Comparative optimism, so useful

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L'optimisme comparatif, si utile

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Abstract

Comparative Optimism results from a comparison between the self and another person and consists of a self-serving judgment about the future. Most recent studies show that targets who exhibit a comparative optimistic outlook are judged positively but are also rated as more useful than desirable. In this paper, three experiments examined the social utility and desirability of comparative optimism. They also addressed whether this social acceptance is dependent on the context determined by the predominance of the comparative optimistic response. Results showed that displaying more comparative optimism is less socially accepted on the social desirability than on the social utility dimension. Moreover, the type of context influenced the judgment on the social desirability dimension more than on the social

Résumé

L'optimisme comparatif résulte de la comparaison entre la perception de son propre avenir et celle que l'on a au sujet de l'avenir des autres. Il correspond à un jugement autofavorable. La plupart des études montre que les cibles qui expriment de l'optimisme comparatif sont positivement perçues. D'autres montrent également qu'elles sont jugées socialement plus utiles que désirables. Dans cet article, trois expérimentations ont examiné la désirabilité et l'utilité sociales de l'expression d'optimisme comparatif. L'objectif était aussi d'étudier dans quelle mesure l'acceptation sociale de l'optimisme comparatif est dépendante du contexte, défini ici par la prédominance d'un certain niveau d'optimisme exprimé. Les résultats ont montré qu'exprimer de l'optimisme comparatif est socialement moins accepté

Key-words
Comparative optimism, utility, desirability, social acceptance, context

Mots-clés
Optimisme comparatif, utilité, désirabilité, acceptabilité sociale, contexte

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utility dimension. Specifically, a target who expresses strong comparative optimism is generally judged to be useful rather than desirable, except when the target is different from the group of other targets presented.

sur la dimension de désirabilité sociale que sur celle d'utilité sociale. Par ailleurs, le contexte détermine davantage le jugement de désirabilité que celui d'utilité. Concrètement, une cible qui exprime un fort optimisme comparatif est généralement jugée plus utile socialement que désirable, excepté lorsqu'elle est différente de l'ensemble des autres cibles présentées.

When thinking about the future, people often express a positive outlook. When they compare their own and another's future, they generally have a better outlook for the self than for the other. In other words, people are inclined to think that they will experience more positive (e.g., a good job offer before graduation; living past age 80) and fewer negative events (e.g., divorced a few years after marriage; being 40 or more pounds over weight) than others. This trend is called unrealistic optimism (Weinstein, 1980) or comparative optimism (CO, Harris & Middleton, 1994). In spite of great variability in its size, this effect is observed consistently and recurrently, and has been observed across a wide variety of outcomes, across many person categories and cultures, and using varied targets (for reviews, see Helweg-Larsen & Shepperd, 2001 or Shepperd, Carroll, Grace, & Terry, 2002). This tendency is frequently linked to a variety of health, emotional, and other personal benefits (Shepperd, Grace, Cole, & Klein, 2005). Beyond these benefits, CO contributes also to acquiring social benefits, which are the focus of our interest. Research on these social benefits is important for at least two reasons. First, few studies have been conducted to date on the social acceptance of CO, and when they do test it, the acceptance is presented as being unitary, which is in contradiction with certain results (Norem, 2002; Taylor, Lerner, Sherman, Sage, & McDowell, 2003). Secondly, research is needed to understand the specific mechanisms by which CO influences social acceptance and the consequences expressing CO can have as a function of the type

of social acceptance examined. Thus, the first contribution of our paper is to examine the distinct effects of CO on the social acceptance dimensions of desirability and utility. Our second objective is to examine the effect of context on target acceptance. Indeed, judgments of other people are rarely formulated without the presence of other information, which creates the evaluative context and likely affects the judgments (Helson, 1964; Mussweiler, 2003; Parducci, 1995). Thus, we will examine how knowledge of the distribution of a given level of CO in the population (the majority of people is either weakly or strongly comparative optimistic) can affect their evaluation of a target who exhibits a given level of CO.

Is comparative optimism socially accepted?

In recent research, the evidence for a social benefit of CO is solid even if the studies showing this benefit present certain conceptual ambiguities, notably regarding the comparison of comparative optimism with a neutral outlook or with pessimism. For example, Helweg-Larsen, Sadeghian, and Webb (2002) found that persons who exhibited a comparative optimistic outlook on the future were more socially accepted than those exhibiting comparative pessimism (CP). However, expressing CO was not more socially accepted than expressing a neutral outlook (which was more socially accepted than expressing CP). Moreover, in a second experiment by the same authors, results supported the social *rejection* of CP rather than the social *acceptance* of CO. In other words, the results to date concerning the social acceptance of comparative optimism are mainly based on comparisons with the social rejection of comparative pessimism. In this manuscript, we suggest that the social acceptance of CO does not simply result from the social rejection of CP. Indeed, CP could be rejected socially independently of a social acceptation of CO. It is important to test varying degrees of CO, without even considering CP, to better understand the social acceptance of CO. Thus, we propose that these differing degrees of CO are associated with different levels of social acceptance.

Another important issue concerning the social acceptance of CO has rarely been discussed: the domain of the social acceptance.

However, research indicates that the specific domain or type of social acceptance evaluated is associated with particular patterns of results. For example, when the focus of the acceptance measure is on characteristics relevant for relationships, sometimes comparative optimistic targets are not socially accepted. For example, Taylor et al. (2003) showed that optimistic people who make statements such as, "my future is more promising than that of others" have low social acceptance (or social desirability) because they are too narcissistic and self-absorbed, and too unrealistic. On the other hand, results obtained in studies of dispositional optimism have shown that optimism is valued on a work-related dimension. Indeed, those studies show relations between optimism and personality traits typically used to describe a good leader (Dolbier, Soderstron, & Steinhardt, 2001; Hickman, Watson, & Morris, 1996; House & Shamir, 1998). Optimism is also associated with the definition of a good leader (House & Shamir, 1998), and leaders exhibit more optimism than others (Dember, 2001; Wunderley, Reddy, & Dember, 1998). Thus, comparative optimistic persons may have low social acceptance on the relationship dimension and at the same time may be more positively accepted on a work-related dimension.

This distinction between two dimensions of judgment, relationship and work related, is reminiscent of a long tradition of research ranging from the distinction between value and dynamism (Osgood, Suci, & Tannenbaum, 1957), to more recent distinctions such as other or self profitability (Peeters, Cornelissen, & Pandelaere, 2002), morality and competence (Wojciszke, 1997; 2005), warmth and competence (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002), or social desirability and social utility (Cambon, 2006; Darnon, Dompnier, Delmas, Pulfrey, & Butera, 2009; Dubois & Beauvois, 2005). This last conception distinguishes between two dimensions of value attached to people and objects. The first dimension of value, social desirability, reflects the knowledge we have of affects that a person can elicit, or ways in which that person can satisfy the principal motivations of others. In this view, social desirability tells us about the "likeableness" one can attribute to a person in relationships with others. In our opinion, the results obtained when the social acceptance of CO was measured with the relationship dimension clearly relate to this

dimension of value. The second dimension of value, social utility, reflects the knowledge we have of a person's chances of success or failure in social life. It is based on how well one meets the requirements of the society in which one lives. It is noteworthy that the term "social utility" is not used here in its functional connotations but in its quasi-economic connotation. In other words, one's social utility refers to one's "market" value and not to the services that one might perform for a particular person or a particular group in a given context. We contend that the value of optimism for leadership behaviors relates to the social utility dimension: A leader is a person who is successful in social life and who is useful for an organization. Moreover, in a competitive, occidental culture, comparative optimism seems to be associated with initiating projects or being entrepreneurial (i.e., conducting business, founding a firm, or being ambitious, conscientious, and studious), actions which are socially useful in that they favor social functioning.

We therefore suggest that the systematic distinction between two dimensions of acceptance, one being social desirability and the other social utility, has the potential of clarifying where the social acceptance of a comparative optimistic target (CO target) actually lies. More precisely, the previously mentioned results finding a devalorization of optimism when using social relationship items and its valorization when using work-related items suggest that the valorization of optimism can only be understood through the study of both the social desirability and the social utility dimensions simultaneously. Le Barbenchon and Milhabet (2005) conducted one such study and found that strongly comparative optimistic targets were less socially accepted on the dimension of social desirability than on the dimension of social utility. In that particular study, the authors began to examine the role that differing degrees or levels of CO could have on social acceptance. Using three levels of CO, they observed that comparative optimistic targets were judged more socially useful than socially desirable. In other words, the CO targets were judged higher on what it takes to succeed than on what it takes to be liked. It is therefore appropriate to hire these persons and to give them important responsibilities or a high salary, but no one really wants to become their friend or to make them their confidant. However,

in the study by Le Barbenchon and Milhabet (2005), with only three levels of CO, it was not possible to determine whether there was an optimal level of CO for social acceptance. Therefore, to confirm and complete the results of this study using both social acceptance dimensions, further empirical validation is needed and more levels of CO should be tested. Thus, the first goal of the research presented herein was to provide additional tests of the hypothesis that CO is more accepted on the dimension of social utility than on that of social desirability by comparing targets exhibiting different levels of CO (more or less strong).

Context effects on social acceptance of CO

The second major objective of our research was to examine the social acceptance of CO within a context determined by the predominance of CO. Up to now, no such analysis of CO has been conducted. However, the valorization of an object is often affected by the context in which it appears (Helson, 1964; Mussweiler, 2003). Thus, it is possible that the social acceptance of CO for a particular target is determined by the frequency of this mode of responding among others with which the target is presented (Parducci, 1995). For example, if the context suggests that CO is a common response mode, people's evaluation of the target could be different than if they think that CO is rarely adopted. So, in our studies, we created a context based on the predominance of a particular level of CO responding using a methodology adapted from Parducci (1995).

We propose two hypotheses for the effects of context, one for each dimension of social acceptance. First, we propose that evaluations of targets on social utility will be unaffected by the predominance of the CO response. Indeed, social utility is a highly socially determined kind of evaluation (Dubois & Beauvois, 2005) which appears to be based on an objective and consensual reality (which is not the case for judgments of social desirability) concerning the usefulness or value of traits and behaviors. For example, people do not generally question whether white collar jobs are more valuable than blue collar jobs; they appear to be so as a simple matter of fact. There is indirect support for this idea.

For example Cambon (2006) has shown that the repeated exposure of a stimulus (from 0 to 12 exposures) did not influence judgments of its social utility but did influence judgments of its social desirability. Although the repeated exposure of a stimulus and a context in which a stimulus is made frequent or infrequent are not the same thing, Cambon's (2006) results suggest that judgments of social utility are unaffected by frequency. Thus, we hypothesize that the context in which CO targets are presented will not affect social acceptance on the dimension of social utility. On the other hand, we hypothesize that judgments of social desirability will be affected by the context of the evaluation. We made predictions on the basis of uniqueness theory (Lynn & Snyder, 2002; Snyder & Fromkin, 1980). For example, Snyder and Fromkin (1980) showed that targets only moderately similar to the judge (and in consequence showing some uniqueness) were better evaluated on "likeableness" dimensions, which are theoretically close to social desirability, than were highly similar targets. Dubois (2005) showed that targets whose responses to a questionnaire allowed them to appear unique were judged more socially desirable than targets whose responses did not allow them to appear unique. This effect only resulted on social desirability and not on social utility. According to uniqueness theory, CO targets who give the least frequent response within the context of their presentation should be perceived as different and consequently be judged more socially desirable than targets who give the most frequent response.

Hypotheses

To summarize, our goals were to investigate: 1) the social acceptance of comparative optimism by examining the social acceptance of different levels of comparative optimism on two dimensions of social value (i.e., social desirability and social utility); and 2) the impact of the context determined by the predominant level of the comparative optimistic outlook on its social acceptance.

We hypothesize that judgments of social desirability and of social utility will differ as a function of the degree of CO such that the most comparative optimistic targets will be more socially accepted on the social utility dimension than on the social desirability

dimension (Hypothesis 1). We also predict that the predominant level of CO (or context) within a group affects its social acceptance; thus we expect an interaction between the predominance of a level of comparative optimism (type of context) and the target's level of comparative optimistic outlook (Hypothesis 2). This effect is expected on the social desirability dimension more than on the social utility dimension (Hypothesis 2'). Specifically, we suggest that strongly comparative optimistic targets will be socially accepted on the social utility dimension irrespective of the other targets (i.e., predominance of weakly or strongly comparative optimistic targets in the context). On the other hand, for evaluations of desirability, both weakly and strongly comparative optimistic targets can be judged as desirable depending on the context. When targets are different compared to other targets (i.e., type of context), they will be judged more desirable than when targets are similar to other targets.

Overview of the experiments

We present a series of three experiments conducted to address the hypotheses and research objectives. In the first two experiments, participants judged the social acceptance of several targets exhibiting weak to strong levels of comparative optimism on the dimensions of social desirability and social utility in within-participant designs. In the third experiment participants judged these targets separately, either on social utility or on social desirability. Over the series of experiments, we used varying experimental materials and procedures in order to evaluate the consistency and generalizability of the results. To assess the existence of an optimal level of comparative optimism, the level of exhibited CO was manipulated with an increasing number of levels of comparative optimism from Experiment 1 to 2. Finally, to evaluate context effects, which have not yet been studied experimentally in the CO literature, we manipulated the frequency of the CO levels in the materials presented to participants (Experiments 2 and 3). To do so, participants evaluated "critical targets" (from five to ten depending on the experiments) who exhibited a specific level of CO, always the same, in all the experimental conditions, presented among other, "contextual" targets.

The presentation of these contextual targets, exhibiting weak versus strong levels of comparative optimism (and moderate levels of comparative optimism in Experiment 3), allowed for manipulating the predominance of different levels of comparative optimism (i.e., type of context).

The same general procedure was used in all three experiments (see details in the method section of Experiment 1). Participants examined a summary table presenting the essential CO information for all targets to be considered. The targets were presented in a different randomized order for each participant (Molina & Fabre, 2000). Then, they proceeded to read detailed information describing each target one by one, answering questions about the social desirability and/or social utility of each target before continuing to the next; and so on for all the (more or less) CO targets they had to judge. Following the experiment, which lasted about 20 to 30 minutes, we debriefed and thanked participants.

The same dependent variables were used for all three experiments (see Table 1). For each question about social desirability or utility, participants answered using 7-point scales (1 = *not at all*; 7 = *entirely*). The questions were always presented in different randomized orders for each subject. From two to four questions were used to measure each dimension in the three experiments (see Table 1). Dependent measures ("social acceptance") corresponded to the mean of the responses to the questions for each dimension (social utility and social desirability). For each experiment, we conducted a principal components analysis to verify the existence of the two dimensions of social acceptance. In our statistical analyses, we only included the social acceptance ratings for the critical targets, although participants also assessed the social acceptance for contextual targets.

Finally, in order to verify that the target's comparative optimism was perceived as intended, participants rated each target's level of CO (i.e., "Do you think that this person is more optimistic for himself/herself than for others?"). This question was systematically presented at the end of the questionnaire for each target. Participants responded on a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*entirely*). Results of the analyses on the manipulation check consistently confirmed the experimental manipulation. Moreover,

before conducting each experiment, we conducted pre-tests to check that each target was perceived in accordance with our manipulation.

TABLE 1:
Items used to evaluate targets with factorial weights (PCA) following Varimax Rotation.

Questions of social utility	**Factor 1 Utility**	**Factor 2 Desirability**
*Would you give high wages to this person?	.804	.130
*Would you entrust this person with responsibilities?	.853	.228
Would you hire this person?	.753	.448
Do you think that this person has everything it takes to succeed professionally?	.718	.279
Questions of social desirability	**Factor 1 Utility**	**Factor 2 Desirability**
*Would you like this person to become your best friend?	.252	.892
Would you like this person to be placed beside you at a party?	.206	.922
*Would you like to meet this person?	.254	.906
Do you think that this person has everything it takes to be loved?	.373	.741

*Questions retained in Experiment 2.

Experiment 1

In this study, the goal was to test the effect of the different levels of comparative optimism on the judgments of social desirability and social utility independently of the context. These results will serve as a baseline for comparing the results of the other experiments manipulating the context. Only Hypothesis 1 was examined in this initial study.

Method

We completely describe the presentation of targets for this first experiment. For the following experiments, we present only the points of divergence from this initial presentation.

Participants and experimental design

Twenty-four students in psychology from 18 to 31 years old (M = 21.5; SD = 4.00) participated in the study. There were four men and twenty women. The experimental design used two within-

participants independent variables: 9, Level of Comparative Optimism (1 vs. 2 vs. 3 vs. 4 vs. 5 vs. 6 vs. 7 vs. 8 vs. 9) X 2, Dimension of Social Acceptance (social utility vs. social desirability).

Material

A short booklet presented information about nine target individuals (in reality, fictitious) by showing their responses to questionnaires. The questionnaires concerned the targets' outlook on the future wherein they evaluated the likelihood that they would experience particular events relative to average persons of the same age and sex. For each event (3 positive and 3 negative), targets were presented as having chosen one of three types of responses: Strongly comparative optimistic, comparative optimistic, or neutral, as described in the following paragraphs.
We first conducted a pre-test involving 33 participants which allowed us to identify 12 events for the experimental material distributed unambiguously into three distinct categories. Four events illustrated the dimension of social utility (e.g., "To find work less than one year after one's studies"; "To fail an exam or a professional promotion"), four illustrated the dimension of social desirability (e.g., "To experience a happy family event"; "To lose sight of his/her friends"), and four events were neutral with respect to the two social dimensions (e.g., "To receive a valuable present"). The neutral events were neither socially useful nor socially desirable. To construct the material for each participant, targets were illustrated with only 6 of the 12 events, selected randomly to include 2 events, 1 positive, and 1 negative, of each category (utility vs. desirability vs. neutral).

To manipulate the level of comparative optimism (from 1 to 9) for a target, the number of the CO responses for the six events varied in the following manner: the least CO target (level 1) was comparative optimistic for one event (i.e., "less probable for me than for others" for a negative event vs. "more probable for me than for others" for a positive event) and neutral for five events (i.e., "as probable for me as for others"). The most CO target (level 9) was strongly comparative optimistic for four events (i.e., "much less probable for me than for others" for a negative event vs. "much more probable for me than for others" for a positive

event), comparative optimistic for one event (i.e., "less probable for me than for others" for a negative event vs. "more probable for me than for others" for a positive event), and neutral for one event (i.e., "as probable for me as for others"). The other levels (i.e., 2 vs. 3 vs. 4 vs. 5 vs. 6 vs. 7 vs. 8) varied by increasing successively by one increment (neutral to comparative optimistic, or comparative optimistic to strongly comparative optimistic) the level of CO expressed for one event. The responses were always randomly associated with the events selected for each target.

On the first page of the booklet, a summary table presented the events in columns, and the targets on lines. The cells of the table presented the targets' responses (their more or less comparative optimistic outlook on the future) for each of the six events. Thus, all targets were simultaneously presented (i.e., the entire set of the targets was presented on the same page, see Molina and Fabre, 2000, for a review of presentation mode). Then, in the following pages, these same targets were presented, one per page. Each detailed presentation of a target was followed by eight questions measuring the two dimensions of social acceptance, four questions for each dimension[1]. Targets, events, and questions were randomly presented for each participant.

Results and discussion

The 2 X 9 within participants analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed a main effect for the dimensions of judgment ($F[1, 22] = 6.88, p < .05, \eta^2 = .75$) that showed a straightforward distinction between the dimensions of social desirability and social utility, supporting the idea that the two dimensions of social acceptance were relevant to consider in the study of CO. Irrespective of their level of comparative optimism, targets were judged better on the social utility dimension ($M = 4.42$; $SD = 0.79$) than on the social

1. We conducted a Principal Components Analysis on the responses to the questions assessing the targets for each study presented in this article. The results for all experiments were similar to those of the first experiment. We present only the results of the first experiment for illustration (for more details, contact the first author). Two factors, explaining 76.59 % of the variance, were extracted. After Varimax rotation, the 4 questions concerning social utility loaded on factor 1 (42.03 %) and the four questions concerning social desirability loaded on factor 2 (34.56 %) (see Table 1). Participants' responses were therefore analyzed based on two scores, one for the assessment of social desirability (Cronbach's alpha = .84), the other for the assessment of social utility (Cronbach's alpha = .93).

desirability dimension (M = 3.98; SD = 1.11). In accordance with Hypothesis 1, the non significant main effect for target's level of comparative optimism ($F(8, 176) < 1$, *ns*) interacted with the dimensions of social acceptance, $F(8, 176) = 3.56$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .05$ (see Table 2). As expected, displaying CO was less socially accepted on the social desirability than on the social utility dimension. On the social utility dimension, comparative optimism did not vary linearly with social acceptance [linear contrasts, $F(1, 22) < 1$, *ns*]. On the social desirability dimension, the most comparative optimistic targets were the least socially accepted [linear contrasts, $F(1, 22) = 5.23$, $p < .05$]. Further, the targets exhibiting the highest levels of comparative optimism were the most differentiated on the two dimensions. More precisely, the most comparative optimistic targets were the least socially accepted on the dimension of social desirability.

Target's Level of CO	Social Utility	Social Desirability
1	4.36_a (1.31)	4.54_a (1.03)
2	4.45_a (1.07)	4.36_a (1.31)
3	4.23_a (1.11)	3.93_a (1.22)
4	4.36_a (0.98)	4.04_b (1.54)
5	4.39_a (0.93)	3.79_b (1.65)
6	4.39_a (1.13)	3.82_b (1.53)
7	4.45_a (0.91)	3.77_b (1.41)
8	4.46_a (1.00)	3.89_b (1.52)
9	4.67_a (1.06)	3.71_b (1.48)

Note. For each level of CO (i.e., each line) a common letter indicates that the difference between the means for social utility and social desirability is not significant ($p < .05$)

TABLE 2:
Mean evaluation of targets for the interaction between the target's level of comparative optimism and the dimension of social acceptance - Experiment 1 (SD in parentheses).

Given these initial results in line with Hypothesis 1, in the following experiment, we sought to replicate the results while continuing to examine a large number of CO levels. More importantly, we investigated the impact of the predominance to which weakly or strongly comparative optimistic targets are present within the group (i.e., type of context) in order to test Hypothesis 2.

Experiment 2

In this experiment, our goal was to improve the examination of Hypothesis 1 by using a large number of CO levels (i.e., 10 critical target levels and 16 total targets). We also manipulated the context within which the critical targets were placed in order to study Hypothesis 2. To do so, we manipulated the predominance of weak or strong CO encountered in the set of targets presented. Increasing the number of CO levels and hence the number of targets presented necessitated simplifying the experimental material. In order to present targets more briefly and directly, their CO levels were indicated with percentages rather than with textual information. We also reduced the number of events on which the targets expressed themselves and we used two items to measure each dimension of social acceptance.

Method

Participants and experimental design

Sixty employees of a pharmaceutical factory participated voluntarily in this study (30 men and 30 women) and were randomly assigned to experimental conditions. They were from 35 to 52 years old[2].

The experimental design was: 2, Predominant Level of CO (majority of targets weakly vs. strongly comparative optimistic) X 10, Critical Target's Level of CO (1 vs. 2 vs. 3 vs. 4 vs. 5 vs. 6 vs. 7 vs. 8 vs. 9 vs. 10) X 2, Dimension of Social Acceptance (utility vs. desirability). The first independent variable was a between-participants factor; the final two were within-participants factors.

Material: presentation of targets

Participants viewed information on 16 targets, 10 critical and 6 contextual. Each target was described by a given percentage of exhibited CO. The levels of comparative optimistic outlook for the critical targets were 2, 12, 24, 34, 45, 55, 66, 76, 88, and 98 percent. For positive events, these percentages expressed how much more probable an event's occurrence was for oneself than

2. As biographical data were optional, many participants did not give their age.

for others (e.g., "I think that this event is 24% more likely to occur for me than for others"); negative events were presented as being less probable. The least CO target exhibited a CO level of 2%; the most CO target exhibited a CO level of 98%. A summary table presented a mean percentage CO for each target. Then, the details of the targets' responses on four specific events were presented in the following pages of the booklet. The four events were selected among the positive and negative events used in the previous experiments.

The contextual information provided by the predominant level of CO among the targets (weak *vs.* strong CO more frequent) was created by adding the six contextual targets to the ten critical ones. For the predominance of weak CO, we added six weakly comparative optimistic targets with CO levels of 3%, 5%, 7%, 13%, 15%, and 18%. For the predominance of strong CO, we added six strongly comparative optimistic targets: 82%, 85%, 87%, 93%, 95%, and 97%. Each participant received materials in which the targets and the events illustrating their CO were presented in random order.

Results and discussion

We analyzed the data with a 2 (weak vs. strong CO predominance) X 10 (critical target CO level) X 2 (dimension of social acceptance) mixed-design ANOVA (cf. Appendix). First, a significant main effect for CO level resulted, $F(9, 522) = 47.50$, $p < .0001$, $\eta^2 = .05$. Linear contrasts showed that with increasing comparative optimism, the critical targets were more socially accepted, $F(1, 58) = 106.06$, $p < .001$. Second, there was a significant interaction between level of comparative optimism and dimension of social acceptance, $F(9, 522) = 56.36$, $p < .0001$, $\eta^2 = .03$. In accordance with Hypothesis 1, the more the critical targets expressed CO, the greater the difference between their social utility and their social desirability, social utility being greater at higher levels of CO (Table 3). On the dimension of social desirability, the level of comparative optimism exhibited by targets did not influence their social acceptance (linear contrasts, $F(1, 58) = 1.36$, *ns*). However, on the dimension of social utility, we observed a linear increase (linear contrasts, $F(1, 58) = 303.10$,

$p < .001$). The lowest CO level critical target was not rated as socially useful. Otherwise, exhibiting a little more CO strongly increased the social utility of the critical target (i.e., level 3). From this level through the higher ones, social utility increased progressively, with a strong increase at the highest level.

TABLE 3:
Mean evaluation of targets for the interaction between targets' level of comparative optimism and the dimension of social acceptance – Experiment 2 (SD in parentheses) .

Target's Level of CO	Social utility	Social desirability
1	2.17_{a} (1.05)	2.55_{b} (1.40)
2	3.04_{c} (1.22)	3.05_{cd} (1.29)
3	3.67_{e} (1.46)	2.93_{bd} (1.17)
4	3.81_{f} (1.42)	2.96_{bd} (1.12)
5	4.02_{g} (1.29)	2.90_{bd} (1.04)
6	4.23_{h} (1.32)	2.85_{bd} (1.10)
7	4.52_{i} (1.28)	2.98_{d} (1.16)
8	4.77_{j} (1.27)	2.88_{bd} (1.09)
9	5.08_{k} (1.03)	3.04_{d} (1.26)
10	5.70_{l} (0.96)	3.06_{bd} (1.62)

Note. Means with different subscripts differ significantly ($p < .05$).

Third, there was a significant interaction between level of CO and predominance of CO level, $F(9, 522) = 24.77, p < .0001, \eta^2 = .02$. This effect supported Hypothesis 2 indicating that the social acceptance of each specific level of CO was dependant on the predominance of weakly or strongly comparative optimistic targets (Table 4).

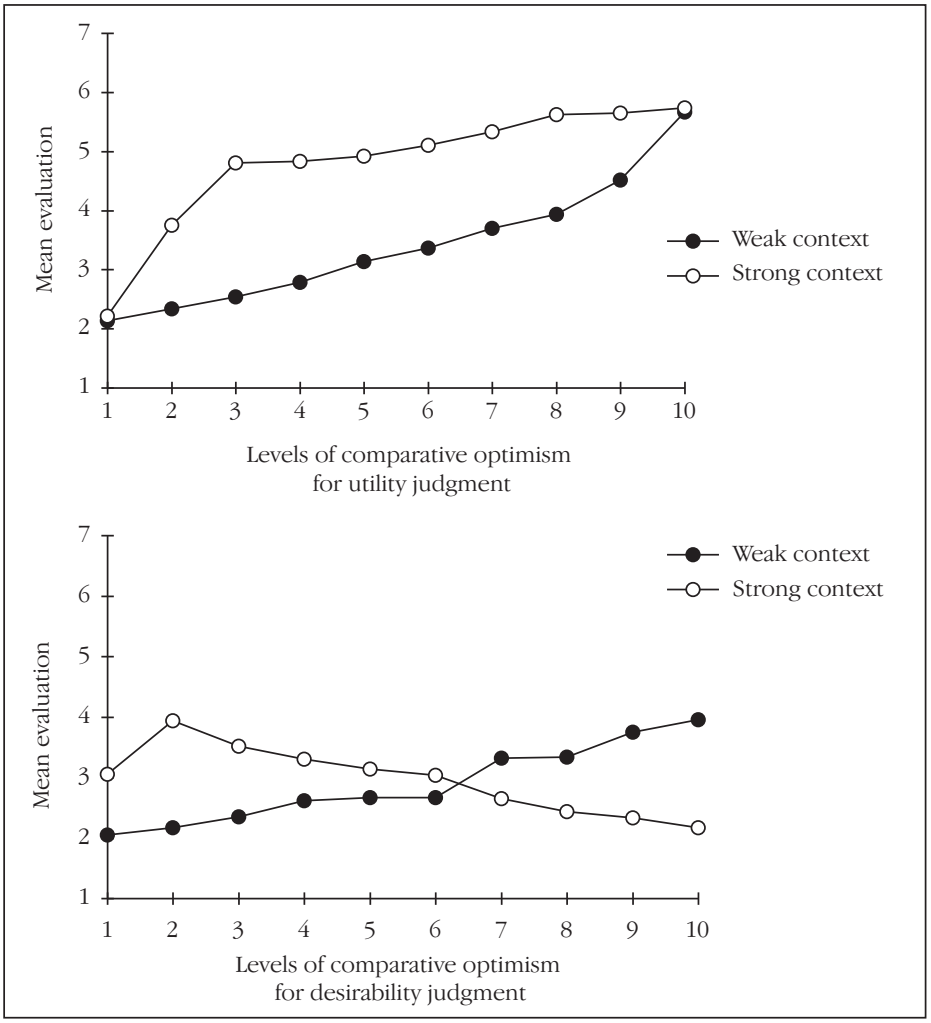
TABLE 4:
Mean evaluation of targets for the interaction between targets' level of comparative optimism and predominant level of CO- Experiment 2 (SD in parentheses).

Target's Level of CO	Weak CO Predominant	Strong CO Predominant
1	2.09_{a}	2.63_{b}
2	2.25_{a}	3.84_{b}
3	2.44_{a}	4.16_{b}
4	2.70_{a}	4.07_{b}
5	2.90_{a}	4.03_{b}
6	3.02_{a}	4.07_{b}
7	3.51_{a}	3.99_{b}
8	3.63_{a}	4.03_{a}
9	4.13_{a}	3.99_{a}
10	4.81_{a}	3.95_{b}

Note. For each level of CO (i.e., each line) a common letter indicates that the difference between the means for weak and strong CO is not significant ($p < .05$).

However, this effect, as well as the significant effects for the predominant level of CO [$F(1, 58) = 20.53, p < .0001, \eta^2 = .19$] and for the interaction between predominant level of CO and dimension of social acceptance [$F(1, 58) = 47.86, p < .0001, \eta^2 = .16$], was qualified by a three-factor interaction between the three independent variables, $F(9, 522) = 22.34, p < .0001, \eta^2 = .01$ (Hypothesis 2'). These results supported Hypothesis 2' predicting a stronger effect of the interaction between CO and predominant level of CO on social desirability than on social utility. As shown in Figure 1a, on the dimension of social utility, greater CO was associated with more acceptance irrespective of the predominant level of CO (linear contrast for the effect of CO level in a weak CO predominance context: $F(1, 58) = 169.95, p < .001$; linear contrast for the effect of CO level in a strong CO predominance context: $F(1, 58) = 134.23, p < .001$). However, on the dimension of social desirability (Figure 1b), more CO produced more acceptance in a weak CO predominance context (linear contrast for the effect of CO level: $F(1, 58) = 45.79, p < .001$) and less acceptance in a strong CO predominance context (linear contrast for the effect of CO level: $F(1, 58) = 26.18, p < .001$). In other words, the type of CO which was predominant did not influence social utility whereas it did influence social desirability. Indeed, for judgments of social desirability, when the context was one wherein weak CO predominated, targets high in CO stood out and were judged more favorably. When the context had a strong CO predominance, targets exhibiting low CO were judged more socially desirable. To be judged more socially desirable, the target had to be distinct or unique for the context (although all the targets, even the least CO target, had mean social desirability ratings inferior to the scale midpoint of 4). Thus, for social desirability, the results can be explained with uniqueness theory because we observe a distinctiveness or contrast effect. In conclusion, the type of CO predominant in the context influenced the dimension of social desirability and not the dimension of social utility.

FIGURES 1a and 1b: Mean evaluation of targets for the interaction between targets' level of comparative optimism, predominant level of CO, and dimension of social acceptance.



Experiment 3

Experiments 1 and 2 were conducted with an experimental procedure where social desirability and social utility judgments were measured in a within-participants design which could have artifactually created a distinction between evaluations on social desirability and social utility (participants judge targets high on social utility and low on social desirability). Indeed, Judd, James-Hawkins, Yzerbyt, and Kashima (2005) noted that a significant negative correlation tends to appear between two dimensions similar to social utility and social desirability when these judgments are obtained simultaneously on targets presented in a within-participants design. In contrast, when targets are presented in a between-participants design, the two dimensions tend to

correlate positively. Judd et al. (2005) suggested that if participants realize that a target is better than another on one of the two dimensions, they seek to compensate for this in their evaluation on the other dimension. A justice norm or sense that there must be good qualities in everyone could drive this compensation process. Although the experimental context of Judd et al. (2005) was not the same as the context of the present studies, it remains that the intervention of a justice norm driving a compensation between the two dimensions of social utility and social desirability is a plausible explanation of the present results. In order to eliminate this alternative explanation and the possibility of a compensation effect, we conducted a last experiment using a between-participants design: participants evaluated either the social utility or the social desirability of the targets.

The goals and hypotheses for this new experiment were the same as those in Experiment 2. Experiment 3 shared the same experimental material and method used in Experiment 1. In this experiment, we used the same kind of targets as the ones used in Experiment 1.

Method

Participants and experimental design

One hundred and nineteen students in psychology participated voluntarily and were randomly assigned to the experimental conditions. There were 100 women and 19 men, from 18 to 34 years old ($M = 20.9$; $SD = 3.4$).

The experimental design was: 3, Predominant level of CO (majority of targets weakly vs. moderately comparative optimistic vs. strongly comparative optimistic) X 2, Dimension of social acceptance (utility vs. desirability) X 5, Level of critical target's comparative optimism (1 vs. 3 vs. 5 vs. 7 vs. 9). The first two independent variables were between-participants factors; the third was a within-participants factor.

Material: presentation of targets

Targets were constructed following the same principle as in Experiment 1. Participants were presented with nine fictitious

targets (five critical and four contextual targets) who responded with varying degrees of CO to the same events used in Experiment 1.

In the presentation of targets, we also manipulated the predominant level of CO in the context, this time using three predominant levels of CO context: weak, moderate, and strong. For the weak CO predominant context, the four contextual targets each showed a weak level of CO (i.e., level 2). For the moderate CO predominant context, the contextual targets exhibited moderate levels of comparative optimism (i.e., two each of levels 4 and 6). Finally, in the strong CO predominant context, the contextual targets each showed high levels (i.e., level 8) of CO.

Results and discussion

First, the ANOVA revealed a main effect for dimension of social acceptance, $F(1, 113) = 8.18$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .002$. Targets were more socially accepted on the dimension of social utility ($M = 4.46$; $SD = 0.76$) than on the dimension of desirability ($M = 4.05$; $SD = 0.84$).

Second, we obtained the expected interaction effect between Dimension of social acceptance and Level of critical target's comparative optimism, $F(4, 452) = 22.03$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .15$. As expected (Hypothesis 1), the most comparative optimistic targets were more socially accepted on the dimension of utility than on the dimension of desirability. The more the targets were comparative optimistic, the more they were socially accepted on the dimension of utility (linear contrast: $F(1, 113) = 14.85$, $p < .01$) and the less they were socially accepted on the dimension of desirability (linear contrast : $F(1, 113) = 26.57$, $p < .01$).

Third, the ANOVA revealed an interaction effect between Predominant level of CO, Dimension of social acceptance, and Level of critical target's of CO, $F(8, 452) = 2.74$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .03$ (Table 5).

TABLE 5:
Mean evaluation of targets for the interaction effect between predominant level of CO, dimension of social acceptance and target's level of comparative optimism – Experiment 3 (SD in parentheses).

Level of target's CO	Social acceptance on the dimension of social utility			Social acceptance on the dimension of social desirability		
	Weak CO predominant	Moderate CO predominant	Strong CO predominant	Weak CO predominant	Moderate CO predominant	Strong CO predominant
1	3.9 $_{bc}$ (1.25)	4.62 $_{b}$ (1.62)	3.22 $_{c*}$ (1.12)	4.66 $_{a}$ (1.55)	4.58 $_{ad}$ (1.49)	5.20 $_{a*}$ (1.48)
3	4.07 $_{b}$ (1.20)	5.00 $_{b}$ (1.06)	3.85 $_{c*}$ (1.02)	4.08 $_{ab}$ (1.23)	4.40 $_{af}$ (0.97)	4.91 $_{ab*}$ (1.23)
5	4.38 $_{b}$ (1.28)	4.79 $_{b}$ (1.39)	4.11 $_{bc}$ (0.97)	3.63 $_{bc}$ (1.33)	3.75 $_{ef}$ (1.17)	4.18 $_{be}$ (1.37)
7	4.34 $_{b*}$ (1.30)	4.53 $_{b}$ (1.57)	4.53 $_{bc}$ (0.74)	3.20 $_{c*}$ (1.49)	3.90 $_{de}$ (0.96)	4.05 $_{ce}$ (1.13)
9	4.67 $_{ad*}$ (1.44)	4.83 $_{ab*}$ (1.58)	5.95 $_{d}$ (1.05)	3.12 $_{c*}$ (1.60)	3.37 $_{de*}$ (1.42)	3.63 $_{ce}$ (1.27)
Linear contrasts	$F(1, 113) = 2.30$ ns	$F(1, 113) < 1$ ns	$F(1, 113) = 26.38$, $p < .001$	$F(1, 113) = 10.99$, $p < .01$	$F(1, 113) = 5.36$, $p < .05$	$F(1, 113) = 11.13$, $p < .01$

Note. A common letter indicates a lack of a significant difference, $p < .05$; * indicates a significant difference between the evaluation on the dimension of social utility and the evaluation on the dimension of social desirability.

We first examine the results for social acceptance on the dimension of utility. For it a clear linear increase with increasing levels of CO was observed only in the context of strong CO predominance [linear contrasts, $F(1, 113) = 26.38, p < .001$]. In the weak CO predominance context, the linear trend was not significant [$F(1, 113) = 2.30$, *ns*], but post-hoc analysis (LSD) revealed that the highest CO target (level 9) was judged more useful than any other target. Thus, although the weak CO predominance context attenuates the effect of CO level it does not eliminate it. However, Hypothesis 2' was clearly not supported in the moderate CO predominance context [$F(1, 113) < 1$, *ns*] because no differences resulted among the targets.

Turning to the results for social acceptance on the dimension of desirability, the predominant level of CO did not change the social desirability for specific levels of target CO but influenced it for all levels. The critical targets were more socially desirable when the predominant outlook on the future was strongly CO ($M = 4.40$; $SD = 0.78$) rather than weakly CO [$M = 3.74$; $SD = 0.89$; $F(1, 113) = 7.09, p < .01$]. There was no difference between the contexts where strong and moderate levels of CO were predominant ($M = 4.00$, $SD = 0.76$), or between the contexts where the weak and moderate comparative optimistic levels were predominant [$F(1, 113) = 2.44$, *ns* and $F(1, 113) = 1.06$, *ns,* respectively]. Thus, Hypothese 2' was not supported.

The results obtained in Experiment 3 clarify the results regarding Hypothesis 1 across the experiments. In this experiment, we measured only one dimension of social acceptance in each experimental condition so that participants could not compensate low ratings on one dimension with high ones on the other. Thus, the differences in results obtained for each dimension across the conditions are not an experimental artifact. We observed that participants valued the most optimistic targets on the social utility dimension but not on the social desirability dimension. Moreover, the context effect was partial and differed for each social dimension. On social utility judgments, the highly CO targets were judged the most useful when they were presented in the context of strong CO predominance. Even though weak CO predominance did not produce a linear trend in

the judgments, the highest comparative optimistic target was also judged more useful than all the other targets. Thus, as in the case of Experiment 2, it seems that the predominant level of CO did not affect the evaluation of the most comparative optimistic targets on the dimension of social utility in the weak and strong CO predominance contexts. But moderate CO predominance clearly influences the perception of CO targets by leveling their evaluations.

On the other hand, the results on the dimension of social desirability were not the same. In Experiment 2, the desirability of CO targets interacted with the predominant level of CO whereas in Experiment 3 such an interaction did not occur. This difference can be explained by different experimental designs and by different numbers of targets. In Experiment 2, participants viewed information on 16 targets, 10 critical and 6 contextual. In Experiment 3, participants viewed information on 9 targets, 5 critical and 4 contextual. The number of targets in this latter study, and the range of CO expressed, is smaller than in Experiment 2. In order to reduce these disparities and to examine the context effect as a function of the different levels of CO expressed, we conducted some new analyses after standardizing the scores.

Complementary analyses across all experiments

To gain an overall understanding of the role of CO in determining the social acceptance of targets, we undertook some new analyses that integrated data across all the experiments. Our objectives were to examine: 1) social acceptance on the two dimensions in relation to CO, 2) the relations between these dimensions when rating targets, and 3) the role of the predominant level of CO in these relations. These analyses concern the evaluations of social desirability and utility for all the critical targets across all the experiments, for a total of 24 critical targets. Across all the experiments, two items for assessing each dimension were identical (see Table 1); we only retained the responses to these items for these analyses. We also took into consideration participants' ratings of the CO of each target, which was evaluated as a manipulation check in each of the experiments. For each of the 24 targets, we calculated the mean social desirability, social utility,

and CO ratings across the participants evaluating it. We then calculated the correlations between these mean ratings across the 24 targets.

The correlations showed that the more the targets were rated as exhibiting comparative optimism, the more they were judged to be useful (r = .75; p < .001; N = 24) and the less they were judged to be desirable (r = -.48; p < .05; N = 24). Social desirability and utility were not significantly correlated (r = .04; *ns*; N = 24). This pattern of correlations is consistent with Hypothesis 1 stating that the most comparative optimistic targets would be more socially accepted on the social utility dimension than on the social desirability dimension. To illustrate, for the least comparative optimistic target of the 24, the mean utility rating was 2.2 and the mean desirability rating was 4.8, whereas these means were 5.7 and 3.1, respectively, for the most comparative optimistic target.

We conducted another similar analysis to examine the role of the predominant level of CO context on social acceptance ratings across Experiments 2 and 3 (context was not manipulated in Experiment 1). This analysis concerns the 15 critical targets of these experiments, and we examined the mean social utility, social desirability, and CO ratings for both the weak and strong CO predominance contexts (we did not consider the moderate CO predominance context only studied in Experiment 3). Concerning the correlation between CO and social desirability judgments, when strong CO predominated, a significant negative correlation was obtained (r = -.88; p < .001; N = 15), and in the weak CO predominance context, the correlation (r = .47, *ns; N = 15*) was positive but non significant. In contrast, for the correlation between CO and social utility, a significant positive correlation was obtained when the predominant level of CO was strong (r = .87; p < .001; N = 15) or weak (r = .85; p < .001; N = 15). These results are consistent with Hypothesis 2' suggesting a stronger role of context in judgments of desirability.

Furthermore, the relationship between the two social acceptance dimensions depended on the predominant level of CO among the targets. In the context of weak CO predominance, social desirability and social utility were positively correlated (r = .78; p

$< .001$; $N = 15$); in the strong CO predominance context, they were negatively correlated ($r = -.65$; $p < .01$; $N = 15$). Moreover, the utility judgments in the predominantly weak CO context were positively correlated with those from the predominantly strong CO context ($r = .72$; $p < .001$; $N = 15$), whereas the desirability judgments from the two contexts were not correlated ($r = -.43$; *ns*). In conclusion, the relations between the judgments of desirability and utility depend both on the method (measuring both dimensions in a within-participants approach or separately) and on the context (Judd et al., 2005).

General Discussion

Our pattern of results shows a straightforward distinction between the dimensions of social desirability and social utility supporting the idea that the two dimensions of social acceptance are useful to consider in the study of CO. Strong comparative optimistic targets were judged more useful than desirable. They were also judged more useful than weak comparative optimistic targets. In addition, we obtained a *uniqueness* effect on the desirability dimension. When targets were different compared to other targets (i.e., type of context), these targets were judged more desirable that when they were similar.

To summarize, in our experiments, we studied the social acceptance of comparative optimism without comparing it to comparative pessimism (Helweg-Larsen et al., 2002) or to an uncertain outlook on the future (Carver, Kus, & Scheier, 1994). Further, we employed various experimental designs in order to observe the consistency of the effects. We tested social utility and social desirability conjointly in Experiments 1 and 2 and independently in Experiment 3. We considered that the judgments about the CO targets (e.g., "Would you like to meet this person?" or "Would you like to work with the person on a class group project", see Helweg-Larsen et al., 2002) were an expression of social acceptance, as did Helweg-Larsen et al. (2002). However, Helweg-Larsen et al. (2002) measured social acceptance without distinguishing social utility and social desirability, and an examination of their measure indicates that two of the eight items could correspond to social utility, the remaining to social desir-

ability. In our studies, we distinguished both dimensions and found that targets were better accepted when they exhibited a strong rather than a weak CO, especially on social utility.

This pattern of results is consistent in part with previous results. As in the literature on CO outlook, we observed that strongly comparative optimistic persons are socially accepted. A vast literature shows links between CO and a great variety of health, emotional, and social benefits. These benefits are essentially personal (Shepperd et al., 2005), but also social (Carver et al., 1994). Persons expressing a comparative optimistic outlook are better judged for future relationships. Whereas Helweg-Larsen et al. (2002) showed that a comparative optimistic outlook was more socially accepted than comparative pessimism, and Carver et al. (1994) observed that optimism was more socially accepted than pessimism or having an uncertain outlook on the future, we observed social acceptance for different levels of CO outlook. A new perspective for research could be the study of the links between these different benefits (social and personal). One could then hypothesize that people who exhibit strong CO may be psychologically healthy because other people react to them positively.

More importantly, we examined this social acceptance in light of the distinction between acceptance on the social utility dimension and acceptance on the social desirability dimension. To compare the social desirability and social utility inspired by comparative optimism directly we used a common procedure in which participants judged targets on both dimensions (Experiments 1-2). We suggested that a strong, or too strong, comparative optimistic outlook on the future would not be so desirable. Indeed, a person who always says “more for me than for others” or “better for me than for others” is not evaluated in a favorable way. We proposed that highly comparative optimistic persons would be judged more favorably on the dimension of social utility than on the dimension of social desirability. In other words, strongly CO targets are perceived to have what it takes to succeed more than what it takes to be liked. Indeed, we can suppose that in a competitive system, a comparative optimistic is a person who proposes projects, undertakes social goals (to

create a business, to found a firm), and engages in actions which are socially useful in that they favor social functioning. All three experiments supported the existence of the two dimensions. Moreover, the results showed that the targets were judged more socially useful than socially desirable (Hypothesis 1; Dubois, 2003). Comparable effects have been obtained in other studies. For example, Cambon, Djouari, and Beauvois (2006) showed that persons exhibiting internal attributions and self-sufficiency judgments are seen as more socially useful than persons exhibiting external attributions and other-sufficiency judgments. They are also judged more socially useful than desirable. However, our results are relatively novel because they investigate social utility and social desirability in order to study the social acceptance of a comparative optimistic outlook on the future.

The strength of perceived social utility or of perceived social desirability is determined by targets' CO levels. We suggested that the most comparative optimistic targets would be judged the most favorably on social utility rather than on social desirability. Moreover, we proposed that social utility judgments would be associated linearly with the expression of CO whereas social desirability judgments would express the reverse association (a decrease in desirability as the expression of CO increases). Our results confirm our expectations (Hypothesis 1). The more comparative optimism the targets exhibited, the more they were perceived to be socially useful (Experiments 2 and 3) and the less they were perceived to be socially desirable (Experiments 1 and 3). In all cases, the most comparative optimistic targets were judged more socially useful than desirable. And this result was observed when the dimensions (social utility and social desirability) were tested conjointly (Experiments 1-2) or separately (Experiment 3), suggesting that the dimensions are not distinguished due to an experimental artifact. The recurrent pattern of effects reinforces the conclusions. Moreover, global *z* scores show a positive correlation between CO levels and utility and a negative correlation between CO levels and desirability. Without considering the informational contexts, utility and desirability are not correlated.

This pattern of results demonstrates that a great level of CO is not judged to be really desirable, and that it is judged more useful

than desirable. Explanations of these effects are not directly tested with our experiments. Taylor et al. (2003) showed that people see their friends positively when their friends are in good mental health and have strong psychological resources. Helweg-Larsen et al. (2002) and Carver et al. (1994) showed that optimistic targets are not rejected because they are perceived as not depressive. Despite these results, one cannot explain the differences found between the judgments of social desirability and social utility with an explanation based on depression proposing that the less comparative optimistic targets are more depressed than the more comparative optimistic ones. In this perspective, the most CO targets would not be depressed. Why then are they judged to be of low desirability? First, the artificial context in which our participants made their judgments did not allow them to have any other information about the targets. In contrast to what might occur in natural interactions, the participants could not have any interpersonal elements that could counterbalance their negative judgments. Their evaluations of the targets are then based on more "cold" information than on "hot" information. This frequent criticism of experimental studies on social judgment merits consideration. Nevertheless, such a criticism can not explain the effects of the context that we observed for desirability judgments. Indeed, the context effect may offer a partial explanation for the low desirability of the comparative optimistic targets: The target's rating depends on the set of other targets presented (Mussweiler, 2003).

We manipulated the context with the number of targets having a particular level of CO (i.e., type of context). We observed a uniqueness effect (Hypothesis 2; Lynn & Snyder, 2002; Snyder & Fromkin, 1980). Our complementary analyses across all critical targets clarified the specific effects for each context (predominantly weak *vs.* strong CO). In all cases, the more the targets were comparative optimistic the more they were judged socially useful. On the other hand, the social desirability of targets depended on the set of other targets presented. In accordance with Hypothesis 2', the predominance of a level of CO influenced the social desirability dimension more than the social utility dimension. For the social desirability dimension, our results were consistent with the uniqueness hypothesis. It is when the most

comparative optimistic targets were in a predominantly weak CO context and the least comparative optimistic targets were in a predominantly strong CO context that they were judged the most desirable. Globally, the results related to the effect of context were consistent in Experiment 2 and in the complementary analyses across all experiments. They were less clear in Experiment 3 (in this study these effects occurred only in the predominantly strong CO context) suggesting that these context effects were stronger when numerous levels of CO were used. Throughout this manuscript, we have used the term "context" because it is directly related to our experimental procedure. However, one could consider that this is equivalent to an operationalization of normativity. More particularly, in their Focus Theory of Normative Conduct, Cialdini, Reno, and Kallgren (1990) differentiated two categories of normative beliefs. Descriptive normative beliefs, which refer to what an individual thinks others do in a particular situation, and injunctive normative beliefs, which describe what an individual thinks others approve or disapprove of. The manipulation of the context we have made is clearly in line with a descriptive normative belief. When weak CO was predominant, we activated a descriptive norm where CO was low in the population whereas when strong CO was predominant, we activated a descriptive norm where CO was high in the population. It would also be interesting to study to what degree our manipulation of the descriptive norm is congruent or incongruent with the existence of an injunctive norm valuing the expression of comparative optimism or not. One interesting possibility for examining this idea would be to study the social acceptance of CO in cultures where CO is strongly normative (e.g., Western cultures) compared to cultures where CO is weakly normative (e.g., East Asians who are known to be less optimistic but not necessarily more pessimistic than North Americans; Rose, Endo, Windschitl, & Suls, 2008).

Conclusion

To conclude, our results show the importance of distinguishing between the dimensions of social utility and social desirability when investigating the social acceptance of targets expressing more or less CO. With the exception of a few studies (Norem, 2002; Taylor et al., 2003), the social acceptance of CO is typically reduced to its acceptance relative to the rejection of PC and is presented as unidimensional. The results presented here show that even if CO is generally more positively evaluated than PC, this acceptance varies both as a function of the dimension of social acceptance and of the context of judgment. These conclusions counter results tending to suggest that CO is accepted no matter what. We suggest that future research should replicate these effects with more levels of CO targets and other events, and test alternative explanations for the effects. To do so, targets showing more or less CO and CP must be tested regarding whether they are depressed or not, as Helweg-Larsen et al. (2002) or Carver et al. (1994) did. At this stage, it is difficult to explain the greater social utility and the weaker social desirability of strong CO targets based on their being judged as less depressed. However, we can conclude that to be desirable, people must exhibit a weak CO or be different from others. On the other hand, expressing a comparative optimistic outlook on the future leads to appearing useful for social functioning and showing a greater economic value. The results of the current studies contribute to defining the situations, for example professional or friendship, in which it is better to express CO or, on the contrary, to moderate it, in order to be socially accepted. In a more general way, we suggest that in the strong CO context, the most CO targets are representative of the modal norm (i.e., the targets are the most representative of the set of targets) which is also the social norm (i.e., the targets are the most valued of the set of targets; Dubois, 2003). Another set of experiments should address this assumption.

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Appendix

Mean evaluation of targets for the interaction effect between predominant level of CO, dimension of social acceptance and target's level of comparative optimism – Experiment 2

Predominant level of CO	Dimension of social acceptance	Level of critical target's comparative optimism	Mean
weak	utility	1	2.13
weak	utility	2	2.33
weak	utility	3	2.53
weak	utility	4	2.78
weak	utility	5	3.13
weak	utility	6	3.37
weak	utility	7	3.70
weak	utility	8	3.93
weak	utility	9	4.52
weak	utility	10	5.67
weak	desirability	1	2.05
weak	desirability	2	2.17
weak	desirability	3	2.35
weak	desirability	4	2.62
weak	desirability	5	2.67
weak	desirability	6	2.67
weak	desirability	7	3.32
weak	desirability	8	3.33
weak	desirability	9	3.75
weak	desirability	10	3.95
Strong	utility	1	2.22
Strong	utility	2	3.75
Strong	utility	3	4.80
Strong	utility	4	4.83
Strong	utility	5	4.92
Strong	utility	6	5.10
Strong	utility	7	5.33
Strong	utility	8	5.62
Strong	utility	9	5.65
Strong	utility	10	5.73
Strong	desirability	1	3.05
Strong	desirability	2	3.93
Strong	desirability	3	3.52
Strong	desirability	4	3.30

Predominant level of CO	Dimension of social acceptance	Level of critical target's comparative optimism	Mean
Strong	desirability	5	3.13
Strong	desirability	6	3.03
Strong	desirability	7	2.65
Strong	desirability	8	2.43
Strong	desirability	9	2.33
Strong	desirability	10	2.17