Social Comparison Effects on Exercise Performance and Happiness: A Two-Mechanism Model

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Abstract

This study investigates how social contexts influence gym beginners' performance and happiness. Social context refers to a combination of individual ability level (i.e., beginners or advanced gym customers) and group composition (i.e., mixed or same-level-ability groups). Two field experiments show that the context affects customers' performance and happiness through two mechanisms, respectively: motivation, due to the Köhler effect, and self-concept and membership esteem, due to the frog-pond effect. Results show that mixed groups improve the performance but decrease the happiness of beginners (vs. advanced) gymgoers. Beginners in mixed groups tend to have low self-concept, which leads to less membership esteem and happiness, but high motivation, which leads to better performance. Additionally, effort visibility weakens the impacts of social comparison on motivation and self-concept. Last, results show that happiness mainly comes from comparing with oneself rather than with others.