Investigating the Relationship Between Benign and Malicious Envy

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In this paper, we identify conditions when benign envy can turn into malicious envy. Results show that perceived attractiveness of the purchase to others and tendency to engage in ability-oriented comparisons predicts malicious envy. The tendency to engage in opinion-orientated comparisons negatively moderates the relationship between benign and malicious envy.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Envious reactions have been argued to be common at the marketplace (cf. Belk 2008). Envy is referred to as a frustrating feeling and mix of negative emotions that arises when a person compares him- or herself to other people who are doing better (Salovey and Rodin 1991; Parrott and Smith 1993). Nascent research suggests that envy can come in positive form, i.e. benign envy, and a negative form, i.e. malicious envy (Van de Ven, Zeelenberg, and Pieters 2009; 2010; 2011ab). Although they both comprise frustration, malicious envy includes hostility towards the envied (Van de Ven et al. 2011a), while benign envy comprises admiration of the envied (Van de Ven et al., 2011a, p. 985). Van de Ven et al. (2011a) documented that benign envy increases willingness to pay while malicious envy decreases willingness to pay. Consequently, it is important for firms to evoke benign envy and avoid malicious envy. However, empirical evidence suggests that benign and malicious envy are closely related or that one form of envy can easily “transmute” into the other (Van de Ven 2009, 134). Considering that the same term envy can yield such different consequences, yet denote the same type of emotional reaction, it is proposed here that benign envy may serve as an antecedent to malicious envy. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to investigate the relationship between benign and malicious envy and identify variables predicting when benign envy turns malicious.

We propose that perceived attractiveness of the purchase to others and the tendency to engage in ability-orientated 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. This prediction is based upon theories of envy as a response to ego-threats (Salovey 1991). As consumers often use consumption as a tool to enhance social status, belongingness, admiration and strengthened ego (Mead et al. 2011), it is likely that people are sensitive to what purchases other people value. Therefore, it can be expected that perceived attractiveness of a purchase to other people strengthens the relationship between benign and malicious envy.

The envy literature postulates that envy is evoked by negative comparisons to other people (Salovey 1991; Smith and Kim 2007; Van de Ven et al. 2011a). The literature on social comparisons propose that people can engage in different types of social comparisons (Festinger 1954; Gibbons and Buunk 1999). Gibbons and Buunk (1999) report that people can engage in ability and opinion-orientated social comparisons. Ability-orientated comparisons are defined as social comparisons where people compare their abilities and skills with those of other people, i.e. answer the question “How am I doing?” (Gibbons and Buunk 1999, 129). Opinion-orientated comparisons refer to comparisons where a person uses other people as a reference point for evaluating what to think about something, i.e. “What should I think or feel?” (Gibbons and Buunk 1999, 129). Thus, the ability dimension refers to enhancement of the self in comparison to others while the opinion dimension refers to an orientation towards wanting to be approved by others. It is proposed here that the tendency to make ability-orientated comparisons increase the likelihood that people will feel malicious envy because these people are concerned with self-enhancement and consequently vulnerable to ego-threats. In contrast, it is proposed here that people who engage in opinion-orientated comparisons are less likely to turn maliciously envious because they are interested in blending in rather than enhance themselves.

125 students (37.6 % females, M$_{age}$ = 22, SD = 4.09) took part in the study. Following the study outline of Van de Ven et al. (2011a), participants were shown a color-picture featuring an advertisement for an iPhone with product information and a short story. In the story, the participants were asked to imagine themselves working on a common 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. 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.

Results show a positive moderating effect of perceived attractiveness of the purchase to others (β = .176, t = 1.87, p > .05). We also tested whether attractiveness of the purchase to oneself as a moderator but this relationship was insignificant. Thus, the more attractive the purchase is believed to be for others (vs. to oneself), the more likely it is that maliciously envious reactions will be elicited. In line with our predictions, we found evidence for that the tendency to engage in ability-orientated comparisons positively moderates the relationship between benign and malicious envy (β = .173, t = 1.85, p > .05). The main effect of ability comparison was also significant (β = .311, t = 3.40, p > .01). This means that the tendency to engage in ability-comparison also has a direct influence on malicious envy even in the presence of the other factors. Furthermore, in line with predictions, the tendency to engage in opinion-orientated comparisons negatively moderated the relationship between benign and malicious envy (β = -.190, t = -2.05, p > .01).

These results 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. In conclusion, findings show that perceived attractiveness of the purchase to others as well as tendency to engage in ability-orientated comparisons positively moderate the relationship between benign and malicious envy, whereas engaging in opinion-orientated comparisons negatively moderates the relationship between benign and 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 and Rodin 1991; Smith and Kim 2007).

REFERENCES


