Social comparison, social anxiety, and television viewership

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Abstract
The present study explored relationships between social anxiety, social comparison tendencies, and television viewership. The cultivation theory of mass communication posits that high levels of television viewership lead to distorted perceptions of social reality. Working from this theory, the current investigation aimed to test the hypothesis that high levels of television viewership lead to greater social comparison tendencies, which in turn increase social anxiety. Participants were 156 respondents to an online survey which included measures of participants’ social interaction anxiety, social comparison orientation, attention paid to social comparison information, and television viewership per day. Results indicated significant positive correlations between social anxiety and both television viewership and measures of social comparison. No significant associations were found between social comparison factors and television viewership. These findings suggest that while social anxiety and television viewership are related, this relationship cannot be accounted for by the effects of television on social comparison tendencies.

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SOCIAL COMPARISON, SOCIAL ANXIETY, AND TELEVISION VIEWERSHIP

A THESIS
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APPROVED:
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Abstract

The present study explored relationships between social anxiety, social comparison tendencies, and television viewership. The cultivation theory of mass communication posits that high levels of television viewership lead to distorted perceptions of social reality. Working from this theory, the current investigation aimed to test the hypothesis that high levels of television viewership lead to greater social comparison tendencies, which in turn increase social anxiety. Participants were 156 respondents to an online survey which included measures of participants’ social interaction anxiety, social comparison orientation, attention paid to social comparison information, and television viewership per day. Results indicated significant positive correlations between social anxiety and both television viewership and measures of social comparison. No significant associations were found between social comparison factors and television viewership. These findings suggest that while social anxiety and television viewership are related, this relationship cannot be accounted for by the effects of television on social comparison tendencies.

Keywords: Social anxiety, social comparison, media, television
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Introduction

In his article “A Theory of Social Comparison Processes,” Leon Festinger (1954) outlined a set of principles for how people get information about themselves. He argues that humans are driven to find ways of evaluating their opinions and abilities, and that in situations in which they have no objective means by which to do this, people will make these evaluations by making comparisons between themselves and others. These comparisons can be made for any number of reasons, but three that are broadly adopted in social comparison research are self-evaluation, self-improvement, and self-enhancement (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999).

Self-evaluation, the motive most closely derived from Festinger’s original principles of social comparison, refers to comparisons undertaken for the purpose of assessing how one is doing by looking at one’s abilities in relation to others (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999). For instance, to determine how well you have done on a test, you might look at your own grade; then ask other people how they did. If the majority of the people that you asked received higher scores than yourself, you might determine that you did not do well. If, however, your score was higher than those of other people, you would be likely to evaluate your own performance more positively.

By making these types of evaluations of oneself though social comparison, people can then engage in a second motive for social comparison, self-improvement, in which the individual uses the information gained from social comparisons to improve their own attitudes or behaviors (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999). Thus, if you discover that you have performed badly in comparison to other people, you may use this information to increase the amount of studying that you do in order to bring your own score up to match those of
your classmates. As this example makes clear, the self-comparison motives of self-evaluation and self-improvement can be interrelated – one must engage in evaluation of oneself in relation to others in order to determine if improvement is needed.

Finally, social comparisons can be made for the purpose of self-enhancement (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999). In these situations, individuals engage in comparisons specifically to enhance their own self-esteem. Comparisons made for this purpose may be referred to as downward social comparisons, or comparisons that allow the individual to increase well-being by comparing oneself with a less fortunate other, thus casting oneself in a favorable light (Wills, 1981).

While most everyone uses social comparison for the aforementioned purposes, the degree to which people attend to and engage in social comparisons differs from person to person (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999; Lennox & Wolfe, 1984), and the factors that affect individual differences in social comparison tendencies have not yet been fully elucidated. The following study will investigate the relationship between social comparison tendencies and two factors that may affect an individual’s level of attendance to social comparison information: social anxiety and television viewership.

**Literature Review**

**Social Anxiety**

The concept of social anxiety can be defined as anxiety resulting from the possibility of personal evaluation in social situations, either real or imagined (Schlenker & Leary, 1982). Although engaging in “anxious” behaviors such as avoiding social interactions and appearing inhibited in such interactions is not a necessary component of social anxiety (Leary, 1983), these behavioral indicators commonly accompany the
internal experience of social anxiety (Creed & Funder, 1998). In fact, social anxiety’s behavioral accompaniments may serve an evolutionary purpose, by leading the individual to avoid conflicts which may place him or her at risk and leading the individual to engage in submissive behaviors which increase acceptance and reduce negative evaluation by the wider community (Gilbert, 2001). This facilitates group belonging and individual survival. Thus, the utility of engaging in social comparison is tied directly to social anxiety’s potential evolutionary bases, as attending to social comparison information is crucial for determining how to conform to community standards and craft behaviors to reduce potential conflicts.

If it is indeed the case that social anxiety is borne at least in part out of an evolutionary need to conform to community norms, then this should be evident in how individuals with high levels of social anxiety are affected by the social norms of their cultures. In recent years, researchers have explored the relationship between social norms and social anxiety using both domestic and cross-cultural research.

**Social norms and social anxiety.** In one study addressing the relationship between norms and social anxiety, Neighbors et al. (2007) examined whether perceived norms about peer drinking had a greater effect on the drinking behavior of socially anxious individuals than on the behaviors of those with low levels of social anxiety. The sample included 1,217 students at a midsized university in the US. Participants completed a 20-min survey that included self-report measures of alcohol consumption, perceived on-campus drinking norms, and social anxiety. Consistent with the researchers’ predictions, results indicated that the relationship between drinking behavior and perceived social norms about drinking was stronger for participants who reported high social anxiety than
for those who reported low levels of social anxiety. The researchers concluded that anxiety about living up to other peoples’ expectations may increase the susceptibility of socially anxious individuals to the influence of peer norms regarding alcohol consumption.

In another study, Heinrichs et al. (2006) approached the issue of the influence of social norms on social anxiety from a cross-cultural perspective. The researchers tested the hypothesis that social anxiety levels would be higher among people from collectivistic countries than among those from individualistic countries because of stronger social sanctions imposed for deviance from expected roles in collectivistic societies. The researchers also postulated that acceptance of socially reticent behavior would be higher in collectivistic countries and acceptance of attention-seeking behavior would be higher in individualistic countries. Participants were 909 undergraduates from eight countries classified as either individualistic (Australia, Canada, Germany, the Netherlands, the United States) or collectivistic (Japan, Korea, Spain). All participants read vignettes depicting either socially reticent or attention-seeking behavior and rated how acceptable the behaviors were within their cultures. They also completed measures assessing social anxiety and fear of blushing. Results indicated that socially reticent behaviors were judged as more acceptable in collectivistic countries than in individualistic countries, and levels of social anxiety were also higher among participants from these countries. The researchers concluded that strict social norms and strict sanctions for stepping outside of social norms may contribute to higher levels of social anxiety in collectivistic countries.
Schreier et al. (2010) followed up Heinrichs et al.’s (2006) research with a study replicating and extending the research to include Latin American collectivistic countries in the sample, predicting that the previous findings of less social anxiety in collectivistic countries would not hold true within these countries. Participants were 866 undergraduates from nine countries classified as individualistic (Australia, Canada, Germany, the Netherlands, the United States) or collectivistic (Costa Rica, Ecuador, Japan, Korea). All participants completed a questionnaire that included scales assessing anxiety during social interactions and reactions to attention-seeking or socially-reticent behaviors within the participants’ cultures. Results indicated that participants from the Latin American collectivistic countries in the sample reported lower levels of social anxiety than did those from the East Asian collectivistic countries. Schreier et al. concluded that cross-cultural differences in social anxiety cannot be fully explained by differences in countries’ levels of collectivism and individualism but that other cultural values also have to be taken into account.

Taken together, these studies indicate that social anxiety is affected by social norms, leading individuals to engage in behaviors that are consistent with the norms of their social environment. But even if it is the case that socially anxious people are particularly impacted by and driven to conform to the norms of their cultures, how can we know that social comparison plays a role in this process? What evidence is there that individuals with social anxiety attend to and are affected by social comparison information more than other people? The next section will summarize previous research regarding the effect of social comparison information on social anxiety.
Social comparison, social rank, and social anxiety. Gilbert (2000) argued that concerns such as shame, depression, and social anxiety are based in beliefs that one is in an inferior position to others in regard to socially valued domains. If true, this would put the individual in a subordinate social position, and so the individual who holds these beliefs will engage in submissive behaviors in order to avoid social status challenges in which the individual believes him or herself unlikely to prevail. To examine the relationships between these factors further, the author conducted a study of the relationships between social rank and shame, social anxiety, and depression. Participants were divided into two samples, a normal student group and a depressed group, that were comprised of 109 psychology students and 50 hospitalized depressed patients, respectively. All participants completed measures assessing their levels of social anxiety, shame, submissive behaviors, perceived social rank, and depression. Results indicated that making unfavorable comparisons of oneself to others and engagement in submissive social behavior were both associated with greater levels of social anxiety. In addition, associations between depression and both submissive social behaviors and unfavorable comparisons of oneself were weakened when social anxiety was controlled for. Gilbert concluded that his results support the conclusion that depression and social anxiety are associated with submissive behavior and lower perceived social rank and that these patterns of association are consistent with an evolutionary, psychobiological basis for social anxiety.

A later study by Aderka, Weisman, Shahar, and Gilboa-Schechtman (2008) further examined the relationships between depression, social anxiety, and social rank factors along with attachment, predicting that associations of attachment and social rank
with depression would be mediated by social anxiety. The sample included 102 participants, who completed self-report measures assessing attachment anxiety and avoidance, perceived social rank, submissive behaviors, social anxiety, and depression. Consistent with the researchers’ predictions, results indicated that social anxiety severity partially mediated the association between attachment and depression when social rank factors (submissive behavior and perceived social rank) were not included in analyses, and that social anxiety fully mediated associations between depression and the social rank factors. The researchers argued that their results lend support to a social rank model (Trower & Gilbert, 1989) in which social rank factors play a prominent role in the development of social anxiety and of depression resulting from social anxiety.

Weisman, Aderka, Marom, Hermesh, and Gilboa-Schechtman (2010) investigated the relationship between social anxiety and social comparison further in a pair of studies comparing individuals with social anxiety disorder to other members of the population, predicting that those with social anxiety disorder would display more submissive behavior and lower perceived social rank than controls. In the first study, participants were 42 individuals who sought treatment for social anxiety disorder alone and 47 individuals who did not have this diagnosis. Participants in the second study were 45 individuals with social anxiety disorder and comorbid major depressive disorder and 31 individuals with both major depressive disorder and one or more other anxiety disorders. In both studies, participants completed a series of self-report measures which included measures of attachment, rejection sensitivity, closeness to others, submissive behavior, and perceived social rank. Results indicated that individuals in both of the social anxiety groups reported lower perceived social rank, more submissive behavior, greater rejection
sensitivity, and greater attachment avoidance with romantic partners than those in their respective comparison groups. The researchers concluded that individuals with social anxiety disorder display both greater utilization of the social rank system of social comparison and lower social affiliation overall than the general population, and that these effects endure above and beyond the influence of depression on these factors.

Finally, working from the theory that social anxiety does not include only fear of negative evaluation in social situations but fear of positive evaluation as well, Weeks, Jakatdar, and Heimberg (2010) studied associations between fear of evaluation, negative affect specific to social situations, and social comparison factors. Participants included 423 undergraduate students who completed measures assessing fear of positive evaluation, fear of negative evaluation, social anxiety, positive and negative affect, submissive behavior, and social comparison tendencies. Results indicated that fears of both positive and negative evaluation were associated with more submissive behaviors and stronger social comparison tendencies as well as higher overall levels of negative affect and lower levels of positive affect in social situations. The authors concluded that their results support their hypothesis that fears of both positive and negative evaluation play a role in experiences of social anxiety. They also note that their findings are consistent with previous findings regarding the relationship between social anxiety and social comparison and submissive behaviors.

In summary, research on social anxiety in the past fifteen years has provided multiple sources of support for the presence of a relationship between social anxiety and social comparison tendencies, in which individuals who experience significant social
anxiety engage in greater levels of social comparison than the general population, even accounting for other factors such as depression.

**Television Viewership**

Another factor that may have an impact on social comparison processes is media, and in particular, television viewing. As of 2012, Americans spent an average of 144 hours and 54 minutes a month watching television, dwarfing time spent on other forms of media usage such as the internet (29 hour, 28 minutes), game consoles (6 hours, 26 minutes), and DVD/Blu-Ray (5 hours, 13 minutes; Nielsen, 2012). When time-shifted television (television that is recorded on a device such as a DVR and viewed at a later time) is included alongside traditional television viewing, this number rises to 156 hours and 27 minutes. This means that in a 30-day month, the average American spends an average of 5.2 hours a day watching television. It stands to reason, then, that with all of this time spent watching television, the messages that television sends about the world will have some effect on those who consume it.

A number of theories have been put forth by researchers to explain why people watch television and how it affects viewers, including social learning theories, uses and gratifications theory, socialization theories, and schema theory (Harris, 2009). One such theory, cultivation theory, argues that television overall tends to represent the world in certain ways, and that these representations are often discrepant from reality (Morgan & Signorielli, 1990). Television, it is argued, is less reflective of objective reality than of the “dominant ideologies and values” of a culture (Morgan & Signorielli, 1990, p. 19). These ideologies and values are repeatedly portrayed and are thus perpetuated as cultural norms by television programming. The cultivation process occurs not through a single viewing
experience or even a small sample of such experiences but through a pervasive, repetitive pattern of messages encountered again and again by viewers (Shanahan & Morgan, 1999). Over time, these messages affect the viewer’s own conception of social reality (Hawkins & Pingree, 1990).

In addition, cultivation theory posits that different people are differentially prone to being affected by these cultivation processes (Morgan & Signorielli, 1990). One of the primary subjects explored by researchers working from a cultivation theory perspective is what individual and group factors make one more or less susceptible to the cultivation process. Are there particular groups of people who are particularly susceptible to the influence of television messages? Do these individual factors interact with the types of messages being communicated, making certain messages more likely to be accepted by certain groups of people? Questions such as these have been a fruitful avenue for study in cultivation research. First, though, it is necessary to determine whether the messages that television sends about the world do, in fact, affect perceptions of reality.

**Cultivation effects.** One early study of cultivation effects examined the relationship between soap opera viewership and estimates of common soap opera plot occurrences such as infidelity, illegitimacy, crime, divorce, and nervous breakdown in the real world (Buerkel-Rothfuss & Mayes, 1981). The researchers collected data from 290 university students, who were asked to estimate what proportion of the population they believed to have had a variety of experiences common to soap operas. The researchers also collected information about how often participants viewed soap operas, their levels of life satisfaction, and their self-concepts. Results indicated that soap opera viewing was associated with higher estimates of the real-world occurrence of affairs, divorces,
illegitimate children, abortion, and serious operations. In addition, frequent soap opera
viewers made higher estimates of the proportion of the population who were doctors,
lawyers, businessmen, and housewives and who had committed crimes or been in jail, all
frequent components of soap operas. The researchers argue that their findings lend
support to cultivation theory by indicating that the television that one views affects
beliefs about commonality of a variety of events in the real world.

More recent research has further explored the types of beliefs about the world that
may be affected by cultivation processes. One such pair of studies conducted in Germany
investigated whether levels of television viewership and viewing of fictional narratives
would affect one’s belief in a just world and belief that the world is a scary place (Appel,
2008). The researcher hypothesized that watching fictional narratives would be
associated with greater belief in a just world, because these programs would tend to
depict just-world narratives in which people get what they deserve. Participants included
140 individuals who completed measures of overall television use, viewership of a
number of fictional genres, belief in a just world, interpersonal trust, scary-world beliefs,
and fear-related behavior. Results indicated that those who viewed more television
overall tended to view the world as a scarier place, report more distrust, and engage in
more fear-related behavior. In addition, viewership of fictional narratives was positively
associated with belief in a just world, indicating that those who viewed this type of
programming frequently believe more strongly that people tend to get what they deserve
in the real world.

A study conducted in Japan demonstrated the effects of what cultivation
researchers refer to as mainstreaming (Shanahan & Morgan, 1999), a process by which
heavy viewing of television may reduce the influences of social and cultural factors to produce differences between people, leading to greater homogenization of attitudes and perspectives among heavy television viewers. Researchers in this study explored whether one’s amount of television viewership would affect one’s likelihood of holding traditional gender role attitudes (Saito, 2007). Respondents included 417 individuals living in Tokyo who returned a mailed questionnaire which included measures of gender role attitudes, political orientation, and television viewing. Results indicated that among women, heavy television viewing was associated with more traditional gender role attitudes, maintaining the status quo. Among men, however, this pattern did not hold; in fact, conservative men who were heavy television viewers held more liberal gender role attitudes overall than conservative men who were not heavy viewers. The researchers argue that their results may indicate that television viewing leads heavy viewers away from highly traditional or highly liberal attitudes toward gender roles and closer to the mainstream, reducing the effects of political orientation on these attitudes.

Recently, researchers have also begun to use research to assess what effects cultivation has on individuals with different viewership patterns. In service of this aim, one team of researchers in Israel conducted a study of the effects that different levels of television viewership have on the estimates one makes of how common various phenomena are both on television and in the real world (Hetsroni & Tukachinsky, 2006). A content analysis was performed assessing the percentage of violent crimes (in relation to total crime), percentage of characters with a criminal record, and percentage of people over the age of 65 on Israeli television. Participants then completed measures requiring them to estimate how common each topic was both in the real world and on television,
choosing between an accurate, real-world estimate of the prevalence of these topics, a “TV answer” based on the results of the content analysis, and an exaggerated answer which was a larger estimate of the prevalence of the topic than is present in reality or on television. Results indicated that respondents showed different patterns of responding based on levels of television viewership. Most notably, low and medium-low television viewers showed what the researchers termed “simple no cultivation” and “distorted no cultivation” patterns in their estimates, either giving accurate estimates of both real-world prevalence and prevalence on television or giving accurate estimates of real-world prevalence and exaggerated estimates of prevalence of the topics on television. In contrast, heavy viewers tended to display a pattern of what the researchers termed “overcultivation,” in which they selected exaggerated estimates of the prevalence of the topics both on television and in the real world. The researchers argue that these results suggest that cultivation is a more complex process than traditional cultivation research has addressed, and that cultivation patterns differ based on levels of viewing.

Overall, cultivation research has found support for the proposition that television viewership affects various expectations about the real world. It is not only the effect of television on outward perceptions of the world that interests media researchers, however. Another avenue of research examines how viewership of certain television messages may affect individuals’ emotional and behavioral responses to the world around them.

Effects of television on feelings and behaviors. One early study in this area (Jennings, Geis, & Brown, 1980) examined how viewing different types of portrayals of women in television commercials would affect real women’s self-confidence and independent judgment. Participants included 52 undergraduate women who viewed either
commercials depicting men and women in traditional gender roles or otherwise identical commercials in which the roles were reversed. These participants then completed tasks intended to assess their self-confidence and independence of judgment. Results indicated that, consistent with the researchers’ predictions, those who viewed the commercials in which the gender roles were reversed displayed greater self-confidence and independence of judgment on the later tasks. The researchers conclude that viewing images of women in more strong, competent roles enhances confidence among female viewers.

A later study also explored the effect of television on women specifically, this time in relation to young women’s sexual self-concept (Aubrey, 2007). The researcher conducted questionnaire data in two phases, gathering data from 149 undergraduate females on television viewing variables including overall daily viewership, exposure to soap operas, exposure to sitcoms, and exposure to primetime comedies and dramas. Sexual self-concept was assessed using measures of sexual esteem, sexual assertiveness, sexual interest, and sexual anxiety. Results showed that more frequent exposure to soap operas and dramas as well as higher television viewership overall were all associated with lower sexual self-concept. The author argues that the prevalence of portrayals of sexual relationships in which women are punished for taking the initiative in relationships or are treated as sexual objects on certain types of programs may negatively impact women’s sexual self-concept.

Research on the effects of television on feelings and behaviors has even been applied to specific programs; one recent study (Quick, 2009) examined how viewership of the television program *Grey’s Anatomy* would affect perceptions of doctors and patient satisfaction. The researcher assessed an undergraduate sample of participants on their
viewership of *Grey’s Anatomy*, perceptions of the credibility of the program’s medical storylines, perceptions of the courageousness of real-world doctors, and satisfaction with their own physicians. Results indicated that viewership of *Grey’s Anatomy* was positively associated with perceptions of its credibility, and that greater belief in the credibility of *Grey’s Anatomy* was associated with greater perceptions of real-world doctors as being courageous. In addition, patient satisfaction was positively related to perceptions of doctor courageousness. The author argues that these results provide support for the applicability of cultivation patterns to a single program and indicate one way in which media may influence attitudes such as patient satisfaction.

Coyne, Nelson, Robinson, and Gunderson (2011) explored whether viewing ostracism on in media content would cause feelings of distress using experimental research. Participants included 50 undergraduates and community members who were divided into two equal groups, an ostracism condition and a control condition. Those in the ostracism condition viewed a 10-min film clip depicting a character being ostracized, while those in the control condition viewed a clip of comparable length from the same film that did not depict ostracism. Participants’ physiological responses (blood pressure, heart rate, and galvanic skin response) were measured before and after viewing of the clip, and all participants completed a questionnaire assessing their mood, self-esteem, feelings of control, sense of belonging, and feelings of meaningful existence at the end of the experiment. Results indicated that those in the ostracism condition had higher heart rate and galvanic skin response than those in the control condition. In addition, participants in the ostracism group reported lower levels of belonging, self-esteem, and
mood. The researchers conclude that their results indicate that vicarious exposure to ostracism through media has the power to induce distress in viewers.

A strong body of research has also developed regarding the effects of television viewership on one particular type of attitude: body image, particularly among women. Harrison and Cantor (1997) found that consuming what they term “thinness-depicting and thinness-promoting media” (p. 45) is associated with greater eating disorder symptomology and higher drive for thinness among women. In addition, television consumption specifically was found to be associated with greater body dissatisfaction among both men and women. Results from another study conducted by Harrison (2000) indicated that exposure to television featuring central characters or personalities who are seen as fat was associated with increased bulimia among adolescents while exposure to thin-ideal media was related to anorexia among adolescent girls. Overall, relationships between media exposure and eating disorder symptomology were stronger for adolescent girls than adolescent boys. A more recent study which examined the relationship between media identification and body image among women specifically (Greenwood, 2009) obtained results indicating that wishful identification with (i.e. desire to be like) a favorite female television character was associated with greater body shame and body surveillance. In addition, results indicated that having a greater perceived level of similarity to a favorite television character was associated with higher levels of body surveillance.

While the aforementioned studies cannot be taken to definitively support a causal relationship in which television viewership causes low body image, together, they do provide strong evidence that media in general and television specifically may play an
important role in the development of these concerns, particularly among women. The evidence in the area of body image provides a strong indication that television consumption can have significant effects on important aspects of the individual’s inner psychological experience.

**Social Comparison Messages on Television**

If television viewership can affect everything from an individual’s sexual self-confidence to patients’ satisfaction with their doctors, it stands to reason that television viewing may also influence perceptions of and responses to one’s social world. The previously mentioned research on the impact of viewing ostracism on television (Coyne, Nelson, Robinson, & Gunderson, 2011) provides one example of how the social situations that one views in media may affect viewers emotional responses; these types of viewership experiences may have more direct effects on beliefs about the social world as well.

For instance, in a recent study, Mares, Braun, and Hernandez (2012) explored how viewing a number of television shows about school that are aimed at tweens (defined as individuals aged 8 to 14) would affect feelings and expectations about middle school among fifth graders. The researchers also looked at how these feelings and expectations would be affected by viewing episodes of these shows that depicted high versus low amounts of social conflict. Participants included 97 students in the fifth grade who viewed either a high-conflict or low-conflict episode of the television program *That’s So Raven* and who were then interviewed. Results indicated that regular viewing of tween sitcoms was positively associated with expectations that one would encounter stereotypical social groups such as “jocks” and “nerds” in middle school, expectations of
encountering more bullying in middle school, and greater levels of anxiety about entering middle school. In addition, those who viewed the television episodes depicting high amounts of social conflict reported more expectations of encountering hostility in middle school and higher levels of anxiety about entering middle school than those who viewed the low-conflict episodes. These findings indicate that the content of social situations depicted on television can affect beliefs about what to expect in social situations in the real world for at least a certain population of young viewers.

Another study aimed primarily at determining whether trait voyeurism is associated with greater consumption of reality television also explored the relationship between participants’ levels of social comparison tendencies and their television viewership choices (Baruh, 2010). Results indicated that consumption of fiction television (as opposed to reality television) was associated with higher levels of social comparison orientation. Although the causal direction of this relationship is unclear, this finding does provide further evidence that television viewing and perceptions of the social world are intertwined.

One way to explore the effect of televisual depictions of the social world is by looking at the effect of television viewing on life satisfaction and factors related to life satisfaction, which may provide an indication of how viewing fictional depictions of people’s lives affects one’s perception of one’s own. The section that follows explores recent research on this topic and discusses how this avenue of research may be pertinent to relationships between social comparison tendencies and television viewing.

**Television viewership and perceived quality of life.** In one study of television viewership and life satisfaction conducted by Sirgy et al. (1998), researchers examined
whether high television viewership would lead to decreased life satisfaction as a result of instilling individuals with higher levels of materialism and dissatisfaction with their standards of living. The researchers collected data from 1,226 participants in the United States, Canada, Australia, Turkey, and China, using survey measures to assess participants’ levels of television viewing, materialism, life satisfaction, and evaluation of their standard of living. Within the United States, the results indicated that as the researchers predicted, high levels of television viewership were associated with higher levels of materialism and lower evaluations of one’s own standard of living. In addition, materialism was negatively associated with overall life satisfaction, while evaluation of standard of living was positively associated with life satisfaction. The researchers conclude that their results support a relationship between television viewership and life satisfaction which is mediated by levels of materialism and standard of living evaluation. However, results from the non-U.S. samples in many cases failed to support the hypothesized relationships, which the researchers theorize may either be a result of methodological problems or may indicate that this pattern of relationships is unique to the United States.

Hammermeister, Brock, Winterstein, and Page (2005) explored the relationship between different levels of television viewership and a number of psychosocial health characteristics. They collected data from participants who were classified as belonging to one of three groups: those who did not watch television, those who watched two or less hours of television per day, and those who watched more than two hours of a television per day. All participants completed measures assessing their levels of loneliness, hopelessness, depression, shyness, self-esteem, weight satisfaction, life satisfaction,
perceived attractiveness, and tendency toward disordered eating. Results indicated that there were no group differences among men on the psychosocial health variables. Among women, however, viewing more than two hours of television per day was associated with having higher levels of loneliness, hopelessness, shyness, depression, and tendency toward disordered eating and lower levels of self-esteem, weight satisfaction, perceived attractiveness, and life satisfaction. These findings support a relationship between high television viewership and decreased life satisfaction and may indicate that the messages provided by television programming affect overall psychosocial health. In addition, the fact that television viewership was associated with lower psychosocial health for female, but not male, participants suggests that the effect of these messages may be mediated by individual difference factors such as gender.

Finally, a recent study by Yang and Oliver (2012) explored the mechanisms by which television viewership may lead to decreased life satisfaction. The researchers collected data from 225 individuals who completed measures assessing television viewership, value placed on material goods, estimates of others’ affluence, perceived social comparison gaps between oneself and others, and dissatisfaction with one’s own personal life. Results indicated that high television viewership was associated with participants placing greater value on material goods, making higher estimates of others’ affluence, and having greater perceptions of social comparison gaps. In addition, dissatisfaction with one’s life was associated with greater perceived social comparison gaps among both high-income and low-income participants. The researchers argue that making upward social comparisons between oneself and others appears to be the primary mechanism by which television viewing leads to decreased life satisfaction.
Taken together, studies such as these indicate that television viewership is associated with lower life satisfaction. In addition, the process by which this relationship develops may be through viewers making social comparisons during their television viewership experiences which negatively affect their perceptions of themselves in relation to others.

The Present Study

The present study aims to explore the interrelationships between the previously discussed factors of social comparison, social anxiety, and television viewership. Social comparison is assessed on two related dimensions: level of social comparison orientation and level of attention paid to social comparison information. The former assesses how much one is driven to compare oneself to others, while the latter is a measure of how much one makes note of comparison-relevant information in one’s social environment.

Given the findings of previous research indicating associations between social anxiety and comparison-relevant variables such as social rank and social affiliation, it is predicted that social anxiety will be positively associated with the social comparison factors in this study. In addition, in view of research findings indicating that television viewing is associated with changes in feelings and attitudes potentially tied to social information such as life satisfaction, it is hypothesized that television viewership will also be positively associated with social comparison factors. There is also a body of evidence suggesting that, in at least some domains such as body image and psychosocial health, females may be more affected by high television viewership than males (Hammermeister, Brock, Winterstein, & Page, 2005; Harrison, 2000; Harrison & Cantor, 1997). Thus, it is
predicted that any associations found between television viewership and social comparison will be stronger for females than for males.

In addition, the present study aims to explore whether there is a relationship between television viewership and social anxiety, and if so, whether this relationship is mediated by social comparison factors. If a relationship of this nature is found, it could indicate that television viewership leads to increases in one’s tendency to make social comparisons, and that this shift in attention to the social environment then increases one’s social anxiety. It may also be that social anxiety leads to greater social comparison tendencies, which lead individuals to seek out television as an avenue for making these comparisons. If an association between television viewership and social anxiety is not found, however, it may suggest that social anxiety and television viewership both make separate contributions to social comparison tendencies. If a relationship is found between television viewership and social anxiety that is not mediated by social comparison, more research may be indicated to further explore the means by which this relationship functions. The current study will explore the pattern of associations between these factors with the aim of discovering which causal patterns find support and may warrant further study.

Method

Participants

The initial sample consisted of 158 participants. From this sample, one participant was excluded for failing to complete the “television viewership” item in an interpretable manner, while another was excluded because the individual reported being only 17 years of age on the demographic items. The final sample thus included 156 participants.
between the ages of 18 and 69 ($M = 31.96$). Of these participants, 132 were female and 24 were male. Out of the 156 participants included in subsequent analyses, 3.2% of the sample indicated an education level of “12$^{th}$ grade or less,” 2.6% of “graduated high school or equivalent,” 13.5% of “some college, no degree,” 1.9% of “associate degree,” 33.3% of “bachelor’s degree,” and 44.9% of “post-graduate degree.”

**Measures**

**Demographic information.** Participants were asked to complete a series of demographic questions in which they reported their age, gender, and highest level of education completed. Responses to the age and gender items were provided as open-ended responses, while response options for the “highest level of education completed” item ranged from 12$^{th}$ grade or less to Post-graduate degree.

**The Iowa Netherlands Comparison Orientation Measure (INCOM; Gibbons & Buunk, 1999).** Comparison orientation was assessed using the INCOM, a measure of one’s need to compare oneself with others. The INCOM has 11 items. Six items measure the extent to which participants compare their abilities to those of other people, and include items such as “I always pay a lot of attention to how I do things compared with how others do things.” The remaining five items measure the extent to which participants compare their opinions to those of other people, and include items such as “I often try to find out what others think who face similar problems as I face.” Responses are measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (I disagree strongly) to 5 (I agree strongly), with higher scores indicating a higher level of comparison orientation. The INCOM has been reported to have Cronbach’s alphas ranging from .78 to .85 in American samples,
indicating an acceptable level of reliability for research purposes. Internal consistency for the present study was .82.

**The Concern for Appropriateness Scale (CAS; Lennox & Wolfe, 1984).** Use of and attention paid to social comparison information were assessed using the CAS, a scale developed to measure two factors related to social anxiety: cross-situational variability in self-presentation, and attention paid to social comparison information. The CAS has 20 items. Seven items measure cross-situational variability, and include items such as “Different situations can make me behave like very different people.” The remaining thirteen items measure attention to social comparison information, and include items such as “I try to pay attention to the reactions of others to my behavior in order to avoid being out of place.” Responses are measured using a 6-point Likert-type scale ranging from 0 (**certainly, always false**) to 5 (**certainly, always true**). This measure has been found to have acceptable reliability for research purposes, with Cronbach’s alpha levels in previous samples of .75 for the total scale and alphas of .77 and .70 for the cross-situational variability and attention to social comparison information subscales, respectively. Internal consistency for the present study was .87 on the total scale, .87 on the cross-situational variability subscale, and .82 on the attention to social comparison information subscale.

**The Social Interaction Anxiety Scale (SIAS; Mattick & Clarke, 1998).** Participant levels of social anxiety were measured using the SIAS, a 19-item scale developed to assess one’s fear of social interaction. The measure includes items such as “I have difficulty talking with other people.” Responses are measured using a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 0 (**not at all**) to 4 (**extremely**). This measure has been
found to have high reliability for research purposes, with Cronbach’s alphas in previous samples of .90 in a community population and .93 in a population of individuals with social phobia. Internal consistency for the present study was .95.

**Television viewership.** Participant levels of television viewership were measured using an open-ended response item. The item stated: “On a typical day, about how many hours do you spend watching television?” Participants’ responses were measured on a numerical scale. If the respondent provided a non-numerical response (e.g., “half an hour”) the response was converted to be expressed in numerical terms (e.g., “0.5”). If the respondent provided a range (e.g., “one to two hours”) the response was recoded as the value halfway between the minimum and maximum values given (e.g., “1.5”).

**Procedure**

Participants were recruited online using e-mails sent out to listservs subscribed to by psychology graduate students at a university in the northwest United States, e-mails sent to listservs viewed by psychologists in the state of Oregon as well as nationally, and Facebook requests for participation. A link to the survey was also posted on a website compiling current psychological research projects being conducted online. Participants were offered the option to be entered into a drawing for a $50 Amazon.com gift card in thanks for their time. After viewing and agreeing to informed consent information, participants completed the CAS, the INCOM, and the SIAS. Participants were then asked to report how many hours per day on average they spend watching television and were invited to provide their demographic information. At the end of the survey, participants were offered the option of being entered into the optional drawing. Those who requested
Results

Overall, participant scores on the CAS ranged from 5 to 88 (M = 48.06, SD = 12.92). When divided by education level, mean CAS scores ranged from 42.75 (in the “graduated high school or equivalent” group) to 55.04 (in the “associate degree” group). Scores on the INCOM ranged from 17 to 55 (M = 37.91, SD = 6.73). When divided by education level, mean INCOM scores ranged from 36.60 (in the “12th grade or less” group) to 40.33 (in the “associate degree” group). Scores on the SIAS ranged from 1 to 68 (M = 24.93, SD = 15.27). When divided by education level, mean SIAS scores ranged from 17.00 (in the “12th grade or less” group) to 44.67 (in the “associate degree” group). On the television viewership item, reported levels of television viewing ranged from 0 to 8 hours per day (M = 2.17, SD = 1.65). When divided by education level, mean television viewership per day ranged from 1.88 (in the “graduated high school or equivalent” group) to 3.00 (in the “12th grade or less” group). For means and standard deviations on all measures divided by gender, see Table 1.

To test the first two hypotheses of the present study - that there would be positive relationships between social anxiety and social comparison and between social comparison and television viewership - Pearson product-moment correlations were conducted to assess the relationships between these factors.

As expected, a significant moderate positive correlation was found between scores on the CAS and the INCOM, \( r(154) = .54, p < .001 \), indicating that participants who obtained high scores on one of the measures of social comparison tendencies
Table 1

Means and Standard Deviation for Male and Female Respondents on the CAS, INCOM, SIAS, and Television Viewership Item

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Female</th>
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<th>Male</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>SD</td>
<td></td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CAS</td>
<td>48.09</td>
<td>12.43</td>
<td>47.92</td>
<td>15.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INCOM</td>
<td>38.12</td>
<td>6.62</td>
<td>36.75</td>
<td>7.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SIAS</td>
<td>24.95</td>
<td>15.40</td>
<td>24.82</td>
<td>14.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV Viewing</td>
<td>2.06</td>
<td>1.63</td>
<td>2.77</td>
<td>1.66</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

generally obtained high scores on the other as well. Results indicated that with regard to the first hypothesis, there was a significant positive relationship between scores on the SIAS and the CAS, \( r(154) = .53, p < .001 \), indicating that participants with higher social anxiety also reported paying more attention to social comparison information and exhibiting more variability in behavior across situations than those with low social anxiety. In addition, there was a significant positive relationship between scores on the SIAS and the INCOM, \( r(154) = .25, p = .002 \), indicating that participants with higher social anxiety also had higher levels of comparison orientation than those with low social anxiety. With regard to the second hypothesis, results indicated no significant correlation between television viewership and scores on either the CAS, \( r(154) = .10, p = .21 \), or the INCOM, \( r(154) = .02, p = .82 \).
Table 2

Correlations Among the CAS, INCOM, SIAS, and Television Viewership Item for Female Respondents (N = 132)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>CAS</th>
<th>INCOM</th>
<th>SIAS</th>
<th>TV Viewing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CAS</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>.50**</td>
<td>.51**</td>
<td>.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INCOM</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>.23**</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SIAS</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>.18*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV Viewing</td>
<td>--</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05

**p < .01

With respect to the third hypothesis, that associations between television viewership and social comparison factors would be stronger for men than for women, no significant relationships were found between television viewership and either of the social comparison measures among either men or women when the data for these groups was analyzed separately. Among females, significant positive relationships were found between CAS scores and INCOM scores, CAS scores and SIAS scores, and INCOM scores and SIAS scores (see Table 2). Among males, significant positive relationships were found between CAS scores and INCOM scores and between CAS scores and SIAS scores (see Table 3). No significant differences were found between the male and female samples in the strength of the correlations.

Finally, the present study aimed to explore whether there is a relationship between social anxiety and television viewership, and if so, whether this relationship would be mediated by social comparison tendencies. With regard to this question, results indicated
Table 3

*Correlations among the CAS, INCOM, SIAS, and Television Viewership Item for Male Respondents (N = 24)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>CAS</th>
<th>INCOM</th>
<th>SIAS</th>
<th>TV Viewing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CAS</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>.71**</td>
<td>.63**</td>
<td>.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INCOM</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>.39</td>
<td></td>
<td>-.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SIAS</td>
<td>--</td>
<td></td>
<td>.09</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV Viewing</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05

**p < .01

that there was a significant positive relationship between scores on the SIAS and average hours of television viewership ($M = 2.17$, $SD = 1.65$), $r(154) = .16$, $p = .043$, indicating that participants with higher social anxiety also reported watching more television than those with low social anxiety. Linear regression was used to assess whether this relationship was mediated by scores on the CAS or the INCOM. A linear regression assessing the relationship between CAS scores and television viewing indicated no significant relationship between CAS scores and television viewing levels when controlling for SIAS scores, $B = .00$, $p = .81$. The standard error of this path coefficient is .01. Similarly, a linear regression assessing the relationship between INCOM scores and television viewing indicated no significant relationship between INCOM scores and television viewing levels when controlling for SIAS scores, $B = -.01$, $p = .77$. The standard error of this path coefficient is .02.
Associations between social anxiety and television viewership were also assessed for both men and women separately. When the data was analyzed for these groups separately, results indicated that among women, there was a significant positive relationship between SIAS scores ($M = 24.95$, $SD = 15.40$) and amount of television viewing per day ($M = 2.06$, $SD = 1.63$), $r(130) = .18$, $p = .04$. Among men, there was no significant relationship between SIAS scores ($M = 24.82$, $SD = 14.86$) and television viewing ($M = 2.77$, $SD = 1.66$), $r(22) = .09$, $p = .69$. However, a test of the significance of the difference between the correlation coefficients of the male group and the female group indicated that there was no significant difference between the obtained correlations, $p = .69$.

**Discussion**

The purpose of the present study was to explore the relationships between social anxiety, social comparison tendencies, and television viewership. The findings indicate partial support for the study hypotheses. Overall, higher levels of social anxiety were found to be associated with greater social comparison tendencies. As predicted, those individuals who reported being more socially anxious also engaged in more comparison between themselves and others and reported being more aware of social comparison information in the environment. This finding is consistent with previous research on the relationship between social anxiety and social rank (Aderka, Weisman, Shahar, & Gilboa-Schechtman, 2008; Weisman, Aderka, Marom, Hermesh, & Gilboa-Schechtman, 2010) and indicates that the experience of social anxiety is typically accompanied by a greater concern about perceptions of rank and hierarchy in social situations. This is consistent with the conceptualization of social anxiety as comprised by high concern.
about personal evaluation by others in social situations. Having a high degree of concern about this kind of evaluation is likely to make social comparison information much more salient in everyday interactions than it is likely to be for a non-anxious population.

In addition, higher levels of social anxiety were also associated with greater levels of daily television viewership, indicating that those with high social anxiety also tend to watch more television overall. However, the hypothesized cause for this relationship, that social comparison tendencies would be higher among those who watch more television, and that social comparison would mediate the relationship between social anxiety and television viewing, was not borne out by the data. In fact, no significant relationships were found between television viewership and either social comparison measure. There are a number of possible explanations for this result. It may be that television simply does not communicate enough strong messages encouraging viewers to compare themselves to others to affect viewers’ actual social comparison tendencies. Cultivation theory argues that the process by which viewers are “cultivated” to certain attitudes and norms includes repeated and continual exposure to these messages through television; it is possible that social comparison messages are simply not prevalent enough on television to have an effect.

Another possible explanation for the lack of relationship found between television viewership and social comparison tendencies is that television does cultivate social comparison tendencies, but that other mass media transmit these messages as well, diluting the effects of television alone. The present study was concerned only with television viewership, but there are many other forms of popular media, such as the internet, social media, film, and print media, which transmit messages about accepted
social norms. Perhaps those individuals in this study who reported low television viewing take in cultural messages regarding the importance of social comparisons through other forms of media.

Finally, it may be that viewers are simply not as affected by television messages regarding social comparison and social hierarchy as they are by other types of messages. For instance, while media often depicts ideal body images which are highly divergent from the body types of the majority of the general population, it may be that the social judgments and comparisons taking place on television are similar enough to those that viewers experience in their everyday lives that viewing these portrayals does not spur a change in general attitudes about this information. Whatever the reason may be, however, the results of this study suggest that social comparison tendencies are not one of the attitudes that television viewing is likely to have a strong effect on.

Analyses were also conducted to assess whether there would be differences between men and women in the patterns of association between social anxiety, social comparison, and television viewership. No significant gender differences were found in the present study, potentially indicating that the relationships between these factors operate in similar ways for both men and women. However, the conclusions that can be drawn from these comparisons are limited by the large difference in the sample sizes of the male group and the female group in this study. For instance, while analyses looking at both groups separately indicated that the relationship between television viewership and social anxiety was significant for females but not for males, this may be reflective of the small sample size of the male group (n = 24) reducing the power of the tests that were conducted on this group, rather than reflective of a real difference in this relationship for
women versus men. Further research with a larger sample of males could help to clarify the results found in the present study.

**Limitations**

A number of limitations must also be taken into account when considering the aforementioned results. For one, the low number of male participants limits the amount of information that can be gleaned from the comparisons between men and women. Although the patterns of results among the female group suggest that the overall patterns of results found in this study are generalizable to women, there may be differences in the relationships between social comparison, social anxiety, and television viewership among men that a larger sample of male participants would have been needed to detect.

In addition, the sample for the present study was a convenience sample, gathered largely from websites and listservs viewed by individuals in the field of psychology. Thus, the sample obtained for this study may be more psychologically-minded than the general population, and this may have affected the generalizability of their responses. Perhaps even more importantly, the majority of this sample (78.2%) reported having a bachelor’s degree or higher as their highest level of education achieved. As a result, this sample reflects a more highly educated sample of people than the general population. Education level may be associated with a number of other factors, such as socioeconomic status, amount of television viewed per day, and types of programs watched, which may affect the patterns of associations found in this study. Thus, these results may have limited generalizability for a less educated population than the one sampled here.

Finally, much of the research in regard to the impacts of social norms and cultivation effects on individuals’ attitudes, feelings, and behaviors comes from
international research. While the presence of significant findings from cross-cultural research does indicate that cultivation effects may occur across cultures and thus be evident in a large number of populations and circumstances, it also introduces a number of other variables which may explain the obtained results. The high degree of variability across cultures presents multiple cultural, social, political, and other factors which could play a role in how cultivation operates, and these factors should be considered as they may moderate the conclusions drawn regarding cultivation effects found in other countries. In a similar vein, although the present study drew primarily from the United States, it was accessible to individuals from around the world, and thus the aforementioned variables that impact the generalizability of cross-cultural research may also have led non-American respondents to show different patterns of results from the rest of the sample. These differences could have attenuated the overall effects found in the current study.

**Future Research**

The findings of this study suggest multiple potential avenues for future research. For one, given the lack of significant relationships found between social comparison tendencies and television viewing, the relationship indicated by this study between television viewership and social anxiety remains unexplained. An important avenue for further research in this area will be to determine what the direction of this relationship is and what the mediating components in the relationship are. Does experiencing a high level of social anxiety lead one to watch more television? If so, factors such as introversion, social isolation, or depression may provide mechanisms by which this relationship occurs. Or do components of television itself raise one’s social anxiety? And
if so, what aspects of television or television viewing contribute to this effect? More research on this relationship is needed to gain a better understanding of the influences at play in the connection between social anxiety and television viewership.

In addition, the fact that the present study’s sample primarily represented a highly educated population means that further research is needed to determine the effects that different education levels and socioeconomic statuses may have on the variables under study. An individual’s status in society may have important effects on how he or she views the social world, and these differences could lead to different patterns of associations between social anxiety, social comparison, and media use among less affluent respondents. Further exploration comparing different socioeconomic groups’ tendencies to engage in social comparison and experience social anxiety could shed light on how influential socioeconomic status is to these relationships and how generalizable the present study’s results are to less affluent populations.

Future research can also further explore cross-cultural variability in relationships between television viewing, social anxiety, and subscription to various social norms. Because social norms are such an important component of cultivation effects, this area of research in particular may benefit from international research which can analyze differences in norms across cultures and the effect of television and other media in transmitting these norms. Cross-cultural research is also a potentially valuable tool for examining the connection between television viewing and emotional responses such as social anxiety, as research that incorporates findings from a variety of cultures can provide an indication of how culture-bound or universal such relationships are. Such avenues of exploration provide a rich area for future research.
Finally, although television remains one of the most influential and highly utilized forms of media, the recent advent of social media had provided people with new ways to compare themselves to and judge themselves against others. Although the present study’s findings on the relationships of social comparison and social anxiety to television viewership were mixed, future research could explore whether these variables are affected by social media usage, which allows users to make immediate comparisons between themselves and others in their social worlds. The high personal relevance of the social comparison information provided by social media venues as compared to the broader messages of television may be a crucial factor in determining when media usage plays a role in facilitating social comparison and contributing to social anxiety.

**Conclusion**

Although this study did not find a relationship between social comparison and television viewership, the significant relationships that did arise between social anxiety and social comparison and between social anxiety and television viewership indicate that social anxiety is tied to both media and interpersonal influences. There is much still to be learned about the mechanisms by which these relationships function, and much still to be explored about the more general effects of media on psychological functioning. The avenues for research in this area only grow as media usage and social interaction in modern society continue to develop and change. By continuing to explore the ways that social comparison processes occur and media messages are internalized by individuals, psychologists can develop new ways to approach enhancing psychological well-being on both the individual and societal levels.

**References**


