

**Being kind to ourselves:  
Self-compassion, coping and consumption**

Katerina Karanika, Department of Organizational Studies, University of Exeter, Exeter, UK

Margaret K. Hogg, Department of Marketing, Lancaster University, Lancaster, UK

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Send correspondence to Katerina Karanika, University of Exeter Business School,  
Department of Organizational Studies, 1.72 Streatham Court, Exeter EX4 4ST, e-mail:  
[K.Karanika@exeter.ac.uk](mailto:K.Karanika@exeter.ac.uk). Margaret K. Hogg, Lancaster University Management School,  
Department of Marketing, Charles Carter Building, D42, Lancaster, LA1 4YX, e-mail:  
[m.hogg@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:m.hogg@lancaster.ac.uk).

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**Abstract**

Most consumer research on coping builds from the notion of pursuing self-esteem. However recent psychological research emphasizes the pursuit of self-compassion as a healthier goal versus the pursuit of self-esteem within coping strategies. Only a minority of consumer research studies discuss self-compassion in relation to coping. Yet, these more recent consumer studies firstly, do not explore the different coping strategies linked to self-compassion even though psychological research suggests that self-compassion involves different components. Secondly, these recent consumer studies do not explore the role of socio-temporal comparisons in self-compassionate coping even though psychological research relates socio-temporal comparisons to self-compassion. This phenomenological study of downwardly mobile consumers identifies different coping strategies that reflect a pursuit of self-compassion and highlights how coping strategies, with a focus on self-compassion, relate to socio-temporal comparisons. The study contrasts and maps consumers' coping strategies in their pursuit of self-esteem and self-compassion. The study contributes to understanding of consumer coping.

Keywords: self-compassion, social comparisons, temporal comparisons, coping, downward mobility, low-income consumers

## **Being kind to ourselves: self-compassion, coping and consumption**

Most consumer research on coping centers around the notion of protecting, restoring, or bolstering self-esteem (e.g., Burroughs & Rindfleisch, 1997; Elliott, 1995; Hamilton, 2012; Hamilton & Catterall, 2008; Henry & Caldwell, 2006; Hill & Stamey, 1990; Sivanathan & Pettit, 2010; Viswanathan, Rosa, & Harris, 2005). However, despite the benefits of self-esteem, recent psychological research highlights the self-defeating costs associated with the pursuit of self-esteem such as contingencies of self-worth and rather emphasizes the pursuit of self-compassion as a healthier alternative to the pursuit of self-esteem in coping strategies (e.g., Leary et al., 2007; Neff et al., 2007). Self-esteem refers to a self-attitude in which self-worth is conditional on (perceived) personal competence, performance and attainment of desired states and ideals. Self-compassion, in contrast, refers to a self-attitude that is non-judgmental toward one's inadequacies and failures and in which self-worth is unconditional (e.g., Crocker & Wolfe, 2001; Leary et al., 2007; Neff et al., 2007). Because self-esteem incorporates conditional self-worth, it is non-protective against self-deficits (i.e., discrepancies between how one wants to view oneself and how one currently views oneself). However, self-compassion, incorporating unconditional self-worth, entails compassion for one's self in instances of perceived inadequacy or failure. Self-compassion therefore represents a healthier form of self-acceptance and plays an important role in how people cope with problems. Self-compassion is associated with greater emotional balance than self-esteem (e.g., Leary et al., 2007). Nevertheless, consumer research on coping largely neglects the notion of self-compassion. Only a minority of consumer research studies discuss self-compassion and self-acceptance (i.e., Bahl & Milne, 2010; Kim & Gal, 2014). However, these recent studies do not explore firstly, the different coping strategies specifically related to self-compassion and secondly, the role of socio-temporal comparisons (i.e., the individual's comparisons of himself/herself with others as well as with his/her own

past and his/her desired and undesired selves) in self-compassionate coping. The next sections deal with the literature about self-compassion and socio-temporal comparisons as the theoretical framework for the study. The Greek context is then outlined for the phenomenological interviews with downwardly mobile consumers coping with financial difficulties.

### **Consumer coping**

The majority of consumer research on coping centers around the notion of pursuing self-esteem (often without providing a definition of self-esteem). For instance, Hamilton (2012) and Hamilton and Catterall (2008) discuss how coping successes can be important sources of self-esteem for lone poor mothers in an era of stigmatization of welfare mothers or single mothers on benefits. Viswanathan et al. (2005) explore illiterate consumers' coping that aims to protect their self-esteem in marketplace encounters. Likewise, previous research highlights compensatory consumption as a coping strategy that enhances self-esteem. Individuals consume products that symbolically compensate for self-deficits in a pursuit of self-esteem (e.g., Gao et al., 2009; Kim & Gal, 2014; Woodruffe, 1997; Yurchisin et al., 2006); or use self-gifts as messages to and from themselves that can be elevating, protective, or therapeutic to self-esteem (e.g., Mick & DeMoss, 1990). This work is in line with Wicklund and Gollwitzer's (1982) symbolic self-completion theory that suggests that individuals with low self-esteem achieve a more complete sense of self-identity with the acquisition of material objects. Burroughs and Rindfleisch (1997), for example, examine how children coping with parental divorce and family stress try to enhance their self-esteem via materialism. Similarly, Sivanathan and Pettit (2010) discuss how low-income consumers' lowered self-esteem drives their willingness to spend on high-status goods. In contrast, Elliott (1995) suggests disengaging from, avoiding and resisting consumer culture as a coping strategy of the long-term unemployed who try to construct self-definitions outside the culture

of consumption, bolstering the value of voluntary simplicity to preserve their self-esteem. Hill and Stamey (1990) suggest distancing as a coping strategy of homeless individuals who try to restore their self-esteem by keeping distance from their more dependent peers. Previous research also discusses fantasy as a way poorer individuals cope with conditions that erode their self-esteem (Hill, 1991; Hill & Stephens, 1997). Avoiding and shifting responsibility for negative outcomes has also been discussed as an avoidance strategy that protects the self-esteem (Viswanathan et al., 2005). Such other-blame or external locus of control to protect self-esteem has been associated with the coping strategy of confrontation (Henry & Caldwell, 2006; Yi & Baumgartner, 2004).

Unlike the series of papers above which identify the variety of coping strategies linked to self-esteem as the goal pursuit, only one consumer research study directly discusses the notion of self-compassion. Bahl and Milne (2010) see self-compassion as one of the ways consumers deal with identity tensions and inconsistent consumption preferences. Bahl and Milne (2010) refer to consumers' compassionate inner dialogs that are not judgmental but rather show understanding and kindness towards the self. Closely allied to self-compassion, Kim and Gal (2014) explore the concept of self-acceptance which they define as the detachment of one's self-worth from one's self-assessment. Kim and Gal (2014) discuss how self-acceptance can lead to adaptive consumption (that intends to help the individual improve in the area of deficit), while the pursuit of self-esteem can lead to compensatory consumption (to symbolically compensate for perceived self-deficits in abilities, traits, and status). Kim and Gal (2014) question whether engaging in compensatory consumption in order to pursue self-esteem and to avoid threatening information about the self can offer a defense against self-threats (especially in the face of chronic or recurrent threats); they question whether it gives consumers the chance to directly face the self-deficit and they warn against the long-term harm that compensatory consumption can lead to in pursuit of self-esteem. However,

these two recent consumer studies firstly, do not explore different coping strategies of self-compassion—as an alternative to linking coping strategies to the pursuit of self-esteem—even though psychological research suggests that self-compassion involves different (though interrelated) components (see Table 1) and potentially offers a greater sense of well-being within coping strategies. Secondly, these two recent consumer studies do not explore the role of socio-temporal comparisons in self-compassionate coping even though recent psychological research relates such comparisons to self-compassion.

### **Components of Self-Compassion**

Firstly, self-compassion involves self-kindness rather than harsh self-criticism when encountering pain and personal shortcomings. Individuals are kind to themselves and view their worth as unconditional even after failure (Leary et al., 2007). Secondly, self-compassion encompasses the concept of common humanity that involves acknowledging suffering and personal failure as part of the shared human experience rather than isolating oneself. Thirdly, self-compassion involves mindfulness as a way of resisting two opposing drives associated with the pursuit of self-esteem (i.e., over-identification and avoidance); and represents the middle ground between them (see Table 1). Over-identification involves ruminating on one's own limitations and magnifies the significance of failures. Avoidance of painful emotions intensifies them in the long-term (Neff & Vonk, 2009). Mindfulness involves taking a balanced approach to one's negative emotions so that the individual neither exaggerates nor suppresses or denies his/her feelings. In mindfulness, individuals observe their negative thoughts and emotions with open-mindedness and a lack of judgement (thus avoiding over-identification, rumination and avoidance) (Brown & Ryan, 2003).

### **Social and Temporal Comparisons**

Psychological research relates social comparisons (e.g., Festinger, 1954; Wood, 1989) to the notion of self-esteem (e.g., Aspinwall & Taylor, 1993; Collin, 1996; Crocker et al.,

1987; Taylor & Lobel, 1989) and more recently to the notion of self-compassion (Breines & Chen, 2012; Laithwaite et al., 2009). Even though some scholars argue about a negative relationship (e.g., Leary et al., 2007; Neff, 2003) between social comparison and self-compassion, other scholars suggest a positive relationship (e.g., Breines & Chen, 2012; Laithwaite et al., 2009). However, consumer research studies focus only on the role of self-esteem within social comparisons (e.g., Ackerman, MacInnis, & Folkes, 2000; Gulas & McKeage, 2000; Smeesters et al., 2010; Richins, 1991) and do not explore the role of self-compassion within social comparison. Consumers' standards of comparison can be generated in a variety of different ways. For instance, points of comparison can also arise from prior lifestyles and past selves as well from desired and undesired selves (Banister & Hogg, 2001; Hill, 1991; Markus & Nurius, 1986; Schouten, 1991). Low-income consumers, for example, compare their economic standing to that of others or to their own economic standing earlier in time (Gulas & McKeage, 2000; Sharma & Alter, 2012). Prior consumer literature relates such temporal comparisons to self-esteem (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Schouten, 1991) and neglects the role of self-compassion within temporal comparisons. However, both social and temporal comparisons can relate to self-compassion. Therefore, this study on downwardly mobile Greek consumers investigates socio-temporal comparisons and self-compassionate coping strategies in order to add to the understanding of consumer coping.

### **The Greek context**

Since the 1960s, Greek society has undergone a process of urbanization, industrialization, and modernization. European Union (EU) integration and transnational influences—due to global exposure to mass media, tourism and cultural exchanges—have facilitated this process (Georgas, 1989; Kouremenos & Avlonitis, 1995). Reflecting the rise of a consumer culture, store displays, mass media and advertising provided exaggerated consumption images and expanded consumers' ability to use goods to make social

comparisons. Greater discretionary income and access to consumer credit had encouraged the democratization of consumer aspirations and desire. However, Greece has proved to be particularly vulnerable to the global recession and unable to handle the inherited debt. As a member of the EU, Greece asked for support from the EU and the International Monetary Fund which has resulted in a series of austerity measures that have dramatically affected the everyday lives of Greek citizens.

Greece is this study's empirical context. This is in comparison to prior research on low-income consumers which has been conducted in more affluent societies (Elliott, 1995; Elliott & Leonard, 2004; Hamilton & Catterall, 2008; Hill, 1991; Hill & Stamey, 1990), in upwardly mobile countries (e.g., Üstüner & Holt, 2007) and in subsistence markets (e.g., Chikweche & Fletcher, 2010; Viswanathan et al., 2010). Research has tended to neglect how mainstream consumers cope with financial difficulties and lower levels of consumption within a context of increased economic difficulty. Several societies (e.g., Spain, Portugal, Italy, and Ireland) have recently experienced severe economic difficulties and austerity measures that have impacted on lifestyles and consumption. Despite the upturn in these economies, unemployment rates still remain high (e.g., Spain, Italy) (Eurostat, 2014). Currently, the major recession in Greece has generated significant reductions in salaries, pensions, and other sources of income, weakening job security (with frequent downward revisions to wage agreements), significant job cuts, increased unemployment, increased fears of losing one's job, and burdensome working arrangements that produce distress (e.g., Eurostat, 2012/2014). VAT increased from 17% to 23%. Political transformations took place due to people's lack of trust in politicians who had been in power (Chalari, 2014). The previously biggest political parties lost considerable support while the popularity of the Greek far-right, described as a fascist party (Golden Dawn; third party in the parliament) has increased dramatically. Moreover, in Greece and other Southern European countries, factors

such as late industrialization and relatively recent non-democratic rule have resulted in a weak welfare state where social risks (e.g., unemployment) are assumed to be the responsibility mainly of the family (e.g., Gal, 2010). The state intervenes only with relatively low monetary benefits. Within such a context the notion of self-compassion may be particularly relevant for downwardly mobile consumers as they may have desired or undesired selves (Banister & Hogg, 2001; Karanika & Hogg, 2010; Markus & Nurius, 1986) that they may experience as impossible to approach or impossible to avoid respectively. How downwardly mobile consumers cope within such a context, employing self-compassion rather than self-esteem as a goal, while avoiding or engaging in socio-temporal comparisons, is worth investigating.

### **Self-Identity**

In order to examine how downwardly mobile consumers cope with their reduced financial circumstances, this study draws on the phenomenological approach of the self as an ongoing project (e.g., Reed, 2002; Thompson Locander, & Pollio, 1989). The self is constructed from different images of the self from the past and future, and mediated by the anticipated responses of significant or generalized others (Heidegger, 1962; Sartre, 1943). Sociality and temporality are intrinsic to the ongoing construction of the self. Self-understanding takes place in relation to others, to one's own previous history, to one's aspirations for the future, and to one's present environment. The self is a multi-faceted, social and psychological being, continually reflecting on itself (Giddens, 1991). The sense of self and the relationship of that self with consumption are inferred through the individual's perception and description of his/her own everyday lived experiences in a social world (e.g., Thompson et al., 1989).

### **METHOD**

In line with Askegaard and Linnet's (2011) call for contextually oriented Consumer Culture Theory research and for more context-attentive phenomenological studies, this study explores Greek consumers' experiences of lower levels of consumption due to financial difficulties. The study concentrates on a relatively small number of participants (e.g., Gentry, Kennedy, Paul, & Hill, 1995; Keaveney, 2008). The research study utilized snowball and convenience sampling to identify 35 participants (17 men, 18 women), aged 22-69, who were experiencing lower levels of consumption (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Participants belong to a broad urban middle-class in Greek society based on their educational levels and occupational roles, but they were experiencing significant income reductions and many had problems making ends meet. They were living in Thessaloniki, the second biggest city in Greece, which also has one of the highest unemployment rates in the country. Due to space limitations, the stories of 24 participants are used that reflect the findings of the whole dataset. Table 2 summarizes their personal characteristics.

Existential phenomenology emphasizes the perspective of the experiencing individual and encourages thick first-person descriptions of lived experiences (Kvale, 1983; Thompson et al., 1989). In line with the discovery-oriented project goals, phenomenological interviewing is largely unstructured (Kvale, 1983; Thompson et al., 1989). The interviewer attempted to raise certain topics (participants' backgrounds, how their lives and consumption have changed, how they have dealt with these changes, what goods and services are meaningful to them, what goods and services they have avoided or have abandoned). However, the interviewer let the informant set the agenda and she mainly listened to the participants' stories in order to build a comprehensive account of their lives and how they deal with their financial adversities and lower levels of consumption. She employed short descriptive questions and probed for further elaboration based on participants' own words.

The analysis is grounded in the words and experiences of the participants. Phenomenological–hermeneutical analysis (e.g., Thompson et al., 1989) of the transcribed interviews entails an iterative, part-to-whole reading strategy, first within the context of each interview and then between the body of interviews (Thompson et al., 1989). That is, major themes in regards to coping were identified in a case by case analysis and in cross case analysis. Repeated analysis of the interviews enabled deeper understanding of participants’ descriptions and experiences. Primarily, an emic approach relying on participants’ own terms/categories, helped to relate to the informants’ reflections in a non-dogmatic fashion. Then an etic interpretation linked the emic meanings to broader theoretical terms.

## **FINDINGS**

Informants tried to cope with their financial difficulties and the emotional agony for themselves and their loved ones. They experienced significant income reductions, job loss or job insecurity and uncertainty regarding delayed salary payments. Several accepted low-paid jobs to avoid complete unemployment. Problem-solving strategies (i.e., efforts to generate possible solutions and change the troubled person-environment inter-relationship which was causing the distress; Carver et al, 1989; Folkman et al., 1986) included shopping in discount stores, searching for bargains, using the second-hand and DIY market, postponing purchases, selling and sharing possessions, restricting use and disposition of resources and overall engaging in a materially simpler lifestyle. Also, reflecting adaptive consumption (Kim & Gal, 2014), several participants were reading or attending courses in order to acquire skills and qualifications that could improve job prospects, while many were trying to find a job abroad. Moreover, informants followed a number of emotion-focused strategies (i.e., efforts to regulate stressful emotional situations and reduce emotional distress; Carver et al., 1989; Folkman et al., 1986) that reflect a pursuit of self-compassion (reflecting components of self-compassion; see Table 3) and relate particularly to social comparisons and temporal

comparisons. Discussion of these strategies (that are the focus of this paper) follows below. On some occasions a strategy can be both problem-focused and emotion-focused at the same time (as will become evident in the later discussion of the findings). These occasions can problematize the division between problem-focused and emotion-focused coping, which nevertheless remains a useful division in understanding coping (Carver et al., 1989; Duhachek, 2005; Hamilton & Catterall, 2008; Piacentini & Banister, 2009).

**A. Common humanity; “We’re all in this together; it is not just me”; social emotional support and consoling the self by engaging in similar or downward comparisons.**

In line with Folkman et al.’s (1986) strategy of social support, informants often talked about the importance they placed on expressing their emotions to friends and family (Duhachek, 2005) and about how much they valued the emotional support they received from (and provided to) similar others (see Table 3). Previous research had examined poorer consumers’ concerns with stigmatization (e.g., Elliott & Leonard, 2004) and feelings of alienation, social exclusion and marginalization within an affluent consumer culture (Crockett et al., 2003; Elliott, 1995; Hill & Stamey, 1990; Hill & Stephens, 1997). However, informants in the current study did not feel different from, alienated from or discriminated against within their recessionary environment. They recognized their interconnectedness and equality with others and because of that they experienced compassion for themselves. Reflecting the concepts of shared vulnerability (Baker, Hunt, & Rittenburg, 2007) and common humanity, informants acknowledged suffering and personal failure as part of a shared experience. They tried to be self-compassionate and to console themselves (and others) for their difficulties by prompting themselves to identify with the majority of Greek consumers and by engaging in social comparisons with others that they perceived as being in similar or even worse circumstances. For example, Betty (aged 38), married, a mother of two

children and the main wage earner in her household, is experiencing financial difficulties due to her salary reductions and her husband's long-term unemployment. She consoles herself for having to significantly reduce her consumption by identifying with similar others. She said, "My husband is unemployed for 2 ½ years. [...] but you aren't the last not the first person this happens to [...] this gives some strength to people; that this has happened to everyone; there isn't a family that isn't experiencing unemployment, firing [...] it is not only in our family; the times are difficult; this happens to a lot of families."

Note that Betty addresses herself as "you". She gives self-advice and self-consolation using "you" rather than "I". Like Betty, several participants addressed themselves in the second-person rather than first-person, suggesting second-person self-talk that facilitates self-consolation. Another example is Nicky, a psychologist whose income has been reduced to the extent that she has had to sell her house and she now lives in her office. She consoles herself for her involuntary lifestyle and consumption changes (e.g., eating low-priced and unhealthy food, buying cheaper clothes from the open market) by engaging in comparisons with other people like her clients who are experiencing similar or worse financial difficulties.

In a self-consoling way, participants also make historical comparisons with past crises such as the military dictatorship 1967-1974, the civil war 1946-49, and periods of occupation under German and Ottoman rule that remind them that they can endure and overcome the current situation (Knight, 2012). Thinking in terms of previous crises, participants engage in downward comparisons with others who had experienced more severe hardships and gained courage in trying to overcome their adversities. As in Knight's study (2012), participants in the current study recall first-hand accounts of how their relatives coped during difficult times, while participants with first-hand experience of an era of hardship (e.g., George, Nick, Luke) encouraged themselves with the thought that they knew how to deal with crises.

Overall, rather than distancing themselves from others in similar disadvantaged situations as some previous work suggests (e.g., Hill, 1991; Hill & Stamey, 1990; Hill & Stephens, 1997), informants engage in emotional support with similar others and they console themselves (and one another) for their lifestyle and consumption changes, engaging in comparisons with similar or “worse-off” others or with their own past disadvantaged self.

**B. Balancing external locus of control (downward and similar comparisons) and internal locus of control (upward comparisons):**

In line with the mindfulness component of self-compassion, participants often engaged in both an external and an internal locus of control (see Table 3), which helped them in pursuing a balanced approach to their feelings and to neither exaggerating nor suppressing or denying their feelings. Over-identifying with an external or an internal locus of control can involve ruminating and can magnify a sense of failure. Avoiding thoughts and feelings (relevant to either an internal or an external locus of control) can intensify thoughts and feelings in the long-term. Taking both an external and an internal locus of control helps participants to balance perceptions of responsibility for their circumstances and to regulate their feelings.

Reflecting Folkman et al.’s (1986) strategy of confrontive coping, informants (e.g., Dennis, Christopher, Alec, Nick, Luke, Paul) attributed their situations to external circumstances (i.e., to factors outside of their control such as unemployment, the weak welfare state and the austerity measures). All these attributions help them to be self-compassionate. Also, participants (e.g., Nancy, Thomas, Diana, Vivian, George) often direct blame at the authoritarian external other (USA, Germany, the Troika) perceived as taking decisions of global consequences, thus engaging in a “powerful others” external locus of control. Sometimes they blame the other within as well, such as corrupt politicians (Herzfeld, 2011; Knight, 2012). Greek politicians were also blamed for legitimizing a colonization

process by selling-off national assets to external bodies (as notions of colonization in Greece often resonate with the history of Ottoman occupation and the German occupation) (Herzfeld 2011; Knight 2012). Participants also blamed other citizens for not raising a voice against wrong doings and others' consumerism. Such external loci of control go hand-in-hand with comparisons with similar or "worse-off" others. Informants embracing an external locus of control report feeling that "something is wrong with the world". They (e.g., Nancy, Diana, Vivian) try to deal with these feelings through religious beliefs in a higher power (e.g., Baker et al., 2007; Henry & Caldwell, 2006; Hill, 1991). They say that praying and their religious beliefs gave them strength to get through difficult experiences and they value religious possessions (e.g., crosses and religious icons) that reflect the Christian roots of Greek culture.

The strategy of external locus of control on its own can be a coping strategy to protect or restore the self-esteem. Over-identification with an external locus of control can relate to negative affect and lower subjective well-being (e.g., Christopher et al., 2009) and can lead to confrontation (Henry & Caldwell, 2006). However, in this study an external locus of control was often combined not only with religious beliefs but also with an internal locus of control and contributed to self-compassion. The feeling that "something is wrong with me" (internal locus of control), often mediates participants' perceptions that "something is wrong with the world" (external locus of control). Often informants felt responsible and guilty for their situation, reflecting Folkman et al.'s (1986) strategy of accepting responsibility. For example, some participants feel responsible for being unemployed or for overspending in the past and question their previous lifestyle (e.g., Eric, Rita, Luke). An internal locus of control helps to achieve a sense of control (i.e., a sense that if one is responsible for a situation, then s/he can change the situation). As Dahl et al. (2003) point out the feeling of guilt often relates to a sense of self-responsibility and self-control. Internal loci of control go hand-in-hand with and is facilitated by comparisons with "superior" others for these participants.

An example is Mark (aged 37), who is unemployed and has moved back to his parents' home. His parents are supporting him financially. He partly attributes his situation to the financial crisis, engaging in external locus of control and similar and downward comparisons. He says, "I don't like the reversal in Greece which does not allow us any room for activity, for choice. [...] There is really no work [...] the financial crisis has ruined my life"

Mark does not only engage in external locus of control, but he also feels responsible for his financial difficulties, engaging in upward comparisons. He values his English books as he is studying to learn English in the hope of improving his employment prospects and says:

I'm also responsible... I don't have an English language qualification. I'm trying [to do something] about that now [...] I'm thinking "what's missing from me? What skills and knowledge should I have to get a job?"[...] some people manage it with little money but they have created a family. At least one of the two is working... my friends, my sister. In some way, they make a living and you think "I'm far behind."

Rather than resenting or feeling maliciously envious of others who possess desirable traits or objects, Mark regards them as positive role models (Alicke & Zell, 2008 in Belk, 2011). People can have an upward drive in their comparisons to learn from better-off others, to confirm their similarity to such others, and to get inspiration and hope (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007; Collins, 1996). Several informants engaged in upward comparisons with better-off others and with their better-off past selves and desired selves, which in turn intensified their feelings of guilt and self-blame as well as their sense of responsibility, control, and the hope that they can change their circumstances. It is also interesting to note in the quote above not only that Mark addresses himself as "you" that suggests second-person introspective talk (he said: and you think "I'm far behind"), but also that he engages in interrogative form of

introspective talk (what is missing from me? What skills and knowledge should I have to get a job?) which can facilitate self-compassion; and which we discuss in more detail below.

Another example is Vivian (aged 67) who experiences financial difficulties as her and her husband's pensions are significantly reduced and they are supporting their adult unemployed daughters financially. Vivian engages partly in external locus of control, attributing her financial condition to the austerity measures and to unemployment. Her external locus of control is facilitated by comparison with similar and "worse-off" others. She says:

It's impossible for my daughters to find a job due to unemployment. [...] You try to support your family, your children who live in a different house; it is very hard. [...] We can't manage and like us, so many others! We live in fear with a future that is uncertain. All parents, just like us, are afraid. Let's imagine that we will manage it, but how is a person who is paid 500€ going to manage with all this?

At the same time, Vivian does not only engage in external locus of control but she also feels responsible for her financial difficulties as she feels responsible for her daughter's unemployment. Note in the quote below that Vivian's cherished possessions precipitate not only her warm feelings for her daughters and her nostalgic feelings about her better-off past, but also her feelings of guilt and self-blame. She says:

I've kept my daughters' hair, their gifts and cards to us since they were young [...] Looking at these makes me happy. I see how life went by, how the children grew up [...] I can't realize how they got to this age because, wrongly I always treated them like young kids. I didn't let them grow up. [...] I didn't want my daughter to leave the city and I affected

her. Now, I see it as a solution for her to have a job and feel well. If she had a salary, we wouldn't worry about whether we'll get by each month.

Vivian's comparison of her present state with her desired state (in which her daughter would be financially independent) intensifies her feelings of responsibility, guilt, and self-blame but also her sense of control and hope that her circumstances can change. Overall, informants experience their financial difficulties and consumption restrictions by often engaging in both an internal locus of control (and upward comparisons) and an external locus of control (and similar or downward comparisons). They seem to experience a tension between these two contrasting coping strategies, possibly because each of these two strategies by itself would possibly be maladaptive. A single external locus of control could lead the individual to inaction and resignation, ruminating on and submitting to feelings of hopelessness, helplessness and self-pity. The belief that he or she cannot do anything to change his or her negative situation could set up a self-fulfilling prophesy of failure (Henry & Caldwell, 2006). Whereas a single strategy of self-blame, self-criticism and only acknowledging that others are doing better, results in stress that can be maladaptive.

### **C. Market avoidance (avoiding upward comparisons) and extensive market search (engaging in similar comparisons):**

Informants engaged in two additional contrasting coping strategies, (i.e., market avoidance and extensive market search) that help them in pursuing a balanced approach to their feelings and to neither exaggerate nor to suppress their negative feelings. By avoiding the market of desired goods, participants try to avoid negative feelings, which involve the risk of their suppressed feelings becoming intense in the long run. By engaging in extensive market search for essential goods participants aim to find better value-for-money goods but they also run the risk of engaging in rumination on and exaggeration of their limitations.

They engage in both extensive market search and market avoidance which helps them to pursue a middle ground between the opposing drives of over-identification with and avoidance of negative feelings, in line with the “mindfulness” component of self-compassion (see Table 3).

Specifically, reflecting Folkman et al.’s (1986) strategy of self-control, informants try to avoid the market as a problem-focused strategy in order not to become tempted by material goods, to be self-disciplined and to avoid credit use, as credit appears to them not as a source of security (Peñaloza & Barnhart, 2011) but as a threat and they associate credit with the ongoing pains of payment and sense of debtors’ imprisonment (Bernthal et al., 2005). Avoiding the market is also an emotion-focused strategy. Instead of practicing window shopping with no intention of buying (Elliott, 1995) and fantasizing about a better future (Hill, 1991; Hill & Stephens, 1997), informants in the current study (e.g., Thomas) often try to distance themselves from the market to avoid self-critical upward comparisons. They avoid passing by shops to avoid thinking about products they may want and cannot afford. They avoid negative emotional reactions (Kashdan & Breen, 2007). As participants are not optimistic about the economy’s future, and consequently their own future, they try to avoid upward comparisons with those who they perceive as “better-off” others or past selves; or with the unattainable ideal selves that appear in store displays. In this way, participants try to avoid situations that make their lack of control salient to them. For example, Rita (aged 40), who is a civil engineer, and is experiencing financial difficulties due to salary reductions, payment delays and her husband’s long-term unemployment, avoids passing by clothing shops because she is not expecting an improvement in the country’s financial condition any time soon. She says: “I don’t know if in my lifetime there will be any important improvement in this situation”. Another example is Nancy (aged 35) who has been unemployed for two years and avoids going to the market, keeping away from shops in order to avoid thinking

about goods she wants and to avoid upward comparisons with “better-off” others who shop at these places or with her “better-off” past employed self. She said:

I see other girls dressed more up to date; my clothes aren't up to date in terms of cut or colours and I get upset and jealous... It's not nice having only 5 items in your closet to wear again and again. It had happened to wash a pair of trousers that I was wearing on the day and then dry it with a hairdryer so that I can wear it the next day [...] I avoid going to the city centre, to the market as what you don't see, doesn't hurt you. I don't see things I like, and the want to have them, doesn't get stuck in my mind, so they don't create thoughts and worries.

Note again how the participant addresses herself as “you” (what you don't see, doesn't hurt you), that suggests second-person self-talk. Note also that these informants experienced benign envy (Belk, 2011) which involves a desire to level up through consumption emulation by acquiring the desired consumer goods. Benign envy inspires the person to purchase the equivalent of this possession, while malicious envy motivates with the desire to level down and cause other people to lose their coveted possessions. But benign envy that motivates consumption desires can still feel bad (Ackerman et al., 2000) especially when the purchase is unaffordable, and therefore informants often try to avoid the market of desired goods.

On its own, the strategy of market avoidance can be a strategy to protect the self-esteem in line with the avoidance anti-component of self-compassion (Table 4). However, participants do not only try to keep their distance from the market of desired products, but they (e.g., Max, Brenda) also often contemplate purchases; and they engage in extensive market search and price comparisons for essential and needed goods, exchanging advice in an effort to make better value-for-money purchases while engaging in comparisons with similar

others. An example is Natasha (aged 26) who is unemployed and is supported financially by her parents. She shared that in the past few years she has extensively searched the grocery market, checking the prices at three different supermarkets, and identifying with and getting advice from her friends and acquaintances who also engage in extensive market search. In a similar way, Eric (aged 35), a married father of two young children and the only wage provider in his household, has two jobs and works long hours and during the weekends but extensively searches the market despite his time poverty in order to cope with his financial difficulties. Addressing himself in second person and making comparisons with similar others, he said, “You have to cut back...Everyone is trying to cut back [...] I’ve never searched the market to the extent I do now. Even for the child’s milk I ask in 3-4 supermarkets, as prices are different even the next day... the same product, same brand, can be sold 5€ less further away”

#### **D. Self-kindness, enjoyment and escapism (mainly upward comparisons)**

Reflecting attempts at self-kindness, informants value possessions, products and activities that they feel enable them to regulate stressful emotional situations. These stress-releasing goods are often part of a simplified lifestyle and enable transformation of negative thoughts and moods through contact with others (e.g., meeting with friends in homes or in cafes), enjoying the natural environment (e.g., going to the seaside promenade, running in parks, cycling, camping, day trips) and enjoying art-related escapism. In particular, informants (e.g., Beatrice, Natasha, Alberta, Dalia) value art-related activities such as watching movies at home or listening to music (that they often download illegally), and reading books (that they often borrow from the public library), all for the sake of the escape that such activities can provide. This strategy resonated with Folkman et al.’s (1986) escapism strategy (see Table 3). Such leisure-based enjoyment can enable the person to disengage temporarily from the stresses of everyday reality and to temporarily get away from unpleasant life experiences

(Hamilton & Wagner, 2011; Henry & Caldwell, 2006). Moreover, participants often expect art to provide them with a challenging escape (Walmsley, 2011) enabling them to address life issues and to identify with or to be inspired by stories of “superior” others who have the capacity to succeed in difficult conditions. For example, Bill (aged 24) likes a song that inspires him to identify with a “superior” other who managed to overcome a difficult situation. He said, “What I like about it is that it starts pessimistic and it ends optimistic [...] I want to be optimistic. The context is pessimistic but I want to be optimistic that if I complete my master’s degree and if I try, and I will try, then something will come up career wise.”

Similarly, Dennis (aged 25) talks about his favorite movie. He has worked long hours for two years on a pro-bono basis in order to gain work experience at a law firm. He is considering leaving his internship and finding a job abroad or starting a PhD. He talks about how the movie inspires him to identify with “superior” others who have the courage to make difficult changes. Another example is Mark, who has negative feelings about being unemployed and moving back to his parents’ home. He engages in imaginary upward comparisons, trying to identify himself with “superior” others while reading some books. He said, “Literature helps me; you see yourself, how to react and broaden your spirit”. Several informants often recognized themselves in or wished to be the protagonist of a book, movie or song story, engaging in inspirational comparisons. Participants therefore engaged in escapism but rather than as a coping mechanism which may be harmful to the person (e.g., drinking, overeating, drugs), in this study escapism aids individuals in dealing with their circumstances.

Finally, informants also value activities and possessions (often art-related) that link to nostalgia for enabling them to revisit psychologically past periods and to feel closer to their past positive selves in self-kind escapism. For example, Amanda, who expresses her anguish for the financial difficulties and the time poverty she experiences working long-hours to cope

financially, values an old record player for reminding her of a good period in her life in her effort to identify with her past positive self. Recall also Vivian's discussion regarding her souvenirs that precipitated nostalgic feelings for her better-off past. Informants developed escapist attachments to such possessions that they associate with nostalgia and the past. Participants experience such possessions that offer self-kind escapism as bridges to "displaced meaning" (McCracken, 1988) or "displaced ideals" (i.e., meaning and ideals removed from daily life and relocated in another time or place).

## **DISCUSSION**

A framework (Figure 1) maps consumers' coping strategies (identified from earlier studies as well as this research) in terms of the pursuit of self-esteem and self-compassion. Table 4 depicts the range of self-esteem coping strategies and how these relate to anti-components of self-compassion. On the one hand, in the pursuit of self-esteem, self-worth is experienced as conditional and dependent on self-assessment (e.g., Neff et al., 2007)—which often takes place through socio-temporal comparisons. Hence, in the case of the self-esteem model, socio-temporal comparisons can become particularly threatening and as a result are often avoided—and stimulate various self-esteem coping strategies (Table 4). For example, in Hill and Stamey's (1990) study, identification with similar or "worse-off" others were particularly threatening for homeless individuals, who as a result distance themselves from their more dependent peers [in line with the isolation (anti-)component of self-compassion, Table 4]. Similarly and in line with the avoidance (anti-)component of self-compassion, upward comparisons may be particularly threatening for long-term unemployed individuals (Elliott, 1995) who as a result try to resist and disengage from consumer culture and avoid the market. Poor individuals may also try to avoid identification with similar others and to deny reality with fantasy through daydreaming (Hill, 1991; Hill & Stephens, 1997) in an effort to identify with "better-off" others. Also, when self-worth is conditional on self-assessment, a

single strategy of (and over-identification with) external locus of control, other-blame and confrontation coping (e.g., Yi & Baumgartner 2004) may take place. In this case an internal locus of control is often accompanied by upward comparisons and is seen as threatening and to be avoided. Moreover, over-identification with similar and “worse-off” others may raise intense anxieties and stimulate rumination and a single strategy of extensive market search. Or individuals may try to identify with “better-off” others and to avoid self-critical comparisons through compensatory consumption (Kim & Gal, 2014; Woodruffe, 1997; Yurchisin et al., 2006) even though it may be harmful.

On the other hand, in the pursuit of self-compassion, self-worth is experienced as unconditional and as a result socio-temporal comparisons are experienced as non-threatening (and are resources that facilitate self-compassionate coping). Table 3 depicts participants’ coping strategies that relate to components of self-compassion. For example, informants in this study often felt inspired rather than intimidated by upward comparisons and engaged in internal locus of control and escapist enjoyment. In the same way, identification with similar others was not felt to be threatening and participants did not distance themselves from others and did not isolate themselves but rather engaged in social emotional support (in line with the common humanity component of self-compassion; Table 3). Also, identification with similar and “worse-off” others was not threatening and informants did not engage in harsh self-criticism but in self-consolation through similar and downward comparisons. Also, informants often did not avoid self-critical comparisons (e.g., with “better-off” others) through compensatory consumption but with self-kindness they engaged in such comparisons and adaptive consumption (Kim & Gal, 2014).

Overall participants pursued self-compassionate coping (that is the focus of the paper) but this is not to say that they did not use self-esteem coping strategies at all. At times, they

resorted to self-esteem coping strategies. For example, a few participants (e.g., Nancy, Eric) discussed how at times they engage in short-term self-deception to bolster self-esteem and feel good in the short-term (while they expressed their long-run awareness of their efforts at short-term self-deception). Self-deception is in line with the fantasy and denial coping strategies that aim to bolster or protect self-esteem (Elliott, 1995; Hill, 1991; Hill & Stephens, 1997) and in line with the avoidance anti-component of self-compassion. Or participants discussed how they have been avoiding the news or the market temporarily to protect their self-esteem. Or a few informants discussed how they had been engaging in external locus of control and temporarily avoiding internal locus of control and vice versa.

The three components of self-compassion played an important role within social comparisons (e.g., Ackerman et al., 2000; Gulas & McKeage, 2000; Richins, 1991; Smeesters et al., 2010) and temporal comparisons (e.g., Banister & Hogg, 2001; Schouten, 1991). Firstly, the principle of common humanity that acknowledges suffering and personal failure as part of the shared human experience, helped participants to experience similar and downward comparisons as non-threatening and to engage in such comparisons in their efforts to facilitate self-consolation. Secondly, self-kindness prevented harsh self-criticism when engaging in upward comparisons. Participants tried to be gentle towards themselves and to affirm their self-worth in the face of upward comparisons, getting hope and inspiration rather than frustration from such comparisons. The findings therefore add to the debate in consumer research according to which upward social comparisons tend to give rise to negative emotions such as sadness, envy, and frustration (Ackerman et al., 2000; Gulas & McKeage, 2000; Richins, 1991; Smeesters et al., 2010), but upward social comparisons can also be inspirational (Häfner, 2004; Hogg & Fragou, 2003; Hogg et al., 1999; Takhar et al., 2010). In this study, self-kindness and self-compassion enable consumers not to be threatened by and to

get inspiration and hope from some upward comparisons and therefore to experience a benign rather than malicious envy (Belk, 2011) when engaging in such comparisons.

According to Belk (2011), malicious envy may develop due to the economic, psychological, and philosophical assumptions that life is a zero-sum game in a world where someone else's gain is one's loss, while benign envy may develop when individuals do not perceive the "pie" as finite and feel that everyone can get a piece. However, even though informants in the current study have a limited employment worldview that could generate the assumption that life is a zero-sum game in a world where someone's job gain is someone else's loss and could produce malicious envy, they often expressed a benign rather than malicious envy. Self-kindness enabled these participants to confirm their similarity to others who possess desirable traits or objects, to regard these "superior" others as positive role models and to get inspiration and hope instead of feeling maliciously envious (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007; Collins, 1996).

Thirdly, the pursuit of mindfulness enabled participants not to ruminate on and not to put emphasis on the significance of solely upward, or downward or similar comparisons. They used a blend of upward, downward and similar comparisons. Hill et al. (2012) examining consumption restriction, social comparison and life satisfaction, suggest that the low-income consumer is likely to make upward social comparisons by virtue of having insufficient access to goods and services and is thus less satisfied with his/her life. However, according to the current findings, the low-income consumer engages not only in upward comparisons with "superior" others (or better-off past selves and desired selves) but also in comparisons with similar and "inferior" others (and undesired selves) in the pursuit of self-compassion.

The blend of upward, downward and similar comparisons that reflects the pursuit of mindfulness and self-compassion, relates to participants' interrogative self-talk that is conversation with oneself in the form of a question (Puchalska-Wasył, 2014; Senay et al., 2010). The findings suggest that participants often engage in interrogative rather than declarative forms of introspective talk (e.g., Will I? vs. I will, Am I not responsible? vs. I am not responsible), blending together upward, downward and similar comparisons which facilitates self-posed questions. Self-posed questions can enhance coping as they increase motivation, generate thoughts about approaching a goal (Senay et al., 2010) and can produce better performance compared to self-statements (Puchalska-Wasył, 2014). Also, self-posed questions may contribute to self-compassionate coping as they may relate to self-kindness as questions within a message facilitate perceiving the message as less pressuring and more respectful and kind towards the addressee (Ahluwalia & Burnkrant, 2004; Senay et al., 2010).

Finally, the findings suggest that informants often engage in second-person (rather than first-person) self-talk that can contribute to coping. Non-first-person self-talk leads people to appraise stressors in more challenging and less threatening terms and to display less distress (Kross et al., 2014). It influences people's capacity to control their thoughts, feelings, and behaviour and enhances self-regulation possibly because external encouragement expressed using "You" may become internalized and be reflected later in self-talk in situations that require self-direction (Dolcos & Albarracín, 2014; Kross et al., 2014) and self-compassion. A non-first-person language use reflects adopting a self-distancing perspective which helps people to observe and accept their feelings and to reflect on painful experiences without ruminating. This is compared with first-person language use that reflects the adoption of a self-immersed perspective (Kross et al., 2014). Therefore, participants often addressed themselves as "you" rather than "I" which helped them to identify with others, to recognize

suffering as part of a shared experience and thus to strengthen feelings of self-consolation, self-kindness and ultimately self-compassion, i.e., in being kind to ourselves.

## **CONCLUSION**

This paper adds to our understanding of how consumers cope (Bahl & Milne, 2010; Kim & Gal, 2014) by identifying how consumers' self-compassion involves particular combinations of socio-temporal comparisons (e.g., Festinger, 1954; Wood, 1989; Richins, 1991) and coping strategies (e.g., Folkman et al., 1986). By offering a typology of consumers' coping strategies that takes the perspective of self-compassion (Table 3), the study extends previous work on consumer coping that was largely based on the notion of pursuing self-esteem (e.g., Elliott, 1995; Hamilton & Catterall, 2008; Henry & Caldwell, 2006; Hill & Stamey, 1990). This research identifies specific coping strategies of self-compassion and highlights the importance of socio-temporal comparisons, not only as determinants of life satisfaction (Hill et al., 2012) but also, as resources in self-compassionate coping. The paper contrasts and maps consumers' coping strategies in terms of the pursuit of self-esteem and self-compassion adding to our understanding of consumer coping.

Additional studies of low-income consumers' self-compassionate coping strategies in regard to their engagement in socio-temporal comparisons in more affluent societies not affected by austerity measures, or in subsistence societies, would represent other important avenues that future research can explore. Also, future research could examine consumers' self-compassion in coping with different disruptive life transitions.

Finally, the study can offer implications regarding the low-income consumer as a purchasing target in a context of increased economic difficulty. Practitioners should address the profound moral implications in targeting downwardly mobile consumers by respecting consumers' efforts for self-compassionate coping through socio-temporal comparisons.

Media stories, advertising images and message content for example can facilitate self-compassionate coping through socio-temporal comparison by facilitating appropriate changes in the reference group(s) with which consumers compare themselves. Finally, the study can inform welfare reforms in recessionary societies by providing an enhanced understanding of how individuals cope with the difficulties financial hardship present within a tenuous and volatile economic context.

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Table 1: Components of self-compassion and self-esteem

<b>Self-compassion</b>	Common humanity	Mindfulness		Self-kindness
<b>Self-esteem</b>	Isolation	Avoidance	Over-identification	Self-criticism

Table 2: Informants' personal characteristics

<b>Nickname</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Marital status</b>
Brenda	23	Student	BA	Single
Bill	24	Student	BA	Single
Dennis	25	Student	BA	Single
Natasha	26	Unemployed	Master's	Single
Christopher	29	Part time job	Master's	Single
Amanda	32	Graphic designer	BA	Single
Eric	35	Public servant & photographer		Married, 2 children
Nancy	35	Unemployed	Master's	Single
Mark	37	Unemployed	BA	Single
Betty	38	Public servant	BA	Married, 2 children
Rita	40	Civil engineer	Master's	Married
Thomas	40	Businessman	Master's	Married, 2 children
Max	41	Marketing director	PhD	Married, 2 children
Nicky	43	Psychologist	PhD	Single
Alec	46	Engineer	Master's	Married, 3 children
Diana	50	Support administrator		Divorced, 2 adult daughters, 2 grandchildren
Nick	52	Unemployed	BA	Divorced
Beatrice	55	Architect	BA	Single
Luke	59	Retired	BA	Divorced, one adult son
Alberta	60	Academic	PhD	Divorced, one adult child
Dalia	62	Tour guide	BA	Divorced, two adult children
Vivian	67	Retired		Married, 2 adult children
George	69	Retired	BA	Married, 3 adult children
Paul	69	Retired	PhD	Divorced, 4 adult children

Table 3: Strategies of self-compassion in coping with restricted consumption & downward mobility

	<b>Common humanity</b>	<b>Mindfulness</b>	<b>Self-kindness</b>
<b>Self-compassionate coping</b>	A. Social emotional support and self-consolation	B. Balance external and internal locus of control C. Middle ground between market avoidance and extensive market search	D. Enjoyment and escapism E. Adaptive consumption
Socio-temporal comparisons as tools/resources that facilitate self-compassionate coping			

Table 4: Strategies of self-esteem in coping with restricted consumption & downward mobility

	<b>Isolation</b>	<b>Avoidance</b>	<b>Over-identification</b>	<b>Self-criticism</b>
<b>Self-esteem coping</b>	1. Distancing	2. Market avoidance 3. Fantasy / Denial 4. Avoiding internal locus of control	5. Single external locus of control & confrontation 6. Extensive market search	7. Compensatory consumption
Socio-temporal comparisons can threaten sense of self-worth and thus stimulate self-esteem coping				

Figure 1: Coping strategies in the pursuit of self-esteem and self-compassion

