Monster Or Motivator? Understanding and Taming Consumer Envy

Cait Poynor, University of Pittsburgh, USA
Darren Dahl, University of British Columbia, Canada
Gerald Gorn, Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, Hong Kong, China

While a vast literature has depicted the negative consequences of envy, recent work in economics and management also suggests that envy can be a positive, motivating force. How will envy impact consumers, and can these effects be anything but damaging? Three studies explore ways in which envy’s typical malignant face can be transformed into a less damaging influence both with regard to interpersonal hostility and product valuation. Specifically, we find that self-esteem and one’s sense of control over future opportunities drive the extent to which envy acts as a monster or a motivator in a consumer context.

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Special Session Summary
Social Comparison and Negative Emotions: Understanding Regret, Envy, and Schadenfreude in a Consumer World
Cait Poynor, University of Pittsburgh, USA

Session Overview
A growing body of research identifies widespread effects of social comparison on consumer behavior. For example, in the presence of others, we affiliate with them, adopt an innovation, or increase our purchase intentions for goods we see in use. Implicit in this work is the idea that social comparison can yield powerful emotions, many of which are positive for consumers and marketers. But what happens when social comparison yields powerful negative emotions? What are the consumption implications for consumers and marketers in this instance? Can this type of social outcome be managed or mitigated? Each author in this special session will report results from three empirical studies conducted to explore these questions in depth, specifically focusing on the emotions of regret, envy, and schadenfreude.

Though the papers are tightly clustered around this common theme, they each also provide novel theoretical insights. Particularly, these papers not only depict these relatively understudied emotions in consumer domains, they suggest that they can be sparked by both internal and external processes. For example, Winterich, Mittal, and Inman focus on the effects of regret, which begins as a personal consumer response to their own consumption decisions. However, this individual emotion yields important external consequences, as the combination of social comparison and regret leads to distancing between the consumer and previously proximate others. Poynor and Dahl study envy, which is generated by comparing one’s own personal situation to that of another consumer. As they recognize that someone else has a desired good, consumers respond with varying degrees of hostility depending on their own self-esteem levels, both in regard to the envied other and the desired product. Moving the locus of study farther outside the individual consumer, Sundie et al. highlight schadenfreude, where the driver of hostile emotion lies outside the consumer altogether, and only arises due to observation of the negative experiences of others.

Each paper also makes a compelling case that socially generated emotions are directly related to substantive marketing implications. Winterich et al., for example, show that social distancing can not only impact intentions to repeat a given behavior, but also that financial allocation decisions can be impacted by regret and consequent social distancing. Poynor and Dahl echo the impact of negative emotion on interpersonal relationships, and also demonstrate effects of envy on product value and willingness-to-pay. Sundie et al. show that schadenfreude can have important impacts on brand attitude and word of mouth.

Given the strong focus of the session, we anticipate a high degree of interest among researchers investigating issues involving social comparison, social influence, and interpersonal relationships. However, we also believe that the presentations will attract interest from a broader audience. For example, researchers exploring issues related to consumer happiness and well-being, the role of self-esteem in consumption, and importance of self-conscious emotions will see great value in this session. The range of consequences identified in this work may broaden its appeal further, as the consequences identified may be relevant for pricing, group dynamics, brand attitudes, and motivation research.

Extended Abstract
“The Who in Regret: How Psychological Closeness Affects Regret and Social Distancing”
Karen P. Winterich, Texas A&M University, USA
Vikas Mittal, Rice University, USA
J. Jeffrey Inman, University of Pittsburgh, USA

Regret is defined as “the emotion that we experience when realizing or imagining that our current situation would have been better, if only we had decided differently” (Zeelenberg and Pieters 2007, 3). Social comparison theory states that individuals evaluate themselves in comparison to others (Festinger 1954), suggesting that individuals not only make comparisons to forgone alternatives, but also to the chooser of the forgone alternative. We build on research examining the role of social comparison in regret (Hoelzl and Loewenstein 2005; Kumar 2004) to examine the extent to which subtle differences in psychological closeness influence regret and the relational consequences of regret, particularly social distancing.

Psychological closeness is influenced by physical proximity and/or similarities such as age or gender (Tesser and Campbell 1982). Research has found that emotional responses from social comparison are dependent on the nature of the relationship, with stronger responses when one is psychologically close (Tesser and Collins 1988). Building on this literature, we argue that regret is greater when one is outperformed by someone of high (vs. low) closeness because comparisons to less close others reduce the relevance of a forgone alternative. In doing so, this research acknowledges the “who” (chose), and not just what (was chosen), as an influential reference point for comparison affecting regret (Lin, Huang, and Zeelenberg 2006).

More importantly, we demonstrate that people may employ social strategies to regulate regret (Zeelenberg and Pieters 2007). To date, research has demonstrated distinct behavioral consequences of regret that may serve to regulate regret (Inman and Zeelenberg 2002; Kumar 2004; Tsiros and Mittal 2000). Yet, regret regulation strategies have not considered the tendency of consumers to manage their relationship with the chooser of the forgone alternative. Social distancing is viewed as informal ostracism that may occur in response to social deviance such that individuals who are distanced are not formally removed but are informally excluded from social interaction to some degree through a range of withdrawal behaviors (Westphal and Khanna 2003; Wood 1974). We argue that consumers may regulate regret by distancing themselves from those others who chose the better forgone alternative. Specifically, consumers will be more likely to engage in social distancing when the chooser is of high (vs. low) closeness because less closeness between the self and the other reduces the threat or need for regret regulation when interacting with the other.

In three studies, we prime psychological closeness to examine the effect on regret, as well as social distancing. The first study primed closeness to a cousin and examined regret regarding performance in a hypothetical stock investment scenario. The results indicated that regret was greater when participants were outperformed in a hypothetical investment scenario by a close (vs. distant) cousin. Further, participants who were outperformed by a close
cousin indicated a greater desire to distance themselves from their cousin.

In the second study, each participant brought a friend to the study. Participants then completed a computer word scramble task and received feedback regarding their friends’ performance or that of a random participant to manipulate closeness. Depending on condition, participants were informed that they had performed worse than or equal to the other participant and asked questions regarding their performance. At the end of the study, participants were asked their likelihood to participate in a future study with their friend. Results indicated that participants who performed worse than their friend experienced greater regret and had lower intentions to participate in a future study with their friend than those who performed worse than a random participant. We propose that choosing not to participate in a future study with their friend is a distancing mechanism, thereby regulating regret. Importantly, regret mediated the moderating effect of psychological closeness on participation intentions.

The third study primed closeness by randomly pairing participants of the same gender for three minutes to talk and get to know each other. After this time, participants were asked to think of how their partner was similar to or different from them, priming high or low psychological closeness, respectively. Then participants completed the same word scramble task used in study 2, receiving feedback on their own performance as well as that of their partner. Lastly, participants completed an ostensibly unrelated economic (i.e., dictator) game where they were given $5 to allocate between themselves and their partner. Unbeknownst to participants, each person was assigned to be the decision maker and the amount allocated to their partner served as an indicator of social distancing. Results indicated that those in the high (vs. low) closeness condition not only reported greater regret when they were outperformed in the word scramble task, but also allocated less money to their partner in a subsequent, unrelated economic game. Again, regret mediated the moderating effect of psychological closeness on partner allocation.

Together, we find that regret is influenced by psychological closeness to the chooser of the forgone alternative, and individuals may use social distancing as a strategy to regulate regret arising from social comparison. This research extends regret regulation theory demonstrating that through social distancing behaviors consumers can choose to “run and hide” from their regret or even go so far as to settle the score with the other in an unrelated task. It is important for consumers to regulate regret given that Schwartz et al. (2002) find that regret is positively correlated with depression and negatively correlated with both happiness and life satisfaction. In marketing, companies often attempt to elicit anticipated regret in potential customers by drawing comparisons to users of a competitor’s brand to increase own brand sales through customers’ regret avoidance, but consumers may or may not identify with the person using the target brand (i.e., Apple’s campaign using distinct identities for a PC user and a MAC user). Such strategies are likely to be successful only to the extent that consumers feel psychologically close to the portrayed user of the target brand.

“Monster or Motivator? Understanding and Taming Consumer Envy”

Cait Poynor, University of Pittsburgh, USA
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Envy’s malignant effects have long been depicted in psychoanalysis, theology, literature, philosophy, psychology and political science (Smith and Kim 2007). Our fascination with envy may be partially driven by its ubiquity, as it springs to life as soon as individuals become capable of interpersonal comparison (Schoeck 1969). Seeing another with something we desire has been shown to prompt negative social comparisons, which in turn can yield competition, hostility, alienation, and damage to both the envier and the envied individual (Schoeck 1969, Silver and Sabini 1978, Testa and Major 1990). Indeed, in a marketing context consumers have been shown to experience envy and its negative outcomes when comparing themselves to other consumers and their purchases (Belk 1985). Envy may also drain value from the market, as it leads to a desire to demean or destroy things formerly considered good (Schimmel 1993). At its most powerful, envy has been said to “lead to aggression and violence capable of destroying societies.” (Foster 1972, p. 165).

Recent reviews concede that envy’s antecedents and consequences remain poorly understood (Smith and Kim 2007, Zizzo 2008). A body of conflicting evidence exists on fundamental questions regarding envy and its function, particularly in a consumer context: Does envy impact consumer behavior at all (Grinblatt, Keloharu and Ikaihemo 2008)? Can we experience envy toward consumers who are dissimilar from us as well as those who are similar? Does consumer envy truly only have the malignant face portrayed in psychoanalysis, political science and theology? If so, in what circumstances is the negative outcomes of envy most likely to be realized and how can consumers be prompted to express envy in ways which are perhaps more beneficial to themselves and the marketplace?

We approach these questions by first defining envy and relating conflicting findings regarding the effects of interpersonal similarity and perceived control (defined as an individual’s perceptions of their own ability to obtain an envied good on a future occasion) on envy’s expression. We propose that envy, defined as the emotion generated by seeing another with a desired good (Salovey 1991) creates an “acquisition gap,” that is, a sense of psychological distance that must be bridged for an individual to obtain the envied good. To the extent that the acquisition gap is narrowed by favorable combinations of trait self-esteem, perceived control, and similarity to the envied other, we argue that consumers will move away from malignant expressions of envy. Such a shift may be beneficial to consumers, who avoid the downward spiral caused by unresolved envy, to marketers, whose products can avoid devaluation, and society as a whole, which can avoid or reduce the harmful consequences of envy-driven hostility.

Results from three experiments are consistent with this framework and provide new insights into both envy and self-esteem. Study 1 considers the malignant expression of envy when an envied other is initially similar to participants. In this case, we propose that the initial acquisition gap is small. In this study, participants took part in a simulated online search “competition.” In this study, a confederate, always identified as a business major allegedly wins concert tickets matched to each individual’s preferences based on a survey at the beginning of the semester. Participants were then told that their search strategy was analyzed and that they could (high control) or could not (low control) have obtained the tickets, given their browsing patterns. They then provide the same product evaluation ratings as collected at the beginning of the semester. Finally, they provide their “thin slice” judgments of the confederate as part of an ostensibly unrelated task. We find that high self-esteem individuals only express less damaging envy in such cases—the feasibility of obtaining the confederate’s outcome allows them to feel less hostility towards the envied individual and continue to express value for the envied product. However, low self-esteem individuals express more malignant envy (devaluing the chosen
good and disparaging the envied person) if they do not clearly believe that they might be able to obtain the envied good in the future. Failing to be able to obtain what someone like them has creates a sort of “sour grapes” effect. However, low self-esteem individuals can express a less damaging form of envy (feel less hostility towards the envied person and maintain high value for the envied good, thus, acting like high self-esteem individuals) if they are explicitly told that they are able to obtain the product in the future.

A second study shows that the interaction of perceived control and self-esteem also exists when the envied other is initially dissimilar to participants but that its direction is inverted. In this study, the confederate is always identified as a consumer science major. We argue that this dissimilarity presents a large initial acquisition gap. Here we find that providing perceptions of control over the ability to subsequently obtain the envied good produces less damaging envy among high self-esteem consumers. These individuals are able to envision themselves bridging the acquisition gap and thus, express less hostility for the envied other and maintain the value of the envied good. By contrast, for low self-esteem individuals even positive beliefs about their ability to acquire the product in the future fail to narrow the gap between themselves and the envied individual enough to offset negative feelings. In light of this gap, they consistently demonstrate malignant envy, expressing hostility toward the envied other and devaluing the focal product.

Finally, a third study demonstrates that high self-esteem individuals experiencing envy demonstrate more positive responses to a “substitute” product than do low self-esteem individuals. High self-esteem individuals’ acceptance of even a very poor substitute for the envied product (in this case, receiving an inexpensive mouse pad after watching a confederate win a Wii gaming system) may constitute an important means of coping with the negative experience of envy. By contrast, low self-esteem individuals’ rejection of a consolation prize may serve to exacerbate negative feelings and therefore, increase the negative impacts of envy-related experiences.

“Invidious Emotions in Status-Based Social Comparison: Implications for the Status Brand”
Jill M. Sundie, University of Houston, USA
James C. Ward, Arizona State University, USA
Daniel J. Beal, Rice University, USA
Wynne W. Chin, University of Houston, USA
Stephanie Geiger-Oneto, University of Wyoming, USA

Social comparisons involving status products have the ability to evoke a variety of emotions for consumers, some of which are invidious in nature. When confronted with a similar other who possesses a status symbol superior to one’s own possession, feeling envy is a likely response. Three studies examine this dark side of the emotional experience of status consumption, and explore the effects of feeling envy on downstream thoughts, feelings and consumption-relevant behaviors towards the status brand. In particular the present studies examine the effects of negative emotions such as envy and hostility on emotional and behavioral responses to status product failure.

This work contributes uniquely to the consumer literature in three ways. First, it explores a particular mediational pathway of emotions antecedent to schadenfreude in a status consumption context; a mediational pattern that has recently been conceptualized by envy researchers, but never to our knowledge tested empirically. Second, this research examines the effects of the envy-hostility-schadenfreude chain of invidious emotions on inclinations to spread negative word-of-mouth about the failed status brand, and provides a window into what the content of such word-of-mouth is likely to be. Third, this work demonstrates that brand attitudes change (become more negative) when individuals feel schadenfreude in response to the status brand’s failure. This brand-level analysis also identifies the root of this brand attitude change by examining each of three foundational elements of brand attitudes (positive affect toward the brand, negative affect toward the brand, and brand cognitions). Brand attitude change associated with feeling schadenfreude after status product failure was driven by increased negative affect toward the brand.

Study 1 replicated some conceptually connected research in the emotion literature, but in a consumer context, demonstrating that feeling envy toward a similar other’s status product leads to feeling schadenfreude (joy) after that person’s status product fails. One novel contribution of this first study is empirical support for the recent conceptualization by envy researchers (Smith & Kim, 2007) that hostile emotions (e.g., anger, resentment) mediate the relationship between envy and schadenfreude. Consistent with other work in the emotion literature, these invidious emotions were enhanced for a higher-status product failure (a Mercedes breaking down) versus a lower-status product failure (a Ford compact breaking down). Feeling schadenfreude after product failure predicted participants’ indications they would repeat the product failure story to others—spread word-of-mouth. Content coding of what participants reported they would say to others indicated this word-of-mouth would be primarily negative in nature and thus potentially damaging to the status brand.

Study 2 replicated the pattern in study 1 that hostile emotions mediate the link between feeling envy and schadenfreude in a consumption context, and built upon those findings by examining two previous unexplored but plausibly common sources of status-linked envy: envy of the status symbol itself, and envy of the social attention that possessing the status symbol affords its owner. This study also examined how the target person flaunting (versus modestly displaying) the status symbol would influence observers’ emotional responses before and after the status product’s failure. While envy of the social attention drawn by the status symbol did lead to hostile emotions and schadenfreude, envy of the status product itself did not predict hostile feelings, or schadenfreude post-failure. The target person’s flaunting behavior did enhance schadenfreude, via enhanced envy of social attention and hostility (the positive effect of flaunting on schadenfreude was mediated by envy of social attention and hostility). Schadenfreude again predicted the likelihood to spread negative word-of-mouth about the failed brand.

Study 3 examined the downstream consequences of invidious emotions (envy, hostility) in status-based social comparison on attitudes toward the status brand post-failure. While it might be expected that witnessing a product’s failure would lead unilaterally to more negative attitudes toward the failed brand, study 3 revealed that feeling schadenfreude in response to the failure uniquely predicted lower brand attitudes. The target person’s flaunting behavior did enhance schadenfreude, via enhanced envy of social attention and hostility (the positive effect of flaunting on schadenfreude was mediated by envy of social attention and hostility). Schadenfreude again predicted the likelihood to spread negative word-of-mouth about the failed brand.

Our results contribute to broader work in the emotion literature by empirically testing a conceptualized mediational pathway involving envy, hostility and schadenfreude (Smith & Kim, 2007). Although some previous work on schadenfreude explored both envy and hostile emotions as predictors of feeling happiness about another person’s downfall, these two groups of antecedent emotions generally were presumed to have independent effects on
schadenfreude. Our results are consistent with a transmutational process for envy, and provide evidence for the crucial role that other-focused approach emotions such as anger play in the envy-induced schadenfreude.

Consumer-relevant consequences of schadenfreude studied here included word-of-mouth that is prompted by schadenfreude (studies 1 and 2), and changes in brand attitudes subsequent to experiencing schadenfreude (study 3). Although negative word-of-mouth is typically prompted by personally experienced product or service failures, studies 1 and 2 suggest that feeling schadenfreude after witnessing a product failure can also prompt the spread of negative word-of-mouth when people relate the elements of the story to others. The current data suggest this word-of-mouth will routinely contain information about the product failing, and may also be likely to contain other kinds of disparaging remarks about the product or brand. Another important downstream consequence demonstrated in study 3 is that feeling schadenfreude predicts brand attitude change, to the detriment of the failed brand. We found that when a status product failure is witnessed, those who felt greater schadenfreude in this context were more likely to experience negative affect toward the brand and change their overall attitude as a consequence. This suggests that certain emotional responses to status product failure (i.e., pleasure) can influence subsequent brand evaluations.

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