Regain Attention With Brightness: Effects of Jealousy on Preferences For Brightly Colored Products

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Three studies showed that jealousy can induce a desire to gain attention from one’s partner, which activates a “competition for attention” mindset that influences behaviors in unrelated consumption situation. This effect only occurs when consumers have the opportunity to own the products rather than simply viewing them.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Jealousy arises when either a real or imagined rival is perceived to threaten an important social relationship (Salovey 1991; White and Mullen 1989). The most typical jealousy-evoking scenario involves a romantic triad – that is, people suspect that their partner is interested in a rival and this rival poses a threat to their relationship (Parrott and Smith 1993; Salovey 1991; White and Mullen 1989). Yet, jealousy can emerge in other types of triadic relationship as well. For instance, children can be jealous of a sibling’s relationship with their parents (Masciuch and Kienapple 1993); a consumer might be jealous of another’s relationship with a salesperson (Chan and Sengupta 2013).

The key ingredient of jealousy is the perception that the attention that one has come to expect from someone as a result of one’s a priori relationship with the person has been usurped. To this extent, it is distinguishable from envy, which results from the perception that others already possess something that one personally lacks. Thus, a man might be envious of a colleague whose spouse is attractive, intelligent and wealthy. However, he would be jealous if he finds that his own attractive, intelligent and wealthy relationship partner is spending time with another man.

Jealousy is likely to be accompanied by other negative emotions such as anger or sadness. Consequently, the behavior it elicits might often be attributable to these other, more general emotions. However, feelings of jealousy are likely to elicit reactions that are specific to the type of conditions that give rise to them. For example, if people feel jealous because the attention their relationship partner pays to them is being usurped by another (Bruunk et al. 2008; DeSteno and Salovey 1996), they may attempt to restore this lost attention.

However, although the motivation to regain attention is activated by a particular set of circumstances, it may generalize to other situations, increasing attempts to receive attention in these situations as well. To this extent, it could have implications for consumer behavior. That is, individuals who have recently experienced jealousy might be motivated not only to regain the attention of their partner but also to get attention more generally. Thus, they might be inclined to prefer products that are likely to attract attention of others (e.g., brightly colored clothing; see Duncan 1984; Harris and Jenkin 2001). Moreover, this might occur in situations that are unrelated to those that gave rise to the jealousy.

Three studies confirmed this possibility. In Study 1, participants were first asked to recall a past experience that gave rise to feelings of jealousy/envy/angry or a typical day experience (as the baseline control condition). Afterwards, participants proceeded to an ostensibly unrelated task, in which they were asked to imagine they were shopping online and were presented with a pair of coats taken from Nike’s online store, one was brightly colored and the other was dull in color. Participants indicated their choice for one of the products in each pair. As expected, participants who recalled a jealousy situation were significantly more likely to choose the brightly-colored coat ($M = 57.1\%$) than those who recalled an envious ($M = 34.8\%, \chi^2(1) = 4.43, p < .05$) or a neutral event ($M = 23.4\%, \chi^2(1) = 9.69, p < .01$). Interestingly, participants who recalled an angry situation ($M = 57.9\%$) were equally likely to pick the brightly-colored coat as those who recalled a jealousy situation ($p > .94$).

Study 2 aimed to distinguish between the different underlying mechanisms of jealousy and anger and to test the mediating role of the motivation to seek attention from others. Participants first recalled a past event in which they felt jealousy, anger, or neutral. They were then asked to imagine evaluating bright versus dull paintings either in a painting shop (thus could potentially buy or own the paintings) or in a museum (thus not able to purchase and own the paintings). Afterwards, we empirically measured participants’ motivation to seek attention from others. Results suggested that motivation to seek attention from others mediated the effect of jealousy on greater desire for bright products (95% CI from .0651 to .7364). This effect for jealousy only occurs when participants can personally own the product (i.e., in the painting shop evaluation condition), whereas the effect for anger condition occurs regardless of potential ownership, suggesting that although both jealousy and anger could increase consumers’ tendency to seek bright products, they do so via very different mechanisms.

Study 3 tested a boundary condition (i.e., when brightness loses the attention-grabbing function) of the main effect of jealousy on greater preference for bright-colored, eye-catchy products demonstrated in studies 1 and 2. Firstly, participants were asked to recall either a jealousy or a neutral event. Afterwards, participants were asked to imagine a welcome party for international students organized by the university. In the bright context condition, the supposed party attendees shown in the picture all wear bright-colored clothes, while in the dull context condition; the party attendees all wear dull-colored clothes. They were further instructed that although they have mostly decided what to wear and bring to the party (dress code: casual), they were indecisive about which pair of shoes they should wear to the party and they want to buy a new pair of sneakers for this casual party. As predicted, when the context is dull and thus a pair of bright-colored sneaker could gain attention from others, participants feeling jealous were more likely to choose a pair of brightly-colored shoes than those who feeling neutral ($M_{\text{jealousy}} = 66.7\%$ vs. $M_{\text{control}} = 33.3\%, \chi^2(1) = 6.00, p < .05$). However, when the context is bright, this difference disappears ($M_{\text{jealousy}} = 50\%$ vs. $M_{\text{control}} = 53.8\%, \chi^2(1) = .08, p > .78$).

Taken together, to our best knowledge, this research provides the first evidence that incidental jealousy can affect consumers’ choices in situations that are unrelated to those in which the jealousy is induced. Our research also contributes to a growing body of research showing that incidental emotions can affect people’s sensory perceptions and preferences.

REFERENCES


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