	.82
Real x Life x Sim	1	.27	< .001	.61
Real x Type x Sim	1	.67	.002	.41
Error	261			

Note. *N* = 293.

Table 33

*ANOVA Summary for Perceived Realism (Real), Program Social Class (Class), Program Lifestyle (Life), Program Type (Type), and Perceived Similarity (Sim) on Downward Contrastive Emotions*

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	$\eta^2$	<i>p</i>
Real	1	.61	.002	.44
Real x Class	1	.55	.002	.46
Real x Life	1	.11	< .001	.74
Real x Type	1	1.63	.01	.20
Real x Sim	1	.14	< .001	.71
Real x Class x Life	1	2.27	.01	.13
Real x Class x Type	1	.02	< .001	.89
Real x Class x Sim	1	.03	< .001	.87
Real x Life x Type	1	.14	< .001	.71
Real x Life x Sim	1	.50	.002	.48
Real x Type x Sim	1	1.25	.004	.27
Error	261			

Note. *N* = 293.

**The Role of Self-Image**

H<sub>1</sub> predicted that individuals with a self-enhanced image, as compared to those with a threatened self-image would experience stronger emotions associated with upward social comparisons after viewing the television program. Respectively, H<sub>2</sub> predicted that individuals with a threatened self-image, as compared to individuals with an enhanced self-image, would experience stronger emotions associated with downward social comparisons after viewing the television program.

In addition to threat and enhancement conditions, this study utilized a control condition with no self-image manipulation. Unfortunately, the self-image manipulation again failed to create significant differences among the self-image threat and control conditions in the expected directions. Those in the threat condition reported a non-significant change in state self-esteem from time one ( $M = 3.44, SD = .61$ ) to time two ( $M = 3.43, SD = .61$ ),  $t(95) = .36, p = .72$ . Those in the control condition reported a significant change in state self-esteem from time one ( $M = 3.44, SD = .73$ ) to time two ( $M = 3.51, SD = .78$ ),  $t(107) = -3.48, p < .001$ , despite not being exposed to any manipulation. Of all the conditions, those in the enhancement condition did report a significant change in state self-esteem from time one ( $M = 3.45, SD = .66$ ) to time two ( $M = 3.56, SD = .69$ ),  $t(92) = -3.70, p < .001$ , in the predicted direction.

Including self-image as an independent factor in a factorial analysis of variance (ANOVA) that had five between-subjects factors: self-image (threat, control, enhancement), program social class (low, high), program lifestyle (young and single, older and family oriented), program type (reality, scripted), and perceived similarity to the characters (low, high) did not produce consistent significant effects on upward comparison emotions (see Tables 34 and 35) or downward comparison emotions (see Tables 36 and 37). Similar to Study One, it is likely that the thought experiment was not a strong enough manipulation as compared to other established

self-image manipulations. As a result, self-image was not included as a between-subjects factor in subsequent analyses.

Table 34

*ANOVA Summary for Self-Image (Image), Program Social Class (Class), Program Lifestyle (Life), Program Type (Type), and Perceived Similarity (Sim) on Upward Assimilative Emotions*

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	$\eta^2$	<i>p</i>
Image	1	.10	< .001	.91
Image x Class	1	2.03	.01	.13
Image x Life	1	.73	.004	.48
Image x Type	1	.69	.003	.50
Image x Sim	1	1.25	.01	.29
Image x Class x Life	1	.86	.004	.43
Image x Class x Type	1	1.60	.01	.20
Image x Class x Sim	1	.53	.003	.59
Image x Life x Type	1	2.04	.01	.13
Image x Life x Sim	1	2.13	.01	.12
Image x Type x Sim	1	.10	< .001	.90
Error	261			

*Note.* *N* = 293.

Table 35

ANOVA Summary for Self-Image (Image), Program Social Class (Class), Program Lifestyle (Life), Program Type (Type), and Perceived Similarity (Sim) on Upward Contrastive Emotions

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	$\eta^2$	<i>p</i>
Image	1	.71	.01	.49
Image x Class	1	2.26	.02	.11
Image x Life	1	1.08	.01	.34
Image x Type	1	.03	< .001	.97
Image x Sim	1	1.46	.01	.23
Image x Class x Life	1	.03	< .001	.97
Image x Class x Type	1	.08	< .001	.92
Image x Class x Sim	1	1.03	.01	.34
Image x Life x Type	1	3.77	.02	.02
Image x Life x Sim	1	2.51	.02	.08
Image x Type x Sim	1	.45	.003	.64
Error	261			

Note. *N* = 293.

Table 36

ANOVA Summary for Self-Image (Image), Program Social Class (Class), Program Lifestyle (Life), Program Type (Type), and Perceived Similarity (Sim) on Downward Assimilative Emotions

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	$\eta^2$	<i>p</i>
Image	1	.32	.002	.72
Image x Class	1	.20	.001	.82
Image x Life	1	.08	< .001	.93
Image x Type	1	.60	.004	.55
Image x Sim	1	1.53	.01	.22
Image x Class x Life	1	.33	.002	.72
Image x Class x Type	1	.57	.004	.57
Image x Class x Sim	1	.32	.002	.73
Image x Life x Type	1	1.08	.01	.34
Image x Life x Sim	1	1.03	.01	.36
Image x Type x Sim	1	2.05	.01	.13
Error	261			

Note. *N* = 293.

Table 37

ANOVA Summary for Self-Image (Image), Program Social Class (Class), Program Lifestyle (Life), Program Type (Type), and Perceived Similarity (Sim) on Downward Contrastive Emotions

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	$\eta^2$	<i>p</i>
Image	1	.41	.003	.67
Image x Class	1	1.40	.01	.25
Image x Life	1	2.48	.02	.09
Image x Type	1	.29	.002	.75
Image x Sim	1	.16	.001	.86
Image x Class x Life	1	.39	.003	.68
Image x Class x Type	1	.95	.01	.39
Image x Class x Sim	1	.24	.002	.79
Image x Life x Type	1	2.23	.01	.11
Image x Life x Sim	1	.67	.002	.51
Image x Type x Sim	1	3.37	.02	.04
Error	261			

Note. *N* = 293.

### The Role of Viewer Social Class

RQ<sub>1</sub> asked what influence the participants' social class had on social comparison-related emotional responses to the programs. Including viewer social class (lower, middle, upper) as an independent factor in the ANOVA (replacing self-image) did not produce consistent significant effects on upward comparison emotions (see Tables 38 and 39) or downward comparison emotions (see Tables 40 and 41). Just as in Study One, this suggests that the influence of viewer social class on social comparison-related emotional responses was limited. As a result, viewer social class was not implemented as a between-subjects factor in the analyses that follow.

Table 38

ANOVA Summary for Viewer Social Class (ViewClass), Program Social Class (Class), Program Lifestyle (Life), Program Type (Type), and Perceived Similarity (Sim) on Upward Assimilative Emotions

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	$\eta^2$	<i>p</i>
ViewClass	2	.53	.002	.59
ViewClass x Class	2	1.35	.01	.26
ViewClass x Life	2	.32	.001	.73
ViewClass x Type	2	.89	.004	.41
ViewClass x Sim	2	.56	.003	.57
ViewClass x Class x Life	1	.91	.002	.34
ViewClass x Class x Type	1	.52	.001	.47
ViewClass x Class x Sim	1	2.70	.01	.10
ViewClass x Life x Type	1	.05	< .001	.82
ViewClass x Life x Sim	1	.23	< .001	.63
ViewClass x Type x Sim	1	.07	< .001	.79
Error	255			

Note. *N* = 293.

Table 39

ANOVA Summary for Viewer Social Class (ViewClass), Program Social Class (Class), Program Lifestyle (Life), Program Type (Type), and Perceived Similarity (Sim) on Upward Contrastive Emotions

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	$\eta^2$	<i>p</i>
ViewClass	2	1.02	.01	.36
ViewClass x Class	2	1.78	.01	.17
ViewClass x Life	2	2.50	.02	.08
ViewClass x Type	2	.72	.01	.49
ViewClass x Sim	2	.71	.004	.49
ViewClass x Class x Life	1	.61	.002	.44
ViewClass x Class x Type	1	.002	< .001	.97
ViewClass x Class x Sim	1	.04	< .001	.84
ViewClass x Life x Type	1	3.25	.01	.07
ViewClass x Life x Sim	1	.33	.001	.57
ViewClass x Type x Sim	1	9.41	.03	.002
Error	255			

Note. *N* = 293.

Table 40

ANOVA Summary for Viewer Social Class (ViewClass), Program Social Class (Class), Program Lifestyle (Life), Program Type (Type), and Perceived Similarity (Sim) on Downward Assimilative Emotions

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	$\eta^2$	<i>p</i>
ViewClass	2	.48	.003	.62
ViewClass x Class	2	.41	.03	.66
ViewClass x Life	2	.07	< .001	.93
ViewClass x Type	2	.007	< .001	.99
ViewClass x Sim	2	.11	< .001	.90
ViewClass x Class x Life	1	2.25	.01	.14
ViewClass x Class x Type	1	.56	.002	.45
ViewClass x Class x Sim	1	.24	< .001	.62
ViewClass x Life x Type	1	.43	.001	.51
ViewClass x Life x Sim	1	.10	< .001	.76
ViewClass x Type x Sim	1	1.04	.003	.31
Error	255			

Note. *N* = 293.

Table 41

ANOVA Summary for Viewer Social Class (ViewClass), Program Social Class (Class), Program Lifestyle (Life), Program Type (Type), and Perceived Similarity (Sim) on Downward Contrastive Emotions

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	$\eta^2$	<i>p</i>
ViewClass	2	1.68	.01	.19
ViewClass x Class	2	1.39	.01	.25
ViewClass x Life	2	.36	.002	.70
ViewClass x Type	2	.14	< .001	.87
ViewClass x Sim	2	.22	.001	.80
ViewClass x Class x Life	1	.17	< .001	.68
ViewClass x Class x Type	1	.82	.003	.37
ViewClass x Class x Sim	1	.03	< .001	.87
ViewClass x Life x Type	1	2.01	.01	.16
ViewClass x Life x Sim	1	.47	.002	.49
ViewClass x Type x Sim	1	.85	.003	.36
Error	255			

Note. *N* = 293.

**Smith's Framework of Social Comparison-Related Emotional Responses**



As in Study One, data analysis was completed on social comparison-related emotional responses using two frameworks. The first was based on Smith's (2000) broad categories of assimilative and contrastive emotional responses and then specifically focused on Smith's four groupings: upward assimilative (admiration, inspiration, optimism), upward contrastive (depression, shame, envy, resentment), downward assimilative (pity, fear, worry, sympathy), and downward contrastive (contempt, scorn, *Schadenfreude*, pride). The second was based on social comparison-related emotions outlined by Nabi and Keblusek (2014). The positive hedonic tone/valence items included: cheerful, content, satisfied, and happy. The negative hedonic tone/valence items included: dissatisfied, sad, sorry, and depressed. Additional social comparison-related discrete emotions included: jealous, hopeful, upset, disappointed, anxious, disgusted, embarrassed, and angry.

The ANOVA tested the emotional responses and the results are presented in the following order: Smith's (2000) framework, hedonic tone/valence portions of the mood adjective checklist (Matthews, Jones, & Chamberlain, 1990), discrete emotions previously outlined by Nabi and Keblusek (2014), and enjoyment (Hall & Zwarun, 2012; Oliver & Bartsch, 2010). As in Study One, enjoyment was measured on two dimensions: fun/entertainment and appreciation/meaningfulness. In the ANOVAs below, Fisher's least significant difference (LSD) post-hoc tests ( $p < .05$ ) were conducted to determine mean differences for significant interactions. Means reported below with different subscripts were significantly different at  $p < .05$ . Identical to Study One, the presentation of the analyses based on these groupings was employed for the in favor of conceptual clarity over strength of individual reliabilities of the groupings outlined above (i.e., reports of Chronbach's alphas).

**Assimilative.** H<sub>3</sub> posited that assimilative social comparison-related emotional responses would be stronger for viewers with high perceived similarity to the characters, as compared to viewers with low perceived similarity to the characters. Per Smith (2000), the emotions of inspiration, optimism, admiration, pity, fear, worry, and sympathy were combined to form assimilative emotions (Chronbach's  $\alpha = .81$ ). As in Study One, the ANOVA demonstrated a significant main effect of perceived similarity, where assimilative social comparison-related emotional responses were stronger for those who had high perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 2.51, SD = .70$ ) as compared to those who had low perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 1.89, SD = .75$ );  $F(1, 277) = 17.97, p < .001, \eta^2 = .05$ . Thus, H<sub>3</sub> was supported. For a summary of all effects of perceived similarity and assimilative emotions, see Table 42.

Table 42

*ANOVA Summary for Perceived Similarity (Sim), Program Social Class (Class), Program Lifestyle (Life), and Program Type (Type) on Assimilative Emotions*

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	$\eta^2$	<i>p</i>
Sim	1	17.97	.05	< .001
Sim x Class	1	.47	.001	.50
Sim x Life	1	.06	< .001	.81
Sim x Type	1	.98	.002	.32
Sim x Class x Life	1	1.81	.01	.18
Sim x Class x Type	1	1.83	.01	.18
Sim x Life x Type	1	.11	< .001	.74
Error	277			

*Note.*  $N = 293$ .

**Contrastive.** H<sub>4</sub> posed that contrastive social comparison-related emotional responses to the program would be stronger for viewers where characters were perceived as dissimilar, as compared to characters who were perceived as similar. Per Smith (2000), the emotions of depression, shame, envy, resentment, contempt, scorn, *Schadenfreude*, and pride were combined

to form contrastive emotions (Chronbach's  $\alpha = .80$ ). As in Study One, the ANOVA demonstrated a significant main effect of perceived similarity in the non-hypothesized direction. Contrastive social comparison-related emotional responses were stronger for those who had high perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 2.02, SD = .71$ ) as compared to those who had low perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 1.72, SD = .58$ );  $F(1, 277) = 5.95, p = .02, \eta^2 = .02$ .

Accordingly,  $H_4$  was not supported. As in Study One and replicated here, perceived similarity to the featured cast members appeared to be instrumental in instigating stronger social comparison-related emotional responses to scripted and reality television programs, whether they were assimilative or contrastive in nature. For a summary of all effects of perceived similarity and contrastive emotions, see Table 43.

Table 43

*ANOVA Summary for Perceived Similarity (Sim), Program Social Class (Class), Program Lifestyle (Life), and Program Type (Type) on Contrastive Emotions*

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	$\eta^2$	<i>p</i>
Sim	1	5.95	.02	.02
Sim x Class	1	.02	< .001	.90
Sim x Life	1	.15	< .001	.70
Sim x Type	1	.17	< .001	.69
Sim x Class x Life	1	1.02	.003	.31
Sim x Class x Type	1	.56	.002	.46
Sim x Life x Type	1	2.58	.01	.11
Error	277			

*Note.*  $N = 293$ .

**Upward Assimilative.** The ANOVA tested the differences in upward assimilative emotional responses (admiration, inspiration, optimism) based on the between-subjects factors, which resulted in several significant main effects. Individuals experienced significantly stronger upward assimilative emotions after choosing scripted programs ( $M = 2.55, SD = .99$ ) as

compared to reality programs ( $M = 1.74, SD = .81$ );  $F(1, 277) = 16.76, p < .001, \eta^2 = .04$ . In addition, those high in perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 2.71, SD = .96$ ) experienced stronger upward assimilative emotions than those low in perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 1.74, SD = .79$ );  $F(1, 277) = 38.27, p < .001, \eta^2 = .09$ . See Table 44 for a complete summary of effects.

There was also a significant three-way interaction for perceived similarity, program social class, and program type,  $F(1, 277) = 6.24, p = .01, \eta^2 = .01$ , where for low social class programs, individuals who chose scripted programs and had high perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 2.90_c, 95\% CI = [2.67, 3.13]$ ) experienced the strongest upward assimilative emotions, as compared to those who chose scripted programs and had low perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 2.18_{ab}, 95\% CI = [1.78, 2.57]$ ), and those who chose reality programs and had low perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 1.37_a, 95\% CI = [1.15, 1.59]$ ). Those who chose reality programs and had high perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 2.62_{bc}, 95\% CI = [2.10, 3.15]$ ) also experienced stronger upward assimilative emotional responses than those who chose reality programs and had low perceived similarity to the characters. See Figure 21.1 for the interaction.

For high social class programs, those who chose scripted programs and had high perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 2.77_b, 95\% CI = [2.50, 3.04]$ ) also experienced the strongest upward assimilative emotions to the content, as compared to those who chose reality programs and had high perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 1.92_a, 95\% CI = [1.51, 2.33]$ ), those who chose scripted programs and had low perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 1.84_a, 95\% CI = [1.51, 2.18]$ ), and those who chose reality programs and had low perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 1.72_a, 95\% CI = [1.42, 2.02]$ ). See Figure 21.2 for the interaction.

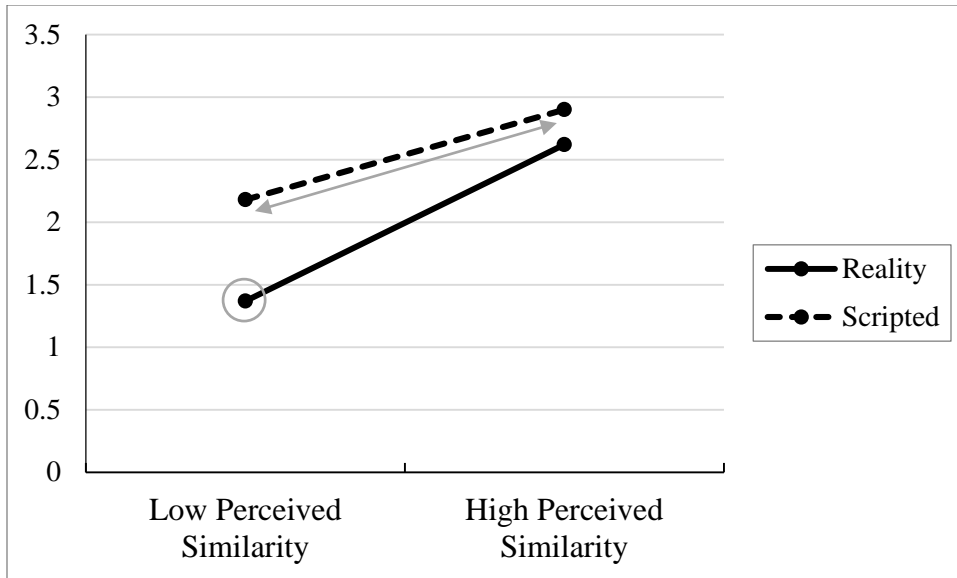


Figure 21.1. Interaction between perceived similarity and program type for low social class programs on upward assimilative emotions after watching the program.

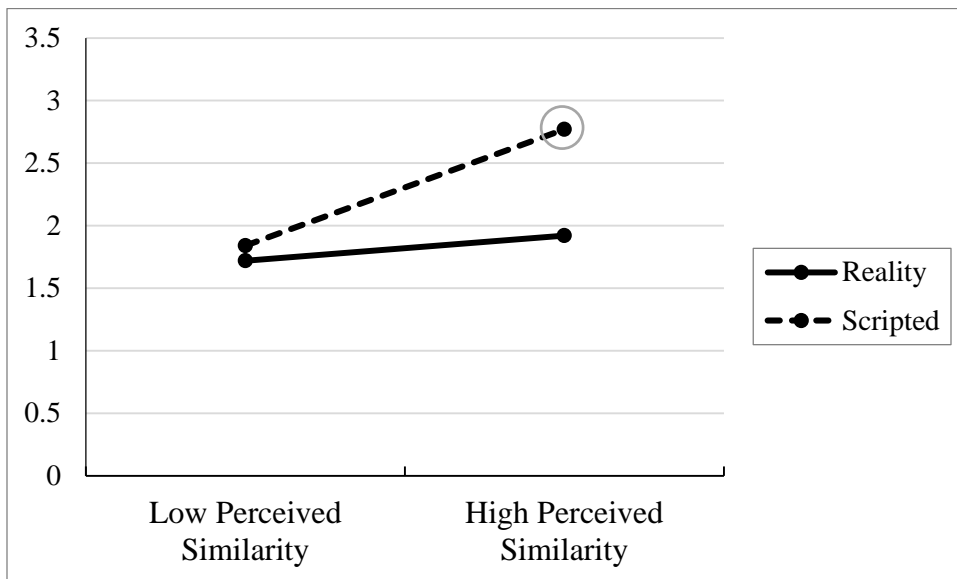


Figure 21.2. Interaction between perceived similarity and program type for high social class programs on upward assimilative emotions after watching the program.

In sum, for low social class programs, those who had high perceived similarity to the characters experienced strong upward assimilative emotional responses (inspiration, admiration, optimism) to both reality and scripted programs. For high social class programs, those who had high perceived similarity to the characters also experienced strong upward assimilative emotional responses, but only for scripted programs. In Study One, there were demonstrated main effects for program type and perceived similarity, where scripted programs and viewers who had high perceived similarity to the characters resulted in the strongest upward assimilative emotional responses. The findings here reveal a more nuanced relationship regarding program social class, program type, and perceived similarity. This interaction demonstrated that when program social class was low (an attribute that could initiate downward social comparisons), viewers actually looked up to both reality and scripted characters when they felt highly similar to them, suggesting that they were engaging in upward social comparisons based on an attribute other than program social class. However, when program social class was high, there was a marked drop in upward assimilative responses for those who chose reality programs and felt highly similar to the cast members. For those who chose high social class programs, it is possible that they engaged in upward social comparisons based on social class for scripted programs but not reality programs.

Perhaps the portrayals of cast members in high social class reality programs were more negative than the portrayals of characters in high social class scripted programs. The findings in Study One did suggest that scripted programs were perceived more positively than reality programs. This notion is reinforced here - when viewers saw themselves as similar to well-off reality cast members, as compared to scripted characters, feelings like inspiration and admiration were diminished.

Table 44

*ANOVA Summary for Program Social Class (Class), Program Lifestyle (Life), Program Type (Type), and Perceived Similarity (Sim) on Upward Assimilative Emotions*

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	$\eta^2$	<i>p</i>
Class	1	2.64	.006	.11
Life	1	3.56	.01	.06
Type	1	16.76	.04	< .001
Sim	1	38.27	.09	< .001
Class x Life	1	1.75	.004	.06
Class x Type	1	.06	< .001	.82
Class x Sim	1	2.88	.01	.09
Life x Type	1	.09	< .001	.76
Life x Sim	1	.94	.002	.33
Type x Sim	1	.14	< .001	.70
Class x Life x Type	1	1.53	.003	.22
Class x Life x Sim	1	1.50	.003	.22
Class x Type x Sim	1	6.24	.01	.01
Life x Type x Sim	1	.04	< .001	.80
Error	277			

Note. *N* = 293.

**Upward Contrastive.** The ANOVA tested the between-subjects factors on upward contrastive emotions (depression, shame, envy, resentment). There was a significant main effect for perceived similarity to the characters,  $F(1, 277) = 6.40, p = .01, \eta^2 = .02$ , where those who had high perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 2.18, SD = .81$ ) experienced stronger upward contrastive emotional responses to the programs than those with low perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 1.83, SD = .71$ ). See Table 45 for a summary of all effects. In Study One, scripted programs, as compared to reality programs, and youth oriented programs, as compared to family oriented programs, initiated the strongest upward contrastive emotional responses. Of interest in this study is that none of the content factors (program social class, program lifestyle, program type) were relevant in predicting upward contrastive emotional responses. This could be a result of the selective exposure environment. In all, viewers were largely effective in selecting content that would not result in negative upward contrastive emotions, suggesting that

individuals were not motivated by feelings of envy and resentment, but rather avoided them in their media choices. Alternatively, upward contrastive emotional responses were likely a negative byproduct for those who chose programs in which they subsequently experienced high perceived similarity to the characters. Because they felt similar to the featured characters, the content was more relevant, thus eliciting stronger upward contrastive responses.

Table 45

*ANOVA Summary for Program Social Class (Class), Program Lifestyle (Life), Program Type (Type), and Perceived Similarity (Sim) on Upward Contrastive Emotions*

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	$\eta^2$	<i>p</i>
Class	1	1.09	.004	.30
Life	1	.12	< .001	.73
Type	1	.10	< .001	.76
Sim	1	6.40	.02	.01
Class x Life	1	.70	.002	.41
Class x Type	1	.57	.002	.45
Class x Sim	1	.002	< .001	.96
Life x Type	1	1.67	.01	.20
Life x Sim	1	.33	.001	.57
Type x Sim	1	.35	.001	.56
Class x Life x Type	1	.24	< .001	.62
Class x Life x Sim	1	.61	.002	.44
Class x Type x Sim	1	1.82	.01	.18
Life x Type x Sim	1	1.81	.01	.18
Error	277			

*Note.* *N* = 293.

**Downward Assimilative.** The relevant predictor variables were tested in the ANOVA on downward assimilative emotional responses (pity, sympathy, fear, worry). There was a significant main effect for perceived similarity,  $F(1, 277) = 5.30, p = .02, \eta^2 = .02$ , where those who had high perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 2.30, SD = .92$ ) experienced stronger downward assimilative emotional responses as compared to those with low perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 2.05, SD = .98$ ). See Table 46 for a summary of effects. This main effect



of perceived similarity was similar to the one outlined for upward contrastive emotions. In Study One, low social class programs and family oriented programs elicited the strongest downward assimilative emotional responses. Again, none of the content factors were relevant here, suggesting there were other attributes by which individuals engaged in downward social comparisons with the characters (whom they perceived as similar to themselves). This provides further evidence that viewers were largely successful in selecting programs that would *not* result in downward assimilative emotional responses. Strong downward assimilative emotional responses were likely an aftereffect of experiencing high perceived similarity to the characters. When considering that upward contrastive and downward assimilative emotional responses are detrimental to the viewer (Smith, 2000), individuals appeared to avoid selecting media that would make them experience these kinds of responses, although they still occurred as a result of feeling similar to the characters portrayed in the content.

Table 46

*ANOVA Summary for Program Social Class (Class), Program Lifestyle (Life), Program Type (Type), and Perceived Similarity (Sim) on Downward Assimilative Emotions*

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	$\eta^2$	<i>p</i>
Class	1	1.79	.01	.18
Life	1	2.48	.01	.12
Type	1	5.30	.02	.02
Sim	1	.67	.002	.41
Class x Life	1	.85	.003	.36
Class x Type	1	3.73	.01	.06
Class x Sim	1	.25	< .001	.62
Life x Type	1	2.92	.01	.09
Life x Sim	1	.27	< .001	.60
Type x Sim	1	1.34	.004	.25
Class x Life x Type	1	1.26	.004	.26
Class x Life x Sim	1	.87	.003	.35
Class x Type x Sim	1	.05	< .001	.83
Life x Type x Sim	1	.08	< .001	.78
Error	277			

Note. *N* = 293.

**Downward Contrastive.** The ANOVA tested the between-subjects factors on downward contrastive emotional responses (contempt, scorn, *Schadenfreude*, pride). There was a significant main effect for program lifestyle,  $F(1, 277) = 4.44, p = .04, \eta^2 = .01$ , where those who chose programs with young and single characters ( $M = 1.81, SD = .73$ ) experienced stronger downward contrastive emotional responses as compared to those who chose programs with older, family oriented characters ( $M = 1.62, SD = .73$ ). See Table 47 for a summary of effects. There were also several significant interactions. A significant two-way interaction emerged between program social class and program lifestyle,  $F(1, 277) = 4.51, p = .04, \eta^2 = .01$ . This interaction was subsumed by a significant three-way interaction between program lifestyle, program social class, and program type,  $F(1, 277) = 6.77, p = .01, \eta^2 = .04$ , where for reality programs, viewers who chose low social class programs with young and single cast members ( $M = 2.01, 95\% CI =$

[1.77, 2.26]) experienced the strongest downward contrastive emotional responses, as compared to low social class programs with family oriented cast members ( $M = 1.44_{ab}$ , 95% CI = [1.01, 1.86]) and high social class programs with young and single cast members ( $M = 1.42_a$ , 95% CI = [1.10, 1.74]). High social class programs with family oriented cast members ( $M = 1.87_{bc}$ , 95% CI = [1.56, 2.17]) also initiated stronger downward contrastive emotional responses as compared to high social class programs with young and single cast members. See Figure 22.1 for the interaction.

For scripted programs, downward contrastive emotional responses were strongest for those who chose low social class programs with young and single characters ( $M = 1.93_b$ , 95% CI = [1.61, 2.25]) and high social class programs with young and single characters ( $M = 1.82_b$ , 95% CI = [1.66, 1.97]) as compared to those who viewed high social class programs with family oriented characters ( $M = 1.37_a$ , 95% CI = [1.03, 1.71]). There was no significant difference among low social class programs with family oriented characters ( $M = 1.59_{ab}$ , 95% CI = [1.36, 1.82]). See Figure 22.2 for the interaction.

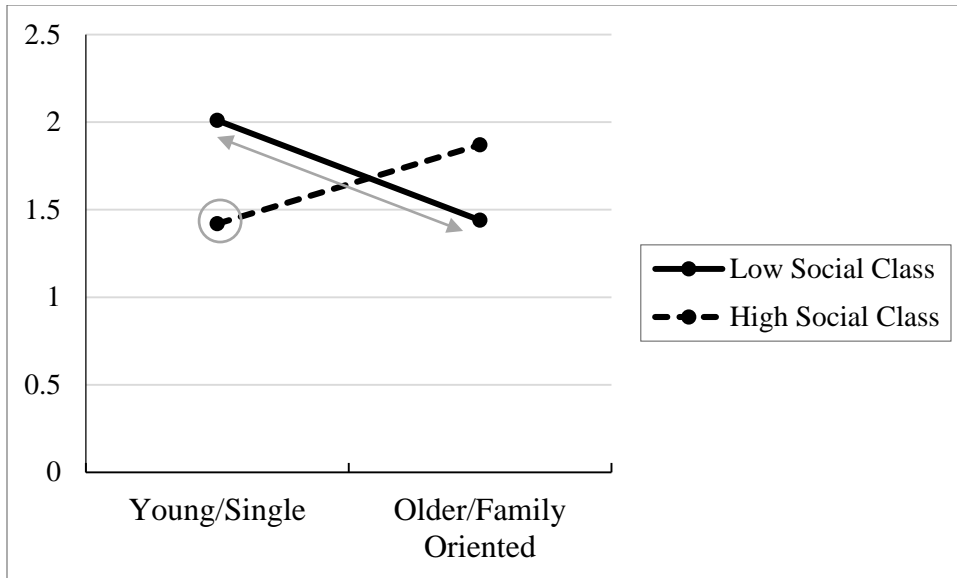


Figure 22.1. Interaction between program lifestyle and program social class for reality programs on downward contrastive emotions after watching the program.

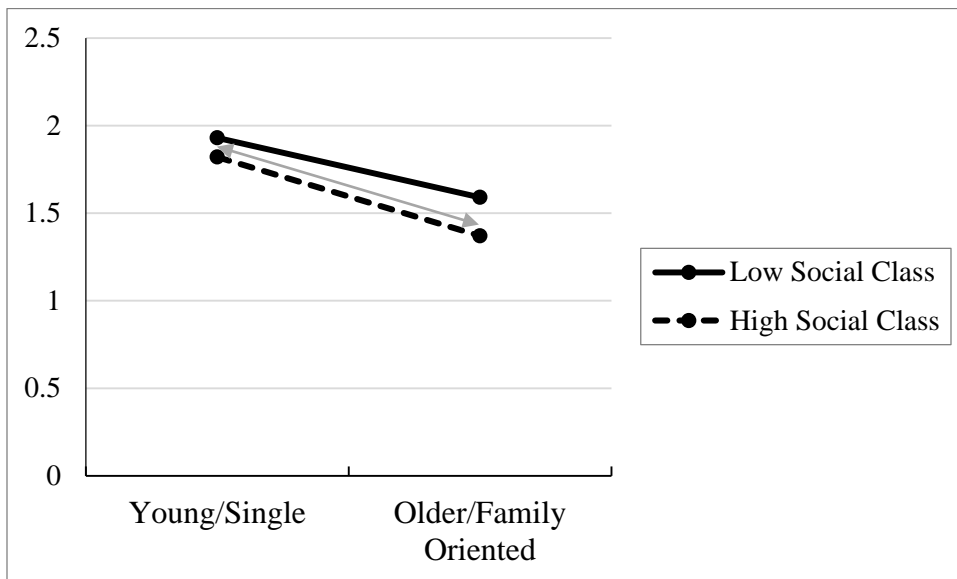


Figure 22.2. Interaction between program lifestyle and program social class for scripted programs on downward contrastive emotions after watching the program.

In Study One, main effects emerged for downward contrastive emotional responses on the content factors of program social class and program lifestyle, where both low social class programs and family oriented programs initiated the strongest downward contrastive emotional responses. Here, there was a significant interaction involving program social class, program lifestyle, and program type. For reality programs, an interesting pattern emerged where both low social class, youth oriented programs and high social class, family oriented programs initiated strong downward contrastive emotional responses. This suggests that downward social comparisons were made for low social class, youth oriented programs based on program social class, while downward social comparisons were made for high social class, family oriented programs for other reasons. Indeed, it is expected that downward social comparisons would be made toward low social class, young and single reality television cast members. However, regarding downward social comparisons made toward high social class, family oriented cast members, perhaps viewers reacted negatively towards the reality television cast members' overall portrayals, including experiencing increased feelings of contempt, scorn, and taking delight in their misfortunes (*Schadenfreude*). The findings in this study concerning upward assimilative emotions support this notion, where upward assimilative emotions (admiration, inspiration, optimism) were diminished for high social class reality programs as well. Alternatively, for scripted content, youth oriented programs, whether high or low social class, initiated the strongest downward contrastive emotional responses. This suggests that in general, scripted programs with young and single characters initiated strong downward social comparisons among viewers, reinforcing the notion (expressed in Study One) that portrayals of youth oriented characters were largely negative in nature.

Relating these findings to choice behavior, some viewers may have chosen low social class programs for the explicit purpose of engaging in downward social comparisons. Indeed, low social class, youth oriented programs initiated strong downward contrastive emotional responses, no matter the program type. When viewers saw the program descriptors and screen captures of the representative casts, they may have selected those programs because the casts appeared to be worse off than them. This suggests that some viewers were motivated to watch ‘guilty pleasure’ television, where they could delight in the misfortunes of others (*Schadenfreude*).

Table 47

*ANOVA Summary for Program Social Class (Class), Program Lifestyle (Life), Program Type (Type), and Perceived Similarity (Sim) on Downward Contrastive Emotions*

<u>Source</u>	<u>df</u>	<u>F</u>	<u><math>\eta^2</math></u>	<u>p</u>
Class	1	1.28	.004	.26
Life	1	4.44	.01	.04
Type	1	.008	< .001	.93
Sim	1	2.86	.01	.09
Class x Life	1	4.51	.01	.04
Class x Type	1	.15	< .001	.70
Class x Sim	1	.03	< .001	.87
Life x Type	1	2.32	.01	.13
Life x Sim	1	.007	< .001	.93
Type x Sim	1	.01	< .001	.92
Class x Life x Type	1	6.77	.02	.01
Class x Life x Sim	1	.97	.003	.32
Class x Type x Sim	1	.009	< .001	.92
Life x Type x Sim	1	2.13	.01	.15
<u>Error</u>	<u>277</u>			

*Note.*  $N = 293$ .

**Smith’s Framework: A Summary.** In sum, the findings related to Smith’s (2000) framework of social comparison-related emotional responses lend insight to the role of

individual differences and content factors in social comparison processes. As compared to Study One, where the social comparison groupings resulted in a series of significant main effects, this study demonstrated several interesting interactions involving the social comparison-related emotional responses. Low social class programs (both reality and scripted) initiated strong upward assimilative comparison emotional responses, but only when perceived similarity to the characters was high. This suggests that upward social comparisons were made based on an attribute other than social class. It is likely these social comparisons were elicited because the viewers saw themselves as similar to the characters and were more likely to be inspired by them, no matter their social class.

Downward contrastive emotional responses demonstrated an interesting pattern as well. For scripted programs, young and single characters initiated strong downward contrastive emotional responses. However, for reality programs, low social class, youth oriented cast members and high social class, family oriented cast members both elicited strong downward contrastive responses. It is possible that reality programs provided greater opportunities for downward social comparisons in general, and that the portrayals of both low social class, young cast members and high social class, family oriented cast members initiated downward contrastive comparisons.

Upward contrastive and downward assimilative emotional responses were predicted by perceived similarity to the characters, where high perceived similarity to the characters resulted in the strongest of these responses. These types of social comparison-related emotional responses are deemed by Smith (2000) to be undesirable. Perhaps these negative feelings, like envy (upward contrastive) and pity (downward assimilative) emerged as relevant when the viewer saw similarities among themselves and the television characters, making the social comparison more

salient to them. It is likely that viewers chose programs *not* to feel this way, but the effects of high perceived similarity to the characters overrode that choice behavior.

H<sub>5</sub> proposed that reality programs would instigate stronger social comparison-related emotional responses than scripted programs. However, stronger emotional responses occurred for reality television as compared to scripted television in only one scenario of downward contrastive emotional responses. There was a significant difference between reality programs with high social class, family oriented cast members ( $M = 1.87_b$ , 95% CI = [1.56, 2.17]) and scripted programs with high social class, family oriented characters ( $M = 1.37_a$ , 95% CI = [1.03, 1.71]) on downward contrastive emotions, where reality programs initiated stronger downward contrastive reactions than scripted programs. Again, this suggests that viewers perceived the characters in reality programs to be worse off than those in scripted programs. The downward social comparisons that took place with these cast members and characters likely took place based on attributes other than social class. Because reality programs elicited stronger downward contrastive emotional responses than scripted programs for only one type of program (high social class, family oriented programs), H<sub>5</sub> was only partially supported here.

### **Hedonic Valence**

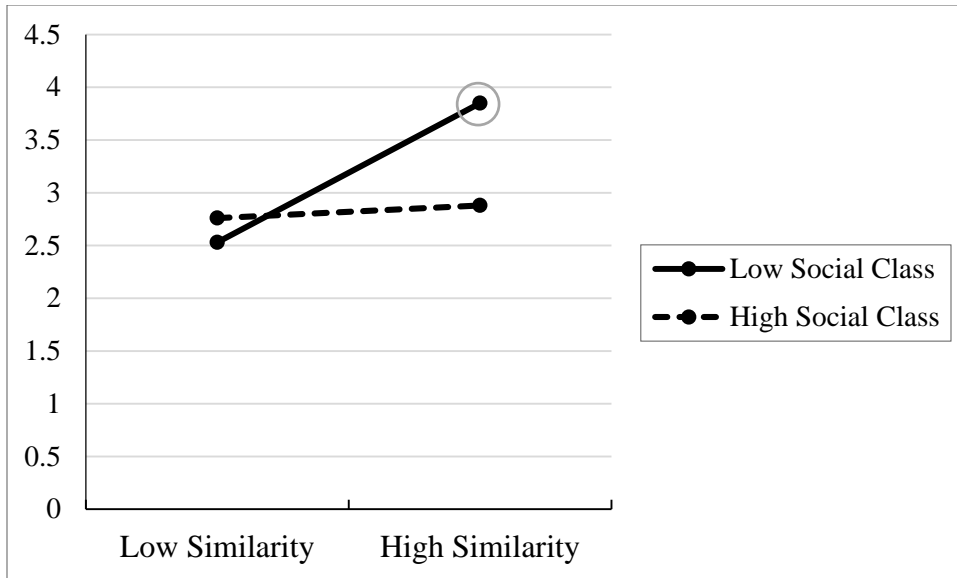
**Hedonic Positive.** The ANOVA tested the between-subjects factors on hedonic positive emotions (cheerful, content, satisfied, and happy). There was a significant main effect for program lifestyle,  $F(1, 277) = 19.36$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .06$ , where those who chose programs featuring older, family focused characters ( $M = 3.18$ ,  $SD = .93$ ) experienced stronger positive emotional responses to the content than those who chose programs featuring young and single characters ( $M = 2.87$ ,  $SD = 1.00$ ). See Table 48 for a summary of all effects. There was another significant main effect for perceived similarity,  $F(1, 277) = 35.66$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .10$ , where



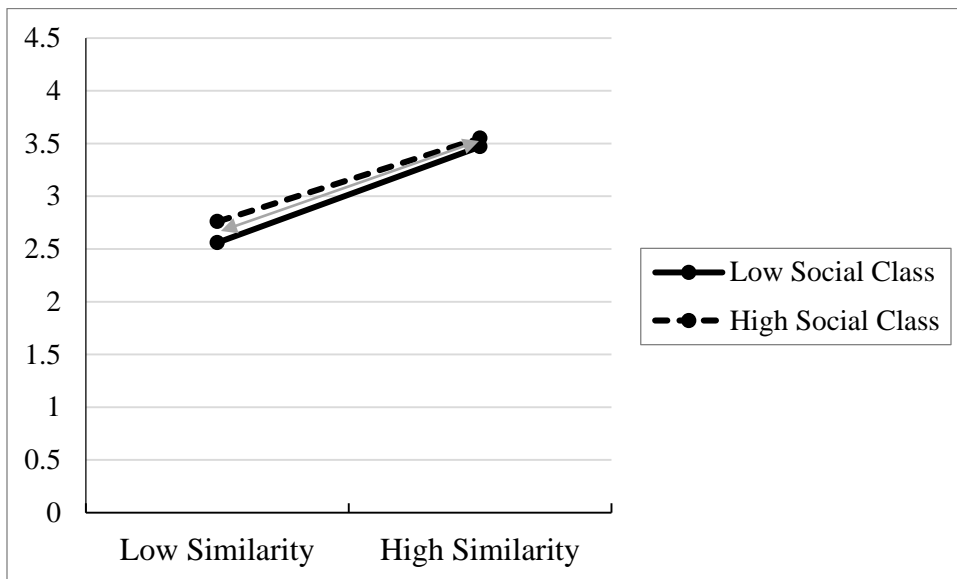
those who had high perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 3.36$ ,  $SD = .77$ ) experienced more positive emotions than those had low perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 2.63$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ ). There were also several significant interactions, including one between program social class and perceived similarity,  $F(1, 277) = 6.35$ ,  $p = .01$ ,  $\eta^2 = .02$ , and one between program social class and program type,  $F(1, 277) = 3.73$ ,  $p = .05$ ,  $\eta^2 = .01$ .

These effects were subsumed by a significant three-way interaction between program social class, perceived similarity, and program type,  $F(1, 277) = 4.25$ ,  $p = .04$ ,  $\eta^2 = .01$ , where for reality programs, those who chose low social class programs and had high perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 3.85_b$ , 95% CI = [3.30, 4.40]) had the strongest positive emotional responses to the content, as compared to those who chose high social class programs and had high perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 2.88_a$ , 95% CI = [2.45, 3.30]), those who chose high social class programs and had low perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 2.76_a$ , 95% CI = [2.45, 3.07]), and those who chose low social class programs and had low perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 2.53_a$ , 95% CI = [2.30, 2.77]). See Figure 23.1 for the interaction.

For scripted programs, those who chose high social class programs and had high perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 3.55_b$ , 95% CI = [3.26, 3.83]) and those who chose low social class programs and had high perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 3.47_b$ , 95% CI = [3.23, 3.72]) had the strongest positive emotions to the content, as compared to those who chose high social class programs and had low perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 2.76_a$ , 95% CI = [2.45, 3.07]) and those who chose low social class programs and had low perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 2.56_a$ , 95% CI = [2.15, 2.97]). See Figure 23.2 for the interaction.



*Figure 23.1.* Interaction between program social class and perceived similarity for reality programs on hedonic positive emotions after watching the program.



*Figure 23.2.* Interaction between program social class and perceived similarity for scripted programs on hedonic positive emotions after watching the program.

To summarize, family oriented programs, as compared to youth oriented programs, initiated stronger positive reactions to the content, just as in Study One. This reinforced the notion that youth oriented programs largely featured negative character portrayals. Study One also demonstrated that scripted programs and high perceived similarity to the characters resulted in strong positive reactions to the content. The significant interaction here reveals more nuanced findings regarding positive reactions to the content. Here, we saw that for scripted programs, a general pattern emerged where, no matter the social class, high perceived similarity to the characters resulted in the strongest positive reactions to the content. Alternatively, for reality programs, high perceived similarity to the characters resulted in the strongest positive reactions to the content, but only for low social class programs. This suggests that high social class reality programs, but not high social class scripted programs, resulted in diminished positive reactions to the content. As demonstrated by the findings related to upward assimilative and downward contrastive emotional responses, viewers may have been turned off by the portrayals of these high social class, reality cast members, whereas high social class, scripted characters did not instigate the same reaction. These findings provided further evidence that viewers were likely making their program selections based on the belief that they were similar to the characters on some dimension and their selections were reflected in their positive hedonic responses to the content, except in the case of high social class reality television programs.

Table 48

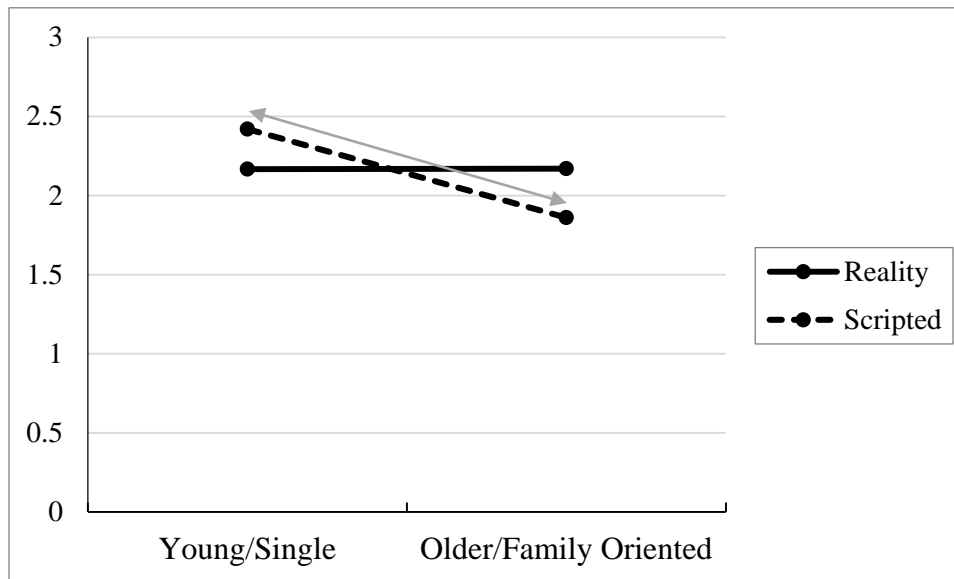
*ANOVA Summary for Program Social Class (Class), Program Lifestyle (Life), Program Type (Type), and Perceived Similarity (Sim) on Hedonic Positive Emotions*

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	$\eta^2$	<i>p</i>
Class	1	.85	.002	.36
Life	1	19.36	.05	< .001
Type	1	.37	.001	.54
Sim	1	35.66	.10	< .001
Class x Life	1	.03	< .001	.87
Class x Type	1	3.73	.01	.05
Class x Sim	1	6.35	.02	.01
Life x Type	1	1.41	.004	.24
Life x Sim	1	1.62	.004	.21
Type x Sim	1	.27	< .001	.60
Class x Life x Type	1	.33	< .001	.57
Class x Life x Sim	1	.18	< .001	.67
Class x Type x Sim	1	4.25	.01	.04
Life x Type x Sim	1	.63	.002	.43
Error	277			

Note. *N* = 293.

**Hedonic Negative.** The ANOVA tested the between-subjects factors on hedonic negative emotions (dissatisfied, sad, sorry, depressed). There was a significant main effect for program lifestyle,  $F(1, 277) = 5.33, p = .02, \eta^2 = .02$ , where those who chose programs featuring young and single characters ( $M = 2.38, SD = .79$ ) experienced stronger negative emotions than those who chose programs featuring older, family focused characters ( $M = 2.13, SD = .84$ ). See Table 49 for a summary of effects. There was also a significant two-way interaction for program lifestyle and program type,  $F(1, 277) = 5.47, p = .02, \eta^2 = .02$ , where those who chose scripted programs featuring young and single characters ( $M = 2.42_b, 95\% \text{ CI} = [2.22, 2.61]$ ) had the strongest negative responses to the content as compared to those who chose scripted programs featuring older, family focused characters ( $M = 1.86_a, 95\% \text{ CI} = [1.64, 2.09]$ ). There were no significant differences among those who chose reality programs featuring older, family focused cast members ( $M = 2.17_{ab}, 95\% \text{ CI} = [1.88, 2.46]$ ) and those who chose reality programs

featuring young and single cast members ( $M = 2.17_{ab}$ , 95% CI = [1.95, 2.39]). See Figure 24 for the interaction.



*Figure 24.* Interaction between program social class and program type on hedonic negative emotions after watching the program.

In Study One, youth oriented programs in general initiated the strongest negative responses to the content. Here, youth oriented, scripted programs initiated the strongest negative responses (as compared to family oriented, scripted programs), while negative responses to reality programs (youth or family oriented) remained relatively stable. Here, it can be presumed that negative responses were a result of two factors: the first being that youth oriented scripted programs featured largely negative portrayals as compared to family oriented scripted programs, and the second being that reality programs, in general, instigated consistent negative reactions no matter the featured lifestyle of the program.

Table 49

ANOVA Summary for Program Social Class (Class), Program Lifestyle (Life), Program Type (Type), and Perceived Similarity (Sim) on Hedonic Negative Emotions

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	$\eta^2$	<i>p</i>
Class	1	.48	.002	.49
Life	1	5.33	.02	.02
Type	1	.06	< .001	.81
Sim	1	3.08	.01	.08
Class x Life	1	.76	.002	.38
Class x Type	1	.54	.002	.46
Class x Sim	1	.37	.001	.55
Life x Type	1	5.47	.02	.02
Life x Sim	1	.01	< .001	.91
Type x Sim	1	.26	< .001	.61
Class x Life x Type	1	2.76	.01	.10
Class x Life x Sim	1	.02	< .001	.90
Class x Type x Sim	1	.09	< .001	.77
Life x Type x Sim	1	.06	< .001	.81
Error	277			

Note. *N* = 293.

### Discrete Social Comparison-Related Emotional Responses

As in Study One, Nabi and Keblusek's (2014) discrete emotions were examined. The goal of these analyses was to determine which of these discrete emotional responses specifically related to social comparison processes and if there were distinct differences between reality and scripted programs regarding these emotional responses. The analyses are below presented in the following order: jealousy, hope, being upset, disappointment, anxiousness, disgust, embarrassment, and anger. A summary of results follows.

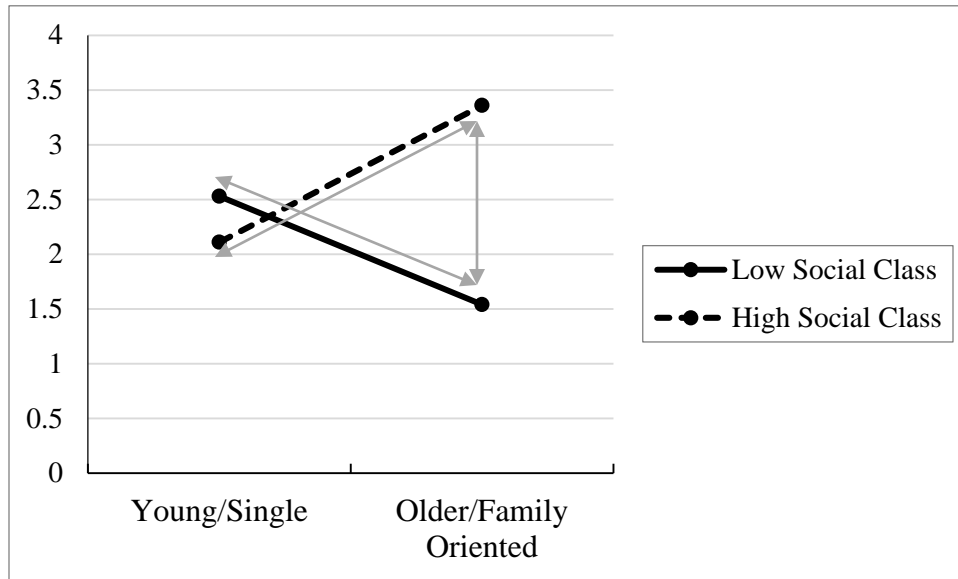
**Jealousy.** The ANOVA tested the between-subjects factors on feelings of jealousy after watching the program. There were several significant main effects, the first being that of program social class,  $F(1, 277) = 7.25, p = .008, \eta^2 = .02$ , where individuals who chose high social class programs ( $M = 2.59, SD = 1.13$ ) experienced stronger feelings of jealousy than those who chose low social class programs ( $M = 2.03, SD = 1.08$ ). There was also a significant main

effect for program lifestyle,  $F(1, 277) = 3.98, p = .05, \eta^2 = .01$ , where those who chose programs featuring young and single characters ( $M = 2.54, SD = 1.14$ ) experienced stronger feelings of jealousy as compared to those who chose programs with older, family focused characters ( $M = 1.98, SD = 1.06$ ). There was another significant main effect for perceived similarity,  $F(1, 277) = 5.18, p = .02, \eta^2 = .01$ , where those who had high perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 2.58, SD = 1.19$ ) experienced stronger feelings of jealousy than those who had low perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 2.05, SD = 1.03$ ). See Table 50 for a summary of all effects.

There were also several significant interactions. A significant two-way interaction emerged for program lifestyle and program social class,  $F(1, 277) = 1.35, p = .001, \eta^2 = .03$ . There was also a significant two-way interaction for program lifestyle and program type,  $F(1, 277) = 7.92, p = .005, \eta^2 = .02$ . These interactions were subsumed by a significant three-way interaction of program lifestyle, program social class, and program type,  $F(1, 277) = 17.07, p < .001, \eta^2 = .05$ , where for reality programs, feelings of jealousy were strongest for those who chose high social class, family oriented programs ( $M = 3.36_c, 95\% \text{ CI} = [2.93, 3.78]$ ), as compared to high social class, young and single programs ( $M = 2.11_{ab}, 95\% \text{ CI} = [1.67, 2.56]$ ) and low social class, family oriented programs ( $M = 1.54_a, 95\% \text{ CI} = [.95, 2.13]$ ). Those who chose low social class, young and single programs ( $M = 2.53_{bc}, 95\% \text{ CI} = [2.19, 2.88]$ ) also experienced stronger feelings of jealousy than those who chose low social class, family oriented programs. See Figure 25.1 for the interaction.

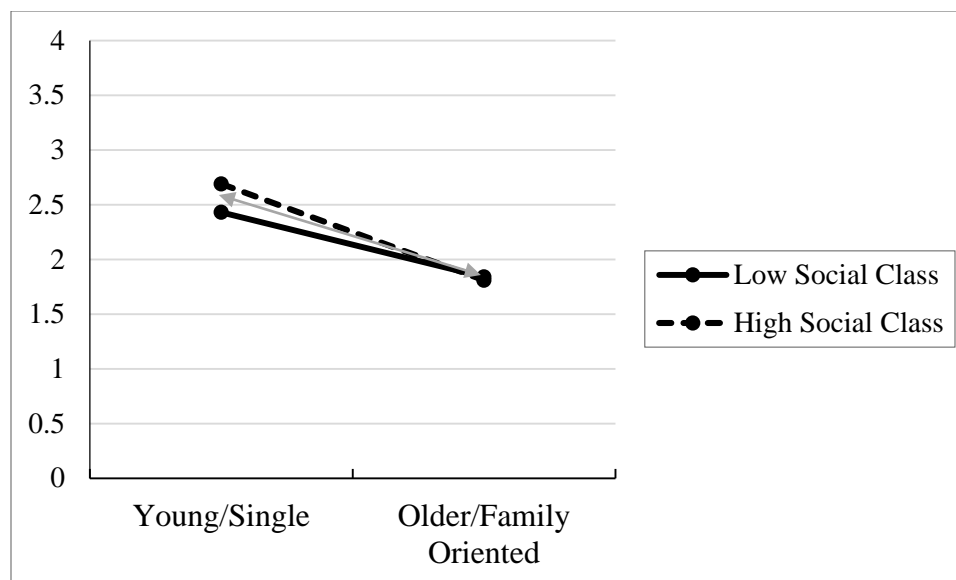
For scripted programs, feelings of jealousy were strongest for those who chose high social class, young and single programs ( $M = 2.69_b, 95\% \text{ CI} = [2.47, 2.91]$ ) and those who chose low social class, young and single programs ( $M = 2.43_b, 95\% \text{ CI} = [1.98, 2.88]$ ) as compared to those who chose low social class, family focused programs ( $M = 1.84_a, 95\% \text{ CI} = [1.51, 2.16]$ )

and those who chose high social class, family focused programs ( $M = 1.81_a$ , 95% CI = [1.34, 2.30]). See Figure 25.2 for the interaction.



*Figure 25.1.* Interaction between program lifestyle and program social class for reality programs on feelings of jealousy after watching the program.





*Figure 25.2.* Interaction between program lifestyle and program social class for scripted programs on feelings of jealousy after watching the program.

In Study One, several main effects emerged for feelings of jealousy. Scripted programs, high social class programs, and youth oriented programs all initiated strong feelings of jealousy. Here, reality and scripted programs demonstrated different patterns regarding feelings of jealousy. For reality programs, both high social class, family oriented programs and low social class, young and single programs elicited strong feelings of jealousy. This is likely because some viewers were jealous of the family oriented cast members' social class, while others may have been jealous of the portrayals featured in low social class, youth oriented reality programs. Many youth oriented reality programs emphasized a party and hookup lifestyle, suggesting that despite their low social class, viewers were jealous of their way of life.

Alternatively for scripted programs, the pattern for high social class programs flipped. Feelings of jealousy were strongest for youth oriented programs (no matter the social class). This suggests that for scripted programs, the glamorized portrayals of youth oriented fictional

characters initiated strong feelings of jealousy, no matter whether the characters were of a higher or lower social class. There was also a main effect for perceived similarity here, where those who felt highly similar to the characters experienced stronger feelings of jealousy than those who did not. Again, this was likely a byproduct of selecting a program in which the characters became relevant comparison targets to the viewer (because they were perceived as similar), and in turn, resulted in enhanced feelings of jealousy. It is also possible that feelings of jealousy were an unintended outcome of viewers' choice behavior. They may have selected certain programs for novelty and to see how people different than them live (e.g., high social class, family-oriented reality cast members), but instead, ended up experiencing strong feelings of jealousy after viewing.

There was a significant difference between reality programs with high social class, family oriented cast members ( $M = 3.36_b$ , 95% CI = [2.93, 3.78]) and scripted programs with high social class, family oriented characters ( $M = 1.82_a$ , 95% CI = [1.34, 2.30]), where reality programs initiated stronger feelings of jealousy than scripted programs. It is possible that viewers experienced stronger feelings of jealousy for reality television because the representations of those characters' wealth and social class were actually real as compared to those in scripted programs. The 'surveillance' reality television programs often utilized production techniques that featured many cut-away shots of the cast members' home, cars, and other belongings to emphasize their status. It is possible that these techniques made social class even more apparent, which in turn, resulted in enhanced feelings of jealousy.

Table 50

ANOVA Summary for Program Social Class (Class), Program Lifestyle (Life), Program Type (Type), and Perceived Similarity (Sim) on Feelings of Jealousy

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	$\eta^2$	<i>p</i>
Class	1	7.25	.02	.008
Life	1	3.98	.01	.05
Type	1	1.59	.004	.21
Sim	1	5.18	.01	.02
Class x Life	1	10.35	.03	.001
Class x Type	1	3.65	.01	.06
Class x Sim	1	1.40	.004	.24
Life x Type	1	7.96	.02	.005
Life x Sim	1	2.81	.01	.10
Type x Sim	1	2.02	.01	.16
Class x Life x Type	1	17.15	.05	< .001
Class x Life x Sim	1	.49	.001	.49
Class x Type x Sim	1	.004	< .001	.95
Life x Type x Sim	1	.02	< .001	.89
Error	277			

Note. *N* = 293.

**Hope.** The ANOVA tested the relevant predictor variables on feelings of hope after watching the program. There were significant main effects for all the predictor variables, the first being that of program social class,  $F(1, 277) = 4.61, p = .03, \eta^2 = .01$ , where individuals who chose low social class programs ( $M = 2.66, SD = 1.07$ ) had stronger feelings of hope than those who chose high social class programs ( $M = 2.64, SD = 1.18$ ). There was also a significant main effect for program lifestyle,  $F(1, 277) = 4.73, p = .03, \eta^2 = .01$ , where those who chose young and single programs ( $M = 2.66, SD = 1.10$ ) experienced stronger feelings of hope as compared to those who chose family oriented programs ( $M = 2.64, SD = 1.16$ ). There was a significant main effect for program type, where those who chose scripted programs ( $M = 3.01, SD = 1.03$ ) experienced stronger feelings of hope as compared to those who chose reality programs ( $M = 2.13, SD = 1.05$ ). Finally, there was a significant main effect for perceived similarity, where

those who had high perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 3.01, SD = 1.03$ ) felt more hopeful after watching the program than those who had low perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 2.30, SD = 1.08$ ). See Table 51 for a summary of all effects.

There were also several significant interactions. There was a significant two-way interaction for program lifestyle and program social class,  $F(1, 277) = 7.82, p = .006, \eta^2 = .02$ , where feelings of hope were strongest for those who chose low social class, family oriented programs ( $M = 3.14_b, 95\% \text{ CI} = [2.81, 3.48]$ ), as compared to high social class, family oriented programs ( $M = 2.40_a, 95\% \text{ CI} = [2.08, 2.72]$ ) and low social class, young and single programs ( $M = 2.40_a, 95\% \text{ CI} = [2.12, 2.68]$ ). There was no significant difference for high social class, young and single programs ( $M = 2.49_{ab}, 95\% \text{ CI} = [2.25, 2.74]$ ). See Figure 26 for the interaction.

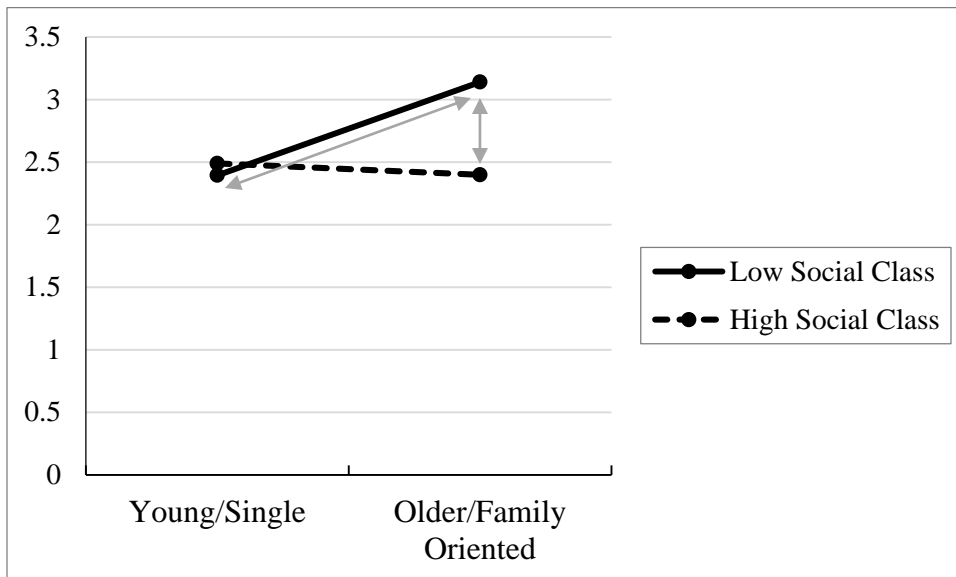


Figure 26. Interaction between program lifestyle and program social class on feelings of hope after watching the program.

There was also a significant two-way interaction between program social class and perceived similarity,  $F(1, 277) = 7.52, p = .007, \eta^2 = .02$ . This two-way interaction was subsumed by a significant three-way interaction between program perceived similarity, program social class, and program type,  $F(1, 277) = 3.78, p = .05, \eta^2 = .01$ , where for reality programs, feelings of hope were strongest for viewers who chose low social class programs and had high perceived similarity to the cast members ( $M = 3.34_b, 95\% \text{ CI} = [3.06, 3.62]$ ), as compared to those who chose high social class programs and had high perceived similarity to the cast members ( $M = 2.20_a, 95\% \text{ CI} = [1.71, 2.69]$ ), and those who chose low social class programs and had low perceived similarity to the cast members ( $M = 1.87_a, 95\% \text{ CI} = [1.60, 2.14]$ ). There was no significant difference among those who chose high social class programs and had low perceived similarity to the cast members ( $M = 2.25_{ab}, 95\% \text{ CI} = [1.89, 2.61]$ ). See Figure 27.1 for the interaction.

For scripted programs, feelings of hope were also strongest for individuals who chose low social class programs and had high perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 3.34_b, 95\% \text{ CI} = [3.06, 3.62]$ ), as compared to those who chose high social class programs and had high perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 2.90_a, 95\% \text{ CI} = [2.58, 3.23]$ ), those who chose low social class programs and had low perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 2.63_a, 95\% \text{ CI} = [2.16, 3.11]$ ), and those who chose high social class programs and had high perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 2.44_a, 95\% \text{ CI} = [2.03, 2.84]$ ). See Figure 27.2 for the interaction.

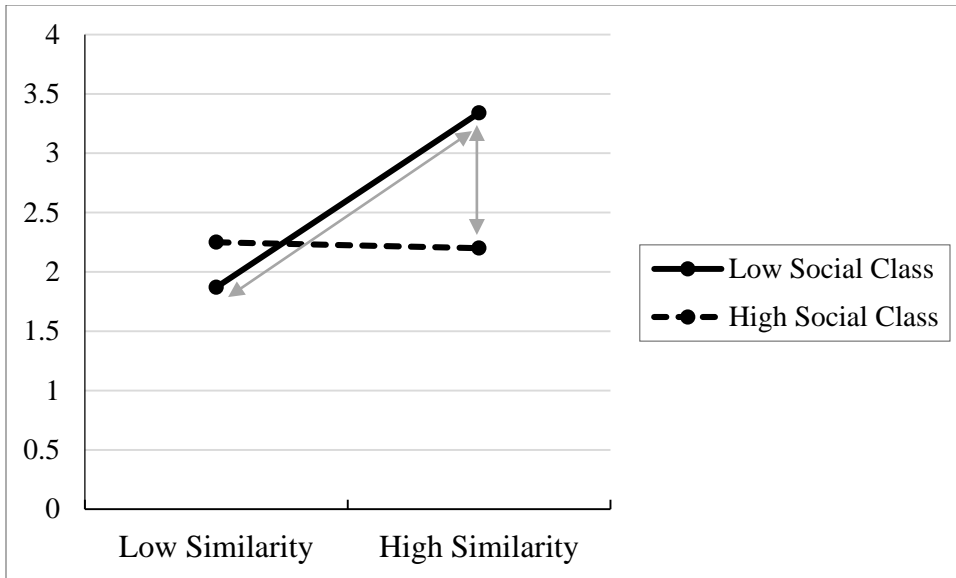


Figure 27.1. Interaction between perceived similarity and program social class for reality programs on feelings of hope after watching the program.

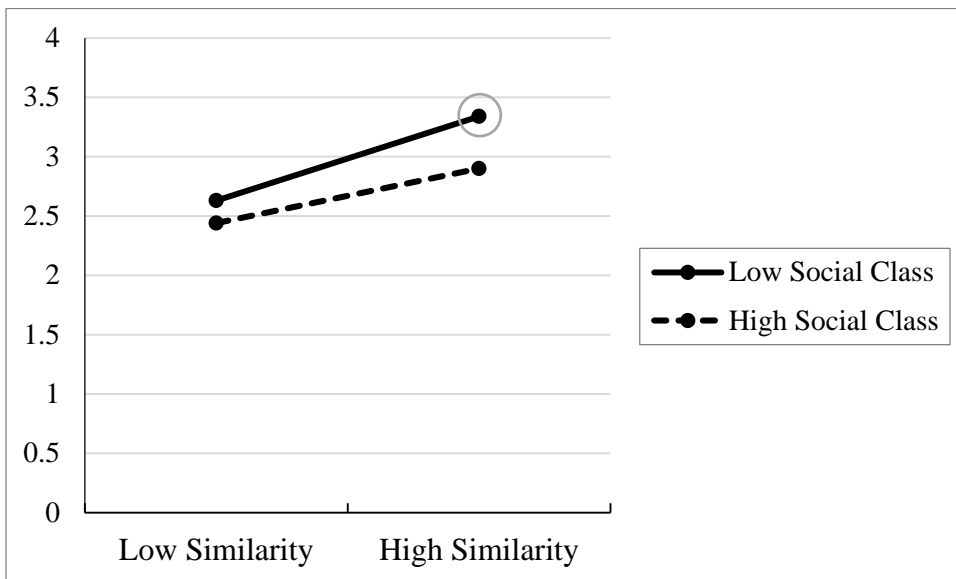


Figure 27.2. Interaction between perceived similarity and program social class for scripted programs on feelings of hope after watching the program.

In Study One, low social class scripted programs initiated strong feelings of hope to the content. There were similar findings here, but some differences emerged among the program types. In a two-way interaction, low social class, family oriented programs initiated strong feelings of hope. In a three-way interaction, low social class programs elicited the strongest feelings of hope as well, but high perceived similarity to the characters was an important factor in instigating those feelings. The viewers had to feel highly similar to these low social class characters in order to experience feelings of hope for them. In this study, feelings of hope appear to be most strongly related to downward assimilative social comparisons, where viewers feel similar to a worse off other. The pattern of findings for feelings of hope involving the interaction between perceived similarity, program social class, and program type nearly mimicked that of positive hedonic emotional responses. It is likely that hope was strongly related to overall positive responses to the content and further suggests that feelings of hope and other downward assimilative responses were not necessarily negative in nature.

Table 51

*ANOVA Summary for Program Social Class (Class), Program Lifestyle (Life), Program Type (Type), and Perceived Similarity (Sim) on Feelings of Hope*

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	$\eta^2$	<i>p</i>
Class	1	4.61	.01	.03
Life	1	4.73	.01	.03
Type	1	8.55	.02	.004
Sim	1	17.01	.05	< .001
Class x Life	1	7.82	.02	.006
Class x Type	1	.001	< .001	.98
Class x Sim	1	7.52	.02	.007
Life x Type	1	2.69	.01	.10
Life x Sim	1	.26	< .001	.61
Type x Sim	1	.05	< .001	.82
Class x Life x Type	1	.70	.002	.40
Class x Life x Sim	1	.37	< .001	.54
Class x Type x Sim	1	3.78	.01	.05
Life x Type x Sim	1	1.51	.004	.22
Error	277			

Note.  $N = 293$ .

**Being Upset.** The ANOVA tested the between-subjects factors on feelings being upset after watching the program. There were no significant main effects, but there was a significant two-way interaction for program lifestyle and program type,  $F(1, 277) = 10.64$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .03$ , where individuals were most upset after watching scripted programs with young and single characters ( $M = 2.51_b$ , 95% CI = [2.26, 2.75]) as compared to those who watched scripted programs with family oriented characters ( $M = 1.80_a$ , 95% CI = [1.52, 2.08]) and those who watched reality programs with young and single characters ( $M = 1.79_a$ , 95% CI = [1.52, 2.07]). There were no significant differences among those who watched reality programs with family oriented cast members ( $M = 2.06_{ab}$ , 95% CI = [1.70, 2.42]). See Table 52 for a summary of all effects and Figure 28 for the significant interaction.



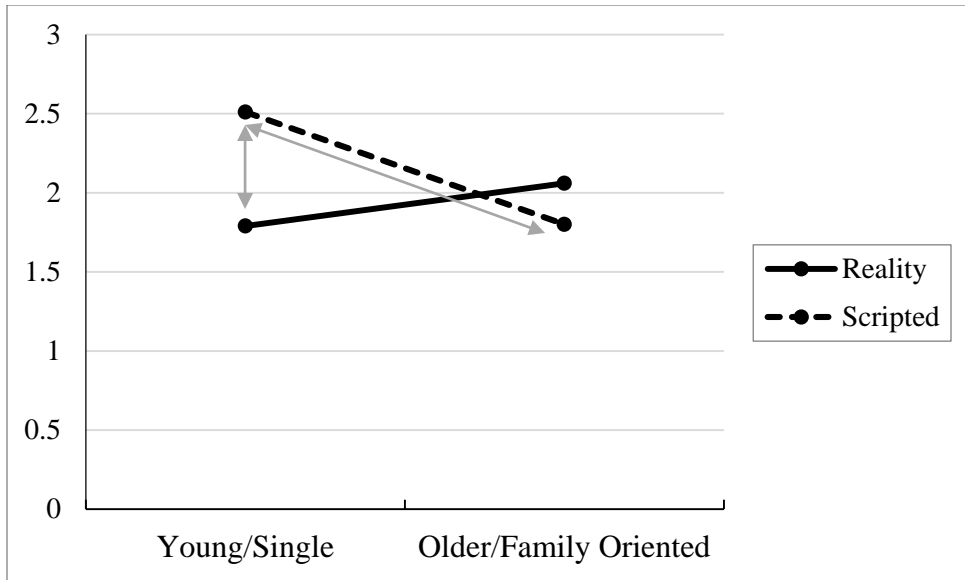


Figure 28. Interaction between program lifestyle and program type on feelings of being upset after watching the program.

In Study One, feelings of being upset were strongest for high social class programs with young and single characters. Here, social class did not demonstrate to be a significant factor in feeling upset, instead, those who chose a scripted program featuring young and single characters experienced the strongest feelings of being upset. This suggests that feelings of being upset were more specifically related to upward contrastive social comparisons. The glamorized portrayals of scripted characters as compared to the real world representations of reality television cast members were more effective at instigating these responses - viewers who watched an idealized version of the young and single lifestyle were likely upset that they could not be like the featured characters.

Table 52

ANOVA Summary for Program Social Class (Class), Program Lifestyle (Life), Program Type (Type), and Perceived Similarity (Sim) on Feelings of Being Upset

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	$\eta^2$	<i>p</i>
Class	1	.06	< .001	.80
Life	1	2.16	.01	.14
Type	1	2.36	.01	.13
Sim	1	1.93	.01	.17
Class x Life	1	.08	< .001	.77
Class x Type	1	.41	.001	.52
Class x Sim	1	.86	.003	.35
Life x Type	1	10.64	.03	.001
Life x Sim	1	.20	< .001	.66
Type x Sim	1	.18	< .001	.67
Class x Life x Type	1	.72	.002	.40
Class x Life x Sim	1	.29	< .001	.59
Class x Type x Sim	1	.18	< .001	.67
Life x Type x Sim	1	.03	< .001	.87
Error	277			

Note. *N* = 293.

**Disappointment.** The ANOVA tested the between-subjects factors on feelings of disappointment after watching the program. There was a significant main effect for perceived similarity  $F(1, 277) = 16.25, p < .001, \eta^2 = .05$ , where those with low perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 2.52, SD = 1.17$ ) experienced stronger feelings of disappointment as compared to those with high perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 2.06, SD = 1.92$ ). See Table 53 for a summary of effects. In Study One, feelings of disappointment were influenced by the viewers' overall perceived realism of television, where those with low perceived realism of television experienced stronger feelings of disappointment after viewing. Here, another individual difference variable influenced those feelings of disappointment after viewing: perceived similarity. It is likely in this study that when viewers chose the content for viewing, many did so in hopes of selecting a program that was relevant and meaningful to them, i.e., featuring

characters that were similar to them on some dimension. Hence, when they were not rewarded with that sense of perceived similarity, the viewers were disappointed as a result. This time, feelings of disappointment may have been specifically related to viewers' choice behavior.

Table 53

*ANOVA Summary for Program Social Class (Class), Program Lifestyle (Life), Program Type (Type), and Perceived Similarity (Sim) on Feelings of Disappointment*

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	$\eta^2$	<i>p</i>
Class	1	.15	< .001	.70
Life	1	1.67	.01	.20
Type	1	.03	< .001	.87
Sim	1	16.25	.05	< .001
Class x Life	1	1.00	.003	.32
Class x Type	1	.002	< .001	.96
Class x Sim	1	.68	.002	.41
Life x Type	1	1.84	.006	.18
Life x Sim	1	.12	< .001	.73
Type x Sim	1	.34	.001	.56
Class x Life x Type	1	.74	.002	.39
Class x Life x Sim	1	.14	< .001	.71
Class x Type x Sim	1	1.00	.003	.32
Life x Type x Sim	1	.02	< .001	.90
Error	277			

Note. *N* = 293.

**Anxiousness.** The ANOVA tested the between-subjects factors on feelings of anxiousness after watching the program. There was a significant main effect for program social class  $F(1, 277) = 4.24, p = .04, \eta^2 = .01$ , where those who chose low social class programs ( $M = 2.40, SD = 1.18$ ) had stronger feelings of anxiousness than those who chose high social class programs ( $M = 2.22, SD = 1.07$ ). See Table 54 for a summary of effects. There were several significant interactions as well, including a two-way interaction between program lifestyle and program type,  $F(1, 277) = 16.03, p < .001, \eta^2 = .05$ , where feelings of anxiousness were strongest for individuals who chose scripted programs featuring young and single characters ( $M$

= 2.79<sub>b</sub>, 95% CI = [2.53, 3.06]), as compared to those who chose scripted programs with family oriented characters ( $M = 1.80_{a}$ , 95% CI = [1.52, 2.08]) and those who watched reality programs with young and single characters ( $M = 1.79_{a}$ , 95% CI = [1.52, 2.07]). There were no significant differences among those who chose reality programs with family oriented cast members ( $M = 2.32_{ab}$ , 95% CI = [1.93, 2.71]). See Figure 29 for the interaction.

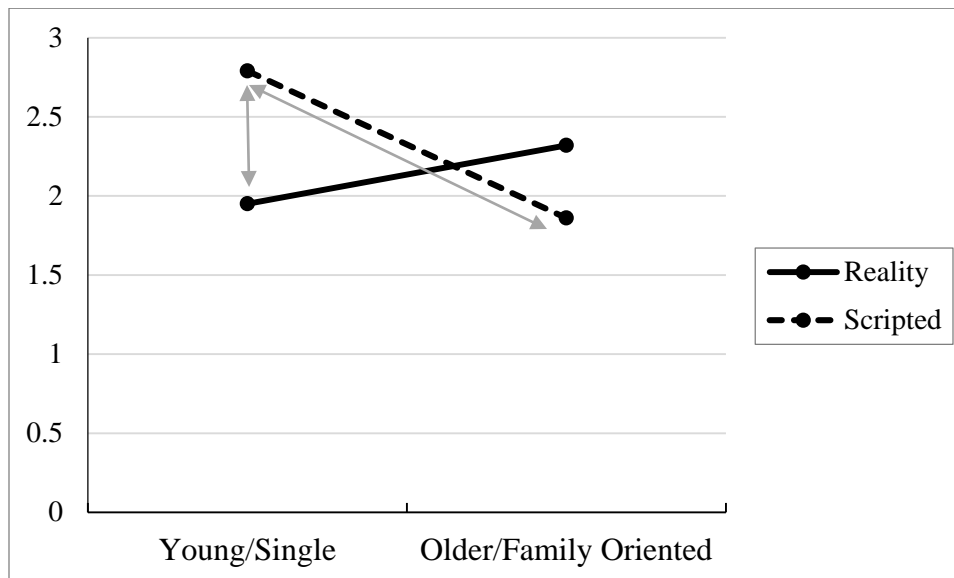
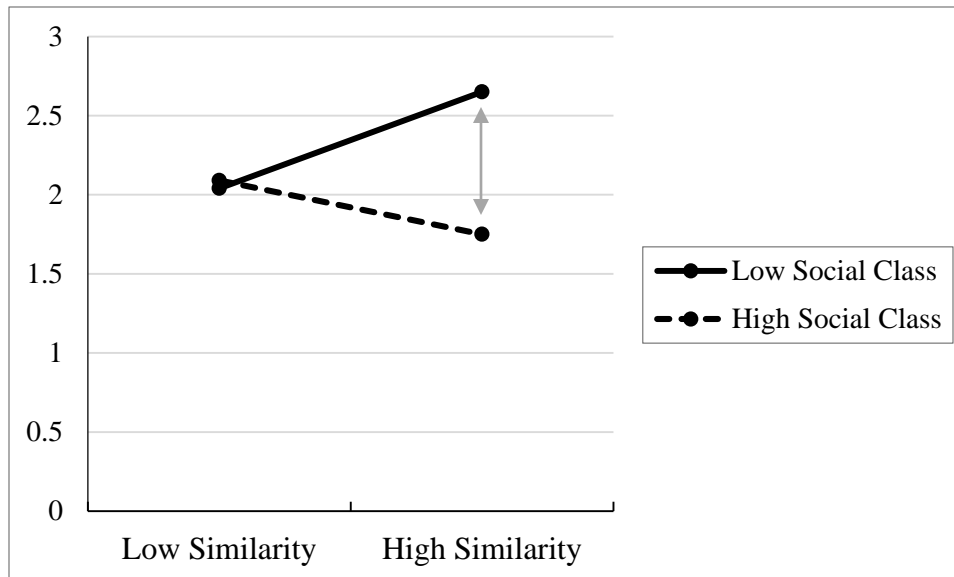


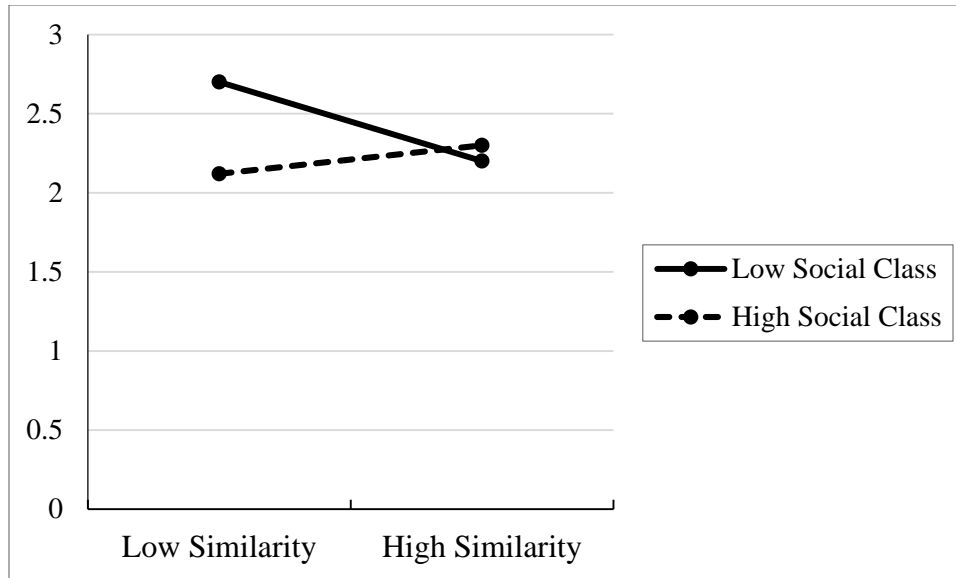
Figure 29. Interaction between program lifestyle and program type on feelings of anxiousness after watching the program.

There was a significant three-way interaction between perceived similarity, program social class, and program type,  $F(1, 277) = 6.30, p = .01, \eta^2 = .02$ . The significant portion of this interaction involved reality programs, where feelings of anxiousness were strongest for those who chose low social class programs and had high perceived similarity to the cast members ( $M = 2.65_{b}$ , 95% CI = [1.98, 3.33]), as compared to those who chose high social class programs and had high perceived similarity to the cast members ( $M = 1.75_{a}$ , 95% CI = [1.21, 2.28]). There were

no significant differences among those who chose high social class programs and had low perceived similarity to the cast members ( $M = 2.09_{ab}$ , 95% CI = [1.70, 2.48]) and those who chose low social class programs and had low perceived similarity to the cast members ( $M = 2.04_{ab}$ , 95% CI = [1.75, 2.33]), and See Figures 30.1 and 30.2 for the interaction.



*Figure 30.1.* Interaction between perceived similarity and program social class for reality programs on feelings of anxiousness after watching the program.



*Figure 30.2.* Interaction between perceived similarity and program social class for scripted programs on feelings of anxiousness after watching the program.

In Study One, perceived realism of television demonstrated to be a significant factor regarding feelings of anxiousness. Those with high perceived realism of television experienced stronger feelings of anxiousness likely because they found the content to be realistic. Here, perceived similarity to the characters demonstrated to be an important individual difference variable. The interaction between program lifestyle and program type determined that feelings of anxiousness were strong for youth oriented scripted programs. It is possible that viewers became anxious because they were upwardly comparing to glamorized portrayals of youth oriented scripted characters. The three-way interaction revealed that feelings of anxiousness were strong for reality programs when perceived similarity to the characters was high, but this only held when the programs featured low social class cast members. In this context, feelings of anxiousness were similar to that of downward assimilative social comparison emotions (pity,

sympathy, fear, worry) because viewers saw themselves as similar to the characters in some way and were anxious that they could become like them, i.e., feeling anxiety about their own situation in looking down on a worse off other based on social class. Indeed, high perceived similarity to the characters demonstrated to be a significant variable in instigating both downward assimilative emotions and feelings of anxiousness in this study, suggesting that these emotional responses were similar in nature. Overall, feelings of anxiousness related to both upward and downward social comparisons.

Table 54

*ANOVA Summary for Program Social Class (Class), Program Lifestyle (Life), Program Type (Type), and Perceived Similarity (Sim) on Feelings of Anxiousness*

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	$\eta^2$	<i>p</i>
Class	1	4.90	.01	.04
Life	1	3.40	.01	.09
Type	1	1.68	.01	.23
Sim	1	.008	< .001	.94
Class x Life	1	1.59	.004	.24
Class x Type	1	.40	.001	.56
Class x Sim	1	.20	< .001	.68
Life x Type	1	18.51	.05	< .001
Life x Sim	1	.70	.002	.44
Type x Sim	1	.97	.003	.36
Class x Life x Type	1	.001	< .001	.98
Class x Life x Sim	1	1.65	.004	.23
Class x Type x Sim	1	7.27	.02	.01
Life x Type x Sim	1	.65	.002	.45
Error	277			

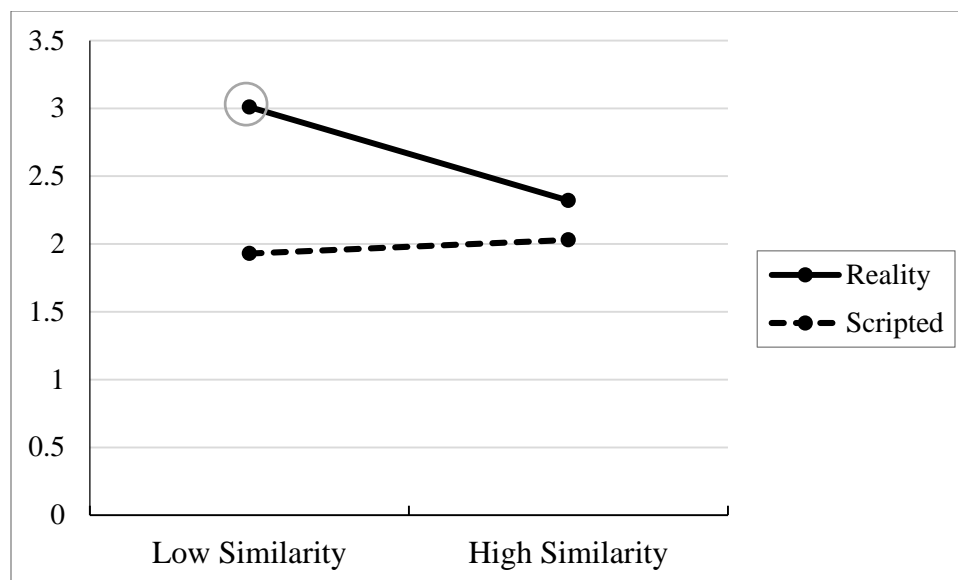
*Note.* *N* = 293.

**Disgust.** The ANOVA tested the relevant predictor variables on feelings of disgust after watching the program. There was a significant main effect for program social class  $F(1, 277) = 6.60, p = .01, \eta^2 = .02$ , where viewers felt stronger feelings of disgust after watching low social class programs ( $M = 2.67, SD = 1.27$ ) as compared to the high social class programs ( $M = 2.15,$

$SD = 1.10$ ). There was also a significant main effect for program type,  $F(1, 277) = 17.07, p < .001, \eta^2 = .05$ , where viewers felt stronger feelings of disgust after watching reality programs ( $M = 2.92, SD = 1.32$ ) as compared to scripted programs ( $M = 2.06, SD = 1.00$ ). See Table 55 for a summary of effects.

There was also a significant two-way interaction between program type and perceived similarity,  $F(1, 277) = 5.64, p = .02, \eta^2 = .02$ , where feelings of disgust were strongest for viewers who chose reality programs and had low perceived similarity to the cast members ( $M = 3.01_b, 95\% \text{ CI} = [2.76, 3.26]$ ), as compared to those who chose reality programs and had high perceived similarity to the cast members ( $M = 2.32_a, 95\% \text{ CI} = [1.88, 2.76]$ ), those who chose scripted programs and had high perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 2.03_a, 95\% \text{ CI} = [1.80, 2.27]$ ), and those who chose scripted programs and had low perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 1.93_a, 95\% \text{ CI} = [1.58, 2.27]$ ). See Figure 31 for the interaction.





*Figure 31.* Interaction between perceived similarity and program type on feelings of disgust after watching the program.

In Study One, feelings of disgust were influenced by perceived realism of television, where feelings of disgust were stronger when perceived realism of television was low. These strong feelings of disgust occurred for high social class, youth oriented programs and low social class, family oriented programs. Here, low social class programs elicited stronger feelings of disgust than high social class programs. In addition, reality programs initiated the strongest feelings of disgust when perceived similarity to the characters was low. These feelings of disgust were likely enhanced because the viewers felt they were different than the characters. This suggests that downward comparisons to reality cast members were taking place. As result, disgust could likely be conceptualized as another downward contrastive social comparison emotion, similar to contempt and scorn. These findings speak again to choice behavior, where some viewers may have selected programs based on novelty, i.e., explicitly selecting programs

that featured characters they were dissimilar to, and may have been motivated by the desire to watch ‘guilty pleasure’ programming - to watch portrayals of characters who are worse off and then to take delight in their misfortunes (*Schadenfreude*).

Table 55

*ANOVA Summary for Program Social Class (Class), Program Lifestyle (Life), Program Type (Type), and Perceived Similarity (Sim) on Feelings of Disgust*

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	$\eta^2$	<i>p</i>
Class	1	6.60	.02	.01
Life	1	.78	.002	.38
Type	1	17.07	.05	< .001
Sim	1	3.07	.01	.08
Class x Life	1	1.73	.01	.19
Class x Type	1	.96	.002	.33
Class x Sim	1	1.36	.004	.25
Life x Type	1	.75	.002	.39
Life x Sim	1	.14	< .001	.71
Type x Sim	1	5.64	.02	.02
Class x Life x Type	1	.02	< .001	.88
Class x Life x Sim	1	.17	< .001	.68
Class x Type x Sim	1	.77	.002	.38
Life x Type x Sim	1	.18	< .001	.67
Error	277			

Note. *N* = 293.

**Embarrassment.** The ANOVA tested the relevant predictor variables on feelings of embarrassment after watching the program. There was a significant main effect for program social class  $F(1, 277) = 3.95, p = .05, \eta^2 = .01$ , where those who chose low social class programs ( $M = 2.43, SD = 1.20$ ) felt more embarrassment after watching than those who chose high social class programs ( $M = 2.00, SD = .95$ ). There was a significant main effect for program type,  $F(1, 277) = 3.98, p = .05, \eta^2 = .01$ , where those who chose reality programs for viewing ( $M = 2.48,$

$SD = 1.25$ ) experienced stronger feelings of embarrassment after viewing as compared to those who chose a scripted program ( $M = 2.02$ ,  $SD = .95$ ). Table 56 for a summary of effects.

There were also several significant interactions. There was a significant two-way interaction for program type and perceived similarity,  $F(1, 277) = 3.97$ ,  $p = .05$ ,  $\eta^2 = .01$ , which was subsumed by a significant three-way interaction for perceived similarity, program social class, and program type,  $F(1, 277) = 5.70$ ,  $p = .02$ ,  $\eta^2 = .02$ . The significant portion of this interaction involved reality programs, where those who chose low social class programs for viewing and had low perceived similarity to the cast members ( $M = 3.08_b$ , 95% CI = [2.80, 3.36]) experienced stronger feelings of embarrassment as compared to those who chose high social class programs and had low perceived similarity to the cast members ( $M = 1.92_a$ , 95% CI = [1.43, 2.41]), and those who chose low social class programs and had high perceived similarity to the cast members ( $M = 1.87_a$ , 95% CI = [1.22, 2.52]). There was no significant difference among those who chose high social class programs and had high perceived similarity to the cast members ( $M = 2.07_{ab}$ , 95% CI = [1.56, 2.59]). See Figure 32.1 and 32.2 for the interaction.

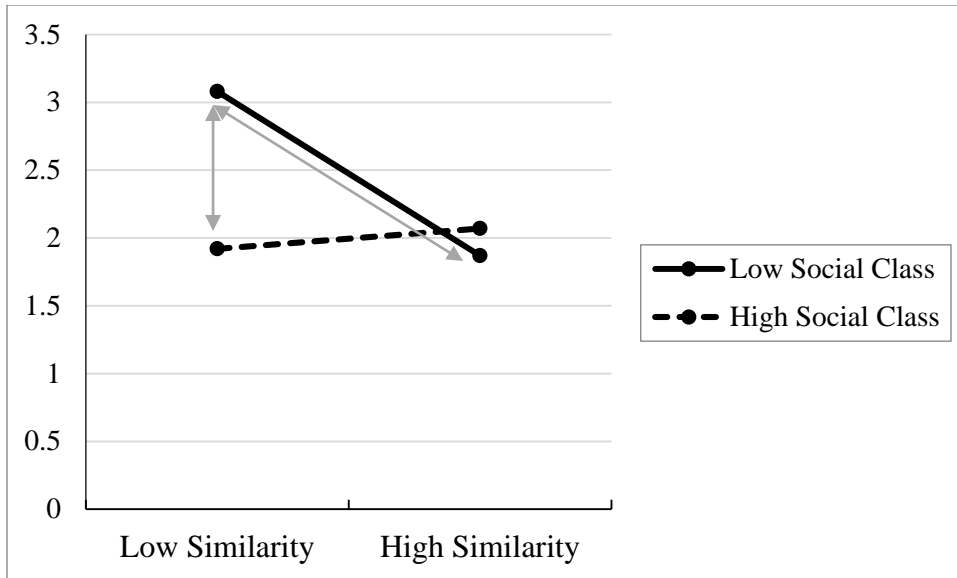


Figure 32.1. Interaction between perceived similarity and program social class for reality programs on feelings of embarrassment after watching the program.

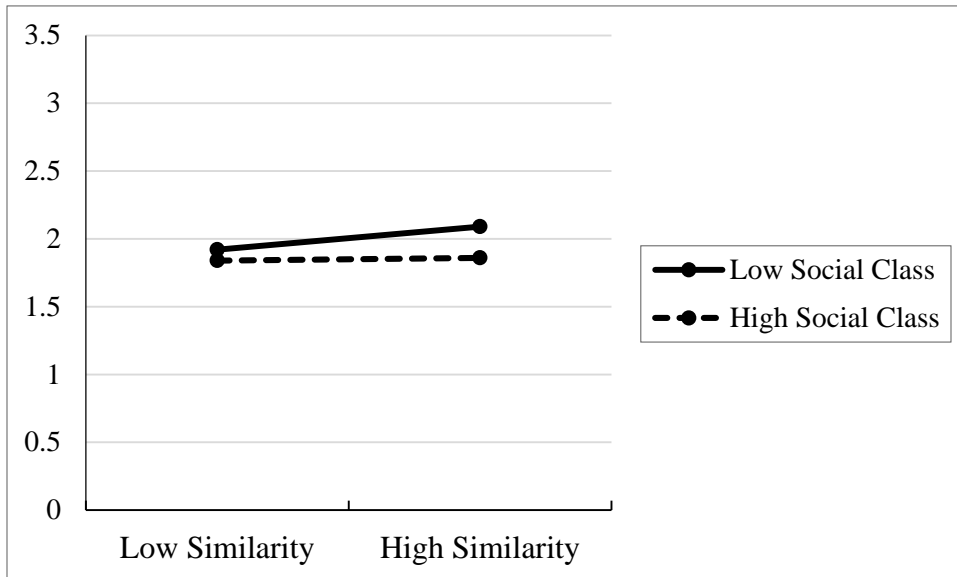


Figure 32.2. Interaction between perceived similarity and program social class for scripted programs on feelings of embarrassment after watching the program.

There was a difference between low social class, youth oriented reality programs ( $M = 2.68_b$ , 95% CI = [2.32, 3.03]) and low social class, youth oriented scripted programs ( $M = 1.90_a$ , 95% CI = [1.44, 2.36]), where reality programs elicited stronger feelings of embarrassment than scripted programs. It is possible that viewers were either embarrassed of the low social class reality television cast members' behavior or embarrassed of their own choice behavior by choosing a low social class reality program as compared to a low social class scripted program. Again, this suggests that reality television cast members were worse off than scripted characters, in general.

In Study One, there were no significant effects related to feelings of embarrassment after viewing the program. In this study, embarrassment responses were similar to those of disgust and downward contrastive emotional responses, where low perceived similarity to the characters resulted in stronger reactions of embarrassment. Those who selected low social class reality programs and had low perceived similarity to the cast members experienced strong feelings of embarrassment after viewing. This suggests that these feelings of embarrassment occurred because the viewers were embarrassed by their media choice (a low social class, reality program) and because after choosing, they did not feel any sense of similarity with the characters. Viewers may have also been embarrassed of the portrayals of low social class reality cast members who they did not feel similar to. Alternatively, those who selected low social class reality programs but felt highly similar to the cast members did not experience these same feelings of embarrassment, suggesting that it was not the program social class alone that resulted in this downward contrastive emotional response. Perhaps most telling was that choosing this type of program (Study Two), instead of being forced to view it (Study One), resulted in significant feelings of embarrassment. Again, individuals may have chosen programs based on novelty and

the desire for a ‘guilty pleasure,’ purposely selecting content featuring characters who were dissimilar to them. This suggests that viewers respond to content differently when they are able to make their own entertainment choices and after viewing, feel regret or reward based on those choices.

Table 56

ANOVA Summary for Program Social Class (Class), Program Lifestyle (Life), Program Type (Type), and Perceived Similarity (Sim) on Feelings of Embarrassment

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	$\eta^2$	<i>p</i>
Class	1	3.95	.01	.05
Life	1	1.29	.004	.26
Type	1	3.98	.01	.05
Sim	1	1.98	.01	.16
Class x Life	1	.27	< .001	.60
Class x Type	1	1.05	.003	.31
Class x Sim	1	3.61	.01	.06
Life x Type	1	.16	< .001	.69
Life x Sim	1	.12	< .001	.73
Type x Sim	1	3.97	.01	.05
Class x Life x Type	1	2.37	.01	.13
Class x Life x Sim	1	.20	< .001	.66
Class x Type x Sim	1	5.70	.02	.02
Life x Type x Sim	1	.01	< .001	.91
Error	277			

Note. *N* = 293.

**Anger.** The ANOVA tested the between-subjects factors on feelings of anger after watching the program. There was a significant main effect for program lifestyle  $F(1, 277) = 4.00$ ,  $p = .05$ ,  $\eta^2 = .01$ , where those who chose programs with young and single characters ( $M = 2.18$ ,  $SD = 1.01$ ) felt more anger after watching than those who chose programs with older, family oriented characters ( $M = 1.90$ ,  $SD = 1.07$ ). See Table 57 for a summary of all effects. Similar to Study One, youth oriented programs elicited strong feelings of anger after viewing. This

provided further support for the notion that portrayals of young and single characters in entertainment television were largely negative in nature. In consideration of choice behavior, viewers may have been angered by their program selection as well. Thus, these strong feelings of anger could have been the result of the negative portrayals of young and single cast members, a poor media selection, or a combination of the two.

Table 57

*ANOVA Summary for Program Social Class (Class), Program Lifestyle (Life), Program Type (Type), and Perceived Similarity (Sim) on Feelings of Anger*

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	$\eta^2$	<i>p</i>
Class	1	.09	< .001	.77
Life	1	4.00	.01	.05
Type	1	.07	< .001	.79
Sim	1	2.57	.01	.11
Class x Life	1	.24	< .001	.62
Class x Type	1	.07	< .001	.79
Class x Sim	1	1.68	.01	.20
Life x Type	1	.19	< .001	.67
Life x Sim	1	.01	< .001	.92
Type x Sim	1	1.17	.004	.28
Class x Life x Type	1	2.07	.01	.15
Class x Life x Sim	1	.03	< .001	.86
Class x Type x Sim	1	1.58	.01	.21
Life x Type x Sim	1	.27	< .001	.60
Error	277			

*Note.* *N* = 293.

**Discrete Social Comparison-Related Emotional Responses: A Summary.** Once again, the findings above informed the relationship between directional social comparisons and the affective responses to entertainment content. Regarding hedonic positive emotional responses, family oriented programs elicited stronger positive emotional responses as compared to youth oriented programs, suggesting that youth oriented media portrayals are more negative than

family oriented media portrayals. Several significant interactions emerged, where hedonic positive responses were strong for both low social class reality programs where viewers experienced high perceived similarity to the characters and for high social class scripted programs where viewers experienced high perceived similarity to the characters. Upward assimilative emotional responses were strong for these groups as well, reinforcing the notion that upward assimilative social comparisons are beneficial to the individual (Smith, 2000).

Content features of the programming were instrumental in predicting negative emotional reactions to the content. Hedonic negative responses were strongest for scripted programs featuring young and single characters. This was also the case for feelings of being upset and feelings of anxiousness. As described above, this suggests that these types of programs featured negative portrayals of young and single characters, thus eliciting strong negative responses to the content.

In discussion of choice behavior, feelings of disappointment were strongest when perceived similarity to the characters was low. Feelings of disgust and embarrassment were also strongest when viewers selected low social class reality programs and perceived similarity to the characters was low. This suggest that some viewers were disappointed, disgusted, and embarrassed by their media choices. This could have been a result of the choice itself, the portrayals of the featured characters, that the content did not meet their viewing expectations, or a combination of these factors. Additional findings related to disgust and embarrassment suggest that downward contrastive social comparisons took place, based on the program social class and program type.

Regarding the differences between reality and scripted programs, H<sub>5</sub> predicted that reality programs would initiate stronger social comparison-related emotional responses than scripted



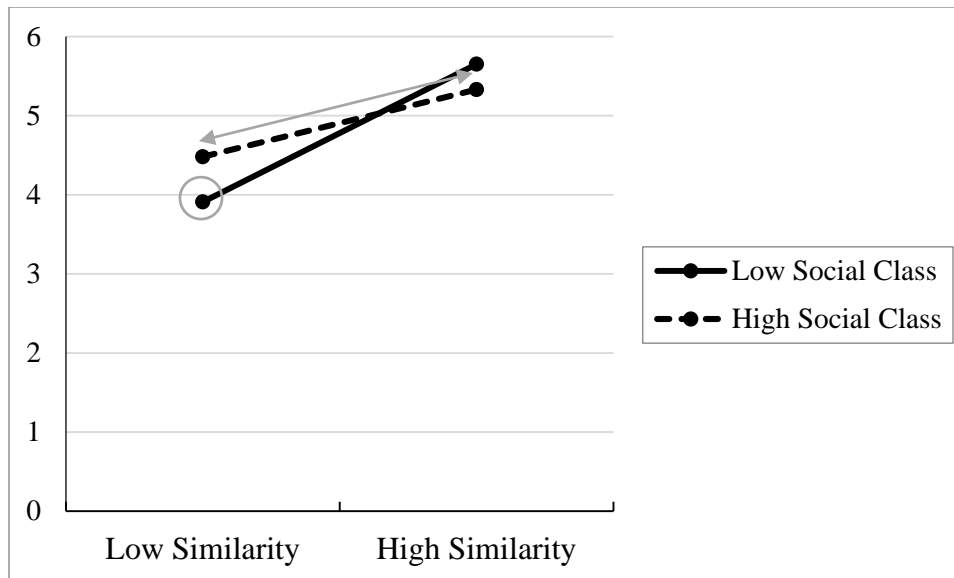
programs. Reality programs did instigate stronger social comparison-related emotional responses than scripted programs in certain cases. Reality programs with high social class, family oriented cast members initiated stronger feelings of jealousy than scripted programs did. Low social class youth oriented reality programs elicited stronger feelings of embarrassment and disgust than scripted programs did. Of interest is that all of these emotional responses were negative in nature and that viewers selected these programs of their own free will to view. Feelings of jealousy were likely related to the social class dimension of social comparison, where viewers were jealous of the high social class reality cast members' lifestyle, this based on the notion that the lifestyles on reality television are more highly emphasized as compared to the lifestyles on scripted television. However, with embarrassment and disgust, it is possible that viewers were either embarrassed of and disgusted with the low social class characters' behavior (as the result of a downward social comparison based on social class), embarrassed of and disgusted with their own choice behavior by choosing a low social class reality program as compared to a low social class scripted program, or a combination of the two. Considering this, H<sub>5</sub> was supported here in ways that it was not in Study One.

Overall, the discrete emotional responses profiled here demonstrated patterns much more consistent with Smith's (2000) framework of directional (upward, downward) social comparison emotional responses than those in Study One. Feelings of jealousy and being upset mimicked the patterns of upward contrastive emotions, feelings of disgust and embarrassment were similar to downward contrastive emotions, and feelings of hope and anxiousness were closely related to downward assimilative emotions. Feelings of disappointment and anger were the only discrete emotions in this study that were somewhat ambiguous in their directional outcomes.

## Enjoyment

**Fun and Entertainment.** The ANOVA tested the between-subjects factors on how fun and entertaining the program was. There were two significant main effects (see Table 57 for a summary). There was a main effect for program lifestyle,  $F(1, 277) = 8.49, p = .004, \eta^2 = .02$ , where those who chose older, family oriented programs ( $M = 4.90, SD = 1.44$ ) found them to be more fun and entertaining than those who chose young and single programs ( $M = 4.84, SD = 1.63$ ). There was also a main effect for perceived similarity,  $F(1, 277) = 36.37, p < .001, \eta^2 = .10$ , where those who had high perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 5.44, SD = 1.21$ ) found the programs to be more fun and entertaining than those who had low perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 4.30, SD = 1.65$ ). See Table 58 for a summary of all effects.

There was also a significant interaction for perceived similarity to the characters and program social class,  $F(1, 277) = 4.22, p = .04, \eta^2 = .01$ , where those who chose low social class programs and had high perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 5.65_c, 95\% \text{ CI} = [5.16, 6.14]$ ) and those who chose high social class programs and had high perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 5.33_c, 95\% \text{ CI} = [4.91, 5.76]$ ) found the programs to be the most fun and entertaining as compared to those who chose high social class programs and had low perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 4.48_b, 95\% \text{ CI} = [4.09, 4.87]$ ) and those who chose low social class programs and had low perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 3.91_a, 95\% \text{ CI} = [3.52, 4.30]$ ). See Figure 33 for the interaction.



*Figure 33.* Interaction between program social class and perceived similarity on feelings of fun and entertainment after watching the program.

In Study One, there was a significant main effect for perceived similarity, where those with high perceived similarity to the characters had stronger feelings of fun and entertainment than those with low perceived similarity to the characters. Similarly, in this study, high perceived similarity to the characters, no matter whether the programs featured high social class or low social class characters, resulted in the strongest feelings of fun and entertainment. These feelings significantly decreased for programs with high social class characters when perceived similarity was low and again for low social class characters when perceived similarity was low. In general, when perceived similarity was high, feelings of enjoyment related to fun and entertainment were strong. Program social class became relevant when perceived similarity to the characters was low, significantly decreasing from high social class programs to low social class programs. This suggests that low social class programs featuring dissimilar characters resulted in the weakest feelings of fun and entertainment. These findings reinforced the importance of perceived

similarity to the characters as it related to entertainment of reality and scripted programs.

Viewers likely chose media content based on the belief that they were similar to the portrayed characters on some dimension and when they did indeed perceive themselves to be similar to the characters after viewing, fun and entertainment of the program increased.

Table 58

*ANOVA Summary for Program Social Class (Class), Program Lifestyle (Life), Program Type (Type), and Perceived Similarity (Sim) on Fun and Entertainment*

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	$\eta^2$	<i>p</i>
Class	1	.34	< .001	.56
Life	1	8.49	.02	.004
Type	1	.32	< .001	.57
Sim	1	36.37	.10	< .001
Class x Life	1	.27	< .001	.60
Class x Type	1	3.70	.01	.06
Class x Sim	1	4.22	.01	.04
Life x Type	1	1.28	.003	.26
Life x Sim	1	.04	< .001	.85
Type x Sim	1	1.83	.01	.18
Class x Life x Type	1	2.88	.01	.09
Class x Life x Sim	1	.39	.001	.53
Class x Type x Sim	1	1.35	.004	.25
Life x Type x Sim	1	.20	< .001	.65
Error	277			

Note. *N* = 293.

**Appreciation and Meaningfulness.** The ANOVA tested the between-subjects factors on appreciation and meaningfulness of the program. Several significant main effects emerged (see Table 59 for a summary). There was a main effect for program type,  $F(1, 277) = 21.62, p < .001, \eta^2 = .05$ , where those who chose scripted programs ( $M = 3.52, SD = 1.60$ ) found them to be more meaningful than those who chose reality programs ( $M = 2.04, SD = 1.24$ ). There was also a significant main effect for perceived similarity, where those who had high perceived similarity to

the characters ( $M = 3.71$ ,  $SD = 1.59$ ) appreciated the programs more than those who had low perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 2.14$ ,  $SD = 1.27$ ).

There was also a significant three-way interaction for perceived similarity, program social class, and program type,  $F(1, 277) = 6.76$ ,  $p = .05$ ,  $\eta^2 = .01$ , where for reality programs, appreciation and meaningfulness were strongest for those who chose low social class programs and had high perceived similarity to the cast members ( $M = 3.06_b$ , 95% CI = [2.21, 3.91]) and those who chose high social class programs and had high perceived similarity to the cast members ( $M = 2.92_b$ , 95% CI = [2.25, 3.58]), as compared to those who chose high social class programs and had low perceived similarity to the cast members ( $M = 1.76_a$ , 95% CI = [1.28, 2.25]) and those who chose low social class programs and had low perceived similarity to the cast members ( $M = 1.65_a$ , 95% CI = [1.29, 2.01]). See Figure 34.1 for the interaction.

For scripted programs, appreciation and meaningfulness were strongest for those who chose high social class programs and had high perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 4.08_b$ , 95% CI = [3.64, 4.52]), those who chose low social class programs and had high perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 3.85_b$ , 95% CI = [3.48, 4.22]), and those who chose low social class programs and had low perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 3.16_b$ , 95% CI = [2.52, 3.80]), as compared to those who chose low social class programs and had high perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 2.08_a$ , 95% CI = [1.53, 2.63]). See Figure 34.2 for the interaction.

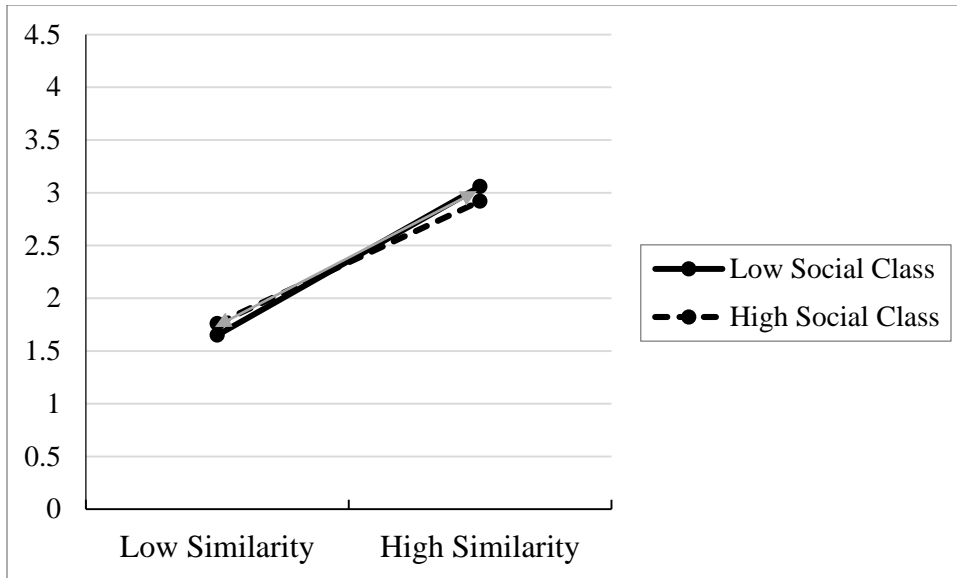


Figure 34.1. Interaction between program social class and perceived similarity for reality programs on feelings of appreciation and meaningfulness after watching the program.

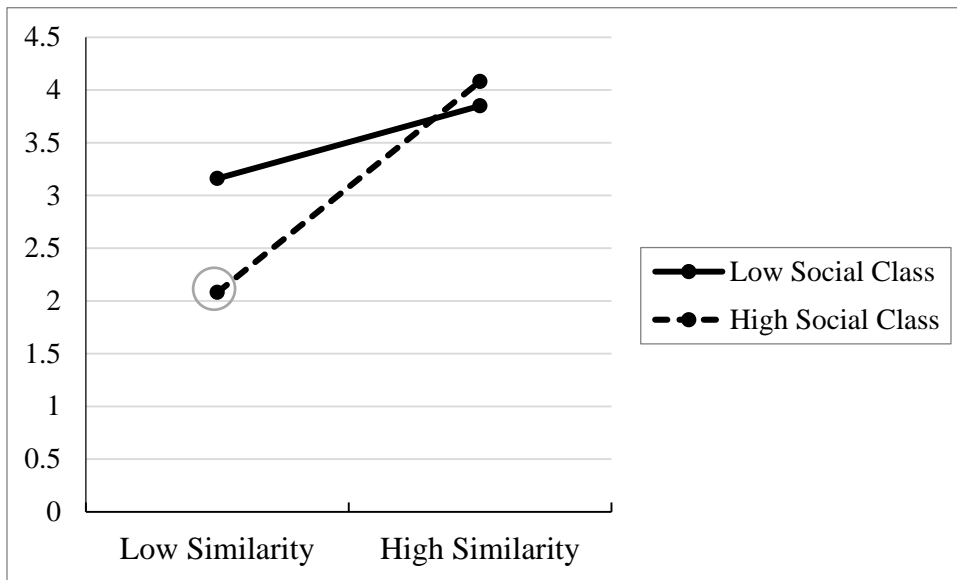


Figure 34.2. Interaction between program social class and perceived similarity for scripted programs on feelings of appreciation and meaningfulness after watching the program.

In Study One, feelings of meaningfulness and appreciation were strongest when perceived similarity to the characters was high. Similar results regarding perceived similarity were demonstrated in this study. For reality programs, appreciation and meaningfulness were strongest when perceived similarity to the characters was high, similar to the findings described above related to fun and entertainment. Scripted programs demonstrated a similar pattern, except regarding low social class programs when viewers had low perceived similarity to the characters. Here, it did not matter that the viewers did not see themselves as similar to the low social class scripted characters. They experienced the same feelings of meaningfulness and appreciation for the content, suggesting that scripted programs were more effective than reality programs in eliciting these types of feelings, even when viewers did not have a high sense of perceived similarity to the presented characters. Overall, perceived similarity to the characters was an important factor in increasing feelings of meaningfulness and appreciation of scripted and reality programs.

Table 59

*ANOVA Summary for Program Social Class (Class), Program Lifestyle (Life), Program Type (Type), and Perceived Similarity (Sim) on Appreciation and Meaningfulness*

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	$\eta^2$	<i>p</i>
Class	1	1.17	.003	.28
Life	1	3.63	.01	.06
Type	1	21.62	.05	< .001
Sim	1	41.73	.10	< .001
Class x Life	1	3.52	.01	.06
Class x Type	1	1.03	.002	.31
Class x Sim	1	1.68	.004	.20
Life x Type	1	1.30	.003	.25
Life x Sim	1	.91	.002	.33
Type x Sim	1	.03	< .001	.87
Class x Life x Type	1	.64	.001	.43
Class x Life x Sim	1	1.07	.002	.30
Class x Type x Sim	1	3.75	.01	.05
Life x Type x Sim	1	.01	< .001	.91
Error	277			

Note. *N* = 293.

### The Role of Individual Differences

**Viewer Gender.** H<sub>6</sub> suggested that females would report greater consumption of reality television than males. An independent samples t-test determined there was no significant difference between consumption of reality television between males ( $M = .38$ ,  $SD = .82$ ) and females ( $M = .27$ ,  $SD = .52$ );  $t(291) = 1.43$ ,  $p = .15$ . As in Study One, H<sub>6</sub> was not supported.

**Social Comparison Orientation.** H<sub>7</sub> posed that individuals with a high social comparison orientation would report greater consumption of reality television than individuals with a low social comparison orientation. An independent samples t-test determined that there was no significant difference in the consumption of reality television among those with a high social comparison orientation ( $M = .34$ ,  $SD = .67$ ) and those with a low social comparison orientation ( $M = .30$ ,  $SD = .65$ );  $t(292) = -.50$ ,  $p = .62$ . As in Study One, H<sub>7</sub> was not supported.



**Perceived Realism.** H<sub>8</sub> posited that those high in reality television consumption would report greater perceived realism of reality television programs than those low in reality television consumption. An independent samples t-test determined that those who were high in reality television consumption ( $M = 3.88, SD = .74$ ) reported significantly greater perceived realism of reality television as compared to those low in reality television consumption ( $M = 3.51, SD = .76$ );  $t(292) = -4.13, p < .001$ . As in Study One, H<sub>8</sub> was supported.

**Perceived Similarity.** RQ<sub>2</sub> asked whether there would be a difference between reality and scripted programs on feelings of perceived similarity to the characters. A chi-square analysis revealed there was a significant association between the participants' feelings of perceived similarity to characters in the program (low, high) and the type of programs they selected to watch (reality, scripted),  $X^2(1, N = 293) = 40.76, p < .001$ . Of those who chose a reality television program, 72.9 percent reported low perceived similarity to the characters. Of those who watched a scripted program, only 34.9 percent reported low perceived similarity to the characters, suggesting that viewers experienced greater perceived similarity to scripted characters as opposed to reality cast members.

### **The Relationship between Desirable and Undesirable Social Comparisons and Enjoyment**

H<sub>9</sub> posited that emotional responses associated with desirable social comparisons would be positively related to enjoyment of the television program. Per Smith (2000), individual emotions were combined into appropriate categories of social comparison-related groupings. The emotions of inspiration, optimism, and admiration were combined to form upward assimilative emotions (Chronbach's  $\alpha = .89$ ). The emotions of contempt, scorn, *Schadenfreude*, and pride constituted the downward contrastive emotions (Chronbach's  $\alpha = .70$ ). As in Study One,

enjoyment<sup>2</sup> was positively correlated with upward assimilative emotions,  $r(294) = .66, p < .001$ .

Unlike Study One, enjoyment was not significantly correlated with downward contrastive emotions,  $r(294) = .10, p = .10$ . As a result, H<sub>9</sub> was partially supported.

H<sub>10</sub> posed that emotional responses associated with undesirable social comparisons would be negatively related to enjoyment of the program. The emotions of depression, shame, envy, and resentment comprised the upward contrastive emotions (Chronbach's  $\alpha = .74$ ). The emotions of pity, fear, worry, and sympathy were combined to form the downward assimilative emotions (Chronbach's  $\alpha = .80$ ). Enjoyment was positively correlated with upward contrastive emotions,  $r(294) = .30, p < .001$ . Enjoyment was also positively correlated with downward assimilative emotions,  $r(294) = .51, p < .001$ . Thus, H<sub>10</sub> was not supported.

As in Study One, all four social comparison groups were positively related to enjoyment. However, downward contrastive emotions were not as strongly related to enjoyment in Study Two as in Study One. It is likely that choice behavior influenced the relationship between social comparison emotions and enjoyment. Although downward contrastive emotional responses like contempt and scorn were beneficial to the comparer (Smith, 2000), it is unlikely that individuals would willingly choose media content that they believe would make them feel this way. Upward contrastive and downward assimilative emotional responses were much more strongly correlated with enjoyment here than in Study One. Thus, it is likely that those who chose content featuring upward comparison targets enjoyed those programs despite having experienced emotions like envy and resentment (upward contrastive). Similarly, viewers who chose programs featuring

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<sup>2</sup> As in Study One, for the correlational analyses of H<sub>9</sub> and H<sub>10</sub>, an overall measurement of enjoyment was used, with items consisting of both fun and appreciation (Chronbach's  $\alpha = .90$ ). This measure of enjoyment (Hall & Zwarun, 2012; Oliver & Bartsch, 2010) was examined separately in previous analyses.

downward comparison targets enjoyed those programs despite having felt emotions like pity and sympathy (downward assimilative).

### **The Role of Selective Exposure**

**Perceived Similarity of Program Lifestyle and Program Social Class.**  $H_{11}$  suggested that viewers would likely select programs that featured characters of a similar lifestyle and social class than programs that featured characters of a dissimilar lifestyle and social class. A chi-square analysis was performed to determine whether individuals selected programs that featured characters of a similar lifestyle. Selection of programs featuring characters of a similar lifestyle was marginally significant,  $X^2(4, N = 290) = 5.67, p = .06$ . Of those who most identified with a young and single lifestyle, 63.7 percent chose a program featuring young and single characters. A second chi-square analysis was employed to determine whether individuals chose programs that featured characters of a similar social class. Selection of programs with a similar social class was significant,  $X^2(2, N = 294) = 8.21, p = .02$ . Of those with a low social class, 70.6 percent chose programs with low social class characters. Of those with a high social class, 64.7 percent chose programs with high social class characters. Considering these two analyses,  $H_{11}$  was largely supported.

**Program Social Class and Self-Esteem.**  $H_{12}$  posed that those who selected programs featuring low social class characters would report greater state self-esteem after viewing than those who chose programs featuring high social class characters.  $RQ_3$  further asked whether individuals who selected reality television programs featuring low social class characters would report greater state self-esteem than those who chose scripted programs featuring low social class characters. The testing ANOVA on feelings of state self-esteem resulted in a significant main effect for program type,  $F(1, 277) = 4.25, p = .04, \eta^2 = .01$ , where those who chose reality

programs ( $M = 3.65, SD = .74$ ) had higher state self-esteem than those who chose scripted programs ( $M = 3.50, SD = .64$ ).

There was also a significant interaction between program lifestyle, perceived similarity, and program social class,  $F(1, 277) = 5.59, p = .02, \eta^2 = .02$ . The significant portion of this interaction involved low social class programs, where those who chose family oriented programs and had high perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 4.02_b, 95\% CI = [3.61, 4.42]$ ) had higher state self-esteem after watching the programs as compared to those who chose young and single programs and had high perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 3.45_a, 95\% CI = [3.22, 3.67]$ ). There were no significant differences among those who chose young and single programs and had low perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 3.75_{ab}, 95\% CI = [3.44, 4.06]$ ) or those who chose family oriented programs and had low perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 3.66_{ab}, 95\% CI = [3.45, 3.86]$ ). See Figure 35.1 and 35.2 for the interaction and Table 60 for a summary of all effects.

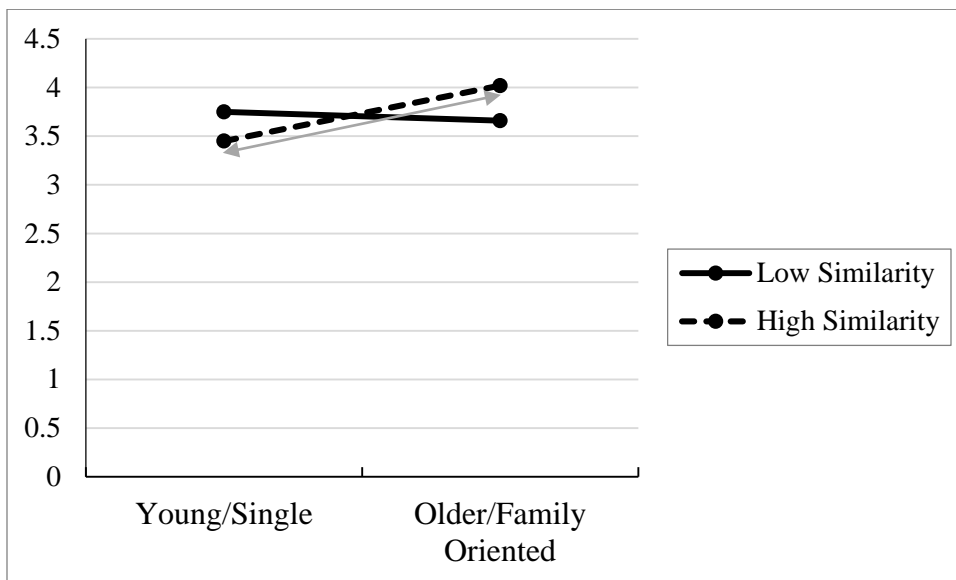


Figure 35.1. Interaction between program lifestyle and perceived similarity for low social class programs on state self-esteem after watching the program.

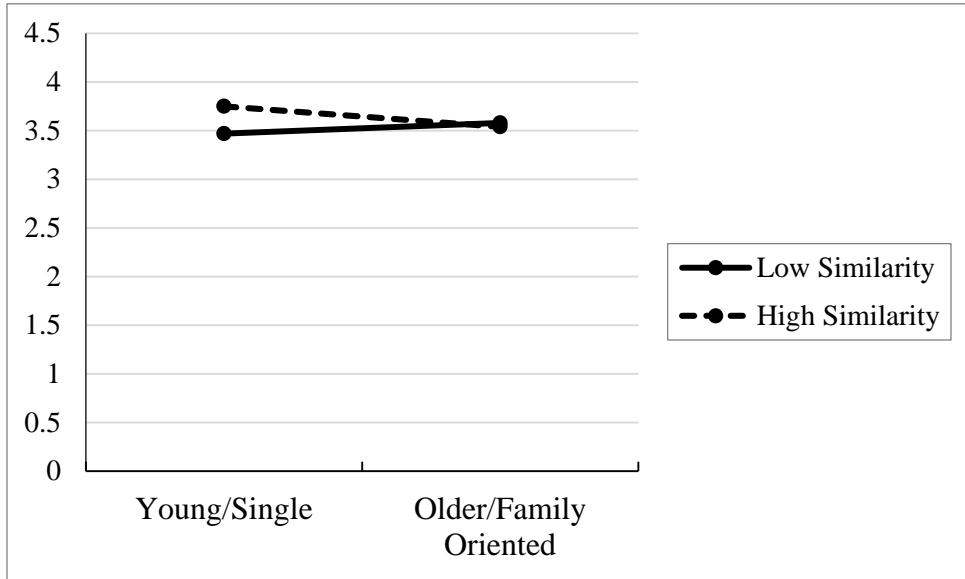


Figure 35.2. Interaction between program lifestyle and perceived similarity for high social class programs on state self-esteem after watching the program.

In sum, those who selected reality television programs for viewing experienced greater state self-esteem than those who selected scripted programs, engaging in downward social comparisons based on program type. This suggests that reality programs were more effective than scripted programs at enhancing self-image after viewing, providing evidence as to the genre's overall appeal. The significant interaction involving low social class programs revealed that those who chose family oriented programs and had high perceived similarity to the characters experienced greater state self-esteem than those who chose youth oriented programs and had high perceived similarity to the characters. This suggests that the family oriented programs likely made the viewers feel better about their own situation (based on social class).

Another possible explanation is that the family oriented programs emphasized more positive content, such as family bonding, which in turn, influenced the viewers' own self-perceptions.

Considering there were no significant effects specifically related to program social class and state self-esteem (the significant portion of the interaction only involved low social class programs), H<sub>12</sub> was not supported. Regarding RQ<sub>3</sub>, there were no significant effects pertaining to both program social class and program type. There was only a main effect for program type, where those who chose reality programs for viewing experienced higher state self-esteem after watching as compared to those who chose scripted programs.

Table 60

*ANOVA Summary for Program Social Class (Class), Program Lifestyle (Life), Program Type (Type), and Perceived Similarity (Sim) on State Self-Esteem*

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	$\eta^2$	<i>p</i>
Class	1	1.63	.01	.20
Life	1	.81	.003	.37
Type	1	4.25	.01	.04
Sim	1	.56	.002	.46
Class x Life	1	1.99	.01	.16
Class x Type	1	.001	< .001	.97
Class x Sim	1	.21	< .001	.64
Life x Type	1	.06	< .001	.81
Life x Sim	1	.69	.002	.41
Type x Sim	1	1.96	.01	.16
Class x Life x Type	1	2.63	.01	.11
Class x Life x Sim	1	5.59	.02	.02
Class x Type x Sim	1	3.22	.01	.07
Life x Type x Sim	1	.85	.01	.36
Error	277			

Note. *N* = 293.

**Entertainment Preferences.** RQ<sub>4</sub> asked what preferences individuals had for televised media entertainment. Regarding preferences based on participant gender, a chi-square analysis

determined there was no significant association between gender of participant (male, female) and the type of programs individuals selected to watch (reality, scripted),  $X^2(1, N = 294) = .32, p = .33$ . 61.7 percent of males and 58.4 percent of females selected scripted programs.

Based on rates of reality television consumption among participants, a chi-square analysis revealed a significant relationship between reality television consumption (low, high) and the type of program that was selected (reality, scripted),  $X^2(1, N = 294) = 7.20, p = .005$ . Those low in reality consumption chose a scripted program 66.1% of the time and those high in reality consumption chose reality and scripted shows nearly equally, with reality programs being chosen 49.6% of the time.

Regarding the social comparisons made with mediated characters, a chi-square analysis was employed and there was a significant association between program type selected (reality, scripted) and the social comparison that was made after exposure (characters were worse off than me, characters were similar to me, characters were better than me),  $X^2(1, N = 293) = 10.29, p = .006$ . Of those who chose a reality program, 60.2 percent of the cast members were deemed to be worse off as opposed to 42.3 percent of scripted characters, confirming that reality television presented more downward social comparison targets than scripted television did.

### **Discussion**

The goal of Study Two was to both replicate the findings of Study One, when possible, and to examine the role of selective exposure in social comparisons with mediated characters. As outlined above, the findings of Study Two were similar to Study One in some ways, but there were also instrumental differences as well. Relevant individual differences and choice behavior demonstrated to be extremely important to social comparisons and their associated emotional responses. The content features of the programs were less consistent in predicting emotional

responses to the content, likely because viewers were able to choose their own programs for viewing.

Regarding Smith's (2000) groupings of social comparison-related emotional responses, Study One largely demonstrated main effects regarding the predictor variables. Alternatively, Study Two demonstrated several significant interactions that suggest choice behavior among the participants played a relevant part in the emotional responses that occurred during and after viewing. As explained above, upward contrastive (depression, shame, envy, resentment) and downward assimilative (pity, fear, worry, and sympathy) emotional responses were considered to be detrimental to the comparer (Smith, 2000). In Study One, which used a forced exposure environment, program content factors such as program lifestyle were significant predictors of these types of emotional responses. Alternatively, in this study, these types of emotions were not predicted by programming factors, but rather by perceived similarity to the characters. This suggests that viewers were effective in choosing programs that would *not* result in strong upward contrastive and downward assimilative emotional responses. Giving viewers agency to choose their own program lessened the upward contrastive and downward assimilative emotional responses that occurred based on programming factors, i.e., they only felt these emotions strongly when high perceived similarity to the characters occurred as a byproduct of exposure.

Smith (2000) originally posited that contrastive emotional responses are a result of the comparer feeling like they could never be like the target. It seems contradictory then that high perceived similarity to the characters would predict strong upward contrastive emotional responses. However, when you consider that emotions like depression and shame are centered on the self, it is possible that viewers who engaged in upward social comparisons experienced these emotions strongly because they felt similar to the characters, making it all that more depressing



and shameful that they could never be like them. Indeed, feelings of jealousy were predicted here (but not in Study One) by high perceived similarity to the characters as well, as it should also be considered to be an upward contrastive emotional response. One individual, after viewing a youth oriented, high social class program, stated, “I thought it would be interesting for me to watch teenagers close to my age running around a big city with a lot of money.” Here, it is clear that the viewer perceived themselves as similar to the characters based on age, but different from characters based on the variable of social class. This type of response suggests that viewers can have a high sense of perceived similarity with the characters on one dimension (age) while engaging in upward contrastive social comparisons based on another (social class).

For upward assimilative emotional responses (inspiration, optimism, admiration), these emotions were also strongest when individuals had high perceived similarity to the characters, suggesting that viewers selected programs based on their perception that the characters would be similar to them. Alternatively, downward contrastive emotional responses (contempt, scorn, *Schadenfreude*, pride) were not predicted by high perceived similarity to the characters. These emotional responses were predicted by the program content factors, including program social class, program lifestyle, and program type. It is possible that those who chose these types of programs did so because of perceived novelty and to look down on worse off others, not that they perceived themselves as similar to the characters. One participant explicitly said: “It looked trashy, so I wanted to watch it. The whole ‘so bad, it’s good thing.’” Indeed, this suggests that some participants chose programs based on their desires for ‘guilty pleasure’ programming.

Hedonic positive and negative responses to the content were predicted by program lifestyle, just as in Study One. Family oriented programs instigated the strongest positive reactions to the content, while youth oriented programs instigated the strongest negative

reactions to the content. Again, this supposes that youth oriented media portrayals are generally more negative than family oriented media portrayals. High perceived similarity to the characters also predicted strong positive responses to the content in both studies. These findings speak to the way both older, family oriented characters and young and single characters are represented in entertainment television. As described in Study One, it is possible that family oriented programs regularly emphasize bonding and family values, while youth oriented programs often focus on the poor behavior of young adults, including promiscuity and fighting. In terms of perceived similarity, positive responses to content result when the viewers feel similar to the characters, again, suggesting that the content was more relevant and meaningful to them.

Considering other discrete emotions in this study, as in Study One, feelings of hope were strongest for low social class programs. This suggests that it is not necessarily related to upward assimilative emotions like inspiration and optimism. It suggests that it may be a downward assimilative social comparison emotion, similar to sympathy, where viewers experience stronger feelings of hope when they wish for the characters' situation to improve.

Feelings of disappointment demonstrated a different pattern here than in Study One, where feelings of disappointment were strongest when perceived similarity to the characters was low. These feelings of disappointment likely could be a result of poor selection on the viewers' part; they may have chosen programs in hopes the characters would be similar to them, but were disappointed when it did not manifest. Feelings of disgust and embarrassment were also predicted by low perceived similarity to the characters, unlike in Study One. Feelings of disgust and embarrassment were strongest for low social class reality programs where perceived similarity to the characters was low. This suggests that viewers who chose these types of

programs made downward comparisons based on social class and program type, and also felt dissimilar to the characters, resulting in strong feelings of disgust.

Regarding embarrassment, it is possible that viewers also felt increased feelings of embarrassment as a result of their media choice, after choosing a low social class reality program for viewing. Alternatively, in Study One, there were no significant effects for feelings of embarrassment, suggesting that this emotional reaction was a result of the selective exposure environment. This notion was casually reflected by several of the participants as well. One viewer, after viewing a low social class, reality program stated, “I actually feel ashamed to admit I wasted any time at all subjecting myself to this disgusting example of the American lifestyle.” This statement suggest that viewers sometimes willingly choose content that they expect will result in negative emotional repercussions.

Most of the relevant differences among reality and scripted television programs emerged as a result of specific individual differences. As in Study One, and in conflict with national ratings data (Adalian, 2012), there was no significant difference among males and females reality television consumption patterns here. They reported watching reality programs a similar amount of time per week. Furthermore, there was no significant association between gender and the type of programs individuals chose to watch. Males and females chose reality programs for viewing at nearly the same rate. This suggests that despite common conceptions that women prefer reality television content over men, in this entertainment context, men and women selected reality and scripted programs relatively equally.

Regarding perceived similarity, viewers largely saw themselves as dissimilar to reality television cast members, when they chose reality programs. Furthermore, most individuals who chose reality programs perceived the reality cast members to be worse off than them (60.2

percent of the time). Alternatively, they only deemed scripted characters to be worse off than them 42.3 percent of the time. This occurred no matter the programs' social class and/or lifestyle. These findings speak to the notion that although reality programs do present real and unscripted activity, viewers do not see themselves as similar to them. Furthermore, they see reality cast member to be worse off than them, more so than they do for scripted characters. It is possible that individuals see scripted mediated characters as more similar to them because fictional characterizations are more sanitized and glamorized, and in turn, these characters represent a more idealized version of the viewers themselves. It is also possible that reality programs present content that is less cognitively and affectively engaging as compared to scripted programs, and as a result, they do not elicit the same types of responses. Indeed, these notions were informally mentioned by viewers after watching reality programs. One viewer said, "I have seen shows like this one and I figured it would be similar. It's good for brainlessly watching something." Another viewer mentioned their desire *not* to get hooked on a storyline. These anecdotal responses suggest that viewers have preconceived notions about the content of reality television programs in general, which in turn influence their expectations of what the media experience would be like.

The role of selective exposure in this study also echoed those findings. Participants largely chose programs featuring a similar lifestyle and social class. Furthermore, there were significant effects of exposure on state self-esteem. Those who chose reality programs experienced significantly higher state self-esteem after viewing than those who chose scripted programs. This could speak to the reality television's overall appeal, as in, although the content itself may not be valued as highly by audiences, it does make viewers feel better about themselves.

In this study, the relationship between social comparison-related emotional responses, overall valenced responses, and enjoyment was complicated. Again and as demonstrated in Study One, the findings of H<sub>3</sub> and H<sub>4</sub> revealed that both assimilative and contrastive emotional responses were stronger when perceived similarity to the characters was high. Unlike Study One, the discrete emotional responses here aligned more concretely with Smith's (2000) groupings of social comparison-related emotional responses.

The emotional responses associated with upward assimilative social comparisons (beneficial in nature), hedonic positive responses, feelings of fun and entertainment, and feelings of meaningfulness and appreciation were all stronger when perceived similarity to the characters was high. Furthermore, overall enjoyment was correlated with upward assimilative emotional responses. This suggests that upward assimilative social comparisons with mediated characters are related to overall positive feelings to the content and in turn, enjoyment. The findings related to downward contrastive emotional responses revealed that these emotional responses were not stronger when perceived similarity to the characters were high, nor were they significantly correlated with enjoyment. This suggests that although downward contrastive social comparisons are deemed to be beneficial (Smith, 2000), the emotional responses associated with them (contempt, scorn, *Schadenfreude*, pride, disgust, embarrassment), do not align with enjoyment in a mediated context. Alternatively, the emotions that were associated with detrimental social comparisons (upward contrastive, downward assimilative) were positively correlated with enjoyment. This suggests that feelings like envy, jealousy, and resentment do not necessarily detract from the overall enjoyment of the mediated experience. Furthermore, it suggests that no matter the assimilative or contrastive processes involved, upward comparisons with mediated characters are positively associated with enjoyment. Again, as in Study One, downward

assimilative responses to mediated content (e.g., sympathy, hope, pity) are not necessarily negative responses, in that they were significantly correlated with enjoyment as well.

In all, this study was effective in aligning two social comparison-related emotional frameworks together. The discrete emotional responses outlined by Nabi & Keblusek (2014) were further categorized into Smith's (2000) groupings, save for the emotional responses of disappointment and anger, which did not demonstrate consistency with any of the four groupings (upward assimilative, upward contrastive, downward assimilative, downward contrastive). Disappointment and anger could be conceptualized in the larger category of hedonic negative emotional responses. High perceived similarity to the characters demonstrated to be a driving factor in predicting beneficial social comparison responses, hedonic positive responses, and enjoyment to the content. Finally, findings related to choice behavior revealed that selective exposure to content is a meaningful factor as well, in that the emotional responses experienced after viewing demonstrated marked differences from those measured in the forced exposure environment of Study One. As a result, the supplemental analyses offered below aim to explicate the differences in exposure, especially as they influence social comparison-related emotional responses to entertainment content.

## CHAPTER FOUR: Supplemental Analyses

The goal of the supplemental analyses presented here was to better understand the role of exposure in social comparison processes, including effects on emotional responses and enjoyment. As a result, these analyses emphasized the differences between forced and selective exposure on responses to media entertainment content.

Considering the designs of Study One and Study Two were similar, combining the participants and utilizing exposure (forced, selective) as a relevant between-subjects factor in the analysis allowed for greater insight into the role of program choice behavior on the various dependent variables. Here, the univariate ANOVA had five between-subjects factors: exposure type (forced, selective), program social class (low, high), program lifestyle (young and single, older and family oriented), program type (reality, scripted), and perceived similarity to the characters (low, high). Once again, perceived realism was not included in this analysis because it was not a relevant predictor variable in Study Two. Furthermore, because Study One and Study Two examined the roles of program social class, program lifestyle, program type, and perceived similarity to the characters, this supplementary analysis solely focused on the role of exposure and any significant interactions with the other between-subjects factors.

As in Study One and Study Two, data analysis was conducted on social comparison-related emotional responses using two frameworks: Smith's (2000) and Nabi and Keblusek's (2014). The order of analyses are as follows: upward assimilative, upward contrastive, downward assimilative, downward contrastive, hedonic positive tone/valence, hedonic negative tone/valence, other discrete emotions, state self-esteem, enjoyment as fun, and enjoyment as appreciation. See Table 61 for a list of reliabilities.

Table 61

*Reliability for Measures*

<u>Measure</u>	<u>Chronbach's <math>\alpha</math></u>
Upward Assimilative Emotions	.89
Upward Contrastive Emotions	.74
Downward Assimilative Emotions	.80
Downward Contrastive Emotions	.70
Hedonic Positive Emotions	.93
Hedonic Negative Emotions	.79
State Self-Esteem	.90
Enjoyment: Fun	.97
Enjoyment: Meaningfulness	.92

**Upward Assimilative**

The between-subjects factors were tested in the ANOVA for effects on upward assimilative emotions (admiration, inspiration, optimism). There were no significant effects for exposure type. See Table 62 for a summary.



Table 62

*ANOVA Summary for Exposure (Exp), Program Social Class (Class), Program Lifestyle (Life), Program Type (Type), and Perceived Similarity (Sim) on Upward Assimilative Emotions*

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	$\eta^2$	<i>p</i>
Exp	1	< .001	< .001	.99
Exp x Class	1	.16	< .001	.69
Exp x Life	1	1.57	.002	.21
Exp x Type	1	.06	< .001	.80
Exp x Sim	1	.19	< .001	.66
Exp x Class x Life	1	.02	< .001	.88
Exp x Class x Type	1	.03	< .001	.86
Exp x Class x Sim	1	.59	< .001	.45
Exp x Life x Type	1	.60	< .001	.44
Exp x Life x Sim	1	1.54	.002	.22
Exp x Type x Sim	1	1.00	.001	.32
Error	450			

*Note.* *N* = 482.

### **Upward Contrastive**

The between-subjects factors were tested in the ANOVA on upward contrastive emotional responses (depression, shame, envy, resentment) to the content. There were no significant effects of exposure type. See Table 63 for a summary.

Table 63

*ANOVA Summary for Exposure (Exp), Program Social Class (Class), Program Lifestyle (Life), Program Type (Type), and Perceived Similarity (Sim) on Upward Contrastive Emotions*

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	$\eta^2$	<i>p</i>
Exp	1	3.52	.01	.06
Exp x Class	1	.63	.001	.43
Exp x Life	1	.05	< .001	.83
Exp x Type	1	< .001	< .001	.98
Exp x Sim	1	.10	< .001	.75
Exp x Class x Life	1	2.50	.005	.11
Exp x Class x Type	1	1.48	.003	.23
Exp x Class x Sim	1	.08	< .001	.79
Exp x Life x Type	1	1.05	.002	.31
Exp x Life x Sim	1	.63	.001	.43
Exp x Type x Sim	1	.42	< .001	.52
Error	450			

*Note.*  $N = 482$ .

### **Downward Assimilative**

The ANOVA tested the relevant between-subjects factors on downward assimilative emotions (pity, fear, worry, sympathy). There were no significant effects for exposure type. See Table 64 for a summary.

Table 64

ANOVA Summary for Exposure (Exp), Program Social Class (Class), Program Lifestyle (Life), Program Type (Type), and Perceived Similarity (Sim) on Downward Assimilative Emotions

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	$\eta^2$	<i>p</i>
Exp	1	.12	< .001	.73
Exp x Class	1	.23	< .001	.63
Exp x Life	1	2.44	.01	.12
Exp x Type	1	.96	.002	.33
Exp x Sim	1	.03	< .001	.88
Exp x Class x Life	1	2.12	.004	.15
Exp x Class x Type	1	.009	< .001	.92
Exp x Class x Sim	1	.28	< .001	.60
Exp x Life x Type	1	.24	< .001	.63
Exp x Life x Sim	1	.27	< .001	.60
Exp x Type x Sim	1	.04	< .001	.84
Error	450			

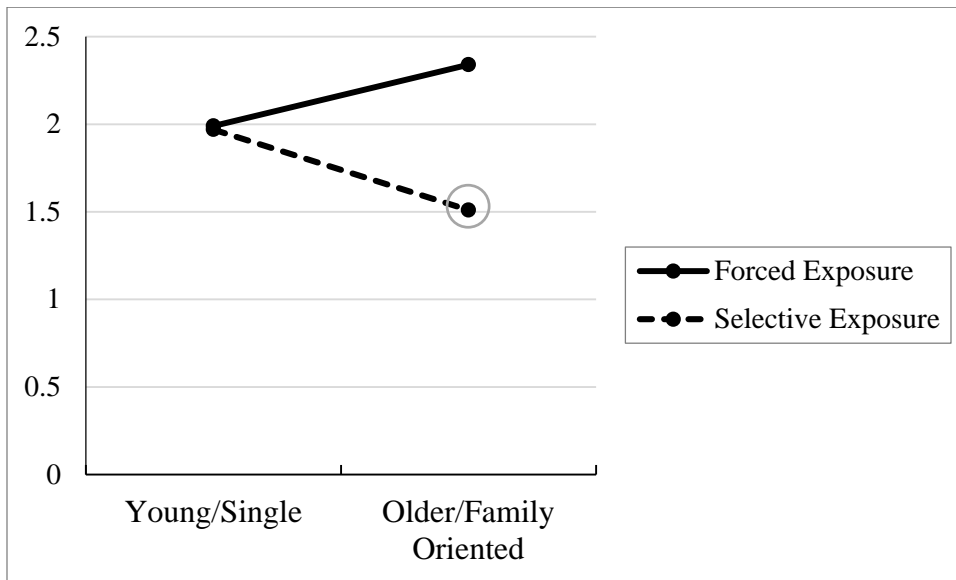
Note. *N* = 482.

### Downward Contrastive

The ANOVA tested the relevant between-subjects factors on downward contrastive emotional responses (contempt, scorn, *Schadenfreude*, pride). There was a main effect of exposure type,  $F(1, 450) = 23.58, p < .001, \eta^2 = .04$ , where those in the forced exposure condition ( $M = 2.03, SD = .82$ ) experienced stronger downward contrastive emotional responses than those in the selective exposure condition ( $M = 1.73, SD = .74$ ). See Table 65 for a summary of all exposure effects. There was also a significant two-way interaction for exposure and program lifestyle,  $F(1, 450) = 5.41, p = .02, \eta^2 = .02$ . This two-way interaction was subsumed by a significant three-way interaction for exposure, program social class, and program lifestyle,  $F(1, 450) = 5.41, p = .02, \eta^2 = .02$ , where for low social class programs, those in the forced exposure condition who viewed family oriented programs ( $M = 2.34_b, 95\% \text{ CI} = [2.02, 2.66]$ ), those in the forced exposure condition who watched young and single programs ( $M = 1.99_b, 95\% \text{ CI} = [1.78, 2.20]$ ), and those in the selective exposure condition who chose young

and single programs ( $M = 1.97_b$ , 95% CI = [1.76, 2.18]) experienced the significantly stronger downward contrastive emotional responses than those in the selective exposure condition who chose family oriented programs ( $M = 1.51_a$ , 95% CI = [1.26, 1.76]). See Figure 36.1 for the interaction.

For high social class programs, downward contrastive emotional responses were strongest for those in the forced exposure condition who viewed young and single programs ( $M = 2.03_b$ , 95% CI = [1.78, 2.28]) and those in the forced exposure condition who viewed family oriented programs ( $M = 2.02_b$ , 95% CI = [1.80, 2.25]) as compared to those in the selective exposure condition who chose family oriented programs ( $M = 1.62_a$ , 95% CI = [1.38, 1.86]), and those in the selective exposure condition who chose young and single programs ( $M = 1.62_a$ , 95% CI = [1.44, 1.80]). See Figure 36.2 for the interaction.



*Figure 36.1.* Interaction between program lifestyle and exposure for low social class programs on downward contrastive emotional responses after watching the program.

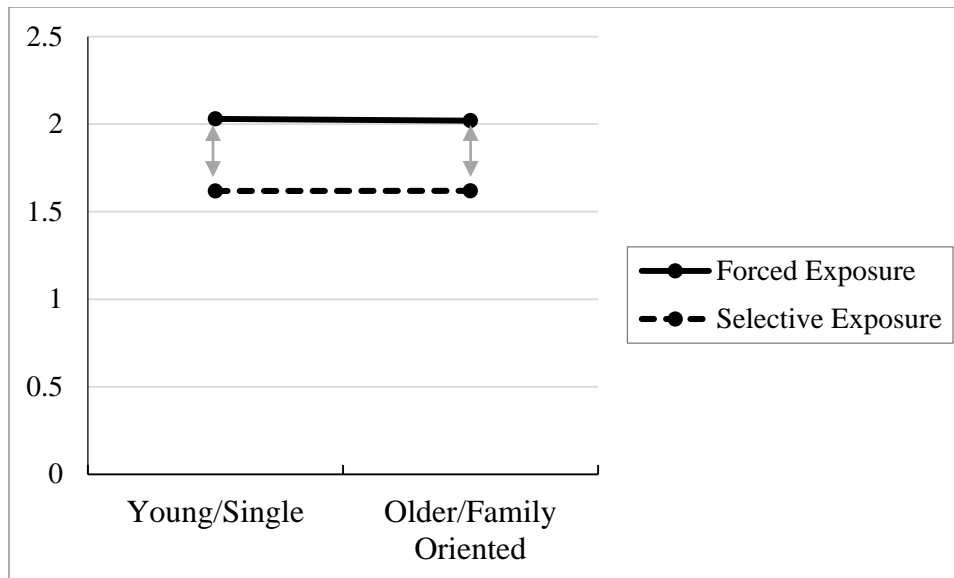


Figure 36.2. Interaction between program lifestyle and exposure for high social class programs on downward contrastive emotional responses after watching the program.

In sum, for high social class programs, the interaction demonstrated that those who were able to choose their own program for viewing (independent of the program's lifestyle) experienced significantly weaker downward contrastive emotions than those who were forced to view a program. This was also the case for low social class programs, but only when they were family oriented. For low social class, youth oriented programs, downward contrastive emotional responses were stronger in a selective exposure environment. This suggests that some viewers chose to view programs that made them feel strong feelings of contempt, scorn, *Schadenfreude*, or pride, reinforcing the notion of novelty and 'guilty pleasure' as a motivation in program choice behavior.

Table 65

ANOVA Summary for Exposure (Exp), Program Social Class (Class), Program Lifestyle (Life), Program Type (Type), and Perceived Similarity (Sim) on Downward Contrastive Emotions

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	$\eta^2$	<i>p</i>
Exp	1	23.58	.04	< .001
Exp x Class	1	.009	< .001	.93
Exp x Life	1	5.41	.01	.02
Exp x Type	1	.38	< .001	.54
Exp x Sim	1	2.76	.01	.10
Exp x Class x Life	1	5.59	.01	.02
Exp x Class x Type	1	.84	.002	.36
Exp x Class x Sim	1	.22	< .001	.46
Exp x Life x Type	1	.01	< .001	.90
Exp x Life x Sim	1	1.35	.001	.25
Exp x Type x Sim	1	.10	.003	.76
Error	450			

Note. *N* = 482.

### Smith's Framework: A Summary.

Considering that there were no significant effects for exposure type on upward assimilative, upward contrastive, or downward assimilative emotional responses, it is likely that viewers experienced these types of social comparison-related emotional responses relatively equally across forced exposure and selective exposure environments. However, the findings concerning downward contrastive emotional responses demonstrated that viewers can and sometimes do select media for purposes of downward contrastive social comparison; to look down on worse off others knowing that the characters are different than them (in this case, on the factor of social class). In turn, this resulted in strong feelings of contempt, scorn, *Schadenfreude*, and pride. This reinforced the notion that viewers sometimes seek out media content for novelty purposes and to engage in 'guilty pleasure' media consumption.

## Hedonic Positive

The ANOVA tested the relevant between-subjects factors on hedonic positive emotional responses to the content. There was a main effect for choice behavior,  $F(1, 450) = 4.58, p = .03, \eta^2 = .01$ , where those in the selective exposure condition ( $M = 2.99, SD = .97$ ) experienced stronger positive emotional responses than those in the forced exposure condition ( $M = 2.73, SD = 1.08$ ). See Table 66 for a summary. This suggests that viewers largely chose programs that resulted in positive emotional responses to the content, whereas being forced to view a certain program did not allow for the these same positive responses.

Table 66

*ANOVA Summary for Exposure (Exp), Program Social Class (Class), Program Lifestyle (Life), Program Type (Type), and Perceived Similarity (Sim) on Hedonic Positive Emotions*

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	$\eta^2$	<i>p</i>
Exp	1	4.58	.01	.03
Exp x Class	1	.23	< .001	.63
Exp x Life	1	< .001	< .001	.99
Exp x Type	1	1.29	.002	.26
Exp x Sim	1	.56	< .001	.46
Exp x Class x Life	1	1.27	.002	.26
Exp x Class x Type	1	1.70	.003	.19
Exp x Class x Sim	1	.58	< .001	.45
Exp x Life x Type	1	1.83	.003	.18
Exp x Life x Sim	1	.10	< .001	.75
Exp x Type x Sim	1	1.16	.002	.28
Error	450			

*Note.*  $N = 482$ .

## Hedonic Negative

The ANOVA tested the relevant between-subjects variables on hedonic negative emotional responses. There were no significant effects for exposure type. See Table 67 for a summary.

Table 67

ANOVA Summary for Exposure (Exp), Program Social Class (Class), Program Lifestyle (Life), Program Type (Type), and Perceived Similarity (Sim) on Hedonic Negative Emotions

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	$\eta^2$	<i>p</i>
Exp	1	2.85	.01	.09
Exp x Class	1	.001	< .001	.98
Exp x Life	1	.02	< .001	.88
Exp x Type	1	.27	< .001	.61
Exp x Sim	1	1.31	.003	.25
Exp x Class x Life	1	1.72	.003	.19
Exp x Class x Type	1	< .001	< .001	.99
Exp x Class x Sim	1	.03	< .001	.86
Exp x Life x Type	1	1.22	.002	.27
Exp x Life x Sim	1	.10	< .001	.75
Exp x Type x Sim	1	.17	< .001	.68
Error	450			

*Note.* *N* = 482.

### **Jealousy**

The ANOVA tested the between-subjects factors on feelings of jealousy after watching the program. There were no significant effects for exposure type. See Table 68 for a summary.



Table 68

*ANOVA Summary for Exposure (Exp), Program Social Class (Class), Program Lifestyle (Life), Program Type (Type), and Perceived Similarity (Sim) on Jealousy*

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	$\eta^2$	<i>p</i>
Exp	1	.75	.001	.39
Exp x Class	1	2.22	.004	.14
Exp x Life	1	.06	< .001	.81
Exp x Type	1	1.52	.002	.22
Exp x Sim	1	1.04	.002	.31
Exp x Class x Life	1	3.18	.01	.08
Exp x Class x Type	1	.19	< .001	.66
Exp x Class x Sim	1	2.06	.003	.15
Exp x Life x Type	1	.05	< .001	.82
Exp x Life x Sim	1	1.07	.002	.30
Exp x Type x Sim	1	.04	< .001	.84
Error	450			

*Note.* *N* = 482.

### Hope

The ANOVA tested the between-subjects factors on feelings of hope after watching the program. There were no significant effects for exposure type. See Table 69 for a summary.

Table 69

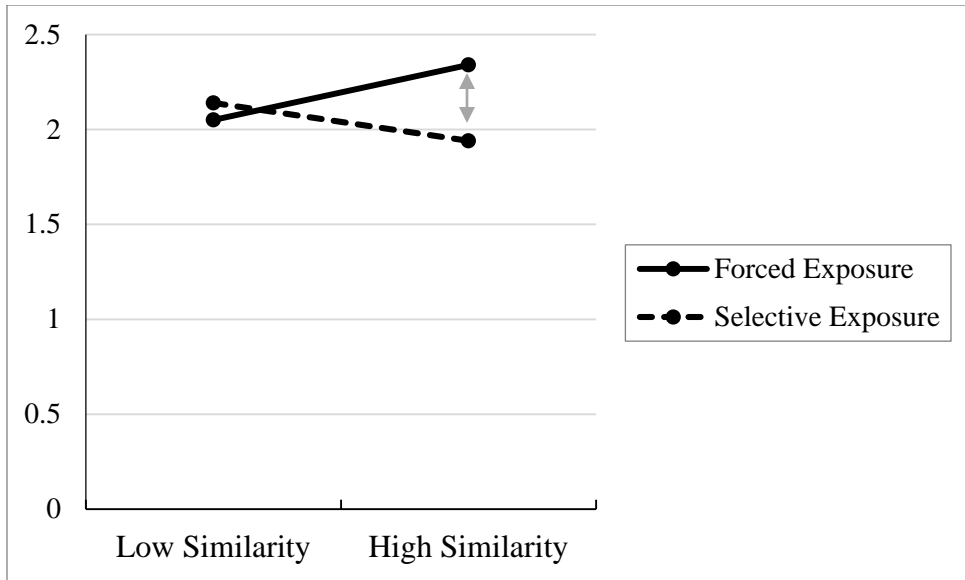
ANOVA Summary for Exposure (Exp), Program Social Class (Class), Program Lifestyle (Life), Program Type (Type), and Perceived Similarity (Sim) on Hope

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	$\eta^2$	<i>p</i>
Exp	1	1.30	.002	.26
Exp x Class	1	.79	.001	.38
Exp x Life	1	.07	< .001	.79
Exp x Type	1	.18	< .001	.67
Exp x Sim	1	.95	.001	.33
Exp x Class x Life	1	2.46	.004	.12
Exp x Class x Type	1	2.75	.004	.10
Exp x Class x Sim	1	2.01	.003	.16
Exp x Life x Type	1	< .001	< .001	.99
Exp x Life x Sim	1	2.90	.01	.09
Exp x Type x Sim	1	2.28	.004	.13
Error	450			

Note. *N* = 482.

### Being Upset

The ANOVA tested the between-subjects factors on feelings of being upset after watching the program. There was a significant two-way interaction for exposure type and perceived similarity,  $F(1, 450) = 4.35$ ,  $p = .04$ ,  $\eta^2 = .01$ , where those in the forced exposure condition who had high perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 2.34_b$ , 95% CI = [2.06, 2.63]) experienced the strongest feelings of being upset as compared to those in the selective exposure condition who had high perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 1.94_a$ , 95% CI = [1.70, 2.17]). There were no significant differences among those in the selective exposure condition who had low perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 2.14_{ab}$ , 95% CI = [1.94, 2.34]) and those in the forced exposure condition who had low perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 2.05_{ab}$ , 95% CI = [1.85, 2.26]). See Figure 37 for the interaction and Table 70 for a summary of all effects.



*Figure 37.* Interaction between perceived similarity and exposure on feelings of being upset after watching the program.

In sum, feelings of being upset were strongest when individuals were forced to view a program and subsequently had high perceived similarity to the characters. Feelings of being upset were significantly weaker when individuals were able to choose a program for viewing and had high perceived similarity to the characters. It is possible that those who were forced to view a program and experienced high perceived similarity to the characters afterwards were upset by the characters' portrayal. Alternatively, those who were able to choose their own program for viewing and then experienced high perceived similarity to the characters were in a sense rewarded by their choice, i.e., they chose the program they wanted to view, featuring the characters they expected to be similar to, and as a result, were less upset after viewing.

Table 70

*ANOVA Summary for Exposure (Exp), Program Social Class (Class), Program Lifestyle (Life), Program Type (Type), and Perceived Similarity (Sim) on Being Upset*

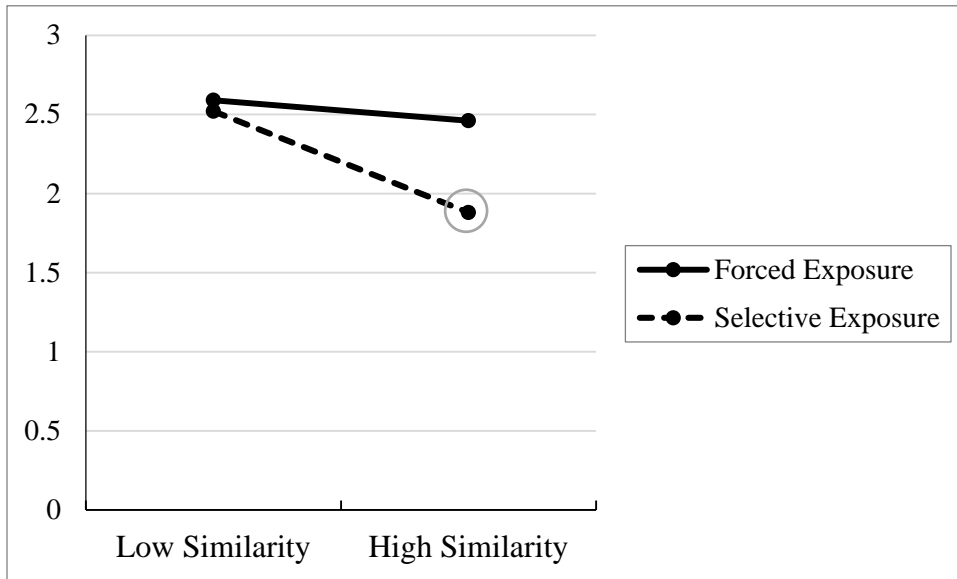
Source	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	$\eta^2$	<i>p</i>
Exp	1	1.73	.003	.19
Exp x Class	1	.16	< .001	.69
Exp x Life	1	< .001	< .001	.98
Exp x Type	1	.80	.002	.37
Exp x Sim	1	4.35	.01	.04
Exp x Class x Life	1	2.21	.004	.14
Exp x Class x Type	1	.009	< .001	.93
Exp x Class x Sim	1	.11	< .001	.74
Exp x Life x Type	1	2.29	.01	.13
Exp x Life x Sim	1	.02	< .001	.89
Exp x Type x Sim	1	.03	< .001	.85
Error	450			

*Note.*  $N = 482$ .

### Disappointment

The ANOVA tested the between-subjects factors on feelings of disappointment after watching the program. There was a significant main effect for exposure type,  $F(1, 450) = 6.40$ ,  $p = .01$ ,  $\eta^2 = .01$ , where those in the forced exposure condition ( $M = 2.51$ ,  $SD = 1.26$ ) experienced stronger feelings of disappointment than those in the selective exposure condition ( $M = 2.29$ ,  $SD = 1.08$ ). See Table 71 for a summary of all effects. There was also a significant two-way interaction for exposure and perceived similarity,  $F(1, 450) = 3.83$ ,  $p = .05$ ,  $\eta^2 = .01$ , where those in the forced exposure condition who had low perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 2.59_b$ , 95% CI = [2.37, 2.82]), those in the selective exposure condition who had low perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 2.52_b$ , 95% CI = [2.30, 2.73]), and those in the forced exposure condition who had high perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 2.46_b$ , 95% CI = [2.15, 2.78]), experienced the strongest feelings of disappointment as compared to those in the selective

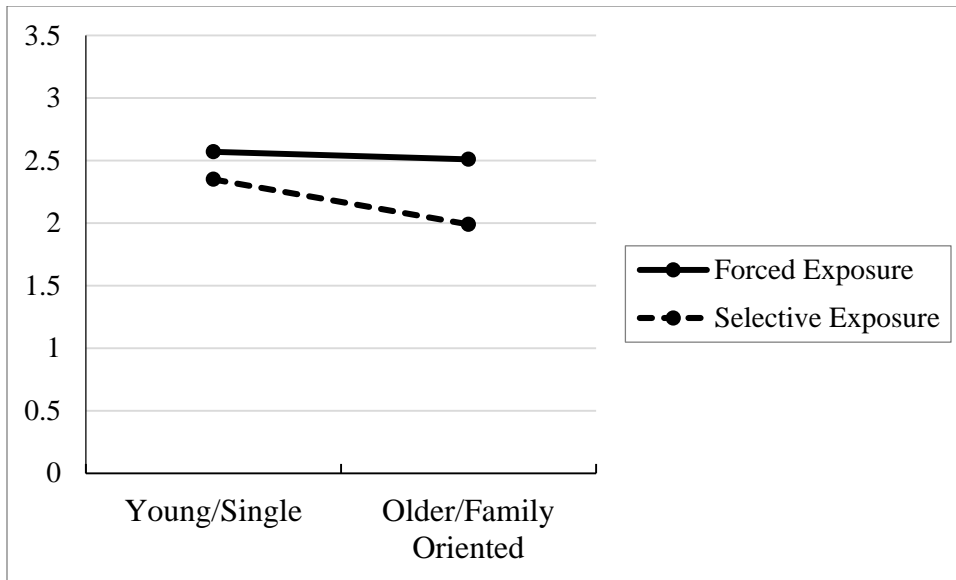
exposure condition who had high perceived similarity to the characters ( $M = 1.88_a$ , 95% CI = [1.62, 2.13]). See Figure 38 for the interaction.



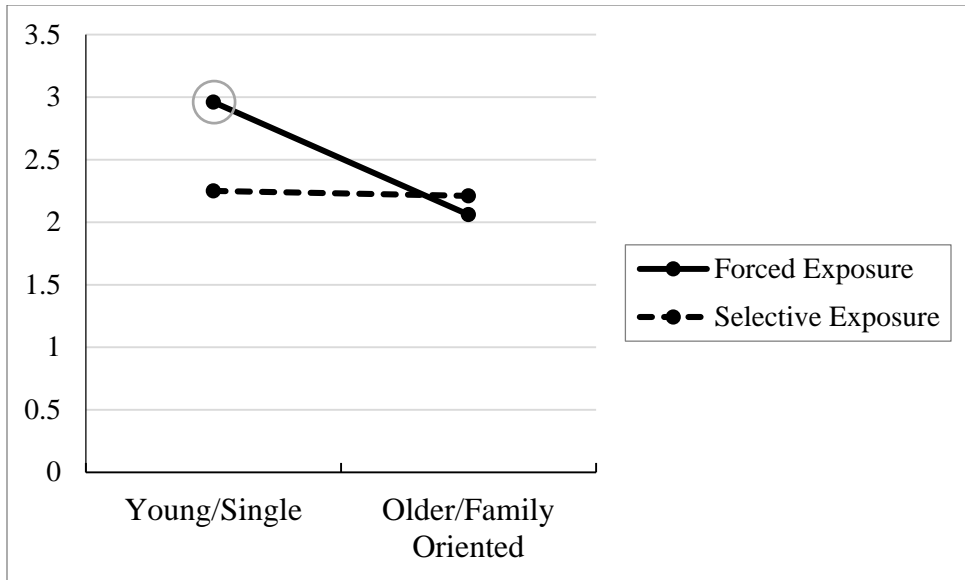
*Figure 38.* Interaction between perceived similarity and exposure on feelings of disappointment after watching the program.

In sum, and similar to the findings on feelings of being upset, feelings of disappointment were weakest for those who selected their own program for viewing and subsequently experienced high perceived similarity to the characters. This is reasonable because they were able to select a program and subsequently experienced high similarity to the featured characters. For those who selected their own program but experienced low perceived similarity to the characters, feelings of disappointment were likely increased because the content did not meet expectations, as in, they were not rewarded in their program selection.

There was also a significant three-way interaction for exposure type, program social class, and program lifestyle,  $F(1, 450) = 5.01, p = .03, \eta^2 = .01$ . The significant portion of this interaction involved high social class programs, where those in the forced exposure condition who watched young and single programs ( $M = 2.96_b, 95\% \text{ CI} = [2.59, 3.34]$ ) experienced the strongest feelings of disappointment, as compared to those in the selective exposure condition who chose young and single programs ( $M = 2.25_a, 95\% \text{ CI} = [1.97, 2.53]$ ), those in the selective exposure condition who chose family oriented programs ( $M = 2.21_a, 95\% \text{ CI} = [1.85, 2.57]$ ), and those in the forced exposure condition who viewed family oriented programs ( $M = 2.06_a, 95\% \text{ CI} = [1.73, 2.40]$ ). See Figures 39.1 and 39.2 for the interaction.



*Figure 39.1.* Interaction between program lifestyle and exposure for low social class programs on feelings of disappointment after watching the program.



*Figure 39.2.* Interaction between program lifestyle and exposure for high social class programs on feelings of disappointment after watching the program.

In all, feelings of disappointment were strongest when individuals were forced to view youth oriented programs, but only when those programs were of a high social class. They were likely disappointed in the negative portrayals of high social class, young and single characters. Alternatively, when individuals were able to choose their own programs that feature upward comparison targets (based on social class), the effects of those negative portrayals and resulting feelings of disappointment were diminished because the viewers willingly selected the content for consumption.

Table 71

*ANOVA Summary for Exposure (Exp), Program Social Class (Class), Program Lifestyle (Life), Program Type (Type), and Perceived Similarity (Sim) on Disappointment*

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	$\eta^2$	<i>p</i>
Exp	1	6.40	.01	.01
Exp x Class	1	.11	< .001	.74
Exp x Life	1	1.12	.002	.29
Exp x Type	1	.16	< .001	.69
Exp x Sim	1	3.83	.01	.05
Exp x Class x Life	1	5.01	.01	.03
Exp x Class x Type	1	.07	< .001	.79
Exp x Class x Sim	1	.10	< .001	.75
Exp x Life x Type	1	1.03	.002	.31
Exp x Life x Sim	1	.15	< .001	.70
Exp x Type x Sim	1	.09	< .001	.77
Error	450			

*Note.*  $N = 482$ .

### **Anxiousness**

The ANOVA tested the between-subjects factors on feelings of anxiousness after watching the program. There was a significant three-way interaction for exposure type, program lifestyle, and program type,  $F(1, 450) = 3.90$ ,  $p = .05$ ,  $\eta^2 = .01$ , however, none of the significant portions of this interaction involved exposure type (forced, selective). The influence of program lifestyle and program type on feelings of anxiousness have been examined in depth above in the analyses of Study One and Study Two. See Table 72 for a summary of all exposure effects.



Table 72

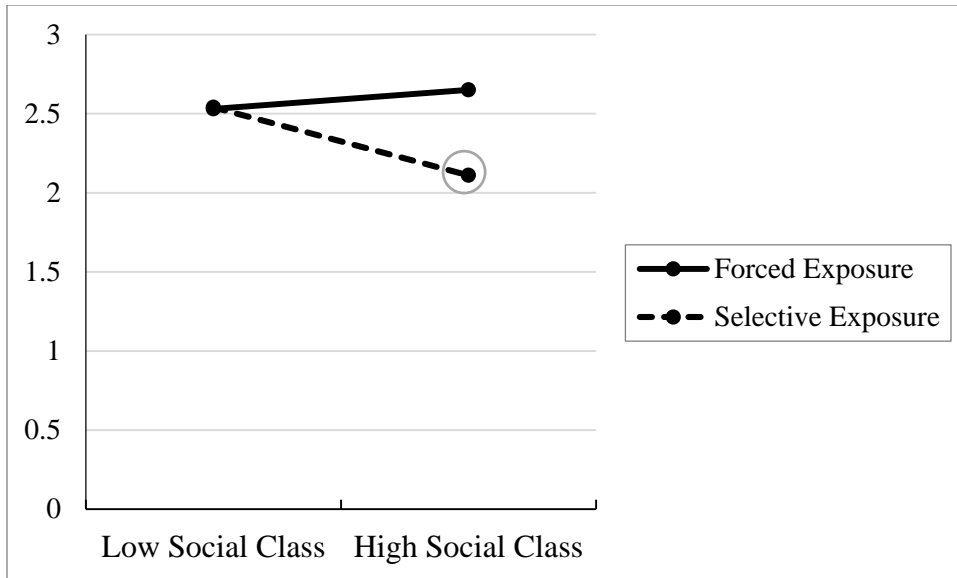
ANOVA Summary for Exposure (Exp), Program Social Class (Class), Program Lifestyle (Life), Program Type (Type), and Perceived Similarity (Sim) on Anxiousness

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	$\eta^2$	<i>p</i>
Exp	1	.11	< .001	.75
Exp x Class	1	1.20	.002	.27
Exp x Life	1	.005	< .001	.95
Exp x Type	1	.40	< .001	.53
Exp x Sim	1	2.61	.01	.11
Exp x Class x Life	1	.29	< .001	.59
Exp x Class x Type	1	.13	< .001	.72
Exp x Class x Sim	1	.03	< .001	.87
Exp x Life x Type	1	3.90	.01	.05
Exp x Life x Sim	1	.36	< .001	.55
Exp x Type x Sim	1	.02	< .001	.90
Error	450			

Note. *N* = 482.

### Disgust

The ANOVA tested the between-subjects factors on feelings of disgust after watching the program. There was a significant main effect for exposure type,  $F(1, 450) = 3.91$ ,  $p = .05$ ,  $\eta^2 = .01$ , where those in the forced exposure condition ( $M = 2.67$ ,  $SD = 1.35$ ) experienced stronger feelings of disgust as compared to those in the selective exposure condition ( $M = 2.41$ ,  $SD = 1.21$ ). There was also a significant two-way interaction for exposure type and program social class,  $F(1, 450) = 4.29$ ,  $p = .04$ ,  $\eta^2 = .01$ , where feelings of disgust were strongest for those in the forced exposure condition who viewed high social class programs ( $M = 2.65_b$ , 95% CI = [2.39, 2.91]), those who were in the selective exposure condition and chose low social class programs ( $M = 2.54_b$ , 95% CI = [2.28, 2.79]), and those who were in the forced exposure condition and viewed low social class programs ( $M = 2.53_b$ , 95% CI = [2.23, 2.82]), as compared to those in the selective exposure condition who chose high social class programs, ( $M = 2.11_a$ , 95% CI = [1.88, 2.34]). See Figure 40 for the interaction and Table 73 for a summary of all effects.



*Figure 40.* Interaction between program social class and exposure on feelings of disgust after watching the program.

In sum, feelings of disgust were weakest when individuals chose high social class programs for viewing. This suggests that those who chose high social class programs did so in part so that they would not be disgusted by the content, either consciously or subconsciously. They chose content they expected would not result in a negative response like disgust. Alternatively, those who selected low social class programs, were somewhat willing to experience the uncomfortable feeling of disgust, again, intimating that they were motivated by novelty and ‘guilty pleasure’ when making their program choice. It is likely that those in a forced exposure environment generally felt stronger feelings of disgust because they were exposed to content not of their choosing, which lent to a greater likelihood that they would experience negative emotional reactions, like disgust, as a result.

Table 73

*ANOVA Summary for Exposure (Exp), Program Social Class (Class), Program Lifestyle (Life), Program Type (Type), and Perceived Similarity (Sim) on Disgust*

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	$\eta^2$	<i>p</i>
Exp	1	3.91	.01	.05
Exp x Class	1	4.29	.01	.04
Exp x Life	1	3.57	.01	.06
Exp x Type	1	.66	.001	.42
Exp x Sim	1	.004	< .001	.95
Exp x Class x Life	1	.88	.001	.35
Exp x Class x Type	1	.33	< .001	.57
Exp x Class x Sim	1	.008	< .001	.93
Exp x Life x Type	1	.07	< .001	.79
Exp x Life x Sim	1	.01	< .001	.92
Exp x Type x Sim	1	.05	< .001	.82
Error	450			

*Note.*  $N = 482$ .

### **Embarrassment**

The ANOVA tested the between-subjects factors on feelings of embarrassment after watching the program. There was a significant main effect for exposure type,  $F(1, 450) = 3.91$ ,  $p = .05$ ,  $\eta^2 = .01$ , where those in the forced exposure condition ( $M = 2.41$ ,  $SD = 1.23$ ) experienced stronger feelings of embarrassment as compared to those in the selective exposure condition ( $M = 2.21$ ,  $SD = 1.10$ ). See Table 74 for a summary of effects. This suggests that individuals generally chose programs they did not expect to be embarrassed by (either by their own choice or by portrayals in the content itself), whereas those who were forced to watch a program were more likely to be embarrassed of the program they viewed (likely because they would not choose it to view themselves).

Table 74

ANOVA Summary for Exposure (Exp), Program Social Class (Class), Program Lifestyle (Life), Program Type (Type), and Perceived Similarity (Sim) on Embarrassment

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	$\eta^2$	<i>p</i>
Exp	1	5.17	.01	.02
Exp x Class	1	2.57	.01	.11
Exp x Life	1	.58	.001	.45
Exp x Type	1	.06	< .001	.81
Exp x Sim	1	.06	< .001	.80
Exp x Class x Life	1	.02	< .001	.89
Exp x Class x Type	1	1.10	.002	.29
Exp x Class x Sim	1	1.13	.002	.29
Exp x Life x Type	1	1.29	.002	.26
Exp x Life x Sim	1	.08	< .001	.78
Exp x Type x Sim	1	.13	< .001	.72
Error	450			

Note. *N* = 482.

### Anger

The ANOVA tested the between-subjects factors on feelings of anger after watching the program. There was a significant main effect for exposure type,  $F(1, 450) = 4.27, p = .04, \eta^2 = .01$ , where those who were assigned a program for viewing ( $M = 2.21, SD = 1.22$ ) experienced stronger feelings of anger than those who chose a program for viewing ( $M = 2.07, SD = 1.04$ ). Once again, just as in the embarrassment responses, feelings of anger were stronger when individuals were forced to view a program as compared to selecting one for viewing. It is possible that those who were forced to view a program experienced anger at the type of program they had to watch, as in, it was out of their control, or experienced anger at the portrayals of the characters featured within the program. Alternatively, having agency to select one's own program for viewing lessened anger responses afterwards. See Table 75 for a summary of all effects.

Table 75

*ANOVA Summary for Exposure (Exp), Program Social Class (Class), Program Lifestyle (Life), Program Type (Type), and Perceived Similarity (Sim) on Anger*

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	$\eta^2$	<i>p</i>
Exp	1	4.27	.01	.04
Exp x Class	1	.04	< .001	.84
Exp x Life	1	.04	< .001	.84
Exp x Type	1	.57	.001	.45
Exp x Sim	1	1.87	.004	.17
Exp x Class x Life	1	2.10	.004	.15
Exp x Class x Type	1	.16	< .001	.69
Exp x Class x Sim	1	.41	< .001	.53
Exp x Life x Type	1	< .001	< .001	.99
Exp x Life x Sim	1	.17	< .001	.68
Exp x Type x Sim	1	.16	< .001	.69
Error	450			

*Note.*  $N = 482$ .

**Discrete Social Comparison-Related Emotional Responses: A Summary.**

The findings regarding discrete emotional responses to the content suggest that, in general, viewers experienced stronger negative responses to media content when they were forced to view it as compared to choosing their own content for consumption. Significant main effects regarding embarrassment and anger revealed that these feelings were stronger in forced exposure environments as compared to selective exposure environments. Furthermore, significant interaction effects demonstrated that feelings of being upset, disappointment, and disgust were all weaker in selective exposure environments as compared to forced exposure environments. In all, these results suggest that the type of exposure environment viewers experienced influenced the emotional responses that occurred as a result of that exposure. Negative responses to content are stronger when participants were forced to view content as opposed to having agency to select their own media for consumption.

## State Self-Esteem

The ANOVA tested the between-subjects factors on state self-esteem after watching the program. There were no significant effects of exposure type. See Table 76 for a summary.

Table 76

*ANOVA Summary for Exposure (Exp), Program Social Class (Class), Program Lifestyle (Life), Program Type (Type), and Perceived Similarity (Sim) on State Self-Esteem*

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	$\eta^2$	<i>p</i>
Exp	1	2.87	.01	.09
Exp x Class	1	.09	< .001	.76
Exp x Life	1	.76	.002	.38
Exp x Type	1	.43	< .001	.51
Exp x Sim	1	1.83	.004	.18
Exp x Class x Life	1	.82	.002	.37
Exp x Class x Type	1	1.03	.002	.31
Exp x Class x Sim	1	.06	< .001	.81
Exp x Life x Type	1	.70	.001	.40
Exp x Life x Sim	1	1.91	.004	.17
Exp x Type x Sim	1	.58	.001	.45
Error	450			

*Note.*  $N = 482$ .

**Fun and Entertainment.** The ANOVA tested the between-subjects factors on feelings of fun and entertainment after watching the program. There was a significant main effect for exposure type,  $F(1, 450) = 8.62, p = .003, \eta^2 = .01$ , where those who chose programs for viewing ( $M = 4.86, SD = 1.55$ ) found them to be more fun and entertaining than those who were assigned programs for viewing ( $M = 4.18, SD = 1.87$ ). This suggests that choosing content for viewing was an important factor in enjoyment responses to entertainment media and demonstrated that having agency to select media content for viewing influenced subsequent emotional responses, as opposed to being forced to view it. Whereas a forced exposure environment elicited stronger

feelings of embarrassment and anger, a selective exposure environment resulted in more feelings of fun and entertainment afterwards. See Table 77 for a summary of effects.

Table 77

*ANOVA Summary for Exposure (Exp), Program Social Class (Class), Program Lifestyle (Life), Program Type (Type), and Perceived Similarity (Sim) on Fun and Entertainment*

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	$\eta^2$	<i>p</i>
Exp	1	8.62	.01	.003
Exp x Class	1	.03	< .001	.87
Exp x Life	1	1.60	.003	.21
Exp x Type	1	2.47	.004	.12
Exp x Sim	1	.37	< .001	.54
Exp x Class x Life	1	.94	.002	.33
Exp x Class x Type	1	1.34	.002	.25
Exp x Class x Sim	1	2.29	.004	.13
Exp x Life x Type	1	.20	< .001	.65
Exp x Life x Sim	1	.05	< .001	.82
Exp x Type x Sim	1	2.04	.003	.15
Error	450			

*Note.* *N* = 482.

**Appreciation and Meaningfulness.** The ANOVA tested the between-subjects factors on appreciation and meaningfulness after watching the program. There were no significant effects of exposure type. See Table 78 for a summary.

Table 78

*ANOVA Summary for Exposure (Exp), Program Social Class (Class), Program Lifestyle (Life), Program Type (Type), and Perceived Similarity (Sim) on Appreciation and Meaningfulness*

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	$\eta^2$	<i>p</i>
Exp	1	.83	.001	.36
Exp x Class	1	.003	< .001	.96
Exp x Life	1	.21	< .001	.65
Exp x Type	1	.03	< .001	.86
Exp x Sim	1	.31	< .001	.58
Exp x Class x Life	1	1.90	.003	.17
Exp x Class x Type	1	.04	< .001	.85
Exp x Class x Sim	1	.82	.001	.37
Exp x Life x Type	1	2.61	.004	.11
Exp x Life x Sim	1	.09	< .001	.77
Exp x Type x Sim	1	.01	< .001	.91
Error	450			

*Note.* *N* = 482.



## **CHAPTER FIVE: General Discussion**

The goal of this dissertation was to better understand the social comparisons that occur with mediated characters in reality and scripted television programs, including the emotional responses that occur as a result. Two studies were employed to examine social comparison processes and the relevant factors that influence those comparisons. Although similar in design, the first study used a forced exposure environment and the second study implemented a selective exposure environment. There were similarities among the emotional responses to the content across both studies, but several important differences regarding exposure settings emerged as well.

### **Reflecting on Social Comparison Theory's Application in Media**

The findings in this dissertation largely suggest that viewers do engage in social comparisons with mediated characters and those comparisons have resulting effects on emotional responses to the content. Corcoran, Crusius, and Mussweiler (2011) proposed that social comparison is an effective way to learn about oneself without using too many cognitive resources. Indeed, both real world interpersonal interactions and entertainment media content provide comparison targets that individuals can gain valuable information from. It is possible that media, in general, provide an easier way for individuals to both resolve uncertainty about themselves and gain valuable information about others as compared to traditional interpersonal interactions. Furthermore, there was little evidence that a general propensity for social comparison influenced the social comparison processes that occurred, that is, individuals with a strong social comparison orientation did not demonstrate significant differences in social comparison-related emotional responses as compared to those with a weak social comparison orientation. This suggests that social comparisons occur with mediated characters no matter

one's predisposition for social comparison. This reinforces the notion that entertainment media provide an environment that easily allows for social comparison, without the effort of involving oneself in real world interpersonal interactions.

When Festinger first developed social comparison theory in 1954, he proposed that people would generally select similar targets for social comparison as there are greater social pressures for uniformity and assimilation as compared to uniqueness. He also suggested that similar comparison targets would provide better diagnostic information. However, in a media environment, people sometimes chose contrastive targets, or characters different from themselves, for social comparison. This is perhaps because media, as compared to real world social groups, provide a wide range of comparison targets, many of which most people would not interact with in real life. This suggests that the information gained from these unique comparison targets allows individuals to socially calibrate themselves from those who are different, i.e., determine who they are and who they are not. Furthermore, Festinger (1954) originally postulated that individuals would generally choose superior others for comparison. Here, some viewers selected media that specifically featured worse off comparison targets. This aligns with downward comparison theory (Brickman & Bulman, 1977; Wills, 1981), which proposed that individuals do sometimes choose targets to downwardly compare to, especially when threatened. Here, in an entertainment media environment (i.e., without threat), some individuals selected media featuring worse off others. This suggests that when given a variety of comparison targets to choose from, individuals sometimes choose worse off others, even when their self-image is not at risk.

## Differences between Reality and Scripted Television

One major focal point of this dissertation was to determine the differences between reality and scripted programs in social comparison processes to mediated characters. This inquiry was driven by notion that the reality television's popularity has increased in recent years (Ferris, Smith, Greenberg, & Smith, 2007), but it is still uncertain what drives the genre's overall appeal. It was suggested that social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) could serve to explain the psychological processes and resulting effects that occur when viewing these types of programs. The findings in this dissertation revealed that generally, viewers experienced stronger social comparison-related emotional responses to scripted programs as compared to reality programs. However, in specific cases, reality programs did elicit stronger social comparison-related emotional responses than scripted programs and thus provided further insight into viewers' perceptions of and emotional responses to this type of content.

The findings here suggest that aspects of reality television are largely perceived as novelty and 'guilty pleasure' programming, where some viewers selected programs featuring portrayals of worse off others to experience downward contrastive social comparisons and delight in others' misfortunes (*Schadenfreude*). The findings also suggest there is another aspect of 'guilty pleasure' programming, where one does not have to invest too many cognitive or affective resources into the characters and plot development. When viewers were informally asked why they chose the program that they did, one participant who chose a reality program stated, "It looked like it would be entertaining while not requiring a lot of attention." This sentiment were echoed in the results, where in general, scripted programs largely elicited stronger emotional responses than reality programs did. Based on these comments, viewers sometimes willingly chose content that was less cognitively and affectively engaging. This

suggests that reality television fills a specific niche of gratifications for television viewers. Whereas painstakingly developed television dramas like *The Sopranos* and *Mad Men* rely on an abundant amount of cognitive and affective engagement, the ‘surveillance’ genre of reality programming (Aubrey, et al., 2012; Riddle & De Simone, 2013), provides an almost instant gratification of unscripted and unpredictable human interaction and all that it entails (e.g., verbal arguments, gossip behavior, sexual encounters, general boredom). To add to this gratification, these programs often feature cast members most viewers consider to be worse off (on some relevant dimension), making it easy for viewers to engage in downward social comparisons.

In this same vein, the outcomes of viewing ‘guilty pleasure’ programming could also mean that viewers are more willing to experience negative emotional responses such as embarrassment and disgust in the short term in order to meet other gratifications. Viewers may be willing to sacrifice traditional enjoyment gratifications in certain contexts (e.g., when watching reality programs) so that they can satisfy other gratifications such as social comparison. At its core, social comparison posits that there is a drive within human beings for self-evaluation, i.e., determining who we are and who we are not (Festinger, 1954). Perhaps reality television provides that information in a way that is more effective than in other traditional mediated representations and gets less complicated by factors such as the extensive narrative and character development seen in scripted programs. To put it simply, viewers may be more willing to experience negative emotions and sacrifice enjoyment in the short term in order to gain useful information about themselves. Many reality programs do an excellent job of showing viewers how *not* to dress, speak, and/or behave in a social context based on the negative repercussions faced by some reality television cast members.

## **The Role of Individual Differences**

Two individual difference variables revealed to be influential to social comparison processes in this dissertation - perceived similarity to the characters and perceived realism of television - with the most influential being perceived similarity. The importance of perceived similarity in social comparison processes draws on some of the earliest work of social comparison theory in the communication discipline, when Berger and Calabrese (1975) proposed that individuals seek out similar, proximate others to determine their appropriateness of behavior when they are uncertain of their environment.

Further extensions in a mediated context have demonstrated that individuals seek out similar others to compare to (Mares & Cantor, 1992; Knobloch-Westerwick & Hastall, 2006). This dissertation specifically advanced these research efforts by examining the viewers' own perceptions of similarity to the mediated characters and provided evidence that participants made directional social comparisons with mediated characters based on those perceptions. As an example, in Study Two when participants were asked generally about their program choices, one individual responded, "I was interested to see how people near my age but of a different social status lived." On the outset, it may appear that individuals make media choices based on basic demographic variables such as age, race, or gender, but as detailed here, some do so based on both similarities and differences to mediated characters. Alternatively, another participant, who had chosen a high social class program for viewing (which might engage upward social comparisons based on this attribute), stated, "I enjoy watching absurd reality programs because they allow me to live vicariously through the characters." Statements like this suggest that one's perception of similarity to social comparison targets influences the directions of and reactions to the social comparisons that are made.

Previous research has demonstrated that perceived similarity is an important factor in social comparison processes, where priming for similarities leads to assimilative effects and priming for differences leads to contrastive effects (Brown, Novick, Lord, & Richards, 1992; Lewis & Weaver, in press; Papiés & Nicolaije, 2012). Here, in a more natural media consumption environment, participants were not primed for similarities or differences among the featured cast members, but in general, selected programs that featured characters that were similar to them on some relevant dimension. This suggests that, to a certain extent, individuals select their media content based on their expectations that they would be similar to the mediated representations in some way.

There are several reasons why perceived realism of television may have been influential in Study One but not in Study Two. The results here demonstrated that, overall, stronger emotional responses to the content were experienced when it was either more realistic (Study One) or when participants felt similar to the characters (Study Two). When placed a forced exposure environment, one does not have the opportunity to choose media for consumption and, as a result, is likely forced to view something that they would not choose for themselves. Once in that forced exposure environment, perceptions of realism become more meaningful. Accordingly, emotional responses are much stronger when viewers perceive the content to be realistic, likely making it more engaging to them.

Alternatively, in a selective exposure environment, perceived similarity to the characters plays a much larger role in selection and subsequent responses to that content. In this study, viewers were presented with a screen capture of the programs' cast with a short description of their social class, lifestyle, and the type of program it was (reality or scripted). This made perceived similarity to the characters more salient than overall perceptions of perceived realism

of television. This notion was supported in the open-ended comments that informally assessed the reasons for their program choices, where participants mentioned being of a similar age and lifestyle to the characters as a motivating factor for their selections. As a result, perceived similarity in this context made the content more meaningful and engaging to them, outside of their overall perceptions of realism of television in general. Thus, in Study One, perceived realism was a relevant predictor variable once viewers were exposed to the content, but was not influential in choosing a program for viewing in Study Two.

Regarding media use and perceptions of reality television, the preference and avoidance patterns here demonstrated that males and females chose reality television programs relatively equally to scripted programs, despite common conceptions that it is 'trash TV.' This is in support of previous research that states viewers report a preference for traditional programming and have a negative view of reality television, yet admit to watching it sometimes or frequently (Nabi, Stitt, Halford, & Finnerty, 2006). It is assumed that most participants in Study Two chose and subsequently watched their program selections on their own personal computers in the privacy of their own apartment or home. It is possible that television viewers, in general, give false reports of their consumption patterns and preferences for traditional television while, at the same time consuming reality television at a greater rate at behind closed doors. This partially explains why many critics and viewers alike condemn reality television while it continues to grow in popularity. It could also be that the viewers generally do prefer traditional television, but at the same time, reality television meets certain basic gratifications as described above.

This dissertation also found that the more individuals consumed reality television, the more realistic they perceived it to be. This finding is especially interesting considering the common assumption that reality television viewers know that reality programs are somewhat

staged and the conflict manufactured. This would suggest that the more audiences consume reality television, the more they would determine the content to be unrealistic. The findings here suggest otherwise; the more audiences consume reality television, the more realistic they find it to be. It could be that audiences either do not consider the ‘staged’ nature of reality television in their evaluations of its realism or that they believe the content to be realistic despite these concessions. Indeed, there are multiple dimensions of perceived realism, e.g., plausibility, typicality, factuality (Cho, Shen, & Wilson, 2014) and it is possible that certain dimensions of perceived realism are met more strongly for reality television programs as compared to scripted television programs. This notion also aligns with the tenets of cultivation theory (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1986), which posits that the more time individuals spend with television, the more likely they are to believe the social reality presented within it. Indeed, past research has demonstrated cultivation effects as they specifically relate to reality television, including its influence on perceptions of dating (Ferris, Smith, Greenberg, & Smith, 2007), rates of social aggression (Ward & Carlson, 2013), and perceptions of teen pregnancy (Martins & Jensen, 2014). Reality television presents an interesting paradox because it actually portrays a real-world social reality. As a result, cultivation effects, as they apply to reality television, could be amplified because of this very stipulation.

### **Using Smith’s Framework and Other Discrete Emotions in a Mediated Context**

Overall, the findings provide evidence that directional social comparisons occur with mediated television characters during and after viewing. For motivations of self-enhancement, viewers engaged in downward social comparisons to worse off others based on attributes such as social class, lifestyle, and whether or not the characters were represented in a reality program or a scripted program. The same pattern emerged for upward social comparisons to better off others



for purposes of self-improvement. Both Smith's (2000) model of social comparison-related emotional responses and additional discrete emotional responses outlined by Nabi and Keblusek (2014) were helpful in assessing the directional social comparisons made.

In Study Two, the discrete emotions of jealousy and being upset demonstrated similar patterns in responses as Smith's (2000) grouping of upward contrastive emotional responses (depression, shame, envy, resentment), suggesting that they should also be considered to be upward contrastive emotional responses. The additional discrete emotions of hope and anxiousness were associated with the findings related to downward assimilative emotional responses (pity, fear, worry, sympathy). Feelings of disgust and embarrassment should further be conceptualized as downward contrastive emotional responses as they demonstrated similar patterns of results. Feelings of disappointment and anger were the only two discrete emotional responses that did not clearly associate with specific directional social comparisons, but could relate generally to negative affective responses to the content.

## **Enjoyment**

The results here also speak to the conflicting findings of various gratifications associated with reality television enjoyment (Nabi, Biely, Morgan, & Stitt, 2003; Nabi, Stitt, Halford, & Finnerty, 2006). In general, emotionality was desirable and a driver of enjoyment. Viewers who experienced stronger social comparison-related emotional responses to the content, aside from the valence of those responses, enjoyed the content more than those who did not experience strong social comparison-related emotional responses to the content. Furthermore, in both studies, upward assimilative emotional responses (inspiration, admiration, optimism) and downward assimilative emotional responses (pity, sympathy, fear, worry) were positively related to enjoyment. Considering the role of perceived similarity as described above, it is reasonable

that social comparison emotions associated with assimilative processes would result in increased enjoyment of the mediated content. Indeed, high perceived similarity to the characters also predicted stronger feelings of fun/entertainment and appreciation/meaningfulness in both studies. These findings suggest that when media content is relevant and meaningful to the viewer, they experience stronger emotional responses to it and in turn, increased enjoyment.

Past research has also demonstrated a significant correlation between upward assimilative emotions and enjoyment (Lewis & Weaver, in press), which suggests that media producers should make efforts in creating content that portrays better off characters who the viewers see themselves as similar to on some relevant dimension. Of importance here is that a general propensity for social comparison will likely not directly correlate with increased enjoyment of media content. Alternatively, specific directional social comparisons that involve assimilative processes with the mediated characters is a determining factor in the relationship between social comparison and enjoyment.

### **Selective Exposure versus Forced Exposure to Entertainment Media**

This dissertation determined that there were differences in emotional responses to entertainment media when individuals were able to select media for consumption as opposed to being forced to view content. Accordingly, this dissertation answered the call for using the selective exposure paradigm in entertainment research (Zillmann & Bryant, 1985). It was also able to compare two similar experimental designs to highlight the differences in emotional responses in forced and selective exposure environments. Indeed, removing agency from the viewer mattered. It resulted in increased negative responses to media content beyond the influence of other relevant factors (i.e., individual differences and content features). This suggests that not only do individuals select media messages to regulate their self-concept as

suggested by the selective exposure paradigm, but that they respond negatively to media content when they are unable to do so. Because the designs of both Study One and Study Two were so similar, it was clear that the emotional responses to the same programs were markedly different based on the exposure environment.

This is especially relevant when considering the SESAM (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2014), which posits that one's self-concept and emotional state are what drive the motivations for media exposure and in turn, influence the subsequent interpretation of media messages. That interpretation then affects the individual's self-concept. Previous research employing this model found that choosing positive messages about one's ingroup increases self-esteem (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2014). In Study Two, the results demonstrated that self-esteem was enhanced due to other factors, not because viewers saw positive messages about one's ingroup. There were two ways by which state self-esteem likely was enhanced after viewing the mediated content: either through downward social comparisons or as a result of features of the content itself. First, regarding downward social comparisons, reality programs initiated higher state self-esteem after viewing than scripted programs did. This increase in state self-esteem was likely because of downward comparisons made to the reality cast members for purposes of self-enhancement. Second, regarding features of the content, a significant interaction revealed that those who selected low social class, family oriented programs for viewing and had high perceived similarity to the characters experienced higher state self-esteem than those who selected low social class, youth oriented programs for viewing and had high perceived similarity to the characters. State self-esteem likely increased because family oriented programs generally feature more positive content, including family bonding, and because the viewers felt similar to these characters they, in turn, felt positive about themselves. Alternatively, when viewers felt highly similar to young

and single, low social class characters, self-esteem decreased because youth oriented programs often feature negative portrayals, including gossiping and fighting. These viewers likely selected these programs because these individuals were worse off than them (based on social class), but self-esteem decreased because they saw negative behavior by characters they perceived as similar to themselves.

These findings suggest that the psychological processes that are at work when individuals select media for consumption are complicated. However, it is apparent here that perceived similarity to mediated characters plays an impactful role in the selection of entertainment content. Individuals are not always selecting what they hope to be positive messages about their ingroup (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2014), but they regularly seek messages featuring individuals they think they would be similar to (except in the case of novelty and ‘guilty pleasure’ media selections). This, in combination with other influential factors (in this case, features of the content itself) has resulting effects on state self-esteem after exposure. The findings here support the tenant of the SESAM that states one’s self-concept and emotional state drive motivations for media exposure and that, in turn, their self-concept is affected. As demonstrated above, the effects on emotions and state self-esteem after selecting content vary after and as a result of that exposure.

Downward contrastive emotions, disgust, disappointment, embarrassment, and anger, and feelings of being upset were generally stronger for those in a forced exposure environment than those in a selective exposure environment. Alternatively, hedonic positive and feelings of fun and entertainment were stronger for those in a selective exposure environment as compared to those in a forced exposure environment. More concretely, feelings of being upset and disappointment were weakest when individuals were placed in selective exposure environments

and experienced high perceived similarity to the characters. In this sense, viewers were rewarded by their choice behavior by selecting programs with highly similar characters and, as a result, feelings of being upset and disappointment were depleted. Feelings of disgust after viewing were weakest for those in a selective exposure environment who chose programs featuring high social class characters. These individuals willingly selected programs with better off comparison targets, thus limiting feelings of disgust. Interestingly, feelings of disgust were significantly stronger for all three comparison groups: forced exposure to high social class characters, forced exposure to low social class characters, and selective exposure to low social class characters. Those in a forced exposure environment experienced strong feelings of disgust no matter the social class of the characters, likely because they were forced to view content that they did not choose for themselves. Alternatively, those who chose low social class programs also felt strong feelings of disgust. These individuals likely chose these programs because they featured worse off downward social comparison targets and were motivated by desires for novelty and to experience 'guilty pleasure' programming. As a result, strong feelings of disgust were one of the short-term outcomes of that exposure choice.

Feelings of embarrassment and anger were strongest for those who were forced to view a program as compared to those who selected a program for viewing. This suggests that individuals are at times embarrassed and angry when forced to view content as opposed to selecting it and that individuals respond negatively when they are not able to make their own media choices. In all, viewers experienced stronger negative emotions when they were in a forced exposure environment as compared to a selective exposure environment. This suggests that forced exposure experiments, especially as they relate to entertainment media research, are likely not the best way to assess affective responses to content. The emotional responses, at least

in this dissertation, skewed negatively simply because the viewers did not have the agency to choose content for consumption. Alternatively, the increased hedonic positive responses and feelings of fun and entertainment in a selective exposure environment speak to aspects of the SESAM (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2014), where viewers were successful in selecting television programs to regulate their emotional state - in this case, selecting programs that resulted in positive emotional responses. Overall, this suggests that media researchers should consider the role of exposure when assessing the processing and effects of media content. Not only do the media choices themselves serve as an outcome variable that informs the cognitive and affective factors involved in the selection, but it creates a more natural consumption environment. This is especially advantageous in understanding the appeal of entertainment media, in that media consumers are regularly free to choose entertainment content for consumption.

### **Implications for Industry**

The findings here have several important implications for media producers. As outlined above, emotionality and perceived similarity to the characters were predictors of enjoyment. For those who create entertainment media for audiences, it is in their best interest to develop content that elicits strong emotional responses from viewers and to feature characters that the viewers can see themselves as similar to on some dimension. Considering that both upward assimilative and downward assimilative emotional responses were positively related to enjoyment, viewers both looked up to and looked down on mediated characters as long as they could see themselves as similar to them in some way. This makes the content more meaningful as a result. However, if content creators are not interested in creating meaningful content that features characters perceive as similar to themselves, the findings here also suggest that ‘guilty pleasure’ programming was a popular choice for some viewers who expressed a desire for novel programs.

In these cases, enjoyment as a result of strong emotional responses to the content or perceived similarity to the characters was not a factor. Viewers chose these types of programs because they perceived them as novel and the featured characters as different than them. In these cases, media producers may benefit from creating content that emphasizes these distinct differences in hopes that viewers will watch those programs based on ‘guilty pleasure’ motivations.

### **Limitations**

Overall, this dissertation was able to experimentally test emotional responses that occur as a result of social comparisons in reality and scripted programming. It also examined the role of exposure in emotional reactions to mediated content. However, and as with all experimental research, there were several limitations. Most of this sample was made up of middle class, young, and single individuals. This was likely the reason why perceptions of one’s own social class was not a relevant predictor variable in the analyses presented because there were not enough low social class and high social class individuals to assess significant differences among the groups. Because the sample was largely White, race was another individual difference variable that could not be examined. Perceived realism of television also presented confounding findings in that it was a relevant predictor variable in Study One but not in Study Two. As a result, this dissertation was unable to fully assess the role of perceived realism and how it relates to social comparison-related emotional responses and enjoyment.

The motivations for directional social comparisons could not be directly assessed in this dissertation because the self-image manipulation was ineffective in instigating an experience of self-image enhancement or threat among the participants. It is likely that the thought experiment used in this dissertation, which asked participants to think about a time when they either outperformed or were outperformed by their peers, was simply not strong enough to increase or

decrease state self-esteem. Perhaps in a mediated context, using manipulations of false performance feedback are more effective, as demonstrated in previous research (Lewis & Weaver, in press). Similarly, program choice behavior was likely influenced by a variety of other motivational factors not explicitly assessed here, including viewers' mood (Zillmann, 2000) and state of ego depletion (Baumeister & Vohs, 2007). Motivations for novelty seeking and experiences of 'guilty pleasures' were not directly assessed in this dissertation either, which lays the groundwork for extensions in this area of entertainment research.

This dissertation overcame previous limitations by examining both scripted and reality programs. However, the reality programs examined in this dissertation were comprised of one genre, 'surveillance' programming (Aubrey, et al., 2012; Riddle & De Simone, 2013), and did not include the wide variety of other subgenres of reality programs (e.g., competition, occupational). The use of this documentary-style genre, which focuses on the daily lives of cast members, did present a natural complement to the scenarios of many scripted dramas and sitcoms on television. Furthermore, it presented an environment where interpersonal interactions were presented as they likely would in the real world. However, this dissertation was unable to integrate the genre of reality television as a whole to determine whether specific social psychological mechanisms drive the emotional responses to reality television, and in turn, whether those mechanisms are inherently unique to reality television as compared to other genres.

### **Directions for Future Research**

This dissertation has answered several questions about how social comparison works in an entertainment media context, but has raised many more. The above findings reveal that social comparison does indeed occur when watching scripted and reality television, but not necessarily



in the ways that were expected. Except for specific emotional responses such as disgust and embarrassment, scripted television programs elicited stronger social comparison-related emotional responses than reality programs did. This suggests that social comparison in an entertainment context is less likely related to the ‘realness’ of reality program cast members and more likely related to perceived similarity to the mediated characters and engagement with the programs’ narratives and characters. Aside from some viewers selecting reality programs for perceived novelty and to experience ‘guilty pleasure,’ the more viewers engage with and relate to the presented characters, the stronger emotional responses are likely to be. To this point, the roles of narrative and character complexity in an entertainment context and their influence on social comparisons are largely unknown. As result, more research is needed to fully understand what is unique about reality television as compared to other entertainment content and what drives consumption of it. Expanding further, examinations of other television programming genres and the relationships between narrative involvement and character identification will be fruitful in explaining more general patterns of media consumption behavior. This would involve studies that assess the long term effects of media consumption, including character identification (Nabi & Keblusek, 2014) and parasocial relationships. (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Rubin & McHugh, 1987).

Another avenue of research involves understanding that individuals relate and compare themselves to others based on multiple dimensions, including demographic variables such as age and social class. But, this dissertation demonstrated that it is more related to how similar one perceives themselves to be to the presented mediated characters. In future research, I intend to explore the specific attributes viewers use to not only socially compare with mediated characters, but that also influence media choice behavior. This could involve the isolation of specific social

comparison targets, or individual mediated characters, as compared to the groups of characters utilized in this dissertation. Indeed, this dissertation was unable to isolate individual cast members for one-to-one social comparisons but instead assessed one-to-few social comparisons. It was assumed that viewers engage in similar social comparison processes with both small groups of mediated characters and individuals. However, it is possible that social comparison processes and their outcomes vary for individual characters as compared to cast groups. It is also likely that social comparisons with mediated characters change over time, that is, social comparisons change based on overall exposure to media character. More information about the character's personality and behavior is gained, thus influencing subsequent social comparison. Addressing these factors would lend greater insight to the specific social comparisons that occur with mediated characters and how those individual comparisons influence the overall emotional reactions to the content, including enjoyment. As demonstrated here, a variety of emotional responses were significantly related to enjoyment of entertainment programming, and not all of them were positive in nature. This calls for a move beyond enjoyment as an explanation for reality television's overall appeal and for more explicit examinations that grapple with the complicated relationship between emotional responses to mediated content and enjoyment.

In this dissertation, social comparison theory provided an insightful, if incomplete, perspective on the consumption of reality and scripted television. As demonstrated in previous research (Nabi, 2009), there are a variety of social psychological mechanisms at work when viewing reality television which, in turn, influence emotional reactions to the content. To this point, I aim to employ multiple theoretical perspectives that would inform and predict selection behavior and emotional responses to the content. Nabi's work in this area examined social comparison (Festinger, 1954), social cognition (Bandura, 2001), and cultivation theories

(Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1986) and reported that although they all demonstrated significant effects, all three shared similarities in their predictions and no single theory was most effective in explaining behavioral intentions. Furthermore, there were conceptual overlaps in their relative predictions. For example, incentives in social cognition and upward social comparisons were both motivated by self-improvement. Other research efforts have tested similar theories in explaining selective exposure in general. Knobloch-Westerwick and Hastall (2006) utilized social cognition (Bandura, 2001), social comparison (Festinger, 1954), and social identity theories (Tajfel, 1978), which all predicted similar results. Again, there were conceptual overlaps. In this case, establishing an ingroup/derogating against an outgroup (social identity) and downward social comparisons were both motivated by self-enhancement. As a result, there has been a call for a cohesive model of media effects, one that accounts for the similarities and differences among social psychological perspectives (Nabi, 2009).

These efforts must take into account the differences between immediate emotional responses to content, which are largely temporary in nature, and their subsequent behaviors and/or intentions. It is possible that certain theoretical perspectives are more effective in explaining immediate affective responses to content, which I have tried to do here, and others are better at predicting intentions and subsequent behaviors in the long term. Indeed, recent research has demonstrated that reality television exposure has lasting effects on sexual behavior (Fogel & Kovalenko, 2013), adolescent behavior (Ferguson, Salmond, & Modi, 2013), and alcohol consumption intentions (Anschutz, Van, de Graaf, & Koordeman, 2014).

One perspective worthy of consideration in addition to the ones mentioned above is that of self-regulation theory (Baumeister, Heatherton, & Tice, 1994), which centers on the capacity individuals have for altering behavior. Self-regulation considers the existing standards of

desirable behavior, what motivation individuals have to meet those standards, what happens before standards are broken, and the willpower individuals have to control urges (Baumeister & Vohs, 2007). In a selective exposure environment, self-regulation theory would likely serve to predict the media choices individuals make in certain contexts. Specifically, it could explain why individuals sometimes choose to watch reality television programs over scripted television programs, even though previous research has shown that most people have negative view of reality television and a preference for traditional programming (Nabi, Stitt, Halford, & Finnerty, 2006). It is possible that when individuals are lacking willpower and cognitive resources, they select content that is less desirable (i.e., reality programs), especially if they are consuming the content in the privacy of their own apartment or home. This scenario decreases the motivation individuals have to meet standards of desirable behavior because the likelihood of experiencing negative repercussions for their media choice is reduced. It would also guide explanations as to why people select 'guilty pleasure' programming in certain contexts but not others. It is likely a combination of being motivated to engage in downward contrastive social comparisons while not expending too many cognitive and affective resources on the media experience. Explorations like these will be beneficial in truly understanding reality television's overall appeal.

Using self-regulation theory to predict choice behavior and then implementing other social psychological theories to explain the subsequent emotional responses to the content (e.g., social comparison) and behavioral intentions (e.g., social cognition) could answer Nabi's (2009) call for a more integrated model of media effects – one that encompasses both media selection behavior and the resulting effects of exposure. Again and as mentioned above, understanding and isolating the conceptual overlaps of these social psychological perspectives will be most advantageous in these research endeavors.

In conclusion, the fundamental aim of this dissertation was achieved, which was to interpret media consumption behavior through the lens of social comparison theory. It is the hope that the findings of the experiments outlined above serve to inform future research in social comparison theory's application in mediated contexts and how individual differences, content factors, and exposure can influence emotional responses to mediated characters in an entertainment environment.

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## Appendix A

### Autobiographic Memory Task

Imagine a time in which you **outperformed/were outperformed by** your peers on an important task. This could have happened in school, during a contest, or any other type of event in which you were in competition with your peers. Try to remember the event in as much detail as possible, including the time, place, and how it made you feel. Do your best to mentally “re-experience” it.

Now, take a few moments to write a brief description of the event.

## Appendix B

### Perceived Similarity

How similar did you feel to the cast members/characters featured in the program you just viewed?

- 1= not at all like me
- 2= not like me
- 3= not much like me
- 4= neutral
- 5= somewhat like me
- 6= like me
- 7= just like me

## Appendix C

### Perceived Lifestyle

How strongly do you identify with the following social groups?

- 1= not at all
- 2= very little
- 3= somewhat
- 4= quite a bit
- 5= a great deal

1. Young and single
2. Older, married, and family-oriented

## Appendix D

### Viewer Social Class

Please identify your current status from the following list:

- 1= poor
- 2= working poor
- 3= working class
- 4 = lower middle class
- 5 = middle class
- 6 = upper middle class
- 7 = upper class

## Appendix E

### Perceived Realism

Reality television programs are defined as programs that feature ordinary people engaging in unscripted activity. Please indicate how much you agree with each statement below.

- 1= strongly disagree
- 2= disagree
- 3= somewhat disagree
- 4 = neither agree nor disagree
- 5 = somewhat agree
- 6 = agree
- 7 = strongly agree

1. Reality television programs show things that could possibly happen in real life.
2. The events in reality television programs portray possible real-life situations.
3. The stories in reality television programs could actually happen in real life.
4. Never in real life would what is shown in reality television programs happen.
5. Real people would do not do the things shown in reality television programs.
6. Not many people are likely to experience the events portrayed in reality television programs.
7. Reality television programs portray events that happen to a lot of people.
8. What happens to people in reality television programs is what happens to people in the real world.
9. Reality television programs are based on facts.
10. Reality television programs show things that have really happened.
11. What is shown in reality television programs has actually happened.
12. Reality television programs show coherent stories.
13. The stories portrayed in reality television programs are consistent.
14. Parts of reality television programs contradict each other.
15. The stories portrayed in reality television programs make sense.
16. The events in reality television programs have logical flow.
17. The visual elements of reality television programs are realistic.
18. The audio elements of reality television programs are realistic.
19. The acting in reality television programs is realistic.
20. The scenes in reality television programs are realistic.
21. I feel that the overall production elements of reality television programs are realistic.

Scripted television programs are defined as programs that feature paid actors and actresses acting out a fictional narrative. Please indicate how much you agree with each statement below.

- 1= strongly disagree
- 2= disagree
- 3= somewhat disagree
- 4= neither agree nor disagree
- 5= somewhat agree
- 6= agree
- 7= strongly agree

1. Scripted television programs show things that could possibly happen in real life.
2. The events in scripted television programs portray possible real-life situations.
3. The stories in scripted television programs could actually happen in real life.
4. Never in real life would what is shown in scripted television programs happen.
5. Real people would do not do the things shown in scripted television programs.
6. Not many people are likely to experience the events portrayed in scripted television programs.
7. Scripted television programs portray events that happen to a lot of people.
8. What happens to people in scripted television programs is what happens to people in the real world.
9. Scripted television programs are based on facts.
10. Scripted television programs show things that have really happened.
11. What is shown in scripted television programs has actually happened.
12. Scripted television programs show coherent stories.
13. The stories portrayed in scripted television programs are consistent.
14. Parts of scripted television programs contradict each other.
15. The stories portrayed in scripted television programs make sense.
16. The events in scripted television programs have logical flow.
17. The visual elements of scripted television programs are realistic.
18. The audio elements of scripted television programs are realistic.
19. The acting in scripted television programs is realistic.
20. The scenes in scripted television programs are realistic.
21. I feel that the overall production elements of scripted television programs are realistic.

## Appendix F

### Social Comparison Orientation

Most people compare themselves from time to time with others. For example, they may compare the way they feel, their opinions, their abilities, and/or their situation with those of other people. There is nothing particularly 'good' or 'bad' about this type of comparison, and some people do it more than others. We would like to find out how often you compare yourself with other people. To do that we would like to ask you to indicate how much you agree with each statement below.

1= I disagree strongly

2= I disagree

3= I neither agree nor disagree

4 = I agree

5 = I agree strongly

1. I often compare myself with others with respect to what I have accomplished in life
2. If I want to learn more about something, I try to find out what others think about it
3. I always pay a lot of attention to how I do things compared with how others do things
4. I often compare how my loved ones (boy or girlfriend, family members, etc.) are doing with how others are doing
5. I always like to know what others in a similar situation would do
6. I am not the type of person who compares often with others
7. If I want to find out how well I have done something, I compare what I have done with how others have done
8. I often try to find out what others think who face similar problems as I face
9. I often like to talk with others about mutual opinions and experiences
10. I never consider my situation in life relative to that of other people
11. I often compare how I am doing socially (e.g., social skills, popularity) with other people



Appendix G

Media Use

1. On average, how many *hours* of **scripted** television do you watch in the following time periods during the average **WEEKDAY** (for example, Monday or Tuesday)?

6:00 AM to NOON \_\_\_\_\_  
NOON to 6:00 PM \_\_\_\_\_  
6:00 PM to MIDNIGHT \_\_\_\_\_  
MIDNIGHT to 6:00 AM \_\_\_\_\_

2. On average, how many *hours* of **scripted** television do you watch in the following time periods during the average **WEEKEND DAY** (for example, Saturday or Sunday)?

6:00 AM to NOON \_\_\_\_\_  
NOON to 6:00 PM \_\_\_\_\_  
6:00 PM to MIDNIGHT \_\_\_\_\_  
MIDNIGHT to 6:00 AM \_\_\_\_\_

3. On average, how many *hours* of **reality** television do you watch in the following time periods during the average **WEEKDAY** (for example, Monday or Tuesday)?

6:00 AM to NOON \_\_\_\_\_  
NOON to 6:00 PM \_\_\_\_\_  
6:00 PM to MIDNIGHT \_\_\_\_\_  
MIDNIGHT to 6:00 AM \_\_\_\_\_

4. On average, how many *hours* of **reality** television do you watch from in the following time periods during the average **WEEKEND DAY** (for example, Saturday or Sunday)?

6:00 AM to NOON \_\_\_\_\_  
NOON to 6:00 PM \_\_\_\_\_  
6:00 PM to MIDNIGHT \_\_\_\_\_  
MIDNIGHT to 6:00 SM \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix H

### State Self-Esteem

This is a questionnaire designed to measure what you are thinking at this moment. There is, of course, no right answer for any statement. The best answer is what you feel is true of yourself at this moment. Be sure to answer all of the items, even if you are not certain of the best answer. Again, answer these questions as they are true for you **RIGHT NOW**.

- 1= Not at all
- 2= A little bit
- 3= Somewhat
- 4= Very much
- 5= Extremely

1. I feel confident about my abilities.
2. I am worried about whether I am regarded as a success or failure.
3. I feel satisfied with the way my body looks right now.
4. I feel frustrated or rattled about my performance.
5. I feel that I am having trouble understanding things that I read.
6. I feel that others respect and admire me.
7. I am dissatisfied with my weight.
8. I feel self-conscious.
9. I feel as smart as others.
10. I feel displeased with myself.
11. I feel good about myself.
12. I am pleased with my appearance right now.
13. I am worried about what other people think of me.
14. I feel confident that I understand things.
15. I feel inferior to others at this moment.
16. I feel unattractive.
17. I feel concerned about the impression I am making.
18. I feel that I have less scholastic ability right now than others.
19. I feel like I'm not doing well.
20. I am worried about looking foolish.

## Appendix I

### Emotional Responses

Please indicate how much you felt the following emotions after watching the television program.

- 1= Not at all
- 2= Very Little
- 3= Somewhat
- 4 = Quite a Bit
- 5 = A Great Deal

- 1. Admiration
- 2. Inspiration
- 3. Optimism
- 4. Pride
- 5. Schadenfreude (a feeling of pleasure or joy from another's misfortune)
- 6. Contempt
- 7. Scorn
- 8. Depression
- 9. Shame
- 10. Envy
- 11. Resentment
- 12. Pity
- 13. Sympathy
- 14. Fear
- 15. Worry

Please indicate how much you agree with the following statement: “This television program made me feel...”

- 1= strongly disagree
- 2= disagree
- 3= neither agree nor disagree
- 4 = agree
- 5 = strongly agree

- 1. Cheerful
- 2. Content
- 3. Satisfied
- 4. Happy
- 5. Dissatisfied
- 6. Sad
- 7. Sorry
- 8. Depressed
- 9. Envious
- 10. Jealous
- 11. Hopeful
- 12. Inspired
- 13. Upset
- 14. Disappointed
- 15. Anxious
- 16. Disgusted
- 17. Embarrassed
- 18. Angry

## Appendix J

### Enjoyment

Please indicate how much you agree with the following statements.

- 1= strongly disagree
- 2= disagree
- 3= somewhat disagree
- 4 = neither agree nor disagree
- 5 = somewhat agree
- 6 = agree
- 7 = strongly agree

1. It was fun for me to watch this program.
2. I had a good time watching this program.
3. The program was entertaining.
4. I found this program to be very meaningful.
5. I was moved by this program.
6. This program was thought-provoking.

## Appendix K

### Program Descriptors



#### **The O.C.**

*Comedy – Drama – Scripted*

Follows the lives of privileged youths living in the wealthy, upper-class neighborhood of Newport Beach, Orange County, California



#### **I Just Want My Pants Back**

*Comedy – Drama – Scripted*

Follows the life of a group of twenty-somethings in Brooklyn as they struggle to make ends meet and get through life as best they can.



#### **NYC Prep**

*Reality TV*

Chronicles the lives of a group of privileged teenagers who are key players in Manhattan's elite teen scene.



#### **Party Down South**

*Reality TV*

Eight young rednecks spend the summer together in Murrells, Inlet, South Carolina, getting involved in hookups, love triangles, and other kinds of drama.



### **Trophy Wife**

*Comedy – Drama – Scripted*

Explores the marriage between wealthy lawyer Pete and his new wife Kate, along with the modern family dynamics between them, his ex-wives, and their respective children.



### **Here Comes Honey Boo Boo**

*Reality TV*

Coupon-clipper mom June keeps her husband and four daughters, including tiny pageant queen Honey Boo Boo, on a tight budget in rural Georgia.



### **CHRISLEY** KNOWS BEST

### **Chrisley Knows Best**

*Reality TV*

Millionaire Todd Chrisley makes the rules for his wife and five children in his northern Atlanta mansion home.



### **Raising Hope**

*Comedy – Drama – Scripted*

James “Jimmy” Chance and his eccentric but well-intentioned family live paycheck to paycheck as they help raise his new daughter in small town Virginia.

**NICKY LEWIS**  
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**EDUCATION**

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**July 2015** **Indiana University** **Bloomington, IN**

*Doctor of Philosophy in Mass Communication*

- Minor: Psychological and Brain Sciences, Emphasis in Social Psychology
- Area of Specialization: Media Psychology and Media Consumption Behavior
- Dissertation: The Role of Social Comparison in Emotional Responses and Exposure to Reality and Scripted Television Programs

**January 2012** **Indiana University** **Bloomington, IN**

*Master of Arts Degree in Telecommunications*

- Concentrations: Media Organizations, Interactive Media, and Fantasy Sports
- Thesis: Trait and Motivational Differences in Fantasy Football Participation

**May 2006** **Indiana University** **Bloomington, IN**

*Bachelor of Science Degree in Sport Communication with Distinction*

- Hutton Honors College Member

**PUBLICATIONS**

---

*Refereed Journal Articles*

- **Lewis, N.**, & Weaver, A.J. (in press). Emotional responses to social comparisons in reality television programming. *Journal of Media Psychology*.
- Gantz, W., & **Lewis, N.** (2014). Sports on traditional and newer, digital media: Is there really a fight for fans?. *Television & New Media*, 15(8), 760-768.
- Martins, N., Weaver, A.J., Katz, D. Y., **Lewis, N.H.**, Tyree, N., & Jensen, J. (2013). A content analysis of print news coverage of media violence and aggression research. *Journal of Communication*, 63(6), 1070-1087.
- **Lewis, N.**, & Weaver, A.J. (2013). More than a game: Sports media framing effects on attitudes, intentions, and enjoyment. *Communication & Sport*, 3(2), 219-242.
- Weaver, A. J., & **Lewis, N.** (2012). Mirrored morality: An exploration of moral choice in video games. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, 15(11), 610-614.

*Invited Book Chapters*

- Gantz, W., & **Lewis, N.** (2014). Fanship differences between traditional and newer media. In A.C. Billings and M. Hardin (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Sport and New Media* (pp. 19-31). London: Routledge.
- Deuze, M., & **Lewis, N.** (2013). Professional identity and media work. In: M. Banks, R. Gill, & S. Taylor (Eds.), *Theorizing Cultural Work: Labour, continuity and change in the cultural and creative industries* (pp. 161-174). London: Routledge.
- Deuze, M., Brown, W., Ibold, H., **Lewis, N.**, & Blank, P. (2012). Mobile media life. In: P. Snickars & P. Vonderau (Eds.), *Moving Data: The iPhone and the Future of Media* (pp. 296-310). New York: Columbia University Press.



- \*Blank, P., Brown, W., Deuze, M., Ems, L., **Lewis, N.**, McWilliams, J., & Speers, L. (2012). Participatory culture and media life: Approaching freedom. In: J. Henderson & A. Delwiche, (Eds.), *Handbook of Participatory Cultures* (pp. 257-265). London and New York: Routledge.  
\*Alphabetical authorship.

### *Popular Press*

- Deuze, M., **Lewis, N.**, Ems, L., Mueller, J., & Nemer, D. (2012, Spring/Summer). Weathering the media, mediating the weather. *Under the Influence Magazine, No. 10*.

### *Under Review*

- Martins, N., Malacane, M., **Lewis, N.**, & Kraus, A. J. (2015). Gritty or glamorous?: A content analysis of teen parenthood in teen mom reality programming. *Health Communication*.

### **WORKS IN PROGRESS**

---

- **Lewis, N.** (in final revisions). The role of social comparison in emotional responses and exposure to reality and scripted television programs.
- **Lewis, N.**, & Hirt, E. R. (in data analysis). Moral responses to ingroup threat: The case of sports fandom.
- Gantz, W., & **Lewis, N.** (in data collection). Sports fandom across the lifecycle.

### **CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS**

---

- Martins, N., Malacane, M., **Lewis, N.**, & Kraus, A. J. (2015). Gritty or glamorous?: A content analysis of teen parenthood in teen mom reality programming. Presented at the International Communication Association Annual Conference in San Juan, Puerto Rico, May.
- Gantz, W., & **Lewis, N.** (2015). The arc of sports fandom. As part of Sports – and Media – Across the Life Span. Presented at the International Communication Association Annual Conference in San Juan, Puerto Rico, May.
- **Lewis, N.**, & Weaver, A.J. (2014). The role of priming and self-image on emotional responses to social comparisons in reality television programming. Presented at the National Communication Association Annual Conference in Chicago, Illinois, November.
- Weaver, A.J., Matthews, N. L., **Lewis, N.**, & Xu, F. (2014). Narrative and moral perspective-taking as determinants of players' antisocial behavior. As part of the Dark Cloud of Video Game Effects (and an Emerging Silver Lining): Can Games Have a Place in a Good Life? Presented at the International Communication Association Annual Conference in Seattle, Washington, May.
- Hirt, E. R., **Lewis, N.**, Clarkson, J. J., & Jia, L. (2014). Social identity on the defense: Differences in reactions to group threat as a function of mode of identification. Presented at the Midwestern Psychological Association Annual Meeting in Chicago, Illinois, May.
- Martins, N., Weaver, A.J., Katz, D. Y., **Lewis, N.H.**, Tyree, N., & Jensen, J. (2013). A content analysis of print news coverage of media violence and aggression research. Presented at the International Communication Association Annual Conference in London, England, June.
- **Lewis, N.** (2013). Who's playing? Accessing and analyzing specialized audiences. As part of Methods and Considerations for Measuring Media Responses. Presented at the Broadcasters Education Association Annual Conference in Las Vegas, Nevada, April.



**January 2010 – May 2010**                      **Indiana University**                      **Bloomington, IN**  
*Associate Instructor*

- T206: Introduction to Production Techniques and Practices, Department of Telecommunications
- Organized and led weekly discussion sections, managed grades for 45 students
- Presented guest lecture on producing for local news and sports, April

**August 2009 – December 2009**                      **Indiana University**                      **Bloomington, IN**  
*Associate Instructor*

- T207: Introduction to Telecommunications Industry and Management, Department of Telecommunications
- Provided feedback on large scale projects and papers, managed grades for 65 students
- Presented guest lecture on the first amendment, November

**September 2006 – August 2009**                      **Waycross Community Media**                      **Cincinnati, OH**  
*Training Coordinator*

- Developed and instructed adult production workshops for the public in studio production, field production, and editing
- Organized and led weekly after school video clubs and summer video camps for local children
- Received three Blue Chip Cable Access Awards for home school and summer camp children's programming

## **PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE**

---

**October 2008 – August 2009**                      **WLWT-TV News 5**                      **Cincinnati, OH**  
*Associate Sports Producer*

- Created nightly rundowns, edited video, and wrote scripts for the nightly 11:00 pm sportscast
- Coordinated guests and line produced the weekly sports show, *Sports Rock*

## **SERVICE**

---

### *Professional*

- Reviewer, Communication & Sport, 2014-present
- Reviewer, Mass Communication Division, International Communication Association Annual Conference, 2012-present
- Reviewer, Journal of Sport Management, 2012
- Member, National Communication Association, 2014-present
- Member, Midwestern Psychological Association, 2014-present
- Member, Broadcasting Education Association, 2012-present
- Member, International Communication Association, 2011-present

### *University*

- Collaborative Science Panel Member, Office of Research Ethics, Education, & Policy, Indiana University, October 2013
- Anchor and Producer, Indiana University Student Television, Indiana University, 2005-2006
- Engineer and Sports Announcer, 99.1 WIUX FM, Indiana University, 2003-2006

### ***Department***

- Graduate Representative to the Faculty, Department of Telecommunications, Indiana University, 2013-2014
- Graduate Representative to the Tenure-track Faculty Search Committee, Department of Telecommunications, Indiana University, 2012-2013
- Graduate and Professional Student Organization Representative, Department of Telecommunications, Indiana University, 2011-2012
- Graduate Representative to the Undergraduate Committee, Department of Telecommunications, Indiana University, 2010-2011
- Peer Facilitator for Associate Instructor Orientation, Department of Telecommunications, Indiana University, 2010-2014

### ***Community***

- Habitat For Humanity, Building Blocks Whirlpool Annual Community Build, October 2010 and October 2012
- Shalom Center Volunteer, Bloomington, Indiana, 2005-2006
- Youth Softball Camp Leader, East Central High School-St. Leon, Indiana, 1996-2002

### **GRANTS AND FELLOWSHIPS**

- Indiana University Graduate Fellowship, Department of Telecommunications, Indiana University, 2009-Present
- Student Academic Appointee, Department of Telecommunications, Indiana University, 2009-Present
- Waycross Community Media Summer Camp, Greater Cincinnati Foundation, \$1000, Summer 2009

### **HONORS AND AWARDS**

- National Communication Association Doctoral Honors Seminar Participant, 2014
- Phi Eta Sigma Honor Society Member
- Indiana University Mortar Board Honor Society Inductee, 2006
- Indiana University Founder's Day Honoree, 2006
- Ball State University Journalism Workshop Award of Excellence, 2000

### **RESEARCH SKILLS**

- Proficient with SPSS and R Statistics Packages
- Proficient with MediaLab and DirectRT Experimental Software
- Experience with psychophysiological data collection and analysis, including Emotiv EEG System, MATLAB, and EEGLAB
- Completed the Neural Time Series Analysis Summer Workshop under the direction of Dr. Thomas A. Busey, Department of Psychological and Brain Sciences, Indiana University, May 2014

### **PROFESSIONAL SKILLS**

- Design Software: Adobe InDesign and Photoshop
- Editing Systems: Adobe Premiere, Apple Final Cut Pro, Avid Newscutter, and Sony Vegas
- News System: ENPS
- Production: HD Cameras, Lighting, Audio, Graphics, Basics of Studio and Field Production