


With whom do people compare at work? The role of regulatory mode and social comparison motives

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Abstract

We investigate whether people's regulatory mode (assessment and locomotion) and social comparison motives (self-evaluation vs. self-enhancement) jointly influence with whom—either a peer or their leader—individuals prefer to compare. In three preregistered studies ($N = 839$), we measured participants' chronic regulatory mode and assessed their comparison target preference separately for different social comparison motives. For each motive, participants indicated with whom they would prefer to compare, using choice (Study 1) and rating (Studies 2 and 3) measures. Supporting our predictions, assessment interacted with social comparison motives such that assessment was positively associated with preferring to compare to peers for self-enhancement motives, but unrelated to comparison target preference regarding self-evaluation motives. In addition, and as predicted, locomotion was consistently positively associated with preferring leaders as comparison target, independently of social comparison motives. These results contribute to emerging research highlighting the key role of individuals' regulatory mode in understanding interpersonal dynamics at work.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Jessica is charged to organize a company event, but she is unsure what the program should look like, which speakers and guests to invite, and where to hold the event. Fortunately, she can interact with other people to find out how they would go about such a task and compare their approach with what she has currently in mind or did in the past. If she is especially concerned with pursuing the task of event organization impeccably, she may prefer to compare with several people to get different perspectives to be well-placed to carefully evaluate what would be best to do. In contrast, if she is especially concerned with initiating action and making rapid progress in her goal pursuit to quickly be able to move on to the next task, she may content herself with the event corresponding more or less to what is expected, and most likely compare with how her leader would go about this and content herself with limiting this to only key requirements.

As this example illustrates, individuals turn to others to compare their standing, performance, opinions, and so forth, to find out whether they

are on the right track—engaging in social comparison (Festinger, 1954). However, with whom do people prefer to compare and what drives their preference? To address this question, our research focusses specifically on the workplace and proposes that people's self-regulation strategies and social comparison motives interact to determine their preference for comparing themselves with a peer versus their leader. Regarding self-regulation, we consider regulatory mode, that is people's assessment mode—a concern for critical evaluation and comparison—and their locomotion mode—a concern for movement from state to state and getting things done quickly (Higgins et al., 2003; Kruglanski et al., 2000). Regulatory mode theory suggests that assessment and locomotion should influence how people compare with others. However, to date empirical tests of this proposition remain scarce. To address this gap, we investigate whether social comparison motives, namely self-evaluation and self-enhancement, moderate the relation between followers' regulatory mode and their comparison target preference. Regulatory mode determines how individuals approach goals (Kruglanski et al., 2010), social comparison motives convey goals, and as such they are likely to both be implicated when choosing with whom to compare. Moreover, our work contributes

to clarifying social comparison dynamics in professional contexts, which are characterized by constant goal setting and strategic choices (Suls et al., 2002). As such, the present work addresses earlier and more recent calls for additional research on social comparison on the work floor, given its potential impact on professional life (Goodman, 1977; Greenberg et al., 2007).

2 | REGULATORY MODE AND COMPARISON TARGET PREFERENCE

When self-regulating one needs to assess the situation, decide on goals, and means, and initiate goal-pursuit to reach desired end-states (Carver & Scheier, 1982). Regulatory mode theory (Kruglanski et al., 2000) proposes two functional self-regulatory orientations (critical evaluation; initiating progress) as independent modes, with individuals being chronically low or high in both, or predominant operating in one of the two modes. The two modes thus operate within individuals and are considered as forms of self-regulation as they involve the ways in which they regulate their choice of means during goal pursuit (Sassenberg & Vliek, 2019). Another well-known self-regulation theory, namely regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1997, 2012) similarly defines two orientations: a promotion focus on ideals and aspirations, motivated by the pursuit of positive outcomes and gains; and a prevention focus on duties and obligations, motivated by security, safety and the avoidance of negative outcomes and losses. The two theories are concerned with distinct aspects of self-regulation. Regulatory focus pertains to the “why” of self-regulation, to what individuals are motivated by (ensuring gains or avoiding losses), whereas regulatory mode pertains to the “how” of self-regulation, the main concerns in individuals’ regulation of their behavior in goal pursuit such as critical evaluation and reflection versus making progress and moving forward. Previous work examined the influence of regulatory focus on social comparison preferences, for example finding that promotion-focused individuals are most inspired by comparing with positive role models highlighting strategies for achieving success, whereas prevention-focused individuals are most motivated by comparing with negative role models highlighting strategies for avoiding failure (Lockwood et al., 2002; see also Lockwood et al., 2005). This stresses the importance of considering the role of self-regulatory orientations in social comparison. However, to date there is no work regarding regulatory mode. This is surprising because, as we detail below, comparison plays a central role in the assessment mode, and theoretically regulatory mode should thus be even more closely associated to social comparison preferences.

The assessment mode entails a concern with critical thinking and comparisons. Individuals with a predominant assessment mode—assessors—want to “get things right” (Kruglanski et al., 2000). For instance, they seek more negative feedback to correct their potential inadequacies (Liu et al., 2021) and characterize positive events in their life as events enabling them to understand “what is true” (Rehani & Bar-Kalifa, 2022). In light of the importance of critical evaluations and appraisals for assessors, they should engage in social comparison more frequently (Kruglanski et al., 2000). However, with whom do assessors

compare? Given that they strive to do the right thing, they should choose carefully with whom they compare, and prefer to turn to the target who will most likely allow them to get things right. At work, this means that they should choose between comparing with a peer or their leader depending on the situation and the task at hand—or even consider both targets simultaneously. Some research indeed suggests that this is the case. Regarding a tendency to presumably carefully adapt their choices, research shows that assessors make less impulsive decisions (Mannetti et al., 2009), are more likely to correct their choice (Appelt et al., 2010), and engage more in counterfactual thinking (Pierro et al., 2008). Additionally, regarding a tendency to presumably compare with multiple social targets, assessors compare several options before making a decision (Chen et al., 2018) and prefer considering all alternatives at once when deliberating a choice (i.e., a full evaluation as compared to a progressive elimination strategy; Avnet & Higgins, 2003).

The locomotion mode entails a concern with movement, change, and quick goal termination to initiate the pursuit of other goals. Locomotors primarily want to “just do it” (Kruglanski et al., 2000). For instance, they are more willing to modify their stance to avoid interruptions of action (Kalafatis et al., 2020). In social comparison, locomotors’ concern with progression should lead them to prefer comparing with those, and only those, who allow them to obtain relevant information regarding how to go about moving on. In the work context, this means that they should prefer to compare with their leaders rather than with their peers, who are less likely to provide such guidance. In addition, locomotors engage less in self-criticism and in self-flattery to a greater extent than assessors, resulting in them having a higher self-esteem than assessors (Komissarouk et al., 2019). Contrary to assessors, locomotors are not concerned with ensuring positive social comparisons and should not be concerned with comparing with peers. Previous work supports our prediction that locomotors focus on who can provide them helpful information to quickly progress. For instance, locomotors are more convinced by advertisements that are not comparative (Pierro et al., 2013), favor social interactions that serve the flow of their action (Kruglanski et al., 2016), and prefer explicit support (Zee et al., 2018).

Overall, people’s regulatory mode should determine with whom they prefer to compare. Specifically, the stronger their locomotion mode, the more individuals should prefer comparing with their leader, likely to provide them with insights on how to *move forward*. Conversely, the stronger their assessment mode, the more carefully individuals should deliberate with whom they compare and consider the target most likely to give them insight on how to *get things right*. Therefore, and to better understand to whom assessors prefer to turn, it seems necessary to reflect on the reasons underlying their preference.

3 | THE MODERATING ROLE OF SOCIAL COMPARISON MOTIVES

One determining factor of preferences for social comparison targets are people’s social comparison motives, that is, the reasons for which they seek social comparison (Corcoran et al., 2011; Suls et al., 2002). Regarding *self-evaluation*, individuals more often turn to similar others (Miller, 1982;

Tesser, 1986)—which in the work context would be peers rather than leaders. At the same time, leaders set expectations and evaluate followers' work. It is thus difficult to predict to whom people generally prefer to turn for self-evaluation at work. Regarding *self-enhancement*, individuals most frequently compare downwards with people showing a weaker performance (Audia et al., 2015; Wood et al., 1985). However, in some cases, for instance when one identifies with the comparison target or uses the target as a standard of reference rather than the target of comparison, upward comparisons improving people's self-esteem may take place (Martinot et al., 2002) and may allow self-enhancing. As such, these motives have various implications and could moderate the relation between people's regulatory mode and social comparison target choices.

Regarding assessors, their comparison motives should shape their preferences for social comparison targets as their concerns with doing things correctly should take different forms depending on self-evaluation or self-enhancement. *Self-evaluation* should generally be of importance for assessors, as their main concern is to critically evaluate options, situations, and themselves (Kruglanski et al., 2010). When assessors seek to self-evaluate, information regarding their leaders should be relevant because leaders set expectations and norms regarding what is desired—and thus generally the “right” thing to do. This being said, information from their peers should also be relevant because it allows gauging how similar others go about things and how they perform. Indeed, assessors should have an interest in *several* targets, because they prefer to consider more rather than fewer sources in their attempt to get things right (Avnet & Higgins, 2003; Chen et al., 2018; Pierro et al., 2013). Consequently, for self-evaluation, assessors should seek to collect as much information as possible and compare with *both* their peers *and* their leader. Turning to *self-enhancement*, assessors' concern to do things right should entail wanting to do better, more correct than others. In fact, assessors strongly focus on the discrepancy between where they stand and where similar others stand (Giacomantonio et al., 2013; Pierro et al., 2008). Consequently, they should prefer to turn their attention to their peers rather than their leader for self-enhancement, because this would more likely result in a favorable—or at least equal—comparison outcome.

In contrast, locomotors' preferences for social comparison targets should depend much less on their motives. Indeed, locomotors are concerned about moving on rather than completing their goal perfectly (Mauro et al., 2009). Consequently, the specific goal or motives they pursue should be less important to locomotors than the outcome of the comparison regarding the advancement of the goal. Leaders set expectations and provide necessary and sufficient criteria for followers to complete goals and to move on, which, as we detailed above, fits with locomotors tendency to give moving forward priority. Therefore, we predict that, independent of social comparison motives, locomotion mode should predict a preference for turning to leaders.

4 | THE PRESENT RESEARCH

In three studies, we investigated how peoples' regulatory mode influences with whom, from a peer or their leader, they compare depending on the salient social comparison motive. As such, this work

is the first to consider jointly the influence of self-regulatory strategies and social comparison motives on social comparison target preference. This research contributes to a better understanding of whom people prefer to turn to and who is most likely to serve their comparison motives.

For all studies, we recruited participants online on Prolific Academic (prolific.co), who filled in Regulatory Mode Questionnaire (Kruglanski et al., 2000) before engaging in an organizational simulation. We subsequently measured with whom they would prefer to compare regarding different social comparison motives: self-evaluation, self-enhancement, self-improvement, and emulation motives. The first three motives are well known in the social comparison literature (Buunk et al., 2007; Gerber et al., 2018). We introduced emulation as some authors deem it relevant in the work context (Morgenroth et al., 2015; Peters et al., 2018). We included all four motives to be scrupulous and to render our research question less obvious to participants, but we did not have hypotheses regarding self-improvement and emulation (see preregistrations). We measured target preferences by either asking participants to choose between a peer, their leader, or neither (Study 1) or by using a continuous scale opposing a peer with their leader (Studies 2 and 3). We expected that the stronger followers' assessment mode, the more they would prefer to compare with a peer rather than with a leader when seeking to self-enhance, but that they would equally prefer to compare with a peer and a leader when seeking to self-evaluate (i.e., an assessment by motive interaction; Hypothesis 1). We further expected that the stronger followers' locomotion mode, the more they would prefer to compare with a leader rather than a peer, independent of (self-evaluation or self-enhancement) motives (i.e., a main effect of locomotion; Hypothesis 2, see Figure 1).

All studies were preregistered (Study 1: <https://aspredicted.org/sy4de.pdf>; Study 2: <https://aspredicted.org/4gd33.pdf>; Study 3: <https://aspredicted.org/bh5ar.pdf>). Preregistration included design, sample size, inclusion and exclusion criteria, and planned analyses. To take part, participants had to be between 18 and 65 years old, be an English native speaker, have a minimum 97% approval rate on Prolific, be employed (full-time or part-time, with a minimum of >40%), have a manager, and not have participated in other studies of ours on similar topics. For all studies, we report excluded observations and reasons for making them based on preregistered criteria. All preregistered analyses come up either in the main text or (together with explanations for deviations) in the supplementary materials.

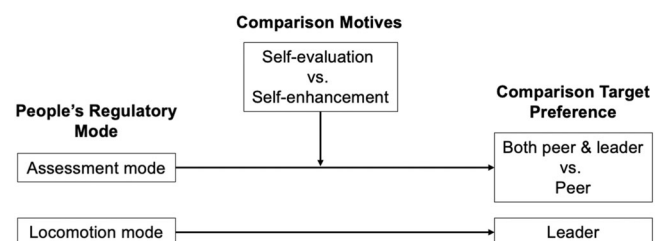


FIGURE 1 Schema of the hypothesized model.

These supplementary materials containing additional results, all materials, as well as data and analyses scripts of all studies are available at: https://osf.io/ezycx/?view_only=7c6ef0d1d1814e59ab0f9fd06bc362c9.

5 | STUDY 1

5.1 | Method

5.1.1 | Participants and design

Because no prior research addressed the current research question, we could not estimate effect sizes. We aimed for 250 participants, because this is a recommended sample size for stable correlation estimates (Schönbrodt & Perugini, 2013). Taking into account possible exclusions, we recruited 300 participants.

As preregistered, we excluded participants who failed two embedded attention checks (Oppenheimer et al., 2009; $n = 2$) or did not indicate being full-time or part-time (>40%) employed ($n = 9$) or having a supervisor ($n = 10$). There were no outliers. The final sample comprised 279 participants¹ (165 females, 111 males, 3 nonbinary people; $M_{\text{age}} = 37.51$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 10.74$, range: 19–64 years old). We measured their regulatory mode and, following an organizational simulation, their social comparison preference by means of a ternary choice (peer, leader, or nobody), separately for four social comparison motives (constituting a within-participant factor with four levels). As such, in this and all other studies, beyond the continuous predictors (assessment and locomotion), all variables were nested in participants (i.e., all studies had a within-subject design).

5.1.2 | Procedure and materials

Participants received 0.80 GBP as compensation. After providing consent, they completed the Regulatory Mode Questionnaire (Kruglanski et al., 2000) and learned that the second part of the study would be an organizational simulation. For this, they had to imagine working in a service company and being part of a team comprising peers at their level and a manager at a higher level. They also learned that they would need to complete a series of tasks, simulating some elements of a day at work. First, we asked participants to complete a task adapted from Inesi et al. (2011) and Scholl and Sassenberg (2014). The sole aim of this task was to highlight and make salient the differences between comparison targets (i.e., peers and the manager). Participants learned that their company was moving to a new building, and that they were to check whether they, their peers', and their manager's new offices were adequate to complete their respective work tasks. Participants' and their peers' offices were depicted in an open space office, whereas their manager had a separate office. Next, we presented the participants with information about another task they had been assigned to, unrelated to the previous one. The aim of this second

task was to place the participants in a situation involving some uncertainty, and therefore in which social comparison could be useful to them. Specifically, participants read that the company had to organize an event and that this task was assigned to them, one of their peers, and their manager. They were informed that during task completion they would have opportunities to consider how their peer or manager go about things, approach problems, what targets they set for themselves, and so forth. We then measured social comparison preference, separately for the four motives. Finally, participants provided demographics information and were debriefed.

5.1.3 | Measures

Chronic regulatory mode

We used the Regulatory Mode Questionnaire (Kruglanski et al., 2000) to assess participants' assessment (12-item subscale; e.g., "I am a critical person") and locomotion mode (12-item subscale; e.g., "I am a doer"). Participants had to indicate how much they agreed with different statements (1 = *strongly disagree*; 6 = *strongly agree*). We computed scores for assessment ($M = 3.90$, $SD = 0.72$, $\alpha = .81$) and locomotion ($M = 4.21$, $SD = 0.71$, $\alpha = .85$). As would be expected given that the modes are thought to be orthogonal and in line with much research (e.g., Amato et al., 2014; Benjamin & Flynn, 2006; Chernikova et al., 2016), the two scales did not correlate $r = 0.04$, $p = .201$.

Social comparison preference

We measured participants' social comparison preference by asking them with whom they would prefer to compare, between a peer, their leader or nobody, regarding each motive with four questions. We adapted the each four items for self-evaluation (e.g., "To see how I'm doing, I would most likely compare with..."), self-enhancement (e.g., "To make myself feel better,..."), and self-improvement (e.g., "To get better, ...") from Buunk et al. (2007) and the items for emulation from Peters et al. (2018; e.g., "To find ways to deal with a new task, ...").

We computed a score for preference to compare with a peer (self-evaluation: $M = 2.40$, $SD = 1.18$, self-enhancement: $M = 2.04$, $SD = 1.59$, self-improvement: $M = 0.75$, $SD = 1.02$, emulation: $M = 1.33$, $SD = 1.23$) and with a leader (self-evaluation: $M = 1.18$, $SD = 1.00$, self-enhancement: $M = 0.69$, $SD = 1.09$, self-improvement: $M = 2.69$, $SD = 1.26$, emulation: $M = 2.44$, $SD = 1.25$) by summing the number of times participants selected the respective target on the four items pertaining to one of the four social comparison motives. For each target the score could thus range from 0 to 4.

5.2 | Results

We hypothesized that the stronger followers' assessment, the more they would prefer to compare with a peer rather than a leader when primarily seeking to self-enhance, but that they would prefer a peer

and leader equally when primarily seeking to self-evaluate (i.e., here: an assessment \times contrast “self-evaluation versus self-enhancement” \times target interaction). We also predicted that the stronger followers' locomotion, the more they would prefer to compare with a leader rather than a peer, independent of comparison motives (i.e., here: a locomotion \times target interaction).

Consequently, we conducted a multilevel model analysis using the lme4 package (Bates et al., 2015). We regressed participants' social comparison preference on their locomotion mode (mean-centered), assessment mode (mean-centered), the four social comparison motives (self-evaluation, self-enhancement, self-improvement, emulation), the target of social comparison (peer coded -0.5 ; leader coded 0.5), and the interactions between the two regulatory modes, the four social comparison motives and the targets (i.e., assessment \times comparison motives \times target of social comparison; locomotion \times comparison motives \times target of social comparison) as fixed effects, and participants as random effects.² We examined the four-level factor predictor social comparison motive by means of the following three contrasts: the contrast “emulation (coded -3) vs. all other motives (each coded 1)”; the contrast “self-improvement (coded -2) versus self-evaluation & self-enhancement (both coded 1),” with emulation coded 0 ; and the contrast “self-evaluation (coded -1) versus self-enhancement (coded 1),” with emulation and self-improvement coded 0 —our contrast of interest regarding assessment mode. We used this specific set of contrast because it allows comparing target preferences between the two motives of interest, that is, self-evaluation and self-enhancement, and thus testing our hypothesis regarding assessment. To be parsimonious, we only report relevant results regarding effects of interest here and in the following studies. Tables depicting all results are available on OSF.

There was a main effect of target ($b = 0.12$, $SE = 0.05$, $CI_{95\%} [0.02, 0.22]$, $t = 2.30$, $p = .022$): participants selected a leader ($M = 1.75$, $SD = 1.43$) more often than a peer ($M = 1.63$, $SD = 1.42$).

There were main effects of all social comparison motives contrasts, indicating that the preference to compare with someone (peer or leader) differed between motives ($b = -0.07$, $SE = 0.01$, $CI_{95\%} [-0.09, -0.04]$, $t = -4.42$, $p < .001$; $b = -0.05$, $SE = 0.02$, $CI_{95\%} [-0.09, -0.01]$, $t = -2.30$, $p = .021$; $b = -0.21$, $SE = 0.04$, $CI_{95\%} [-0.28, -0.14]$, $t = -5.82$, $p < .001$): It was higher for emulation ($M = 1.89$, $SD = 0.30$), followed by self-evaluation ($M = 1.79$, $SD = 0.37$), self-improvement ($M = 1.72$, $SD = 0.44$), and finally self-enhancement ($M = 1.37$, $SD = 0.77$).

The interactions between the secondary contrast “emulation versus all the other motives” and target and between the secondary contrast “self-improvement versus self-evaluation & self-enhancement” and target were significant ($b = -0.33$, $SE = 0.03$, $CI_{95\%} [-0.39, -0.27]$, $t = -11.18$, $p < .001$; $b = -1.08$, $SE = 0.04$, $CI_{95\%} [-1.16, -0.99]$, $t = -25.76$, $p < .001$), indicating that participants' preference to select a leader differed by motives. Preference to select a leader for comparison was

highest for self-improvement ($M = 2.69$, $SD = 1.26$), followed by emulation ($M = 2.44$, $SD = 1.25$), self-evaluation ($M = 1.18$, $SD = 1.00$) and then self-enhancement motives ($M = 0.69$, $SD = 1.09$). Participants preference to select a peer also differed by motives. Preference to select a peer for comparison was highest for self-evaluation ($M = 2.40$, $SD = 1.18$) and self-enhancement ($M = 2.40$, $SD = 1.18$), followed by emulation ($M = 1.33$, $SD = 1.23$) and then self-improvement ($M = 0.75$, $SD = 1.02$) motive.

No main effect of assessment or two-way interactions involving assessment emerged. While there was no assessment \times contrast “self-evaluation versus self-enhancement” \times target interaction ($b = -0.12$, $SE = 0.10$, $CI_{95\%} [-0.32, 0.07]$, $t = -1.24$, $p = .216$), the simple effects for self-enhancement and self-evaluation we calculated exploratory purposes were in line with our hypothesis (see Figure 2): the stronger participants assessment orientation, the more strongly they preferred peers for self-enhancement ($b = 0.28$, $SE = 0.11$, $CI_{95\%} [0.07, 0.49]$, $t = 2.67$, $p = .008$), but not for self-evaluation ($b = 0.14$, $SE = 0.11$, $CI_{95\%} [-0.07, 0.35]$, $t = 1.33$, $p = .185$).

Of less interest, an assessment \times contrast “self-improvement versus self-evaluation & self-enhancement” \times target interaction emerged ($b = -0.15$, $SE = 0.06$, $CI_{95\%} [-0.26, -0.04]$, $t = -2.57$, $p = .003$). Follow-up analyses indicated that the assessment \times contrast interaction was significant for peer preference ($b = 0.09$, $SE = 0.04$, $CI_{95\%} [0.01, 0.17]$, $t = 2.19$, $p = .029$, $R_p^2 = 0.004$), but not for leader preference ($b = -0.06$, $SE = 0.04$, $CI_{95\%} [-0.13, 0.01]$, $t = -1.73$, $p = .083$, $R_p^2 = 0.002$). Specifically, for self-evaluation and self-enhancement but not for self-improvement motives, the stronger participants' assessment orientation was, the more strongly they preferred peers to compare with, rather than leaders (self-evaluation: $b = 0.14$, $SE = 0.11$, $CI_{95\%} [-0.07, 0.35]$, $t = 1.33$, $p = .185$; self-enhancement: $b = 0.28$, $SE = 0.11$, $CI_{95\%} [0.07, 0.49]$, $t = 2.67$, $p = .008$; self-improvement motive: $b = -0.05$, $SE = 0.11$, $CI_{95\%} [-0.26, 0.15]$, $t = -0.52$, $p = .603$). No other significant effects involving assessment emerged.

There was no main effect of locomotion. More importantly, in line with our hypothesis there was an interaction between locomotion and target ($b = 0.38$, $SE = 0.07$, $CI_{95\%} [0.24, 0.52]$, $t = 5.29$, $p < .001$) such that the stronger locomotion-oriented participants were, the more they preferred to compare with a leader ($b = 0.17$, $SE = 0.05$, $CI_{95\%} [0.07, 0.27]$, $t = 3.30$, $p = .001$) and the less they preferred to compare with a peer ($b = -0.21$, $SE = 0.05$, $CI_{95\%} [-0.31, 0.11]$, $t = -4.19$, $p < .001$). There were no other significant effects involving locomotion.

5.3 | Discussion

Regarding locomotion, the present results fully support our predictions: The stronger participants' locomotion mode, the more they preferred comparing with their leader rather than a peer. At the same time, the data do not fully support our hypothesis regarding assessment mode, as the predicted interactions with the “self-enhancement versus self-evaluation” contrast was not significant.

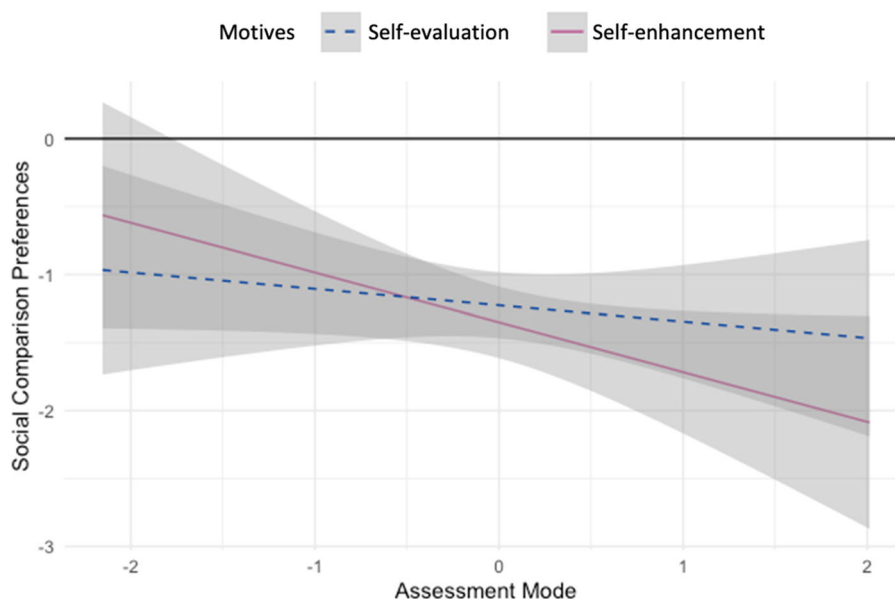


FIGURE 2 Social comparison preference (leader score minus peer score) as a function of assessment mode and self-evaluation and self-enhancement comparison motives (with standard error in the gray band) in Study 1. The higher the social comparison preference score, the more participants preferred comparing with their leader rather than their peer.

However, simple effect analyses did show the predicted relations: assessment was positively and significantly associated with a preference to compare with a peer for self-enhancement, while peer and leader were equally preferred for self-evaluation. One reason for the predicted interaction not reaching significance may be the slightly positive simple slope for self-evaluation, indicating a nonsignificant tendency for participants to prefer peers. This nonsignificant tendency also contributed to the (less interesting) assessment by “self-improvement versus self-evaluation & self-enhancement” contrast interaction, showing assessment to be positively related to preferring to compare with a peer rather than a leader for self-enhancement and self-evaluation motives (taken together), but not for self-improvement motives.

In hindsight, the fact that participants could not indicate a preference to compare with *both* peers *and* leaders might have produced this effect. Indeed, our predictions are more tailored to preferences than to choices (intentions than behavior which is also guided by strategic considerations). Consequently, the next study measured social comparison preference differently, allowing participants to indicate preferences for both peers *and* leader.³

6 | STUDY 2

6.1 | Method

6.1.1 | Participants and design

Because Study 2 used a different measure, effect size estimations could not be based on previous results. As for Study 1, we thus again

aimed for a sample of at least 250 participants and recruited 300 participants to take into account the possible exclusions.

As preregistered, we excluded participants who did not indicate being full-time or part-time (>40%) employed ($n = 13$), did not indicate having a supervisor ($n = 4$), or who were outliers (studentized residuals $> |3|$, Cohen et al., 2003; Judd et al., 2011; $n = 3$). No one failed our attention checks. The final sample comprised 280 participants⁴ (169 females, 108 males, 2 nonbinary people, 1 prefer not to say; $M_{age} = 36.21$, $SD_{age} = 10.57$, range: 19–65 years old). We measured their regulatory mode and their preference to compare with peers versus leaders.

6.1.2 | Procedure and materials

Participants received 1.10 GBP as compensation. This study followed the exact same procedures as Study 1 but used a different answer format to measure social comparison preference. As before, participants completed the regulatory mode questionnaire, took part in an organizational simulation including office space evaluation (again with the sole aim to highlight and make salient the differences between comparisons targets), and learned that they would be organizing an event together with a peer and their manager (again a situation involving some uncertainty in which social comparison could be useful). However, we measured social comparison preference by asking participants to indicate with whom they would prefer to compare, opposing a peer and a leader on one rating scale, with the option to indicate equal preference for *both* targets by marking the scale mid-point. Participants provided demographic information before being debriefed.

6.1.3 | Measures

Chronic regulatory mode

As in Study 1, we assessed participants' assessment ($M = 3.95$, $SD = 0.68$, $\alpha = .79$) and locomotion mode ($M = 4.26$, $SD = 0.67$, $\alpha = .83$) using the Regulatory Mode Questionnaire (Kruglanski et al., 2000; the two modes were not correlated, $r = 0.09$, $p = .129$).

Social comparison preference

We measured participants' social comparison preference by asking them who they would prefer to compare with regarding each motive (self-evaluation: $M = 3.13$, $SD = 1.06$, $\alpha = .58$, self-enhancement: $M = 2.82$, $SD = 1.33$, $\alpha = .80$, self-improvement: $M = 4.88$, $SD = 1.07$, $\alpha = .68$, and emulation: $M = 4.38$, $SD = 1.17$, $\alpha = .63$). Participants answered on a scale ranging from "peer" (1) to "manager" (7), with the midpoint (4) labeled "peer & manager to the same extent." Higher social comparison preference scores for any social comparison motive thus indicate a stronger preference to compare with a manager (rather than a peer).

6.2 | Results

To test our hypotheses, we regressed participants' social comparison preference scores on their assessment mode (mean-centered), their locomotion mode (mean-centered), the four social comparison motives and the interactions between the two modes and the four social comparison motives (i.e., assessment \times motives; locomotion \times motives), including participants as random effects. We used the same set of contrasts as in Study 1.

Main effects for all social comparison motives replicated the findings of Study 1 ($b = -0.19$, $SE = 0.02$, $CI_{95\%} [-0.23, -0.16]$, $t = -11.29$, $p < .001$;

$b = -.64$, $SE = 0.02$, $CI_{95\%} [-0.68, -0.59]$, $t = -26.31$, $p < .001$; $b = -0.16$, $SE = 0.04$, $CI_{95\%} [-0.24, -0.07]$, $t = -3.73$, $p < .001$), showing that leaders were preferred for self-improvement ($M = 4.88$, $SD = 1.07$) and emulation ($M = 4.38$, $SD = 1.70$), and that peers were preferred for self-evaluation ($M = 3.13$, $SD = 1.06$) and self-enhancement ($M = 2.82$, $SD = 1.33$).

There was no main effect of assessment. However, and supporting our prediction, the interaction between assessment and the "self-evaluation versus self-enhancement" contrast was significant ($b = -0.19$, $SE = 0.06$, $CI_{95\%} [-0.31, -0.06]$, $t = -2.98$, $p = .003$; see Figure 3): stronger assessment predicted an increased preference to compare with a peer rather than a leader for self-enhancement ($b = -0.28$, $SE = 0.10$, $CI_{95\%} [-0.48, -0.08]$, $t = -2.71$, $p = .007$) but not for self-evaluation ($b = 0.09$, $SE = 0.10$, $CI_{95\%} [-0.11, 0.30]$, $t = 0.92$, $p = .357$). There were no other effects involving assessment.

Also, and again supporting our prediction, there was a main effect of locomotion such that the stronger locomotion-oriented participants were, the more they preferred to compare with their leader rather than with a peer ($b = 0.23$, $SE = 0.07$, $CI_{95\%} [0.10, 0.37]$, $t = 3.37$, $p = .001$). There were no other effects involving locomotion.

6.3 | Discussion

The results of Study 2 extend those of Study 1 and fully support our predictions. The stronger followers' assessment mode, the more they preferred to compare with a peer when seeking to self-enhance, whereas they equally preferred a peer and leader when seeking to self-evaluate. Overall, assessors thus preferred different targets depending on their social comparison motives. This finding is in line with the documented association between assessment and a concern for getting things right (e.g., Appelt et al., 2010; Higgins et al., 2003).

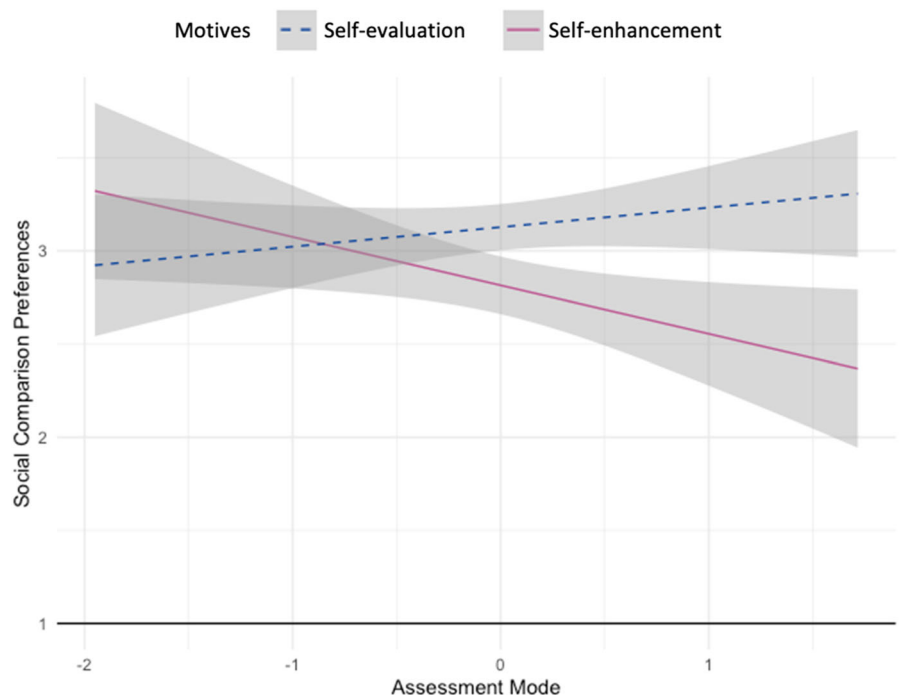


FIGURE 3 Social comparison preference (peer vs. leader) as a function of assessment and self-evaluation and self-enhancement comparison motives (with standard error in the gray band) in Study 2. The higher the social comparison preference score, the more participants preferred comparing with their leader rather than their peer.

Indeed, getting things right has a different meaning depending on the respective motive, namely having an accurate opinion for self-evaluation versus seeing oneself and one's opinions and actions in a more flattering light for self-enhancement.

Moreover, the stronger followers' locomotion mode, the more they preferred to compare with a leader—irrespective of social comparison motives. This is in line with locomotors concern to move on quickly and thus to turn to the target who is the most likely to provide necessary information to do so. Study 3 aimed to test the generalizability and robustness of these findings by using a different organizational simulation.

7 | STUDY 3

7.1 | Method

7.1.1 | Participants and design

We conducted an a priori power analysis using the *simr* package (Green & MacLeod, 2016) in R and based the calculation on the effects sizes in Study 2. To ensure 80% power ($1-\beta$) and $\alpha = .05$, the analysis indicated we needed 250 participants. Taking into account possible loss of participants due to exclusions, we collected data from 302 participants.

As preregistered, we excluded participants who failed two embedded attention checks ($n = 1$), did not indicate being full-time or part-time (>40%) employed ($n = 9$), did not indicate having a supervisor ($n = 9$) or were outliers (studentized residuals $> |3|$; $n = 3$). The final sample comprised 280 participants (190 females, 89 males, 1 nonbinary person; $M_{\text{age}} = 36.69$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 10.17$, range: 18–64 years old). We measured participants' regulatory mode and their preference to compare with a peer versus leader as before.

7.1.2 | Procedure and materials

Participants received 0.90 GBP as compensation. This study followed the exact same procedure as Study 2 but used different materials to make salient the differences between the two social comparison targets (i.e., the organizational simulation). Instead of learning that their company was moving to a new building, participants read that their company was in the process of renewing employee's electronic and office equipment and participants had to check the new equipment and indicate if their own, their peers', and their manager's new equipment was adequate for completing their respective tasks. Participants' equipment was the same as that of their peer, and only one choice regarding this new equipment was proposed, whereas their manager had several options, and all were superior to those offered to participants and their peers. In other words, this task served the same purpose at the task of checking own, peer, and leader adequate office space in the previous studies.

7.1.3 | Measures

Chronic regulatory mode

As before, we assessed participants' assessment ($M = 3.93$, $SD = 0.76$, $\alpha = .82$) and locomotion mode ($M = 4.20$, $SD = 0.69$, $\alpha = .84$) using the Regulatory Mode Questionnaire (Kruglanski et al., 2000; the two modes were not correlated, $r = 0.09$, $p = .147$).

Social comparison preference

To assess participants' social comparison preference (self-evaluation: $M = 3.20$, $SD = 1.14$, $\alpha = .68$, self-enhancement: $M = 2.73$, $SD = 1.43$, $\alpha = .86$, self-improvement: $M = 4.97$, $SD = 1.14$, $\alpha = .76$, and emulation: $M = 4.38$, $SD = 1.05$, $\alpha = .60$), we used the same scale as in Study 2.

7.2 | Results

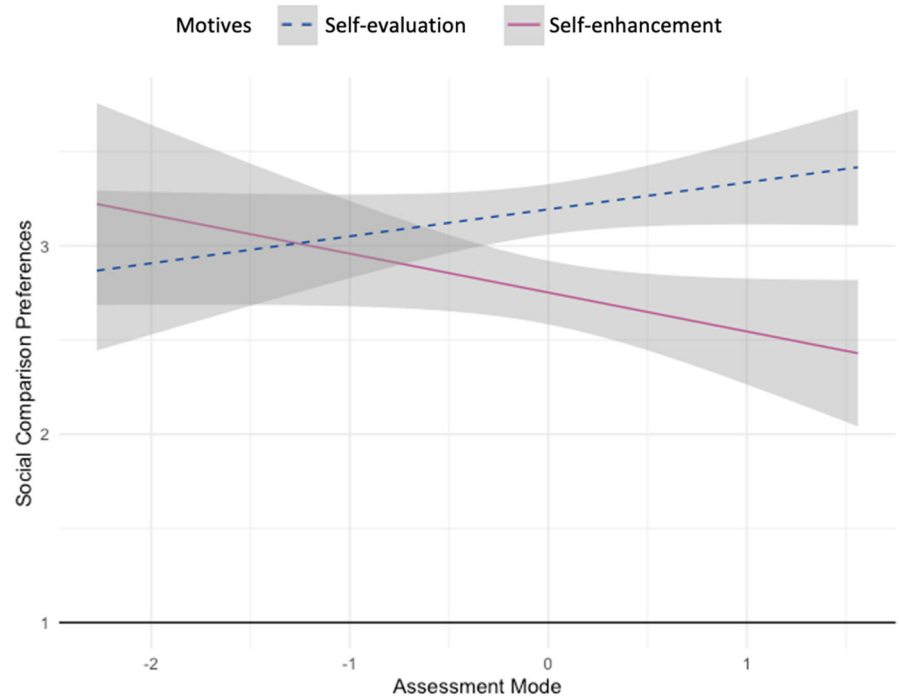
We regressed participants' social comparison preference scores on the same predictors, relying on the same contrasts and interactions as in Study 2. Once again, main effects of all social comparison motives contrasts ($b = -0.19$, $SE = 0.02$, $CI_{95\%} [-0.22, -0.15]$, $t = -10.32$, $p < .001$; $b = -0.67$, $SE = 0.03$, $CI_{95\%} [-0.72, 0.-62]$, $t = -26.10$, $p < .001$; $b = -0.24$, $SE = 0.04$, $CI_{95\%} [-0.32, -0.15]$, $t = -5.32$, $p < .001$) indicated that leaders were preferred for self-improvement ($M = 4.97$, $SD = 1.14$) and emulation ($M = 4.38$, $SD = 1.05$), and peers for self-evaluation ($M = 3.20$, $SD = 1.15$) and self-enhancement ($M = 2.73$, $SD = 1.43$).

Again was no main effect of assessment. More importantly, in line with our hypothesis, we again found an interaction between assessment and the "self-evaluation versus self-enhancement" contrast ($b = -0.15$, $SE = 0.06$, $CI_{95\%} [-0.27, -0.04]$, $t = -2.61$, $p = .009$; see Figure 4). Assessment predicted a preference to compare with a peer rather than a leader for self-enhancement ($b = -0.22$, $SE = 0.09$, $CI_{95\%} [-0.40, -0.03]$, $t = -2.32$, $p = .021$) but not for self-evaluation ($b = 0.08$, $SE = 0.09$, $CI_{95\%} [-0.09, 0.27]$, $t = 0.95$, $p = .343$). There were no other significant effects involving assessment.

Also, and again supporting our prediction, there was a main effect of locomotion such that the stronger locomotion-oriented participants were, the more they preferred to compare with their leader rather than with a peer ($b = 0.28$, $SE = 0.07$, $CI_{95\%} [0.15, 0.41]$, $t = 4.31$, $p < .001$).

There was an unexpected interaction between locomotion and the contrast 'self-improvement versus self-evaluation & self-enhancement' ($b = -0.10$, $SE = 0.04$, $CI_{95\%} [-0.17, -0.02]$, $t = -2.56$, $p = .011$), indicating that the relation between preference for a leader rather than for a peer and locomotion was stronger for self-improvement ($b = 0.47$, $SE = 0.10$, $CI_{95\%} [0.26, 0.67]$, $t = 4.53$, $p < .001$) than for self-evaluation and self-enhancement (self-evaluation: $b = 0.28$, $SE = 0.10$, $CI_{95\%} [0.08, 0.48]$, $t = 2.73$, $p = .006$; self-enhancement $b = 0.08$, $SE = 0.10$, $CI_{95\%} [-0.12, 0.28]$, $t = 0.76$, $p = .448$). It should be noted that this interaction is not qualifying the

FIGURE 4 Social comparison preference (peer vs. leader) as a function assessment mode and self-evaluation and self-enhancement comparison motives (with standard error in the gray band) in Study 3. The higher the social comparison preference score, the more participants preferred comparing with their leader rather than their peer.



finding supporting our hypothesis. There were no other effects involving locomotion.

7.3 | Discussion

Study 3 fully replicated results of Study 2, providing further support for our prediction that the stronger people's assessment mode, the more they prefer to compare with a peer for a self-enhancement motive, while they show no clear peer or leader preference regarding the other social comparison motives. They also provide further support for our prediction that the stronger followers' locomotion is, the more they prefer to compare with a leader—*independent of any social comparison motive they might have.*

The unexpected locomotion by “self-improvement versus self-evaluation and self-enhancement” contrast interaction somewhat nuanced this by showing that the locomotors preference to compare with leaders is especially strong for self-improvement. Given that this effect did not emerge in Studies 1 & 2 and was not predicted, we refrain from interpreting it.

8 | GENERAL DISCUSSION

This research investigated how people's regulatory mode determines with whom they prefer to compare in work contexts—a peer or their leader—depending on different social comparison motives. We discuss results for assessment, before turning to locomotion.

Across three studies, and fully supporting our predictions, assessment mode interacted with social comparison motives to predict people' preference for comparing with peers versus leaders.

These findings are consistent with assessors' concern to do the right thing (Kruglanski et al., 2000) and show that assessors ensure comparing with the most relevant target considering the respective social comparison motive at stake. Specifically, the stronger participants' assessment, the more they preferred to compare with a peer rather than a leader when they sought to self-enhance. However, when they sought to self-evaluate, they equally preferred comparing with peers and with leaders. Presumably because participants had to choose between a peer or a leader (i.e., a situation not likely to be encountered in real life), only simple slopes showed the predicted relation between assessment and comparison target choice for self-enhancement in Study 1. Nonetheless, the predicted relations and interactions clearly emerged in Studies 2 and 3, in which a single rating scale pitted peer and leader targets against each other, thus offering participants the option to indicate a preference for *both* targets at the same time (i.e., a situation resembling real life). Assessors' preference to compare with their peers when self-enhancing shows that for this motive they prefer to compare with someone who might perform worse—or at least equally bad or good—than they do. This result dovetails with findings indicating that assessment is associated with a desire to do better than others (Giacomantonio et al., 2013; Zee et al., 2018). At the same time, assessors' equal preference for peers and leaders when seeking to self-evaluate accords well with work showing they prefer to take different alternatives into account in their quest for getting things right (Appelt et al., 2010; Avnet & Higgins, 2003; Chen et al., 2018).

Turning to locomotion, all three studies consistently demonstrated that the stronger individuals' locomotion mode, the more they preferred comparing with a leader rather than a peer, regardless of social comparison motive. This was the case when measuring

preference by means of a choice, including the option not to compare with anyone (Study 1), and by means of a scale opposing the two targets (Studies 2 & 3). Locomotors thus clearly focus on other individuals who most likely provide information relevant to their concern of moving forward. As such, these findings dovetail nicely with the notion that locomotion-oriented individuals prefer interpersonal interactions that serve their goal pursuit progress (Kruglanski et al., 2016). Moreover, locomotors preferring to compare to leaders suggests they are satisfied choosing the person who presumably will quickly provide sufficient guidance; this emphasizes the fact that locomotors go along with the first good-enough option they find (Avnet & Higgins, 2003).

An important question for future research is whether this preference holds under any circumstances. For example, leaders might not always be quickly available and sometimes be less accessible than peers. In such cases, seeking to interact with leaders to compare implies a delay, which is incompatible with locomotors' concerns to remain in movement. When comparisons with peers are readily available while comparisons with a leader involve hurdles, effects might reverse, or alternatively a preference of locomotors not to compare at all might emerge.

9 | SOCIAL COMPARISON MOTIVES AND COMPARISON TARGET PREFERENCE

Although unrelated to our hypotheses, the current results also reveal that people prefer to compare with different targets depending on different social comparison motives. Across all studies, relatively speaking there was a preference to compare with leaders for self-improvement and emulation, but to compare with peers for self-evaluation and self-enhancement. Given that leaders presumably are more likely to perform better than peers, these results dovetail with findings from the social comparison literature (see Corcoran et al., 2011) indicating that individuals consider people performing better when seeking to self-improve (e.g., Sedikides & Hepper, 2009), being rather similar when seeking to self-evaluate (e.g., Schmitt et al., 2006), and performing worse when seeking to self-enhance (e.g., Wills, 1987). Regarding emulation, participants presumably preferred turning to a leader as they can be assumed to be more competent than peers due to their position—consistent with previous work showing that the more people perceive their leaders as competent, the more they emulate them (Peters et al., 2018).

10 | CONTRIBUTIONS

Prior work indicates that social comparison motives influence comparison target preference (Corcoran et al., 2011; Suls et al., 2002). Going beyond this, we show that this relationship is further shaped by people's regulatory mode. Our findings thus show the added value of considering self-regulatory strategies to better understand with whom people prefer to compare. In turn, this can contribute to a

more fine-grained understanding in future studies of downstream consequences regarding self-esteem, mood, and assimilation versus contrast effects (Gerber et al., 2018).

Our work also further highlights regulatory mode's potential to influence interpersonal dynamics. Prior research showed that regulatory mode shapes people's appreciation of others' behavior, for example their leadership style (Beylat et al., 2020; Kruglanski, Pierro, Higgins, 2007), the way they give support (Cavallo et al., 2016), or take advice (Du et al., 2022). We add that regulatory mode influences whether and when people find peers or superiors relevant for comparison. This is important because previous work on regulatory fit (Higgins, 2000) shows that when people follow strategies that correspond with their regulatory mode, they are more motivated and enjoy more what they are doing (Avnet & Higgins, 2003; Pierro et al., 2009). Therefore, ensuring that assessors can turn to various others and that locomotors are able to quickly receive guidance from their leader may be especially important for them to stay motivated and to feel satisfied at work.

Finally, the present work also has practical implications. It highlights how people have varying needs and preferences when it comes to comparing themselves with others at work. Individuals with a strong assessment mode may find it important to have colleagues or different peers and leaders around to compare themselves with, helping them satisfy their concern with critically evaluating situations and options to ensure they are doing things well. However, for individuals with a strong locomotion mode, the need for such comparisons with others may be lower, and they may only require occasional access to their leader for guidance. Organizations can identify the predominant regulatory mode of their employees, as research on employees shows (e.g., Lo Destro et al., 2021). In groups composed of members with strong assessment, they could encourage work contexts that facilitate discussion and exchange of experiences and ideas among colleagues and between employees and managers, which would provide individuals with the opportunity to compare their plans and analyses with that of their peers and leaders. In groups composed of members with strong locomotion, they could instead focus on ensuring speedy and easy exchanges with leaders. Creating work environments that fit individuals' regulatory mode concerns should contribute to larger motivation and job satisfaction, as for example demonstrated in other work focusing mode-compatible leadership style (Benjamin & Flynn, 2006; Steinmann et al., 2018) or organizational change (Kruglanski, Pierro, Higgins, & Capozza, 2007)

11 | LIMITATIONS

The current research is limited in that the relation between regulatory mode and social comparison preference rests on self-report measures and that the studies are correlational. Although we assume that people's regulatory mode influences their social comparison preference, this work does not allow to draw any causal conclusion. Future

work testing causal relations will also benefit from more diverse samples (Henrich et al., 2010; Muthukrishna et al., 2020).

Moreover, the present work does not consider target characteristics, but relied on an organizational simulation in which a peer and a leader were succinctly described, with the main goal of making differences between these targets salient. However, a preference to turn to a peer or a leader for comparison reasons is likely to depend also on their respective characteristics. For example, whom people prefer to compare with is shaped presumably also by whether they perceive targets as more or less competent (Peters et al., 2018). In addition, previous work on self-regulation in leader-follower dynamics demonstrated that individuals' self-regulatory modes influence evaluations of different leadership styles (e.g., Benjamin & Flynn, 2006). Moreover, individuals evaluate more positively others who demonstrate behaviors fitting their own self-regulatory mode (Bian et al., 2016). Consequently, future studies will benefit from also considering behaviors or traits of peers and leaders.

12 | CONCLUSION

The present research shows that people's regulatory mode influences with whom they prefer to compare: their peer(s) and/or their leader (s). Specifically, we found that the relation between assessment and such preferences depends on people's social comparison motives. Assessors prefer to compare with peers to self-enhance, whereas they do not show clear preferences when motivated to self-evaluate. Conversely, locomotion positively relates with a preference to compare with leaders rather than peers, independent of people's comparison motives. As such, our findings stress the importance of considering individuals' self-regulatory differences to better understand whom they might consider to be an appropriate source for social comparison in the workplace.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

All materials, data and analyses scripts of all studies are available on OSF: https://osf.io/ezyxc/?view_only=d907d83369884bd390e06ee76a490a0f.

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ENDNOTES

¹ We conducted a sensitivity analysis using the PANGAEA webapp (Westfall, 2016). We specified a design with three variables:

assessment (2 levels: high vs. low), social comparison motives (4 levels: self-evaluation, self-enhancement, self-improvement, emulation), and the target of social comparison (2 levels: peer, leader), with participants nested in assessment mode. Assessment is a continuous variable and not a dichotomous variable, but PANGAEA does not allow to specify continuous variables. Therefore, we specified assessment as 2-level variable, which provides a more conservative prediction (McClelland et al., 2015). The analysis indicated that with 279 participants, we could detect an effect of $d = .22$ with 80% power ($1-\beta$) and $\alpha = .05$.

² Alternatively, we could have computed a target score by subtracting participants' peer score from their leader score and used this as our dependent variable. Results when using this approach are similar to the results reported here and can be found on OSF.

³ We conducted this study after Studies 2 and 3. However, we present the studies in the current order because of the weaker ecological validity of Study 1.

⁴ As for Study 1, we conducted a sensitivity analysis using the PANGAEA webapp, specifying the model that best approximates our own, which a design with 2 variables: assessment (2 levels: high vs. low) and social comparison motives (4 levels: self-evaluation, self-enhancement, self-improvement, emulation). The analysis indicated that with 280 participants, we could detect an effect of $d = .28$ with 80% power ($1-\beta$) and $\alpha = .05$. This sensitivity analysis is the same for Study 3 as it has the same design and number of participants.

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