

# **When does Good Envy turn into Bad Envy? The Relationship between Benign and Malicious Envy**

## **Abstract**

Previous research has distinguished between forms of envious reactions - malicious envy that is characterized by hostile feelings leading to negative consequences for firms and benign envy that is free of hostility and leading to positive consequences. In this paper, we focus on identifying conditions when benign envy can turn into malicious envy. Results show that perceived attractiveness of the purchase to others (vs. to the self) and tendency to engage in ability-oriented comparisons positively moderates the relationship between benign and malicious envy. In contrast, tendency to engage in opinion-orientated comparisons negatively moderates the relationship between benign and malicious envy.

**Key-words:** envy, ability, opinion, comparisons

**Track:** Consumer behavior

## 1. Introduction

Envy has been argued to steer people's consumption (cf. Belk, 2008). Most definitions of envy recognize that envy is a feeling of displeasure that one feels when comparing oneself to others who enjoy a superior advantage that the envier also desires (Salovey & Rodin, 1991; Parrott & Smith, 1993). Furthermore, envy is associated with a mixture and a range of qualitatively different types of negative emotions, such as, inferiority, hostility, admiration, hate, resentment, anger, sadness, anxiety and guilt (Salovey & Rodin, 1986; Smith & Kim, 2007). Envy has traditionally been regarded as a hostile feeling, but lately, eloquent research by Van de Ven and his colleagues turned this assumption around by showing that envy also can yield positive consequences (Van de Ven, Zeelenberg, & Pieters, 2009; 2010; 2011ab). These scholars distinguish between a positive form of envy, i.e. benign envy, and a negative form of envy, i.e. malicious envy (Van de Ven et al., 2009; 2010; 2011ab). Maliciously envious people "feel frustrated and try to level the difference with superior others by pulling them down", feel hostility towards the envied and perceive the benefit as unfair (Van de Ven et al., 2011a, p. 985). Benign envy is also characterized by feelings of frustration, but people are trying to "level the difference by moving themselves up", they admire the envied and perceive the benefit as fair (Van de Ven et al., 2011a, p. 985).

Empirical evidence suggests that evoking the right type of envy is important for firms. Van de Ven and his colleagues (2011a) have proposed that benign envy is beneficial for firms, as they show that people who feel benign envy are willing to pay a higher price for a product relative to the control group, while malicious envy is harmful as it makes consumers want to pay less for the advertised product and more for a similar but different product. Clearly, benign envy is regarded as a positive force for firms, while malicious envy is associated with negative outcomes for the firm. Linguistically, it is interesting to note that the same term "envy" contains terms that are almost polar opposites. Considering that the same term can yield such different consequences, yet denote the same type of emotional reaction, we propose that marketers need to recognize that benign envy may serve as an antecedent to malicious envy. Indeed, Van de Ven (2009) suggests that the two are closely related or that one form of envy can easily "transmute" into the other (p. 134). Thus, identifying the "tipping point" across these two forms of envy would bring marketers an understanding of when beneficial envy is likely to turn into harmful envy. We propose that envy may actually be one term with two facets, with a grey zone in between. The aim of this paper is to investigate the relationship between benign and malicious envy and identify the tipping point – when does white (benign) envy become grey, and when does grey turn into black (malicious) envy? In this study, it is proposed that perceived attractiveness of the purchase to others and the tendency to engage in ability-oriented comparisons strengthens the relationship between benign and malicious envy, whereas the tendency to engage in opinion-orientated comparisons mitigates the relationship between benign and malicious envy.

## 2. Hypotheses development

Most definitions of envy comprise the assumption that the envier should want or desire the benefit (cf. Smith & Kim, 2007). Thus, it can be assumed that the more a person desires a product, the more frustrated and the more envy is likely to be evoked. Therefore it can be expected that attractiveness of the benefit to the self positively moderates between benign and malicious envy. However, scholars have proposed that envy is a response to esteem-threats (Salovey, 1991). Previous literature on the effects of ego-threats have generally showed that people react very strongly in situations where they risk looking bad in front of others or when they feel that the status is threatened (cf. Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Baumeister, Bushman, & Campbell, 2000; Smith & Kim, 2007). Drawing upon this theory we find it

equally plausible that perceived opinions and desires of other people play an important role in understanding what type of envy is evoked at the marketplace. Mounting evidence suggests that other people are essential for understanding consumption behavior. Despite the popular lore of the individualistic consumer, empirical evidence suggests that perceptions of others often are more important than one's own preferences. Scholars have proposed that consumption can be considered a tool for gaining important resources that can potentially strengthen one's position, e.g. social status, belongingness, admiration and strengthened ego (Mead et al., 2011). Thus, drawing upon this literature, we propose that it is likely that people are sensitive to what purchases other people value and that this impacts envious reactions. Furthermore, we theorize that perceived attractiveness of a purchase to other people increases the likelihood that malicious envy is evoked. The reason for this is that attractiveness to other people is related to a person's self-worth because possessing the desired good is relevant to the enviers' social position. Therefore, we propose that:

**H1:** Perceived attractiveness of the purchase to oneself positively moderates the relationship between benign and malicious envy.

**H2:** Perceived attractiveness of the purchase to others positively moderates the relationship between benign and malicious envy.

Previous literature has suggested that envious reactions stems from negative comparisons to other people (Salovey, 1991; Smith & Kim, 2007; Van de Ven et al., 2011a). This theory postulates that when a person faces a situation where another person is more successful in an important domain, this poses a threat to the positive image of the envier (Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996; Salovey, 1991; Silver & Sabini, 1978). The literature on comparisons postulates that some people tend to engage in social comparisons more than others and that the nature of social comparisons can differ (Festinger, 1954; Gibbons & Buunk, 1999). More specifically, in their development of the Iowa-Netherlands Comparison Orientation Measure (INCOM) measuring comparison orientation, Gibbons and Buunk (1999) draw upon Festinger's (1954) theories and report that social comparison orientation loaded on two different factors - ability and opinion. Ability refers to people's tendencies to compare their abilities and skills with those of other people and answer the question "How am I doing" (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999, p. 129). The motive to engage in ability comparisons is to measure up against other people in order to self-enhance, foster esteem or a sense of self-worth. Opinion-oriented comparisons refer to comparisons where a person uses other people as a reference point for evaluating what to think about something, "What should I think or feel" (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999, p. 129). Judging by the items of Gibbons and Buunk's (1999) INCOM-scale, the ability dimension relates to enhancement of the self while opinion refers more to an orientation towards other's approval. Thus, we suggest that tendency to make ability-orientated comparisons will increase the likelihood that people will feel malicious envy because these people are more concerned with self-enhancement and thus more vulnerable to ego-threats. In contrast, we suggest that people who engage in opinion-orientated comparisons are less likely to turn maliciously envious because they are less interested in self-enhancement but rather have a social orientation to blending in. Therefore, we propose that:

**H3:** The tendency to engage in ability-orientated comparisons positively moderates the relationship between benign and malicious envy.

**H4:** The tendency to engage in opinion-orientated comparisons negatively moderates the relationship between benign and malicious envy.

### **3. Data analysis and results**

125 students (37.6 % females,  $M_{\text{age}} = 22$ ,  $SD = 4.09$ ) took part in the study. Participants were shown a color-picture featuring an advertisement for an iPhone with product information and a short story. Following a similar study-outline of Van de Ven et al. (2011a), in the story, the participants were asked to imagine themselves working on a joint project together with a fellow student from the same University. The story stated that during the first day of cooperation, the fellow student mentions buying an iPhone and demonstrating the phone and its features to the others. Following the recommendations of Van de Ven and his colleagues (2011a) female participants read a story where the fellow student was a woman and males a version where the person in the story was a man. For the same reason, the story emphasized that the fellow student attends the same University as the participant. Next, participants answered a series of questions about their envy, impressions of the product and the person in the story on a 7-point likert-scale (Van de Ven et al., 2011a) as well as Gibbons and Buunk's (1999) Iowa-Netherlands Comparison Orientation Measure (INCOM) scale.

H1 proposed a positive moderating effect of perceived attractiveness of the purchase to oneself on the link between benign and malicious envy. This effect was not significant and thus H1 is rejected. H2 proposed a positive moderating effect would take place regarding the perceived attractiveness of the purchase to others. The interaction effect is positive and significant ( $\beta = .176$ ,  $t = 1.87$ ,  $p > .05$ ), lending support for H2. H3 proposed that the tendency to engage in ability-oriented comparisons would positively moderate the relationship between benign and malicious envy. The results support this hypothesis: the interaction effect between benign envy and tendency to ability-oriented comparisons is positive and significant ( $\beta = .173$ ,  $t = 1.85$ ,  $p > .05$ ). The main effect of ability comparison was also significant in the model ( $\beta = .311$ ,  $t = 3.40$ ,  $p > .01$ ), meaning that the tendency to ability-comparison also has a direct influence on malicious envy even in the presence of the other factors. No other main effects were significant in the model. H4 suggested that the tendency to engage in opinion-oriented comparisons would negatively moderate the relationship between benign and malicious envy. This hypothesis is supported ( $\beta = -.190$ ,  $t = -2.05$ ,  $p > .01$ ).

### **4. Discussion**

The results of this study extend the work by Van de Ven and his colleagues (2011a) by identifying factors that positively and negatively moderate the relationship between benign and malicious envy. The findings show that perceived attractiveness of the purchase to others (vs. to the self) as well as tendency to engage in ability-oriented comparisons (vs. opinion-oriented comparisons) positively moderate the relationship between benign and malicious envy, whereas engaging in opinion-orientated (vs. self-oriented) comparisons negatively moderates the relationship between benign and malicious envy. Also, these findings extend our understanding of the nature of envy. Most definitions of envy pinpoint that the desire and attractiveness of a possession to the self predict envious reactions (cf. Salovey & Rodin, 1991; Parrott & Smith, 1993). However, our results show that malicious envy is enhanced when the product was perceived to be attractive to other people – not attractive to the self. Thus, this result challenge traditional definitions of envy as something that is desirable for the envied. This result can be explained in two, but not mutually excluded, ways. Firstly, the results provide additional evidence to the bulk of research suggesting that consumption is a social phenomenon and that others' opinions and preferences often mean more to people than their own and that people take actions to feel included (cf. Mead et al., 2011). Secondly, the results

provide evidence that malicious envy is associated with concerns of how well one is doing in relation to others. It is interesting to note, that our results suggest that people who tend to engage in ability-orientated comparisons are also more likely to react with malicious envy. Thus, the results support a theory that “good envy” is likely to turn ugly for people who are relatively who are concerned about their social status in comparison to others (cf. Salovey & Rodin, 1991; Smith & Kim, 2007).

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