Experiences and Material Purchases Differently Evoke Envious Reactions

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Envy can come in a desirable form and an undesirable form (benign and malicious envy). In three studies, we examine when benign vs. malicious envy is evoked. Results show that type of purchase, type of comparison and type of desirability differently evoke benign vs. malicious envy.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1024564/volumes/v45/NA-45

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Envy can comprise two forms: a benign form, serving a positive societal force, and a malicious form, serving a negative societal force and the two can exist simultaneously (Van de Ven, Zeelenberg and Pieters 2009; Van de Ven, Zeelenberg, and Pieters 2010; 2011). However, the conditions predicting the two are relatively unexplored. Drawing upon literature documenting different psychological processing of 1) material versus experiential purchases (Carter and Gilovich 2010; 2012), 2) self-focus versus other-focus (Mussweiler 2001) and 3) theories of envy as a reaction to status threat (Salovey 1991), three effects are expected. First, experiential purchases tend to evoke more benign envy in comparison to material purchases. Second, when consumers engage in self-focused comparisons experiences become associated with higher levels of malicious envy. Third, perceived desirability of the purchase to other people is likely to enhance malicious envy for material purchases.

Study 1. The aim of Study 1 was to test whether consumers felt more benign envy for experiences. Sixty-two students participants were randomly asked to either recall an experiential (n = 32) or a material purchase (n = 30) that another person made that caused them to react with envy. Next, benign and malicious envy was measured following instructions by Van de Ven et al. (2011). A t-test showed that people felt more benign envy related to experiences than material purchases (Mmaterial purchase = 3.60 vs. M experiential purchase = 4.44, t = 1.99, p <.05).

Study 2. The purpose of Study 2 was to examine the variables type of purchase (experiential versus material purchases) as well as with how type of comparison (self- versus other-focus) would affect benign and malicious envy. One hundred and ninety-six students participated in the study. We used a 2 (experiential vs. material purchase) X 2 (self vs. other-focus) between subjects design. Participants’ attentional focus on the self- versus others was primed using a method presented by Johnson, Nolde and Leonardis (1996). Replicating the procedure outlined by Van de Ven et al. (2011), participants’ envy was evoked by a story of a peer acquiring a phone (iPhone) but we also added a condition of an experience (two week long vacation to Brazil). Benign and malicious envy was measured in the same manner as in Study 1. A two-way ANOVA using type of product (experiential, material) and type of comparison (other-focused, self-focused) as between-subjects variables and benign envy as a dependent variable, yielded a significant main effect for type of product, F(1, 190) = 57.30, p = .000, with experiences eliciting more benign envy (M = 4.27) than material purchases (M = 2.51). All other effects were non-significant. A two-way ANOVA using type of product (experiential, material) and type of comparison (other-focused, self-focused) as between-subjects variables and malicious envy as a dependent variable, yielded a significant interaction effect between type of product and type of comparison, F(1, 190) = 16.14, p = .000, a main effect for type of product, F(1, 190) = 6.35, p = .013, and a main effect for type of comparison, F(1, 190) = 8.96, p = .003. The results showed that self-focused comparison resulted in significantly higher levels of malicious envy for experiential purchases (M = 3.49) than other-focused comparisons (M = 1.91), or self-focused comparisons related to material purchases (M = 2.02), or other-focused comparisons related to material purchases (M = 2.25).

Study 3. The purpose of Study 3 was to investigate further and validate the role of other- vs. self-focused as well as investigate the role of perceived desirability of the purchase. One hundred and twenty-five students participated in the study. The experience and material purchases as well as the envy eliciting story and measures of envy were the same as in Study 2 (Van de Ven et al. 2011). Participants were also asked questions related how much they desired the purchase and estimate how much they thought other people desire it. We measured self vs. other focus using a scale by Gibbons and Buunk (1999). Using Hayes (2013) PROCESS model (Model 3) we estimated the impact of type of product (experiential, material), type of comparison (other-focused, self-focused), and perceived desirability (to self vs. others) on benign envy. As we had separate scales self-focused and other-focused comparisons, as well as for the perceived desirability of the purchase for the self vs. for others, we ran a total of four different models; self-self, self-other, other-self and other-other. The results revealed only a significant main effect for type of purchase (as earlier). We found a significant interaction effect between type of purchase and desirability of purchase to others so that material purchases that are attractive to others are associated with lower levels of benign envy, B = -.45, t = -1.95, p = .05., as well as a marginally significant interaction effect between type of purchase and other-focused comparisons, B = -.65, t = 1.88, p = .06, so that experiential purchases that were other-focused were associated with greater levels of benign envy.

Malicious envy. Using Hayes (2013) PROCESS model (Model 3) we estimated the same models using malicious envy as a dependent variable. The results revealed only a significant main effect for self-focused comparisons, so that self-focused comparisons were associated with greater levels of malicious envy (B = .35, t = 2.09, p = .04); all other effects were non-significant. Thus, we found that material purchases that are attractive to others is associated with lower levels of benign envy.

This research yields two main contributions to literature on envious reactions. First, attentional focus on the self, seem to be associated with maliciously envious feelings while attentional focus on others reduce levels of malicious envy. Second, experiences seem to inherently evoke more benign envy but at the same time these are subject to more malicious envy when combined with a self-focus. Also, the literature has assumed that the envious should desire the envious benefit (Smith and Kim 2007) but the findings obtained here, highlight that importance of perceived desirability for others for eliciting malicious envy and not the self. Limitations: The paper would benefit from replications across material and experiential purchases as well as exploration of marketing implications.

REFERENCES


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