

## THE PSYCHOLOGY OF ENVY IN BRAND COMMUNITIES: EXAMINING THE EFFECTS OF STATUS HIERARCHIES AND DESERVINGNESS

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### Abstract

*Envy is a universal emotion that can be triggered by upward social comparisons and the possession of prestige products. In this research, we investigate the impact of status hierarchies within brand communities on the occurrence of Malicious and Benign Envy. We conducted two experiments to examine the antecedents and consequences of envy, as well as their effect on members of brand communities. We specifically focused on the role of deservingness and self-brand connection (SBC). In Experiment 1, we found that deservingness affects feelings of both Malicious and Benign Envy. Participants showed Benign Envy toward a higher status target who is deemed worthy of good fortune, but experienced Malicious Envy if the higher status member of the brand community was deemed unworthy of the good fortune. In Experiment 2, we manipulated deservingness and SBC to investigate their effects on the emotional presence of Malicious and Benign Envy. We found that for Malicious Envy, the impact of the source of the material item was greater for high SBC participants than for low SBC participants. Our research sheds light on the impact of status hierarchies within brand communities on Envy and provides insights into the role of deservingness and SBC in this process. The findings suggest that luxury brands can create hierarchical groups within their communities, leading to upward social comparisons and potential envy. We discuss the practical implications of our findings for marketers and brand managers, as well as future research directions.*

**Keywords:** Envy, Status Hierarchies, Brand Communities, Deservingness, Self-Brand Connection, Malicious Envy, Benign Envy, Upward Social Comparison, Prestige Products, Luxury Brands.

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### INTRODUCTION

In a consumer society there are inevitably two kinds of slaves: the prisoners of addiction and the prisoners of Envy.” Ivan Illich, Tools for Conviviality, Chapter 3 (1973)

According to social comparison theory (SCT), people continually evaluate themselves by comparing their achievements and abilities with others’ (Festinger, 1954; Suls & Wheeler, 2000). When people perceive that others possess clear social advantages relative to themselves, upward social comparison can lead to feelings of Envy and depression (Smith, Parrott, Diener, Hoyle, & Kim, 1999; Smith & Kim, 2007). Conspicuously displayed prestige products can also induce upward social comparisons. Sundie and colleagues found that prestige products signal status and success, and can generate the same emotional responses as other forms of privilege (Sundie, Ward,

Beal, Chin & Geiger-Oneto, 2009). As luxury brands become more accessible to the mass class, owners of luxury brands can be separated into hierarchical groups. Entry-level members may still engage in upward social comparison, even though they own the same brand as the individuals they perceive as socially superior. Such comparisons can lead to Malicious Envy, Benign Envy, anger, and resentfulness.

### Social comparison theory

Most of the research related to SCT has concentrated on comparisons of abilities (Festinger, 1954; Wheeler, 1966) emotions (Wrightsmann, 1960) and personality traits (Hackmiller, 1966). Presumably, people can make comparisons to others based on their social status and material possessions. Festinger’s (1954) fundamental hypotheses and primary interests were in discovering why, how, and

to who people engage in social comparison. People can use social comparisons to self-evaluate by comparing themselves to a similar other (lateral). They can use social comparisons to self-enhance by comparing themselves to less advantaged others (downward). Finally, they can use social comparisons to self-improve, by comparing themselves to slightly more advantage others (upward). Self-evaluation appears to be one of the main motivations for engaging in social comparisons (Festinger, 1954).

People do not always seek accurate feedback when engaging in social comparison, but instead want to maintain a positive self-image (Wills, 1981). This often leads to downward social comparison in which the target for comparison is one who performs more poorly than the person making the comparison. For example, if I want to feel better about myself as a darts player, I will not make a comparison to a professional darts player, but to an amateur who consistently performs more poorly than I do. Even if I fail, I can probably find someone who has failed worse than I have. As a result, I will experience, or should experience, an esteem boost.

In contrast, people can also use upward social comparison to compare themselves to those who are slightly better than they are. They use the advantaged person as a benchmark to be achieved. When engaging in upward social comparison, people can gain insight into how they might perform better. Instead of comparing myself to a professional darts player, I can compare myself to a fellow amateur who beats me, if not just barely, on a consistent basis. This would help me see the ways that I can improve myself and set goals to attain. Given this information, social comparisons appear to be strategic processes that can result in motivational goals, or esteem boosts.

There are myriad potential comparison standards for each social comparison in which we engage. A darts player can compare to a daughter, son, a practice partner, Eric Bristow, or Phil Taylor (the last two are really good). It is important to know to whom we should make our comparisons. According to Festinger (1954), comparison standards are made with similar others on critical dimensions. Critical dimensions are specifically relevant to the comparison. For example, it is not very telling if I beat my nephew at darts; he is only two. The critical

dimension, age, discounts my achievement. In order to obtain accurate self-evaluation, it is important to identify similar standards and critical dimensions (Corcoran, Crusius, & Mussweiler, 2011).

If we are seeking self-enhancement as a means of maintaining a positive self-view, then we might select inferior standards (Wills, 1981). People can seek to boost their self-view with a downward social comparison. This could be an automatic process that results in inaccuracies. People with a threatened self-view are especially prone to engaging in downward social comparisons.

However, when we are seeking to self-improve, we might engage in upward social comparison, and select as a comparison standard someone who is slightly better (Bandura, 1986, 1997). I would not compare my darts abilities to my friend Jimmy—he is a top player in the state. Such an effort would be futile; I can however compare myself to my friend Jeff, who is only slightly better than me. Comparing myself to Jimmy would leave me feeling dejected and as though my goals are unattainable. Comparing myself to Jeff, if I perceive the goals as attainable, will help me to improve (Handley & Goss, 2012; Stapel & Koomen, 2000; Lockwood & Kunda, 1997). When people make upward comparisons, their increased perception of self-efficacy could drive a performance improvement (Lirgg & Feltz, 1991; Maddux, 1995).

The current research explores the effects of upward social comparisons when they occur among owners of an identically branded item. It is hypothesized that people will make comparisons based on relevant standards related to advantage. Several variables related to advantage could present as critical dimensions. One of specific interest is the source of the branded item. Further, whether an item was deserved or undeserved might affect how people make their comparisons.

### **Self-brand connection**

Another variable relevant to my research is Self-Brand Connection (SBC). SBC is a potential domain on which one can engage in social comparison. For example, one can be highly connected to a brand of shoes and make personal comparisons to others who are also connected to that same brand. Below, I will discuss several components of SBC including its origin and how it relates to the present research. The goal is to provide a general overview of SBC.

Branding started as a literal sign of ownership. Livestock were branded, burned, with a symbol indicating that they belonged to the owner of that brand (Tennant, 1994). People seem to develop an attachment to the brands they use. People derive social, cultural, and personal meaning from the brands with which they associate (Thomas & Jewell 2019; Fournier 1998; McCracken, 1986). Academically, we define brands in terms of awareness, quality, loyalty, as-sociations, and equity (Aaker 1996; Keller 1993). Brands can even be explored by examining the relationships they foster and the community ties that result from strong brand connections (Fournier, 1998).

Consumers' perceptions of a brand depend on how they interpret information that the brand presents. Consumers form relationships with brands much like they form relationships with people; they form over time and are based on several interactions between the consumer and the brand (Fournier, 1998). According to Fournier (1998), during encounters with the brand – a print ad, for example – people construct opinions and thoughts about the brand. As time passes these opinions can lead to salient feelings and beliefs about the brand; in other words, an attitude can be formed about the brand (Fournier, 1998). Fournier (1998) further states that potential influencers that a brand might have are stored in the memory of the consumer.

Although sometimes brand associations are made based on utilitarian qualities of the brand, there are other situations in which we can see much higher SBCs between the consumers and the brand. SBC goes beyond convenience; people go out of their way to obtain a brand with which they have a high SBC (Escalas & Bettman, 2003). These higher order connections also go beyond fulfilling a utilitarian need. When a high SBC is present, the brand speaks to the psychological and personal beliefs of the user (Escalas & Bettman, 2003). At this point the brand is linked to how the consumer construes him or herself. This integration is the base of a SBC. The SBC construct captures the extent to which a consumer has integrated a particular brand into his or her identity. The brand can represent who the consumer is, or who the consumer wants to be (Escalas, 2004). Brands can fulfill the psychological need for creating, maintaining, and communicating oneself to the

outside world (Escalas, 2004). If consumers use brands as a way of communicating themselves, then the brand may also be a basis for social comparison. In line with SCT, SBC connections may also occur when the consumer believes that similar others use the product. Perhaps, by using a brand that they perceive people of slightly higher status to use, they can level up their self-identity.

Relevant to the current research, one of the potential emotional consequences of SCT may be Envy. Further, SBC might intensify the feelings of Envy one experiences in a social situation. I hope to investigate the effects social comparison and SBC have on Envy within a consumption context. Before I detail the Envy variable, it is important to explain in greater detail how SBC relates to SCT.

Narrative processing—turning events into a story—can create or enhance SBC (Escalas, 2004). We use narratives in the current research to induce a connection between people and the brands that they are asked to imagine owning. Specifically, we ask participants to imagine that they own an Audi car. Again, this relates to SCT in that brand connections may help self-evaluation and self-construal needs.

In the current research, prestige will be manipulated within a single brand (e.g. Audi). In addition to there being different brands, there are different brand lines, which represent levels of prestige (Audi A4, A6, R8, etc.). The current research investigates how SCT within brand ownership and SBC will affect the critical variable envy.

SBC can be a form of personal relevance, similar to the SCT construct. Escalas and Bettman (2003; p. 341) argue that, “consumers actively construct themselves by selecting brands with associations relevant to an aspect of their current self-concept or possible self.” In other words, the brand can become an essential aspect of one's identity (Escalas & Bettman, 2003). As a result, any challenge to this aspect of one's identity may result in feelings of Envy.

### **Envy**

When individuals have a high level of SBC and engage in Social Comparison it is likely that feelings of Envy will emerge. Our natural propensity to engage in social comparison (Mussweiler & Epstude, 2009) might shed light on why individuals experienced feelings of Envy when presented with scenarios regarding deserving/undeserving others. For

example, if one is highly connected to a brand of shoes and he sees someone wearing a limited edition pair of that brand of shoes, that he was not able to get himself, he will likely experience Envy. Below, I will discuss several components of Envy including its origin and how it relates to the present research.

Envy is the painful emotion caused by the relatively better fortune of others. According to Smith and Kim (2007), understanding Envy is important because it is a hostile emotion that can prompt aggressive behaviors. That said, semantic issues surrounding Envy make studying Envy less straightforward than is optimal (van de Ven, Zeelenberg, & Pieters, 2009). At the root of this semantic issue is that people often confuse the definitions of Envy and jealousy. Envy arises when another person has something that one desires, whereas jealousy is a fear of losing something one already possesses to another person. Usually, jealousy is felt in the context of interpersonal relationships and is less related to objects. Fortunately for Envy researchers, even though the words are often confused, it is more likely that jealousy will be used incorrectly to describe Envy than Envy will be incorrectly used to describe jealousy (van de Ven et al., 2009). Thus, when individuals are asked to report Envy during psychological experiments, they rarely confuse it with jealousy (van de Ven et al., 2009).

It is necessary to distinguish between two types of Envy that are identified by scholars. Smith and Kim (2007) claim that Envy proper (also known as Malicious Envy) is the Envy defined in dictionaries and the main focus of research on Envy. Malicious Envy can be considered a dual focus emotion, one that is directed toward the superior other as well as toward oneself, that is patently negative and presents with hostility (Loureiro, De Plaza & Taghian, 2020; Smith & Kim, 2007). Benign Envy is considered to be free of hostility (Salerno, Laran, & Janiszewski, 2019; Smith & Kim, 2007). The theoretical distinctions between Benign Envy and Malicious Envy form the foundation of the current research and offer justification for my experimental designs and dependent measure composites.

Envy is often associated with longing for or coveting something that another person has (Parrott & Smith, 1993). Though connected, it is not correct to say that longing and Envy are the same emotion (Parrott &

Smith, 1993). Malicious Envy is a dual focus emotion that is directed at a superior other and oneself, whereas longing is a singular focus emotion aimed at an object of desire (Smith & Kim, 2007).

Resentment is another emotion often coupled with Malicious Envy (Smith & Kim, 2007). Resentment is an emotion directed toward a person who has reached a superior position objectively, whereas Malicious Envy is an emotion directed toward a person who has reached a superior position subjectively (Smith & Kim, 2007; Smith 1991). In other words, resentment is directed toward a person who has justly obtained a superior position, whereas Malicious Envy is directed toward a person who has unjustly reached a superior position (van de Ven et al., 2009). In fact, some argue that Malicious Envy triggers an immediate, subjective derivation of injustice as a way of legitimizing the initial feeling of Envy (van de Ven et al., 2009). Further, with the passage of time, envious people rationalize their feelings by claiming injustice (Heider, 1958). These feelings of injustice create the hostile aspect of Envy (Smith & Kim, 2007), and injustice is the key emotion differentiating Malicious Envy from Benign Envy (Smith & Kim, 2007; van de Ven et al., 2009). In defense of envious people, many invidious advantages are unfair. Because the envious person cannot be blamed for his or her position of inferiority, it should be reasonable to attribute the separation between the advantaged and the disadvantaged as simply being unjust. In other words, the envious person did not do anything specific to earn their position of inferiority, but it exists all the same.

Given the nature of Envy, peoples' level of SBC should affect the intensity of the Envy that they feel toward the target when they make upward social comparisons. These predictions are based on the literature related to the justice aspect of Malicious Envy (Smith & Kim, 2007). According to Smith and Kim (2007) Individuals are more likely to experience Malicious Envy if they feel the object of Envy was obtained unjustly. In other words, an individual who deems herself equal to the target individual in all aspects (age, social class, brand community member), except for the high status car, will conclude that the object was unjustly acquired in order to bring the envied target back down to her level. The logic behind Hypothesis 3 is that with Malicious Envy



those who have a high SBC should be more affected by finding out that some-one unjustly obtained an object of desire than those who have a low SBC. Speculatively, this is due to the personal relevance of the brand.

H1: Malicious Envy will be greater if a higher status member of the brand community is gifted a car (unjust advantage) rather than earning it (just).

H2: Malicious Envy will be greater as Self-Brand Connection increases.

H3: With Malicious Envy, the impact of the source of the car will be greater for High Self-Brand Connection than for Low Self-Brand Connection.

Van de Ven and colleagues (2009) elucidate the relation between Benign Envy, inspiration, and admiration. As I will explain below, admiration and inspiration can be differentiated in a similar way to the differentiation of Malicious Envy and resentment. Admiration is a single focus emotion, sometimes present in upward social comparison situations. Some argue that Benign Envy transmutes into admiration much like Malicious Envy transmutes into hostility (van de Ven et al., 2009). The emotion one experiences depends on the envious person's determination of whether the superior others are justified in their positions. If the superior others' actions are justified, then the envious person should experience more Benign Envy than Malicious Envy. Inspiration is a dual focus emotion that motivates the envious person to try to be more like the superior other. Van de Ven and colleagues (2011) indicate that inspiration in Benign Envy situations motivate the envious person to level up, meaning that the envious person aspires to the level of the envied. Conversely, perceived injustice in Malicious Envy situations motivates hostility and aggression. Pain and frustration are not absent from Benign Envy situations, but the feeling of frustration signals that the coveted item is worth the work that one must put into attaining it (van de Ven et al., 2009). With Benign Envy, people like and admire the comparison other more. Due to this higher level of liking, it is possible that they will try to level up. This might be especially true if there is a high level of personal relevance in the form of high SBC.

H4: Benign Envy will be greater when a higher status brand community member earns a car rather than receiving it as a gift.

H5: Benign Envy will be greater as Self-Brand Connection increases.

Though Benign Envy is associated with negative emotions (Van de Ven et al., 2011), it induces the desire to level up to the target individual, whereas Malicious Envy motivates individuals to try to level down. When the envied object was justly obtained, the felt emotions will be directed toward the envied individual in the form of admiration, inspiration, and happiness.

Based on my predictions, in social comparison situations, both SBC and deservingness/justice should have an effect on how much envy one feels about a target.

## **Experiment 1**

### *2.1 Method*

**Individuals and Procedure.** Two hundred thirty-two participants were recruited through Amazon's Mechanical Turk (Mage = 31.7, 56% male) to complete a short survey via Qualtrics for \$0.20 incentive. One of the goals of Experiment 1 was to insure that the individuals would register the Deservingness manipulation. Finally, though SBC was not manipulated, I explored the effects of SBC and Deservingness on Malicious Envy and Benign Envy. At the beginning of the experiment, individuals were told that they would be answering questions based on their snap judgments about people and products. They were first instructed to imagine that they had recently purchased a used Audi A4 (\$27,500). This information was presented with a picture of the car as well as several pertinent car specifications. After viewing that page, they filled out the SBC Scale (Escalas & Bettman, 2003). They were then instructed to read a scenario while imagining that everything taking place was, in fact, happening to them. They were also reminded that it was very important for them to give their gut feeling response to each question they were asked.

The scenario indicated that the participant would be joining some friends as well as one of their friends, who the participant did not know well, at a restaurant for dinner. While sitting outside, waiting for everyone to arrive, the participant and friends saw a man driving a brand new Audi R8 (\$150,000) stop at the valet stand and rev the engine. Jason, the owner of the R8 and the friend of the participant's friends, instructed the valet to take good care of the new car.

The participant's friends then went to talk to Jason and check out the new car. When Jason arrives at the table, one of the participant's friends asks how Jason was able to afford such an expensive car. The individual was reminded that this was a question he or she might also be wondering, considering the fact that Jason seemed to be similar in age. This is where the Deservingness manipulation was placed.

Participants were randomly assigned to one of two Deservingness conditions. In the undeserving condition, individuals were informed that Jason, the subject of the presented scenario, had bought his car after he had successfully founded and operated a small sign printing company. Individuals in the undeserving condition were informed that Jason has a rich uncle who buys all of his nieces and nephews new cars.

After participants finished reading the scenario, they answered several questions about their emotions related to the scenario (in order to reduce demand effects, a mix of positive and negative emotions were included). Finally, the participants completed a demographics questionnaire, were asked to recount the details of the scenario (as an attention check) and fully debriefed (all stimuli and measures were borrowed from Sundie et al., 2009; Sundie, Beal, Perkins, & Ward, 2014).

**Independent Variables.** Participants were randomly assigned to a Deservingness ("deserved" vs. "undeserved") condition. After being told that they had purchased an entry level Audi, their SBC was measured using the SBC Scale (Escalas & Bettman, 2003).

**Dependent Measures.** As noted above, items used to measure Malicious Envy and Benign Envy were interspersed with other measures to prevent demand effects. Three items, presented on 1 to 9 scales (anchored at 1 = not at all to 9 = extremely) assessed Envy of the social attention and recognition that Jason received as well as individuals' feelings of injustice (Sundie et al., 2009). Based on a factor analysis, these three items were combined to create a Malicious Envy composite ( $\alpha = .79$ ). Five items, presented on a 1 to 9 scale (anchored at 1 = not at all to 9 = extremely) assessed happiness, admiration, inspiration, pleased, and pride felt for Jason receiving his new car (Sundie et al., 2009). These five

items were combined to create a Benign Envy composite ( $\alpha = .90$ ).

**Manipulation Check.** At the end of the experiment, in order to assess participants' feelings of Deservingness, they were asked to rank how much Jason deserved the car on a 1 (not at all) to 9 (very much) scale.

## 2.2 Results

**Factor Analysis.** Though the items comprising the Benign Envy and Malicious Envy composites have been identified as relevant measures of Envy in both empirical and scholarly works (for a review, see Smith & Kim 2007), the factorability of the eight dependent variables was conducted here. Several criteria for the factorability of a correlation were assessed. First, all items correlated at least .4 with at least one other item, suggesting reasonable factorability. Additionally, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy was .8, above the recommended value of .6, and Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant ( $\chi^2(28) = 1149.42$ ,  $p < .0001$ ). Finally, the communalities were all above .3, confirming that each item shared variance with other items. Given these overall indicators, a factor analysis was conducted with all eight items.

The Maximum Likelihood extraction method was used to identify distinct Benign and Malicious Envy components. The initial eigen values showed that the first factor explained 47.92% of the variance and the second factor 26.63% of the variance. These were the only two factors with eigen values over one. This two-factor solution was examined using promax and oblimin rotations of the factor-loading matrix (Fabrigar, Wegener, MacCallum, & Strahan, 1999). There was little difference between the promax and oblimin solutions, thus both solutions were examined in the subsequent analyses before deciding on a promax rotation for the final solution.

After three iterations, none of the eight items were removed. A promax rotation provided the best loadings on the factor structure. All items had primary loadings over .6 and only one item had a cross-loading above .3 (admiration for Jason), however this item had a strong primary loading of .75. Scholarly predictions about where admiration fits into the Envy transmutation process differ. Some authors liken Benign Envy to admiration and longing (Smith & Kim, 2007) whereas others posit that

Benign Envy can transmute into admiration (van de Ven et al. 2009; 2011). Given that it is hard to assess felt emotions along a temporal line and the admiration measure loads highly onto Factor 1, I have chosen to retain it in the composite. The internal consistency of both factors was tested, with  $\alpha = .90$  for the Benign Envy composite and  $\alpha = .79$  for the Malicious Envy composite.

**Manipulation Checks and Demographics.** As expected, individuals in the “deserved” Deservingness condition indicated that Jason deserved his car significantly more than the individuals in the “undeserved” Deservingness condition (6.65 vs. 4.28;  $F[1, 231] = 61.22, p < .0001$ ). I conducted a reliability test of the seven measures in the SBC Scale ( $\alpha = .98$ ). There were no effects of gender and age on any of the focal variables for this experiment; therefore, they will not be discussed further.

**Test of Hypotheses.** I predicted that Malicious Envy will be greater if a higher status member of the brand community is gifted a car rather than earning it. (H1), that Malicious Envy will be greater as SBC increases (H2), and that with Malicious Envy the impact of the source of the car will be greater for high SBC than for Low SBC (H3).

To test these hypotheses, I entered SBC and Car Source into a regression analysis to determine whether they predicted Malicious Envy. Supporting Hypothesis 1, individuals in the undeserved/gift condition scored higher on the Malicious Envy composite than individuals in the deserved/earned condition (4.83 vs. 4.10; [ $\beta = .479, t(230) = 2.00, p < .047$ ]). Supporting Hypothesis 2, the effect of SBC was significant ( $\beta = .555, t(230) = 7.37, p < .0001$ ). Malicious Envy was greater as SBC increased. No support was found for Hypothesis 3, as there was no interaction between SBC and deservingness ( $\beta = -.077, t[230] = -.701, p = .484$ ).

Further, I predicted that Benign Envy will be greater if a higher status member of the brand community is gifted a car rather than earning it. (H4), that Benign Envy will be greater as SBC increases (H5), and that with Benign Envy the impact of the source of the car will be greater for high SBC than for Low SBC (H6).

To test these hypotheses, I entered SBC and Car Source into a regression analysis to determine whether they predicted Benign Envy. Supporting

Hypothesis 4, individuals in the unde-served/gift condition scored higher on the Benign Envy composite than individuals in the de-served/earned condition (5.96 vs. 4.90; [ $\beta = -1.263, t(230) = -5.614, p < .0001$ ]). Supporting Hypothesis 5, the result of SBC was significant ( $\beta = .42, t[230] = 5.945, p < .0001$ ), as Benign Envy was greater as SBC increased. No support was found for Hypothesis 6, as there was no interaction between SBC and deservingness ( $\beta = .019, t(230) = .185, p = .853$ ).

### 2.3 Discussion

Experiment 1 was designed to test five hypotheses. The results of Experiment 1 provide evidence for hypotheses 1, 2, 4, and 5. Malicious Envy will be greater if a higher status member of the brand community is gifted a car rather than earning it. Further, Malicious Envy will be greater as SBC increases. These findings are in line with previous research. Participants should feel more Malicious Envy if a target is undeserving of a high status object. Further, as participants feel more connected to a brand, they should feel more Malicious Envy toward one who possesses an object of their desire.

Additionally, Benign Envy will be greater if a higher status member of the brand community earns a car. Further Benign Envy will be greater as SBC increases. Brand community members will admire other members of their community who work hard to obtain objects of their desire. They will be proud of their achievement and happy for them.

Support for Hypotheses 3 and 6 was not obtained. The main reason support may not have been obtained is that all of the participants were induced to have high SBC. They were asked to imagine that they had all recently joined the Audi community. In Experiment 2, I will manipulate SBC to see if I can identify an interaction between SBC and car deservingness and determine whether a causal relation exists.

### Experiment 2

#### 3.1 Method

**Individuals and Procedure.** Two hundred nine individuals were recruited through Amazon’s Mechanical Turk and at a large Southwestern University ( $M_{age} = 30.88, 57.9\%$  male) to complete a survey via Qualtrics. The Mechanical Turk workers were paid a \$.20 wage and the students earned partial course credit for their participation.

Experiment 2 was designed to replicate hypotheses 1, 2, 4, and 5 and to provide a stronger test of hypotheses 3 and 6. The procedure for Experiment 2 was similar to the procedure for Experiment 1, except for one major aspect—SBC was manipulated in Experiment 2. At the beginning of the experiment, individuals were told that they would be answering questions based on their snap judgments about people and products. They were first instructed to imagine that they had recently purchased an Audi A4 (\$32,000); they were not told specifically whether the A4 was new or used. In feedback solicited after experiment 1, several individuals commented that they were having a hard time imagining paying \$27,500 for a used car. Therefore, a picture of a brand new Audi A4 was shown with the price taken directly from the Audi website. Individuals were then given one of the following sets of instructions, adaptations of a question from the SBC Scale, “In the space below, please list ten reasons why the Audi WOULD/WOULD NOT help you become the type of person you want to be.” Individuals in the “would” condition should come to experience a high SBC and individuals in the “would not” condition should come to experience a low SBC (from Sundie et al., 2009; Sundie, Beal, Perkins, & Ward, 2014). Upon completion of this SBC manipulation, individuals read the exact scenario presented in Experiment 1 and completed the same randomly interspersed Malicious and Benign Envy measures.

**Independent Variables.** Participants were randomly assigned to a Deservingness (“deserved/earned” vs. “undeserved/gifted”) condition and an SBC condition (Escalas & Bettman, 2003).

**Dependent Measures.** As noted above, items used to measure Malicious Envy and Benign Envy were interspersed with other measures to mask the study purpose and to prevent demand effects. Three items, presented on 1 to 9 scales (anchored at 1 = not at all to 9 = extremely) assessed Envy of the social attention and recognition that Jason received as well as individuals’ feelings of injustice. These three items were combined to make a Malicious Envy composite ( $\alpha = .81$ ). Five items, presented on a 1 to 9 scale anchored at 1 = not at all to 9 = extremely, assessed happiness, admiration, inspiration, pleased, and pride felt for Jason receiving his new car

(measures were borrowed from Sundie et al., 2009; Sundie, Beal, Perkins, & Ward, 2014). These five items were combined to make a Benign Envy composite ( $\alpha = .85$ ).

**Manipulation Check.** In order to assess individuals’ feelings of Deservingness, they were asked to rate, on a 1 to 9 scale (anchored at 1 = not at all to 9 = extremely) how much Jason deserved the car. At the end of the experiment, I checked the SBC manipulation by using the SBC Scale (Escalas & Bettman, 2003).

### 3.2 Results

**Factor Analysis.** As in Experiment 1, the factorability of the eight dependent variables was measured. All items correlated at least .3 with at least one other item, suggesting reasonable factorability. Additionally, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy was .78, above the recommended value of .6, and Bartlett’s test of sphericity was significant ( $\chi^2(28) = 826.55, p < .0001$ ).

Finally, the communalities were all above .3, confirming that each item shared variance with other items.

Given these overall indicators, a factor analysis was conducted with all eight items.

The Maximum Likelihood extraction method was used to identify distinct Benign and Malicious Envy components. The initial eigen values showed that the first factor explained 45.70% of the variance and the second factor 23.58% of the variance. These were the only two factors with eigen values over one. This two-factor solution was examined using promax and oblimin rotations of the factor-loading matrix (Fabrigar, Wegener, MacCallum, & Strahan, 1999). There was little difference between the promax and oblimin solutions, thus both solutions were examined in the subsequent analyses before deciding on a promax rotation for the final solution.

After three iterations, none of the eight items was removed. A promax rotation provided the best loadings on the factor structure. The internal consistency of both factors was tested, with  $\alpha = .85$  for the Benign Envy composite and  $\alpha = .81$  for the Malicious Envy composite.

### Manipulation Checks.

As expected, individuals in the “deserved” Deservingness condition indicated that Jason deserved his car significantly more than the



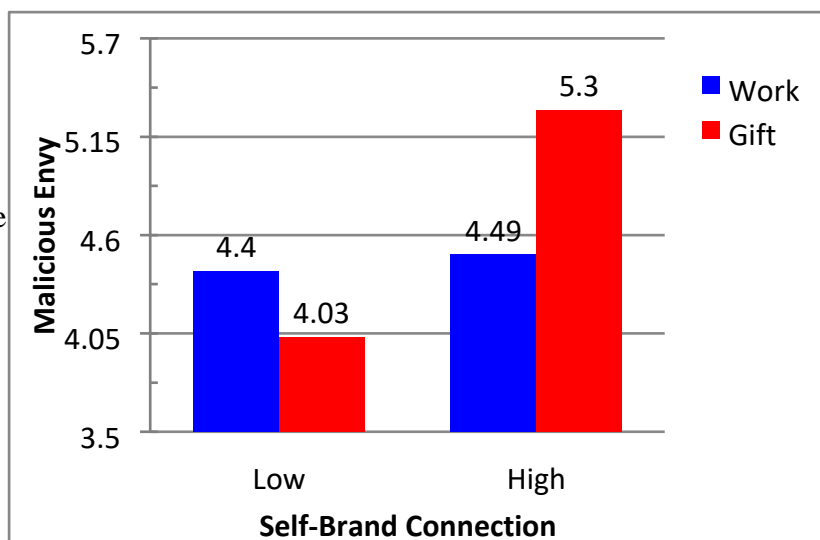
individuals in the “unde-served” Deservingness condition (6.5 vs. 4.72;  $F [1, 207] = 30.20, p < .0001$ ). To assess the effectiveness of the SBC manipulation, a One-way ANOVA compared the mean scores on the SBC Scale by low and high SBC condition (3.37 vs. 4.91;  $F [1, 207] = 43.38, p < .0001$ ) and found that the difference was significant. Further, the reliability of the SBC Scale was calculated ( $\alpha = .96$ ), demonstrating a strong reliability.

**Test of Hypotheses.** Experiment 2 was designed to replicate hypotheses 1, 2, 4, and 5 and to provide a stronger test of hypotheses 3 and 6. Malicious Envy will be greater if a higher status member of the brand community is gifted the car rather than earning it. Malicious Envy will be higher for those in the high SBC condition. With Malicious Envy, the impact of the

source of the car will be greater for High SBC than for Low SBC.

To test hypotheses 1, 2, and 3 I conducted a 2 (Deservingness: “deserved/earned” vs. “undeserved/gifted”) x 2 (SBC: High vs. Low) ANOVA with Malicious Envy as the dependent variable. Providing evidence for hypothesis 2, the analysis revealed a significant main effect of SBC ( $F [1, 209] = 5.15, p = .02$ ). Participants experienced Malicious Envy more strongly in the high SBC condition ( $M = 4.90$ ) than in the low SBC condition ( $M = 4.22$ ). There was no significant main effect of Deservingness ( $F [1, 209] = .526, p = .47$ ). However, these results were qualified by a marginally significant and predicted interaction between SBC and Deservingness ( $F [1, 209] = 3.816, p = .052$ ). The interaction was decomposed

by conducting post hoc tests. A significant simple main effect comparison indicated that individuals assigned to the “undeserved/gifted” condition reported significantly higher feelings of Malicious Envy in the high SBC condition ( $M = 5.30$ ) than individuals in the “undeserved/gifted” condition who were assigned to the low SBC condition ( $M = 4.03$ ) ( $F [1, 102] = 9.61, p = .003$ ). A second significant simple main effect comparison indicated that individuals assigned to the high



SBC condition reported Figure 1. The effect of SBC and deservingness on malicious envy. significantly higher feelings of Malicious Envy in the Undeserved/Gifted condition ( $M = 5.30$ ) than individuals in the Deserved/Earned condition ( $M = 4.49$ ) ( $F [1, 102] = 4.11, p = .045$ ). No other post hoc comparisons were significant. The results of this significant Deservingness by SBC interaction provide evidence to support hypothesis 3 (see Figure 1).

To test hypotheses 4 and 5 I conducted a 2 (Deservingness: “deserved/earned” vs.

“undeserved/gifted”) x 2 (SBC: High vs. Low) ANOVA with Benign Envy as the dependent variable.

Providing evidence for hypothesis 5, the analysis revealed a significant main effect of SBC ( $F [1, 209] = 8.186, p = .005$ ). Benign Envy was felt more strongly in the high SBC condition ( $M = 6.04$ ) than in the low SBC condition ( $M = 5.26$ ). There was a significant main effect of Deservingness ( $F [1, 209] = 16.41, p < .001$ ). Benign Envy was higher in the “de-served/earned” condition ( $M = 6.21$ ), than in the “undeserved/gifted” condition ( $M = 5.16$ ). The interaction was not significant ( $F [1, 209] = .126, p = .723$ ). These results provide evidence for hypotheses 4 and 5.

### 3.3 Discussion

Results from Experiment 2 provided support for Hypotheses 2 and 3. Participants experienced

Malicious Envy more strongly in the high SBC condition than in the low SBC condition (H2). An SBC by Deservingness interaction provided support for Hypothesis 3. Simple main effect comparisons indicate that with Malicious Envy, the impact of the source of the car was greater for High SBC than for Low SBC Participants. Support for Hypothesis 1 was not obtained in Experiment 2. However, the main effects were qualified by a marginally significant interaction. It is likely that support for Hypothesis 3 was found in Experiment 2 because SBC was manipulated instead of measured. When participants were asked to list how owning the car would or would not affect their lives they were induced to experience either a stronger or a weaker SBC, respectively.

Further, support for both Hypotheses 4 and 5 was provided in Experiment 2. Results showed a significant main effect of both SBC and Deservingness. Unfortunately, no support was obtained for hypothesis 6. Due to the nature of Benign Envy, it makes sense that those who have a high SBC would experience Envy that involved admiration and inspiration when a fellow Audi Brand Community member acquires a nice car. Further, regardless of SBC, individuals should experience feelings of admiration and inspiration when they see a similar other who is able to buy the car of his dreams as a result of working hard. Perhaps the SBC manipulation does not sway participants greatly in either direction. If this is the case, then feelings of Benign Envy might overpower any SBC that a participant might have. That might explain why I did not get support for Hypothesis 6 in Experiments 1 and 2. I imagine that I could use a stronger manipulation of SBC, perhaps one in which participants are allowed to choose the brand with which they feel the connection, in order to tease out an interaction.

## **General discussion**

### **4.1 Summary of findings**

The results of Experiment 1 provided evidence for hypotheses 1, 2, 4, and 5. Malicious Envy is greater if a higher status member of the brand community is gifted a car rather than earning it. Further, SBC enhances this effect. Additionally, Benign Envy is greater if a higher status member of the brand community earns a car than if he was gifted the car. Brand community members admire other members

of their community who work hard to obtain objects of their desire. They are proud of their achievement and happy for them. Further, SBC enhances this effect.

Results from Experiment 2 provided support for Hypotheses 2, 3, 4, and 5. Participants experienced Malicious Envy more strongly in the high SBC condition than in the low SBC condition (H2). An SBC by Deservingness interaction provided support for Hypothesis 3. Simple main effect comparisons indicate that with Malicious Envy, the impact of the source of the car is greater for High SBC than for Low SBC Participants.

### **4.2 Implications and future research**

It is interesting to know that there are two different types of Envy that can be experienced. My data indicated that Malicious Envy is greater if a higher status member of the brand community is gifted a car rather than earning it. These results tell us that participants feel negative Envy emotions toward people who achieve a status position in a manner deemed unjust. All else being equal, the realization that the car was acquired unjustly levels down the target. These findings have implications in future Envy experiments and conspicuous consumption research. It will be interesting to investigate other products to see how deservingness/source affects Envy feelings and further to see whether an interaction with SBC is present. As mentioned, this effect will likely only be present when dealing with hierarchical, conspicuously consumed goods.

Further, the more connected one becomes to the brand, the more Malicious Envy they feel toward the higher status member of the brand community. In other words SBC and Malicious Envy are directly proportional. With Malicious Envy, the impact of the source of the car will be greater for High SBC than for Low SBC. There is an interaction between SBC and source/deservingness. When participants have High SBC the difference in Malicious Envy felt is significantly greater than when participants have Low SBC. This indicates that SBC amplifies the Malicious Envy felt toward an undeserving target. This has implications in Envy research as well as SBC research. We now know that participants can become so strongly connected to a brand that it pushes them to feel greater amounts of Envy than those who are

not as connected to the brand. What other emotions does it affect?

Arguments similar to the ones made for Malicious Envy can also be made for Benign Envy. Knowing that Benign Envy will be greater when a higher status brand community member earns a car rather than receiving it as a gift has implications in SBC, Envy, and conspicuous consumption research. Advertisers could use source/deservingness and Benign Envy as a motivator to get people on the right track to buying an item that they previously thought they could not afford.

**Consumer Behavior Implications.** The current research has several implications in the realm of consumer behavior research. First, related to brand evaluations, emotions felt toward a target, like Envy and schadenfreude can affect how one evaluates a brand. If an individual sees a target wearing an Armani suit and feels Malicious Envy toward that target for another reason, it is possible that the individual might negatively evaluate Armani due to the target being associated. This would act as a leveling down mechanism (van de Ven et al., 2009). The same negative evaluation could potentially result if one were experiencing schadenfreude toward a target. Conversely, a leveling up mechanism might occur that results in a positive brand evaluation in the presence of Benign Envy. For example, when I see a fellow golfer's performance increase with a new golf club, I will attribute that performance increase (at least partially) to the club. I will probably feel Benign Envy for the golfer and his performance increase. This should lead to me positively evaluating the new club he is using. As a result I should want to go buy it. Obviously, positive evaluations about a product lead to a stronger purchasing desire (Handley & Goss, 2012). In the example above, my feelings of Benign Envy will come antecedent to my positive evaluations of the club and (likely) subsequent purchase.

My findings could have the same implications in the area of brand switching. If an individual feels Malicious Envy toward a target, the individual might be off-put by any brand he or she observes the target using. Therefore causing a switch. I would expect the opposite for Benign Envy. Research on brand switching and social identity supports this supposition. Customers sometimes switch to new

brands for their symbolic benefits and as a way to enhance their social identity and fit in with a group (Lam, Ahearne, Hu, & Schillewaert, 2010). In this case, upstream feelings of benign envy might catalyze such an outcome. Further, it is plausible that the opposite effect could occur if a customer wishes to distance himself from a group.

### **Conclusion**

Envy is a strange emotion and it is stranger still to know that we can experience two types of Envy. One type, a type that most people would consider negative, seeks to bring others down to our level. It is bent on getting even—settling a score. Malicious Envy is ugly Envy. The other type is almost inspired. It motivates people to succeed and achieve the status of others. Benign Envy is inspirational Envy. The current research resulted in several fascinating findings. First, whether or not someone earns or is gifted a car determines the type of Envy that participants will feel. If the car is earned, then Benign Envy will result. If the car is gifted, then Malicious Envy will result. Further, as SBC increases, so do Benign and Malicious Envy. Finally, the impact of car source/deservingness on Malicious Envy is greater with High SBC individuals than with Low SBC individuals. All of these findings are new, unique, and contribute to what we know about Envy.

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