

Can Brands Squeeze Wine from Sour Grapes?

The Importance of Self-Esteem in Understanding Envy's Effects

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ABSTRACT Brands frequently rely on envy as a means of fostering brand connection and motivating consumer purchase. The current investigation extends recent consumer research in this area, using an interpersonal envy-inducing method to capture envy's effects on consumers' brand and product perceptions. We find that while lower self-esteem consumers withdraw from brands when experiencing malicious envy, higher self-esteem consumers preserve or enhance their relationship with an envied brand when experiencing this emotion. As such, while using envy to foster brand relationships and motivate purchase can be successful with higher self-esteem consumers, among lower self-esteem consumers this tactic is likely to prove largely ineffective and may in fact backfire. Finally, we also show that providing external opportunities to self-affirm in ways other than brand or product denigration reduces the negative consequences of envy among low self-esteem consumers.

Marketers appear to show no hesitation to use envy as a marketing tool to motivate purchase and foster brand relationships with consumers. For example, Gucci markets a perfume called "Envy," consumers in North America can sign up for monthly services at a Massage Envy franchise, Expedia suggests that one should book a trip to avoid "vacation envy," LG offers the "EnV" cell phone, and Hewlett Packard (HP) attempts to inspire purchase of its ENVY line of notebook computers and printers. Indeed, the frequent use of envy by brands suggests that eliciting this emotion yields positive outcomes. But does envy, defined as the emotion felt "when a person lacks another's superior quality, achievement, or possession and either desires it or wishes that the other lacked it" (Parrott and Smith 1993, 906) fuel the fire between consumer and brand uniformly or might it drive a wedge that disrupts an otherwise happy union?

While past literature suggests that individual differences in envy's expression may exist (Tai, Narayanan, and McAllister 2012), most envy research ignores internal factors that might predict envy's potential brand and product effects across wide swaths of the population. In contrast, we argue

that consumer heterogeneity means that in some cases, envy will lead to negative brand or product relationship effects, or "sour grapes," as suggested by prior research (e.g., van de Ven, Zeelenberg, and Pieters 2010), but for other consumers, brands can transform envy's juice into wine. We identify global trait self-esteem as a key moderator of these effects. Consistent with predictions from previous consumer research (van de Ven et al. 2010), we first find that experiencing envy does damage the consumer-brand relationship and product purchase intention; however, we qualify this finding, showing that it happens primarily among consumers lower in self-esteem. That is, an individual who struggles with their sense of self-worth will withdraw from the envied brand, lowering brand perceptions and willingness to pay for a brand's products, to protect their self-view. However, among consumers higher in self-esteem, we find that self-esteem serves a positive "buffering" role with regard to envied brands. That is, envy is not always toxic: individuals with higher self-esteem appear to preserve or enhance their willingness to support and connect with brands, relative to their perceptions when not experiencing envy.

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THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Distinctive Characteristics of Envy

Envy results from an upward social comparison to a superior other in a domain important to the self (Smith and Kim 2007). One critical component of envy is the ego threat experienced by engaging in this upward comparison—envy makes us feel worse about ourselves because others are doing better than we are (Tesser, Miller, and Moore 1988). This social-comparison-based ego threat distinguishes envy from other negative emotions with which it may at times coexist, such as disappointment, sadness, or anger (Smith, Kim, and Parrott 1988).

The ego threat generated by envy creates a drive to equalize the gap between the self and the envied other. There are a number of ways by which consumers can satisfy this drive, all of which may be called “expressions” of envy. First, envious individuals can pull the envied individual down to the level of the self by directing their negative reaction toward the envied other (Heider 1958; van de Ven et al. 2009). Second, envious individuals can seek to “level up,” expressing enhanced motivation in relevant tasks to improve the self (van de Ven et al. 2009). Third, making the envied objectless desirable can reduce the ego threat generated by envy: if someone has something less relevant to the self, there is simply less reason for envy (Smith and Kim 2007).

The majority of envy research focuses on bringing the envied other down to the level of the envious self. This type of envy has been termed “envy proper” (Parrot and Smith 1993; Cohen-Charash 2009). An alternate, more recent conceptualization distinguishes between two types of envy—malicious and benign (van de Ven et al. 2009, 2010, 2012). Van de Ven et al. (2009) argue that when an envied advantage is seen as earned or deserved, consumers experience benign envy. Under benign envy, individuals seek self-improvement as a means of closing the gap. Given the absence of hostility, some debate has emerged as to whether or not benign manifestations should be referred to as “envy” at all (e.g., Cohen-Charash 2009).

The present investigation does not attempt to resolve this debate. Rather, we focus on providing a clearer explanation of the negative effects previously associated with malicious envy relative to nonenvy and benign envy situations, and an extension of these effects into consumer relationships with brands. Of note to the present investigation, in one of the few consumer-focused studies of envy, malicious enviers showed a decreased willingness to pay for the envied product (van de Ven et al. 2010, study 3)—a startling and potentially costly finding, particularly given the prevalent use of envy in brand advertisements, promotions, and products. Our investiga-

tion will therefore help determine if, even under the adverse conditions created in its malicious, undeserved form, brands can ever anticipate that envy will yield positive outcomes. We outline our theory about this possibility next.

Self-Esteem, Envy, and Motivation

Recall that a key characteristic of envy is that it generates a sense of ego threat (Cohen-Charash and Mueller 2007). Because envy presents an ego threat, we propose that individuals with different levels of global self-esteem (i.e., a sense of one’s personal worth; Rosenberg 1979) will express their envy in divergent ways with regard to envied outcomes. Note that according to the definition of envy, envied outcomes may be brand relationships, products, perceptions, or opportunities. All of these outcomes require motivation to attain, whether in the form of brand relationships, attitudes, desirability, or willingness to pay for a brand’s products. Therefore, we predict that self-esteem’s effects on envy-related behaviors occur in part because of the way that self-esteem alters motivation to persist in the face of negative experience or information.

Lower Self-Esteem Consumers. One key component of envy is the inherent social comparison it creates (van de Ven et al. 2009). Previous research has shown that reactions to upward social comparison based ego-threats significantly vary across self-esteem levels (e.g., Wills 1981; Gibbons and Gerrard 1991; Baumeister, Smart, and Bodin 1996). Here we find the first clue that the experience of envy may have destructive consequences for the consumer-brand relationship among lower self-esteem individuals. Research has shown that lower self-esteem consumers experience upward social comparison regularly and already see themselves as negatively positioned relative to their peers (Morse and Gergen 1970; Brickman and Bulman 1977; Tesser et al. 1988). Seeing another individual with a desirable brand is only likely to reinforce this low relative position, making it difficult to cope. At the same time, lower self-esteem consumers are likely to feel disempowered or unworthy of a relationship with the target brand. This feeling of unworthiness is an ego threat—an unpleasant experience that calls their own worth into question—and we propose low self-esteem consumers will cope by showing a sour grapes effect and denigrating the brand or desire for a brand’s products. Thus, lower self-esteem individuals will be more likely than their higher-self-esteem counterparts to revise their original brand perceptions and desire for association downward and reduce their motivation to connect. Devaluing the envied brand allows them to make the loss less

central to their own preferences or identities and reduces the self-threat created by envy (Salovey and Rodin 1991; Smith and Kim 2007).

Higher Self-Esteem Consumers. Conversely, we propose that experiencing malicious envy will foster relationships between brands and higher self-esteem individuals. Past work suggests that motivation is contingent on self-esteem. As the mirror image of lower self-esteem consumers, higher self-esteem individuals have been shown to persist at a task after initial failure. Consistent with persistence after a goal, higher self-esteem individuals may preserve their motivation to connect with an envied brand after seeing a superior other with it (Baumeister 1993). Second, in contrast to lower self-esteem individuals, higher self-esteem is associated with a strong tendency to preserve belief in one's own prior judgment (Swann, Rentfrow, and Guinn 2003). As such, higher self-esteem individuals may be motivated to preserve positive perceptions of a brand or desire for its products after experiencing envy—if they were right in their desire for a brand before someone else received it, then they should remain correct to continue to desire it afterward. Therefore, we predict that higher self-esteem individuals will preserve or enhance perceptions of a brand even after experiencing envy. Formally,

H1: As consumer self-esteem increases (decreases), the motivation to purchase or connect with an envied brand is better preserved (diminished) in envy as opposed to nonenvy situations.

Our framework proposes that low self-esteem individuals devalue the envied brand as a means to cope with the ego threat experienced through envy. If this is the case, is this segment of the population out of reach for brands seeking to use envy as a relationship-building tactic? Our theory suggests that it is possible to reach this group and allows us to propose that providing an opportunity to bolster self-esteem will mitigate this negative consequence. Specifically, providing a product-external opportunity for lower self-esteem consumers to bolster their self-esteem should mitigate this damaging consequence. That is, if a consumer experiencing envy can be externally affirmed, they may not need to repair the ego via product or brand denigration. Formally,

H2: The opportunity to bolster self-esteem will moderate the relationship between envy and brand perception such that when lower self-esteem consumers'

self-view is externally bolstered (vs. not bolstered), envy's negative effect on brand perceptions will be attenuated.

Malicious versus Benign Envy

To connect our findings to recent consumer envy frameworks (i.e., van de Ven et al. 2009, 2010), it is necessary to consider the type of envy engendered by our method. While the majority of envy research focuses on envy proper (the focus of the present work), recent work has suggested that an additional type of envy exists, one that results in motivational and behavioral differences within the envier. This type of envy has been termed *benign* envy. While both types of envy result from an upward social comparison toward a similar other who's advantage is in a domain important to the self (Bers and Rodin 1984; van de Ven et al. 2010), benign versus malicious envy are characterized by variance in the deservingness of the advantage (van de Ven et al. 2010, 2012). Benign envy, where the advantage is deserved, is associated with a lack of hostility toward the envied other, and carries with it a motivation to improve one's own position to equalize the disadvantage. Indeed, van de Ven et al. (2010) found that when experiencing benign envy, consumers increase their valuation of the envied good.

As noted, the focus of the present investigation is on envy proper, which van de Ven and colleagues refer to as malicious envy. We propose that the impact of self-esteem on the motivation to pursue the envied outcome is specific to malicious, and not benign, envy because the "feelings, thoughts, action tendencies, and motivations" differ drastically between the two emotions (van de Ven et al. 2010, 985). Specifically, the ego threat caused by experiencing malicious envy motivates the envier to engage in destructive behavior both toward the target (e.g., Vecchio 2005) and the self (Zizzo 2002). Conversely, the motivation under benign envy is to improve the self, and attention is directed inward as opposed to outward at the envied other. Put another way, the ego threat caused by the upward social comparison is muted under benign envy (Smith et al. 1988; Tesser et al. 1988). As such, under benign envy we only expect to replicate previous research such that motivation to pursue the envied outcome will be higher under benign over malicious envy. We do not expect any interaction between benign envy and self-esteem in this case.

We test our predictions in three experimental studies. We operationalize brand relationships through brand perceptions (study 2) and brand desirability through willingness to pay for a brand's product offering (studies 1 and 3).

In each study, participants observe a confederate obtaining a desired product linked to a positively viewed brand. We examine the effects of these experiences as reflected in post-envy brand or product valuations compared to either a no-envy (studies 1–2) or benign envy (studies 2–3) condition. Further, in study 3 we show that offering an external self-esteem affirmation reduces lower self-esteem individuals' tendency to display sour grapes effects. Given the intensity of this emotion (Smith and Kim 2007), we use a novel, interpersonal envy-inducing experimental method that effectively generates envy and captures expressions toward envied brands and their product offerings.

STUDY 1

Study 1 has two goals: (1) To demonstrate initial support for the moderating relationship between envy, self-esteem, and brand support and (2) to validate an interpersonal envy-inducing experimental situation in a controlled setting.

Method

Pretest. In our pretest, lab participants were randomly assigned to individual computer stations one through four, with a confederate situated at seat five. First, participants were asked to stand up and introduce themselves to the other people in the room, stating their first names, majors, and seat locations. Importantly, all participants met the confederate “Jenny,” who stated she was of the same major as the study participants. This introduction task was included to ensure that participants perceived the confederate as similar to themselves, an important condition for envy (Smith et al. 1999; Smith and Kim 2007; van de Ven et al. 2009).

Immediately after the introductions, a computer program prompted participants to enter the first names, majors, and seat numbers of the other participants. This procedure ensured that participants recalled the confederate. Participants next completed an unrelated task taking approximately 20 minutes. Once participants had completed this task, the experimenter informed them that the present experimental session was sponsored by the local National Hockey League (NHL) club. Participants were told that the marketing department had been consulting with the NHL club regarding their promotional strategy, and to say thank you, the club sponsored this research study and provided a pair of front row tickets to a game against a top rival for one participant. Participants were then instructed to retrieve an envelope taped underneath their seats. In each of the participants' envelopes was a message that read “thank you for participating.” In the envy condition, the confederate “found” and displayed the

two hockey game tickets, expressed excitement and was congratulated by the experimenter. Thus, the confederate's advantage was not earned or deserved (e.g., situationally induced), the key factor in experiencing malicious envy (van de Ven et al. 2009, 2010). In the control condition, the confederate received the same note as other participants.

Next, participants were asked to continue to the next task individually, presented as an emotions inventory. Participants were asked to report the extent to which they presently felt the emotions used on the PANAS scale, augmented with “envious” and “jealous,”¹ using a 1 = clearly does not describe my feelings to 5 = clearly describes my feelings scale.

A total of 36 participants from the University of British Columbia took part in the pretest (18 in the envy sessions, 18 in the no-envy sessions). Data were subjected to a factor analysis using a varimax rotation. Five factors emerged, with one item not loading at $>.5$ on any factor (giddy), which was removed from the analysis. Items constituting the other five factors were averaged to form indexes (positive arousal index: interested, enthusiastic, determined, excited, attentive, active, $\alpha = .90$; shame index: guilty, ashamed, afraid, $\alpha = .77$; negative affect index: depressed, scared, distressed, sad, $\alpha = .83$; envy index: envious, jealous, $\alpha = .92$; pride index: strong, proud, irritable, $\alpha = .76$). We then used session condition (envy/control) to predict the outcomes of each index. Results are shown in table 1. While no significant differences emerged with regard to the other emotions reported, envy was significantly greater in the envy sessions as opposed to control sessions. Thus, our experimental context successfully elicited malicious envy, without creating significant levels of confounding emotions.

Main Experiment. Study 1 followed the method used in the pretest, resulting in a 2 (envy vs. control session) \times continuous measure (self-esteem) between-participants design. Data were collected in two phases. Phase one consisted of a survey capturing 457 potential participants' preferences for a number of sporting and arts events occurring locally, as well as the Rosenberg self-esteem scale (1979), which provided a self-esteem score for each participant.

1. We are aware that envy and jealousy are distinct constructs (Smith and Kim 2007). However, since colloquial speech often uses them interchangeably, they are often handled as equivalent in envy measures taken in prior research (e.g., Smith et al. 1988; Parrott and Smith 1993; van de Ven et al. 2010). Results do not change if we analyze envy without creating an index with jealousy.

Table 1. Pretest Results for Study 1

Emotion Index	Envy Sessions, mean (SD)	Control Sessions, mean (SD)	F-statistic (1, 35 df), significance level
Positive arousal index*	2.57 (.80)	2.19 (.76)	2.13, $p = .15$
Shame index	1.63 (.75)	1.46 (.62)	.53, $p = .47$
Negative affect index	1.76 (.76)	1.69 (.80)	.07, $p = .79$
Envy index	3.36 (1.07)	1.81 (.99)	20.58, $p < .0001$
Pride index	2.46 (.81)	2.13 (.83)	1.50, $p = .23$

Note.—SD = standard deviation.

* If all emotions are considered individually rather than indexed, no significant differences are seen between envy and control sessions.

Phase two occurred four to six weeks later. Ninety-one undergraduate students from the same subject pool as in the pretest participated for course credit and were randomly assigned to either envy or control conditions. Procedures were identical to those in the pretest until the award of the tickets, at which point we captured our dependent measure.

Dependent Measure: Desirability of the Envied Brand.

After the envy manipulation, participants completed a study ostensibly described as a product evaluation study, which included our dependent measure. In this study, we test brand desirability with respect to forming a relationship with a brand, operationalized as willingness to pay for the envied product (two front row NHL hockey tickets).

Analysis and Results

Self-esteem scores from the premeasures were mean-centered at 2.14 (SD = 0.49) and experimental session condition was contrast-coded as -1 (*control*) or 1 (*envy*). In study 1, a floodlight analysis following Spiller et al. (2013) was conducted to probe interactions for the predicted simple effects of envy (vs. control) at various levels of self-esteem.

Manipulation Checks. All participants noted the correct name, major, and seat number of the confederate in the “memory test” and were retained.

Dependent Measure: Desirability of the Envied Brand.

An ANOVA with willingness to pay (WTP) for the envied brand’s product as the dependent measure was estimated to test our hypothesis that a sour grapes effect would be seen among lower self-esteem participants, but the opposite among high self-esteem participants (hypothesis 1). Neither self-esteem nor envy condition main effects predicted WTP for the envied brand. However, a significant interac-

tion of self-esteem and envy condition emerged ($b = 4.05$, $F(1, 140) = 6.51$, $p = .01$; see fig. 1). Johnson-Neyman significance tests reveal a negative simple effect of envy on willingness to pay at values of self-esteem equal to or less than .55, (or 1.12 SD), below the mean ($B_{JN} = -22.04$, $SE = 11.13$, $p = .05$). As predicted and replicating previous research, lower self-esteem individuals reported a lower willingness to pay for the envied brand’s product when experiencing envy. However, high self-esteem participants displayed a decidedly different response to the emotion. Qualifying previous research, individuals with self-esteem at or above .57 (or approximately 1.16 SD) above the mean value in fact raised their valuation of the tickets when they observed a confederate obtaining the tickets as opposed to when they did not ($B_{JN} = 23.57$, $SE = 11.92$, $p = .05$). Further, regression analysis also shows that self-esteem did not have

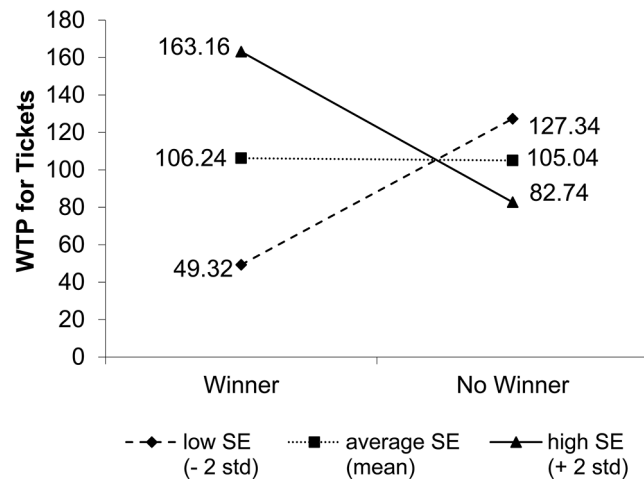


Figure 1. Willingness to pay (WTP) for the envied brand as a function of envy condition. High self-esteem (low self-esteem) participants increased (decreased) WTP for the envied brand when experiencing envy.

a main effect on WTP in control sessions ($b = -22.86$, $t = -1.27$, $p = .21$), but that higher self-esteem was associated with a higher WTP for hockey tickets in the envy sessions ($b = 58.20$, $t = 2.23$, $p = .03$).

Discussion

The results of study 1 provide initial evidence for our proposal that self-esteem is a critical factor in predicting the consequences of envy. Results showed that lower self-esteem individuals diminished their willingness to pay for the envied brand's product, both relative to lower self-esteem individuals who had not experienced envy and relative to higher self-esteem individuals. This finding supports the claim from previous research that envy can potentially lead to a lower valuation of the envied product (e.g., van de Ven et al. 2010, study 3); however, our data suggest that this response only occurred among a subset of individuals. Importantly, higher self-esteem individuals showed an increased willingness to pay for the envied brand's product. We also performed a replication study with a generalized population ($n = 175$) using a different envied outcome commonly employed by brands: promotional contest. Interaction and floodlight results replicated the results of study 1. Envy again drove low self-esteem participants to withdraw brand support (vs. control) but high self-esteem participants to enhance brand support (see app. A for full study details; apps. A–D are available online).

To connect and extend our theorizing to recent consumer envy frameworks, in studies 2 and 3 we include benign envy in our designs. As noted, the focus of the present investigation is on envy proper, or malicious envy (van de Ven et al. 2009). Consistent with prior research, we expect to replicate sour grapes effects among lower self-esteem consumers under malicious, but not benign, envy; however, we expect that high self-esteem consumers will preserve their connection to the envied brand under malicious envy.

STUDY 2

In study 2, we explicitly test our envy proposition using brand perceptions as our dependent measure. Further, we adapted a context used in previous envy research to demonstrate our theoretical contribution (internship interview with desirable brand; van de Ven et al. 2010, study 1).

Method

Study 2 followed a 2 (envy vs. control condition) \times 2 (envy type: malicious, benign) \times continuous measure (self-esteem) between-participants design. One hundred eighty-three mar-

keting undergraduates ($M_{\text{age}} = 20.42$ years, 60% female) from the University of British Columbia completed the study for course credit.

Self-esteem was again collected as part of a battery of measures at the beginning of the semester using the Rosenberg (1979) scale. Along with this measure, participants provided the company name, position held, and tenure of service for their last three jobs. This information would be used in our manipulation of envy type. Approximately three weeks later, participants came to the lab in groups of four or five, joined by one confederate in each session.

Similar to study 1, participants first introduced themselves by stating their name and major and were introduced to second-year marketing student "Jenny." Participants then returned to their individual terminals and were asked to provide the names, majors, and seat numbers of the other participants, followed by an unrelated task for approximately 20 minutes. After completing this study, participants were presented with an internship opportunity from a highly desirable brand: Lululemon.

They were told that locally headquartered Lululemon was considering offering an internship to a student from the business school. Since the brand anticipated a high degree of interest, they were preselecting four students for an "inside track" interview with a Lululemon executive that would take place before main internship applications were solicited. This interview would allow participants to learn more about what might make them the most attractive internship candidate, to separate themselves from the large number of applications, and to increase their chances of obtaining the position.²

We manipulated envy type by changing the ways in which the inside track interview was awarded. In the benign envy condition, participants were told that the inside track winners would be chosen based on the work experience information the students had provided during the presurvey, as judged by the business school's career services center. In the malicious envy condition, participants were told that the inside track interview winners would be randomly selected, following the validated procedure in the pretest and study 1 (using an envelope under a chair to identify a winner). Thus, in the benign condition, the desired outcome was earned or deserved based on relevant past work experience, while in the

2. To be clear, a highly sought after internship was not awarded through a research study but an interview prior to the official recruitment process. This was chosen to ensure believability among the participant population.

malicious condition, the desired outcome was undeserved (van de Ven et al. 2010).³

As in study 1, in the envy conditions the confederate verbally expressed excitement upon opening the envelope under her chair and finding that she had been selected for the “inside track” interview (malicious) or being informed by the experimenter (benign). In the control conditions, there was not a winner in the session.

Dependent Measure: Brand Perceptions. Participants then indicated their brand perceptions of Lululemon. This measure was composed of rating the extent to which the brand offering the internship was liked, positive, good, one of the individual’s favorites, high quality, special, successful, and cool on 1 (not at all) to 7 (very) scales ($\alpha = .94$).

Analysis and Results

Participants’ scores on the Rosenberg (1979) self-esteem scale were mean-centered ($M = 3.95$, $SD = .65$). Envy type and envy condition were contrast-coded as -1 (malicious), 1 (benign); -1 (control), and 1 (envy); interactions were analyzed using the technique used in study 1.

Dependent Measure: Brand Perceptions. We entered envy type, envy condition, mean-centered self-esteem and all interactions into a linear regression to predict brand perceptions. This analysis showed that higher self-esteem individuals tended to rate the brand offering (i.e., the internship) more highly overall ($b = .43$, $F(1, 175) = 8.57$, $p < .01$). Importantly, the predicted three-way interaction emerged ($b = -.35$, $F(1, 175) = 8.77$, $p = .01$).

In the benign envy conditions, higher self-esteem individuals tended to rate Lululemon more highly than did lower self-esteem individuals ($b = .53$, $F(1, 89) = 5.99$, $p < .05$), regardless of whether participants were in envy or control conditions ($b = -.17$, $F(1, 89) = .65$, $p > .40$). As expected, control and benign envy conditions did not interact with self-esteem and behave in a similar fashion. No other effects were significant.

However, when envy was malicious, we again observe an interaction of envy condition and self-esteem ($b = .52$, $F(1, 86) = 7.39$, $p < .01$). Consistent with our predictions, envy led lower self-esteem individuals (at or below 1.32, or .86 SD below the mean) to devalue the target brand relative

to a no-envy situation ($B_{JN} = -.56$, $SE = .28$, $t = -1.99$, $p = .05$). Conversely and qualifying previous research, envy led higher self-esteem individuals (at or above .21, or .32 SDs above the mean) to enhance their valuation of the brand ($B_{JN} = .24$, $SE = .12$, $t = 1.99$, $p = .05$). Regression analyses show that in the malicious envy sessions, higher self-esteem individuals also showed higher desire for the brand associated with the envied internship than did lower self-esteem individuals ($b = .85$, $F(1, 45) = 7.58$, $p < .01$). There was no difference based on self-esteem in the corresponding control condition ($b = .19$, $F(1, 41) = .69$, $p > .40$).

Discussion

Study 2 extends the results from study 1 by examining the effects of malicious envy on brand perception both relative to control and benign envy conditions. We again demonstrate the importance of self-esteem in understanding envy’s effects, such that higher self-esteem individuals preserved high perceptions of the envied brand, but lower self-esteem individuals devalued the brand. This suggests that the use of envy has important implications not only for a specific envied good but also for fostering and potentially damaging brand relationships.

In our final study, we seek to replicate our effects using an established envy manipulation from previous research (van de Ven et al. 2010) to ensure that our effects are not a function of the interpersonal methodology we employed. Moreover, study 3 seeks to add conceptual support by manipulating information that externally bolsters self-esteem prior to product valuation (hypothesis 2). If low self-esteem consumers display the sour grapes effect as a means to bolster their self-esteem in response to ego threat, then providing such information should mitigate this negative brand outcome.

STUDY 3

Study 3 seeks to replicate our effects using an established envy manipulation from previous consumer research (van de Ven et al. 2010, study 3). Given the consistent results observed across control and benign envy conditions in study 2, in this study we use benign envy as our contrast condition to malicious envy. Moreover, study 3 seeks to provide support for our theoretical claim that the brand relationship damage observed among low self-esteem individuals experiencing malicious envy is a means to cope with this ego threat (hypothesis 2). To do this, we introduce a self-esteem bolstering manipulation following the envy experience but prior to the brand support measure. If our theory is correct, lower

3. Full details of our pretest for this experimental method are included in app. B.

self-esteem individuals experiencing such a bolster should not show negative effects on the brand even under malicious envy.

Method

Study 3 followed a 2 (envy type: malicious, benign) \times 2 (self-esteem bolster: absent, present) \times continuous measure (self-esteem) between-participants design. One hundred seventy-one individuals from Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk; $M_{\text{age}} = 36.1$, ages 19–75, 48.5% female) participated in the study in exchange for \$2. Participants were told that within this MTurk study, they would be completing a series of unrelated studies for approximately 20 minutes. At the beginning of the survey, self-esteem was collected using the Rosenberg (1979) scale. After a brief filler task, participants received the envy manipulation.

Envy Induction. To manipulate malicious and benign envy, we created videos that showed a consumer describing a brand experience to an interviewer. We selected flight upgrades from a global airline brand as the envied brand for this study.

We hired professional actors to play the roles of target consumer and interviewer to ensure consistency and believability of the interaction. The target consumer in the video was asked to identify and describe her most recent brand purchase experience. Scripts were obtained and adapted to fit this category from previous envy research (van de Ven et al. 2010, study 3).⁴ In this script, the actress identified herself as “Jenny,” who had recently acquired three first-class upgrades to be used on Star Alliance Airlines. To manipulate malicious versus benign envy, we followed van de Ven et al. (2010, see app. D). In the malicious envy condition, the consumer received the upgrades from her Dad (undeserved), while in the benign condition, the consumer worked to save up enough money to purchase the upgrades herself (deserved). A pretest confirmed our manipulations successfully elicited malicious and benign envy, respectively, and did not interact with self-esteem⁵ (see app. C for full details and discussion).

4. We thank Niels van de Ven for sharing the scripts used in his research and for his guidance in adapting the manipulations to our experimental context.

5. This nonsignificant interaction result is important and supports our theorizing that self-esteem moderates the consequences, and not the emotional experience, of envy. An alternative explanation for our results is that high self-esteem consumers may feel less threatened by an upward social comparison, and as such perceive the envied other to be more deserving of the advantage. In this case, high self-esteem consumers would experience more benign (vs. malicious) envy, and our results would be in line

After the manipulation, the consumer described the experience of flying first class, which was identical across the envy conditions.

Self-Esteem Bolster. After answering cover story questions about the video (e.g., video quality, sound), participants received the self-esteem bolster manipulation. Specifically, participants were told that the first study was now complete and they would be redirected to a different study described as a study for researchers who wrote graduate entrance exam questions. Participants were told that they would complete five multiple choice math questions of varying difficulty to generate feedback regarding which questions to include in future exams. After completing the five questions, participants received the self-esteem bolster manipulation. Participants in the bolster absent condition received no feedback on their performance, and were given the following message: “Thank you for completing these problems. Your correct answers will be tabulated and sent to the researchers.” Participants in the bolster present condition received the following message: “Impressive! Of the 200+ individuals who have completed these questions, you are in the *top 5%*! Well done!”

Dependent Measure: Desirability of the Envied Brand.

Immediately after the self-esteem bolster manipulation, participants were directed to another study in which they indicated their preferences for a number of products. Within this list was our brand desirability dependent measure: valuation of three first class upgrades for Star Alliance Airlines (open response willingness to pay). Upon completion, participants completed demographic and suspicion probe questions before being thanked and paid.

Analysis and Results

Participants' scores on the Rosenberg (1979) self-esteem scale were mean-centered ($M = 5.45$, $SD = 1.38$), and envy type and self-esteem bolster condition were contrast-coded as -1 (*malicious*), 1 (*benign*); -1 (*bolster absent*), 1 (*bolster present*).

with previous research. However, in addition to our results showing that our manipulations cleanly elicited benign and malicious envy across self-esteem level, previous research finds that high self-esteem individuals are more threatened by upward social comparisons because they are “extremely reluctant to revise their self-appraisals in a downward direction” (Baumeister et al. 1996, 8). Taken together, it is more likely that self-esteem moderates the consequences, and not the experience, of envy.

Dependent Variable. We used the full model (envy type, self-esteem repair opportunity, and self-esteem) to predict brand support. The regression yielded a main effect of envy type ($b = 146.1$, $SE = 43.9$, $t = 3.33$, $p < .01$) and a marginal main effect of self-esteem ($b = -52.2$, $SE = 31.5$, $t = -1.66$, $p < .10$). Replicating previous research (van de Ven et al. 2010), willingness to pay was higher when envy was benign as opposed to malicious. However, these effects were qualified by a marginally significant three-way interaction ($b = 57.4$, $SE = 31.7$, $t = 1.81$, $p = .07$). To decompose the three-way interaction, we analyzed the effects of envy type and self-esteem within the bolster absent and bolster present conditions. Our framework predicts the three-way interaction will be driven by the bolster absent condition.

Within the bolster absent condition, we observe significant main effects of both envy type ($b = 157.8$, $SE = 57.2$, $t = 2.77$, $p < .01$) and self-esteem ($b = -83.3$, $SE = 40.1$, $t = -2.08$, $p < .05$). However, these main effects were qualified by a significant two-way interaction ($b = -108.8$, $SE = 40.0$, $t = -2.72$, $p < .01$). Replicating previous results and previous envy research, lower self-esteem participants ($-.60$ SD) displayed a sour grapes effect, reporting lower brand support when envy was malicious as opposed to benign ($b = 222.9$, $SE = 62.1$, $t = 3.59$, $p < .01$). However, consistent with our framework and qualifying previous research, higher self-esteem participants ($+1.10$ SD) preserved their support of the envied brand, reporting no differences in willingness to pay when experiencing either malicious or benign envy ($b = 40.0$, $SE = 72.0$, $t = .53$, $p = .60$).

In the bolster present condition, a different pattern was identified. Only a main effect of envy type emerged from the regression ($b = 144.6$, $SE = 66.4$, $t = 2.18$, $p < .05$). Replicating previous research (van de Ven et al. 2010), participants experiencing benign envy reported higher brand support than participants experiencing malicious envy, regardless of self-esteem.

We conducted one additional analysis of the three-way interaction to directly test our moderation hypothesis among low self-esteem participants (process model 3). Results showed that among low self-esteem participants, the conditional indirect effect of envy type on brand support was significant in the bolster absent condition ($b = 306.8$, $SE = 84.2$, $t = 3.64$, $p < .001$) but not in the bolster present condition ($b = 129.5$, $SE = 94.1$, $t = 1.38$, $p > .15$). The conditional indirect effects were nonsignificant for high self-esteem participants in both bolster conditions (both $p > .10$).

Discussion

Utilizing an established manipulation of benign and malicious envy, study 3 confirms the moderating role of self-esteem on brand support. Among lower self-esteem consumers, experiencing malicious envy damages brand support, thus replicating results from our prior studies. However, qualifying previous research and perhaps suggesting that brands do not face undue danger in using envy to promote their products, higher self-esteem participants preserved their brand support regardless of envy type.

By introducing a self-esteem bolster, we are able to provide some evidence that low self-esteem consumers denigrate the envied product as a means of coping with the ego threat caused by the malicious envy experience (hypothesis 2). Specifically, we found that the sour grapes effect does not occur when low self-esteem individuals experienced a self-esteem boost in a different domain prior to stating their product valuations. We believe this result emerges because the self-esteem bolster mitigates the ego threat of the upward social comparison, a necessary condition for envy to be experienced. Further research should explore the duration of such external self-esteem bolstering relative to any damage caused by envy, to see which in fact is more effective in preserving consumers' self-perceptions.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

As a whole, the present research offers novel insight into the way that envy affects consumers' attraction to products and brands. Overall, we replicate conclusions drawn from previous research (van de Ven et al. 2010) warning that the use of malicious envy may be dangerous. However, we show that this finding may not be uniform across an entire consumer population, but rather, may be driven by lower self-esteem individuals' behavior. Indeed, we consistently find that higher self-esteem individuals display a contrasting reaction to experiencing malicious envy: preserving or increasing the motivation to connect with the brand.

Thus, brands may only want to use envy as a means of fostering brand connection when they anticipate a high level of self-esteem among their target consumers. Given that self-esteem has sometimes been found to correlate with income and education (e.g., Bachman and O'Malley 1977), this is not an impossible limitation for brands to consider. However, it does suggest that using envy when a brand intends to broaden its appeal to a new market requires consideration of that market's dominant sense of self-worth, and possibly, situational boosts to self-esteem that make envy a motivator, at

least in the limited context of a shopping encounter or campaign (Malär et al. 2018).

This research also contributes to the current discussion of the relationship between marketer-induced emotions and brand relationships in multiple ways. First, consistent with work in the present issue (e.g., Albert and Thomson 2018; Park and John 2018; Reimann et al. 2018), our findings suggest that marketer-induced negative emotions can have adverse consequences for consumer-brand relationships. Specifically, we find that eliciting envy as a means to foster relationships may have negative implications on perceptions of the envied brand. However, by demonstrating the moderating role of self-esteem, our research suggests that the interplay between negative emotions and brand relationships is complex in nature. Thus, eliciting negative emotions can positively affect brand relationships, but reactions are likely not ubiquitous across the entire population.

We note that we have used Rosenberg's (1979) explicit global self-esteem measure throughout this work in order to make relevant contributions to existing frameworks. The decision to collect this measure separately from the main experiment should have reduced self-presentation concerns, meaning that our measures were more likely to capture "genuine" self-esteem (Farnham, Greenwald, and Banaji 1999). However, we acknowledge that our results should not be read as generalizable to all measures of self-esteem. Particularly, new work highlights more subtle measures of self-esteem that capture a different theoretical construct or dimension of self-worth judgments than does Rosenberg (1979; see Jordan et al. 2003; Crocker and Park 2004). For example, Jordan et al. (2003) found that individuals with high explicit but low implicit self-esteem (measured via IAT), exhibited more defensive behaviors than individuals high in both explicit and implicit self-esteem. Future work can fruitfully test for replication of our effects in terms of implicit or unstable self-esteem, or identify divergent patterns using these constructs as moderating factors. Moreover, it is important to consider how self-esteem differs across cultures. Our experiments were conducted in North America and future research could investigate whether our self-esteem moderation operates differently across cultures. For example, the negative effects of malicious envy demonstrated in previous research (van de Ven et al. 2010, study 3) were documented in The Netherlands. While similar in many respects, Canadian and American cultures score significantly higher on masculinity (Hofstede 1984), which has been shown to be strongly negatively correlated with self-esteem (Schmitt and Allik 2005). As such, it

is possible that self-esteem may moderate the consequences of envy differently in different markets.

Finally, future research could examine how our effects may vary based on a consumer's prior connection to the brand. We purposely selected brands that participants likely held in positive regard and with which they had some experience. We made this decision deliberately in order to maximize the potential to observe both strengthening and damaging brand relationship behaviors. However, might the consequences of envy operate differently across when brand connection is extremely high? Might the denigration observed by low self-esteem consumers be mitigated or buffered in this case, or might it be exacerbated through perceived betrayal (e.g., Aaker, Fournier, and Brasel 2004; Aggarwal and Shi 2018)? Future research examining this moderator could further add to our understanding of envy's effects.

In conclusion, we find that brands may not uniformly open themselves to damage via the use of envy to motivate and foster brand relationships. However, we suggest this strategy will be most effective in combination with careful targeting, as it will be operative among consumers high in self-esteem. At the same time, we find convergent support for consumer research findings that suggest malicious envy damages consumer-brand relations, but suggest that such effects are most likely among consumers low in self-esteem, who denigrate envied brands and products as a means to cope with the threat of envy. As is the case with wine, understanding the complexities and nuances of envy can, in some cases, lead to an exceptional vintage from sour grapes. Failure to appreciate the subtleties, however, is a direct path to the table wine aisle.

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