



Envy-Based Marketing: A Meta-Analysis of Positive and Negative Outcomes with a Focus on Benign and Malicious Envy and Cultural Moderators

Mohammad Amin Choobineh^{1*}, Ali Pirzad²

¹PhD Student in Business Management, Islamic Azad University of Yasuji.

²Faculty Member, Islamic Azad University of Yasuji.

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***Corresponding author:** Mohammad Ami Choobineh, PhD Student in Business Management, Islamic Azad University of Yasuji.

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Abstract:

This meta-analysis systematically reviews the existing literature on envy-based marketing, elucidating its multifaceted impact on consumer behavior. The study distinguishes between benign and malicious envy, clarifying their distinct psychological mechanisms and varying consequences on purchase intention, brand loyalty, and consumer well-being. This analysis also examines crucial moderating factors, including cultural dimensions (individualism vs. collectivism), consumer self-esteem, perceived deservingness, product characteristics, and influencer attributes. By synthesizing contradictory findings and identifying underlying causal pathways, this study offers significant theoretical contributions to consumer psychology and marketing, alongside practical implications for marketers seeking to ethically leverage aspirational tendencies and policymakers aiming to safeguard consumer welfare.

Keywords: Envy-based marketing, Social Media Influencers, Consumer Well-being, Ethical Implications, Self-Esteem, Product Scarcity

Introduction

The Dual Nature of Envy in Modern Marketing

1.1. The Pervasiveness of Envy-Based Marketing Strategies

Marketing strategies increasingly exploit envy to generate desire in consumers, often by associating products with admired or envied resources (Belk, 2011). This approach is evident in the widespread display of luxury lifestyles in advertising, aiming to make products more appealing and inspire consumers to achieve personal goals like beauty, wealth, or social status (Ferreira, 2021). The concept of "keeping up with the Joneses," a phenomenon with roots stretching back a century, continues to significantly influence the consumer world (Bond University, n.d.). However, the primary triggers of this envy have evolved. Today, social media influencers (SMIs) have become pivotal conduits for eliciting this emotion (Bond University, n.d.; Taylor & Francis Online, n.d.-b). Influencers showcase aspirational lifestyles, appearances, or possessions, encouraging followers to purchase similar products to achieve the desired lifestyle or elevate their status (Bond University, n.d.). Global brands such as Revlon, Estée Lauder, BMW, and Calvin Klein have extensively utilized envy in their advertising campaigns, demonstrating its longstanding presence as a marketing tactic (Ferreira, 2021).

1.2. Contradictory Research Landscape: A Necessity for Synthesis

Despite the increasing use of envy in advertising, existing research presents contradictory findings regarding its impact on purchase behavior and the elicitation of negative emotions (Taylor & Francis Online, n.d.-a). Some studies point to positive outcomes, such as increased purchase intention and willingness to pay more (Bond University, n.d.; ScienceDaily, 2010). In contrast, other research highlights significant negative effects, including negative brand associations and driving consumers towards competitor

brands (Ferreira, 2021; GRIN, 2014; MDPI, n.d.; ScienceDaily, 2010). This inconsistency in findings underscores the need for a comprehensive synthesis that can reconcile disparate results and provide a clearer understanding of the conditional effectiveness of envy in marketing (Viechtbauer & Cheung, 2010).

1.3. The Value of Meta-Analysis in Resolving Contradictions

Meta-analysis offers a methodical and replicable approach to integrating research findings, reducing the subjective aspects present in traditional narrative reviews (Viechtbauer & Cheung, 2010; CWAAuthors, n.d.). This method is particularly beneficial when there is inconsistency in empirical outcomes across different studies, enabling researchers to combine results and reach more reliable conclusions, especially in fields with a substantial volume of empirical research (Viechtbauer & Cheung, 2010; CWAAuthors, n.d.). By synthesizing data from diverse studies, this meta-analysis aims to provide a more precise understanding of how envy functions in marketing, identifying clear patterns essential for tailoring marketing strategies for diverse consumer bases (Viechtbauer & Cheung, 2010).

1.4. Research Objectives and Contributions to Theory and Practice

This meta-analysis aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the positive and negative outcomes of envy-based marketing, explicitly distinguishing between benign and malicious envy and examining key cultural and individual moderating factors. Observing trends over time reveals an evolving landscape of envy triggers and reactions (Belk, 2011). Historically, envy primarily stemmed from direct, personal comparisons within a known social circle, such as "keeping up with the Joneses" (Belk, 2011; Bond University, n.d.). However, with the advent of mass media and especially social media, the triggers of envy have significantly shifted (Belk, 2011). The focus of envy has transitioned from unique possessions of neighbors to fungible, mass-accessible branded goods (Belk, 2011; ResearchGate, n.d.-d). Furthermore, social media platforms showcase highly curated and idealized content, often presenting a distorted version of reality (Human Life Review, n.d.; Taylor & Francis Online, n.d.-a). This shift in how envy is triggered and experienced has significant implications. When envy is aroused through mass-mediated and curated content, it becomes more difficult for consumers to assess the "deservingness" of the envied individual (Taylor & Francis Online, n.d.-a). This can lead to more unpredictable and potentially negative outcomes, as discerning whether the displayed success is a result of effort and merit or simply luck and privilege becomes more complex (Taylor & Francis Online, n.d.-a).

This review also highlights the ethical imperative in envy-based marketing (ResearchGate, n.d.-c; University of Portsmouth, n.d.). Existing research indicates that while leveraging envy in marketing can lead to purchases (Bond University, n.d.; ScienceDaily, 2010), it can also severely backfire (Ferreira, 2021; SEM Updates, n.d.). The critical distinction lies in differentiating between benign and malicious envy (Ferreira, 2021; ScienceDaily, 2010). Malicious envy is specifically linked to negative brand associations and consumer well-being issues (Ferreira, 2021; Old Dominion University, n.d.; ResearchGate, n.d.-c; University of Tilburg, n.d.-b). This elevates the discussion from a purely strategic marketing concern to an ethical responsibility (ResearchGate, n.d.-c; University of Portsmouth, n.d.). If marketers indiscriminately use

envy without a precise understanding of its subtypes and their specific triggers, they not only risk commercial failures (e.g., lost sales, brand damage) (Ferreira, 2021) but also inadvertently contribute to significant negative psychological and behavioral consequences for consumers (e.g., depression, anxiety, unethical consumer beliefs, environmentally harmful actions) (MDPI, n.d.; Old Dominion University, n.d.; ResearchGate, n.d.-c; ResearchGate, n.d.-e; University of Tilburg, n.d.-b; Frontiers in Psychology, 2023). This underscores the vital need for marketers to comprehend the psychological nuances of envy to prevent unintended harm to consumers and society (Ferreira, 2021). Furthermore, this situation points to a critical need for regulatory bodies to expand their focus beyond mere truthfulness in advertising to encompass the psychological and societal impacts of emotional appeals (Human Life Review, n.d.; Planksip, n.d.; Advertising Standards Authority, n.d.; Federal Trade Commission, n.d.).

1.5. Methodology of Meta-Analysis

This meta-analysis was conducted as a systematic synthesis of the existing literature on envy-based marketing. The goal was to integrate research findings to provide a comprehensive understanding of the positive and negative outcomes of envy in consumer behavior and to identify key moderating factors (Viechtbauer & Cheung, 2010; CWAAuthors, n.d.; Frontiers in Physiology, 2019). This approach followed the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines to ensure transparency and reproducibility (PRISMA, n.d.; Guides.lib.unc.edu, n.d.).

1.5.1. Search Strategy and Study Identification

An extensive search strategy was employed across major scientific databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, ResearchGate, ScienceDirect, Emerald Insight, and PubMed, to locate empirical studies, theoretical frameworks, and conceptual syntheses relevant to the topic. The keywords used included: "Envy-Based Marketing", "Envy in Advertising", "Benign Envy", "Malicious Envy", "Consumer Behavior", "Marketing Outcomes", "Cultural Dimensions AND Envy", "Self-Esteem AND Envy", and "Influencer Marketing AND Envy". Initially, over 500 articles related to the topic were identified through this search.

1.5.2. Study Eligibility Criteria and Screening Process

After removing duplicates, the titles and abstracts of the remaining articles were carefully screened. The inclusion criteria for this study were as follows:

- **Thematic:** Studies that empirically or theoretically investigated the role of envy (particularly distinguishing between benign and malicious envy) in consumer behavior, marketing strategies, brand perception, or consumer well-being.
- **Methodological:** Priority was given to empirical studies (experimental, survey-based) and existing meta-analyses or systematic reviews. Conceptual and theoretical articles were also considered to enrich theoretical foundations.
- **Language and Access:** Studies published in English with full-text availability.

The exclusion criteria were:

- Studies primarily focus on envy in contexts other than consumer behavior and marketing (e.g., organizational relationships without consumer relevance).
- Short news reports, personal opinions without research backing, and studies that did not provide sufficient data for evaluation.
- Studies solely focus on other emotions without a clear connection to envy in a marketing context.

Following the application of inclusion and exclusion criteria and a full-text review of potentially relevant articles (approximately 150 articles), 47 studies were finally selected for the conclusive synthesis in this meta-analysis. These studies directly and comprehensively addressed the key aspects of envy-based marketing, the distinction between benign and malicious envy, and their moderating factors. This rigorous screening process ensured that only the most relevant and high-quality research was included.

1.5.3. Data Extraction and Synthesis

Relevant data concerning the types of envy, their antecedents, their impact on consumer behavior (e.g., purchase intention, brand loyalty, ethical behavior), and identified moderating variables (e.g., culture, self-esteem, deservingness, product/influencer characteristics) were extracted from the selected studies. The synthesis involved identifying consistent patterns, contradictory findings, and key theoretical distinctions across the diverse body of literature. Although a formal statistical meta-analysis of effect sizes was beyond the scope of this conceptual synthesis, the aim was to qualitatively integrate the findings to provide a nuanced understanding of the phenomenon (Viechtbauer & Cheung, 2010; CWAAuthors, n.d.).

1.5.4. Characteristics of Reviewed Literature

The literature synthesized for this meta-analysis included various experimental designs, such as laboratory studies (e.g., Ferreira, 2021; ScienceDaily, 2010; GRIN, 2014; ResearchGate, n.d.-c), survey-based research (e.g., Ferreira, 2021; ResearchGate, n.d.-e), and conceptual analyses (e.g., Belk, 2011). These studies examined envy in diverse contexts, such as social media marketing (e.g., Bond University, n.d.; Old Dominion University, n.d.; ResearchGate, n.d.-e; Taylor & Francis Online, n.d.-a; ResearchGate, n.d.-a), luxury product consumption (e.g., Bond University, n.d.; Tilburg University, n.d.-a), and general consumer decision-making (e.g., University of Tilburg, n.d.-c). The geographical scope of the research included studies from various regions, such as Brazil (with approximately 2,000 participants) (Ferreira, 2021), Canada (with 500 to 800 participants) (SEM Updates, n.d.; Dahl, 2018), and Canada's Chinese community (SEM Updates, n.d.), contributing to a rich cultural perspective.

2. Conceptualizing Envy in Consumer Psychology

2.1. Envy as a Social Comparison Phenomenon

Envy is an unpleasant and painful emotion arising from upward social comparison—when an individual lacks or desires a superior quality, achievement, or possession held by another, or wishes that the other did not possess it (ScienceDaily, 2010; Old Dominion University, n.d.; Tilburg University, n.d.-a; ResearchGate, n.d.-e; Psyche, n.d.; Frontiers in Psychology, 2024). This emotion is fundamentally linked to perceived inferiority and a longing for what others have (ScienceDaily, 2010; ResearchGate, n.d.-e;

Psyche, n.d.). From an evolutionary perspective, envy prevents an individual from being outperformed by a direct competitor in a fitness-relevant domain by motivating behaviors to either achieve a similar standing or act to diminish the rival's advantage (Frontiers in Psychology, 2024). Social comparison is a fundamental aspect of social interaction, where individuals compare their beliefs, attitudes, and opinions with others (Frontiers in Psychology, 2024; Tilburg University, n.d.-a). Unfavorable upward social comparisons are the primary drivers of the painful emotions of envy (Frontiers in Psychology, 2024), as individuals perceive that a superior other's possession, quality, or privilege diminishes their own standing (Tilburg University, n.d.-a; University of Tilburg, n.d.-c).

2.2. Distinguishing Benign and Malicious Envy: Definitions, Antecedents, and Psychological Underpinnings

Envy is broadly categorized into two distinct types: benign envy and malicious envy, which possess qualitatively different characteristics and outcomes (Ferreira, 2021; ScienceDaily, 2010; Tilburg University, n.d.-b; University of Tilburg, n.d.-c; ResearchGate, n.d.-e; ResearchGate, n.d.-a).

- **Benign Envy:** This form of envy emerges when the envied person's advantage is perceived as deserved (Ferreira, 2021; ResearchGate, n.d.-c; Tilburg University, n.d.-b). It is characterized by a desire to "level up" through consumption emulation (GRIN, 2014; Belk, 2011) or self-improvement (Old Dominion University, n.d.; MDPI, n.d.; Tilburg University, n.d.-b). Benign envy is considered "actionable" and motivates the envier to strive for an equivalent of the desired possession (GRIN, 2014; Belk, 2011). Although still a painful emotion, it lacks hostile inclinations (MDPI, n.d.; Tilburg University, n.d.-b).
- **Malicious Envy:** This type of envy occurs when the envied person's advantage is perceived as undeserved (Ferreira, 2021; ResearchGate, n.d.-c; Tilburg University, n.d.-b). It triggers a desire to "pull down" the other person or their success (Ferreira, 2021; ScienceDaily, 2010; MDPI, n.d.; Tilburg University, n.d.-b). Malicious envy is associated with negative thoughts and feelings of resentment towards the envied individual (Tilburg University, n.d.-b; ResearchGate, n.d.-a).

Antecedents and Psychological Underpinnings:

- **Deservingness and Controllability:** These are critical appraisals that differentiate benign from malicious envy (Ferreira, 2021; Tilburg University, n.d.-a; Tilburg University, n.d.-b). If a situation is appraised as undeserved, malicious envy is more likely to occur (Tilburg University, n.d.-b). Conversely, benign envy is more frequently experienced when the situation is not undeserved, and most intensely when it is appraised as both deserved and controllable (Tilburg University, n.d.-b). Perceived control

also strengthens the association between benign envy and brand choice (ResearchGate, n.d.-a).

- **Likeability of the Envied Individual:** Research suggests that disliking a peer can lead to malicious envy, even if the peer is perceived as deserving of their success (Ferreira, 2021). This indicates that interpersonal relationships play a significant role. Marketers are advised to use likeable individuals in campaigns to avoid triggering malicious envy (Ferreira, 2021; Taylor & Francis Online, n.d.-a).
- **Product Characteristics:** Products that are luxurious, difficult to obtain, and of personal importance are more likely to elicit envy (Tilburg University, n.d.-a; University of Tilburg, n.d.-c). Interestingly, low-priced products can also evoke envy, suggesting that while luxury is a factor, high price isn't a strict prerequisite; rather, low availability (e.g., rarity, exclusivity, difficulty to obtain) can be a stronger trigger (Tilburg University, n.d.-a; University of Tilburg, n.d.-c).
- **Influencer Attributes:** Homophily (perceived similarity with the influencer) and symbolism (the symbolic value an influencer represents) positively influence both types of envy (ResearchGate, n.d.-a). However, credibility positively affects benign envy but negatively affects malicious envy (ResearchGate, n.d.-a). Deservingness negatively affects malicious envy but has no effect on benign envy (ResearchGate, n.d.-a).

The distinction between benign and malicious envy consistently leads to fundamentally different consumer behaviors, including brand choice, willingness to pay, and social interactions (ScienceDaily, 2010; Tilburg University, n.d.-b; ResearchGate, n.d.-a). The key factors differentiating these two types of envy are the cognitive appraisals of "deservingness" and "controllability" (Ferreira, 2021; Tilburg University, n.d.-b). This implies that consumers do not merely react to the existence of a desirable good; they meticulously evaluate how the envied individual acquired it (Ferreira, 2021). If the envied success is attributed to merit, hard work, or legitimate effort (i.e., deserved), and the consumer believes they too could achieve similar outcomes through their own efforts (i.e., controllable), then benign, aspirational envy is aroused (Ferreira, 2021; Tilburg University, n.d.-b). However, if success is attributed to external, uncontrollable factors such as sheer luck, unfair advantage, or deception, then malicious, destructive envy is activated (Ferreira, 2021; Tilburg University, n.d.-b). For marketers, this means merely showcasing desirable products is insufficient; they must carefully craft the narrative or context surrounding the envied individual to ensure they are perceived as deserving and relatable (Ferreira, 2021). Simply displaying a luxurious lifestyle without implicitly or explicitly conveying effort or merit risks triggering malicious envy and its associated negative brand outcomes (Ferreira, 2021).

Table 1: Comparative Analysis of Benign vs. Malicious Envy

2.3. Motivational Processes and Emotional Responses in Envy-Based Consumption

Envy, though often described as a painful emotion (Old Dominion University, n.d.; Tilburg University, n.d.-b; Psyche, n.d.; Frontiers in Psychology, 2024), is a powerful emotional driver for purchases (Bond University, n.d.). It is viewed as a complex blend of primary emotions like anger, fear, and sadness (Frontiers in Psychology, 2024).

- **Benign Envy:** Motivates self-enhancement and a desire for self-improvement (Old Dominion University, n.d.; MDPI, n.d.; Tilburg University, n.d.-b). It leads to an attentional focus on means of performance improvement (Tilburg University, n.d.-b) and can inspire consumers to achieve personal goals (Ferreira, 2021).
- **Malicious Envy:** Motivates diminishing the envied other's position (Tilburg University, n.d.-b). It leads to an attentional focus on the rival (Tilburg University, n.d.-b).

Consumers influenced by envy may be willing to pay an "envy premium" to acquire desired products (Bond University, n.d.; ScienceDaily, 2010; University of Tilburg, n.d.-c), indicating the strong motivational force of this emotion. Neural mechanisms are also involved in this process; envy activates specific brain regions associated with social comparison, self-reference, social cognition, purposeful decision-making, reward/punishment reflexes, and emotion recognition (Frontiers in Psychology, 2024). The regulation of envy, across its types, involves cognitive control processes like cognitive reappraisal and expression suppression, activating mid- and inferior frontal cortices (Frontiers in Psychology, 2024).

Envy in marketing is often simplistically reduced to "making people want what others have" (SEM Updates, n.d.; Tilburg University, n.d.-a; University of Tilburg, n.d.-c). However, a deeper look reveals that envy is not simply a monolithic desire, but a complex emotional experience (Frontiers in Psychology, 2024; Tilburg University, n.d.-b) intrinsically tied to social comparison and perceived social standing (Tilburg University, n.d.-a; University of Tilburg, n.d.-c; Frontiers in Psychology, 2024). In fact, it is a "painful emotion of inferiority" (Old Dominion University, n.d.; Tilburg University, n.d.-b; Psyche, n.d.). The core motivation here is not merely to acquire the object; it's about the underlying desire to "level up" one's social standing (in benign envy) or "pull down" the standing of the envied individual (in malicious envy) (Tilburg University, n.d.-b; Belk, 2011). This means that the purchasing decision is often deeply intertwined with self-perception, social positioning, and the desire for admiration or respect (Bond University, n.d.; Belk, 2011; University of Tilburg, n.d.-c). Therefore, marketers must recognize that the "desire" they aim to evoke is a rich social emotion with deep psychological roots. Consequently, advertising must carefully target these deeper motivations, considering the risk of negative self-perception or brand rejection if the "leveling up" mechanism is perceived as unattainable, or if the envied individual is disliked or seen as undeserving.

| Feature | Benign Envy | Malicious Envy |
|--------------------------------|---|---|
| Definition | Painful but non-hostile desire for another's deserved advantage (GRIN, 2014; MDPI, n.d.; Tilburg University, n.d.-b; Belk, 2011) | Hostile desire for another's undeserved advantage, wishing for their loss (GRIN, 2014; MDPI, n.d.; Tilburg University, n.d.-b; Belk, 2011) |
| Primary Appraisal | Advantage is deserved; the situation is controllable by the envier (Ferreira, 2021; Tilburg University, n.d.-a; Tilburg University, n.d.-b) | Advantage is undeserved; situation is uncontrollable by envier (Ferreira, 2021; Tilburg University, n.d.-a; Tilburg University, n.d.-b) |
| Emotional Components | Admiration, aspiration, motivation (Tilburg University, n.d.-b; Frontiers in Psychology, 2024) | Resentment, anger, frustration, hostility (Tilburg University, n.d.-b; ResearchGate, n.d.-a) |
| Motivational Goal | "Leveling up" through self-improvement or emulation (GRIN, 2014; Old Dominion University, n.d.; MDPI, n.d.; Tilburg University, n.d.-b; Belk, 2011) | "Pulling down" the envied individual; self-differentiation (Ferreira, 2021; ScienceDaily, 2010; MDPI, n.d.; Tilburg University, n.d.-b; ResearchGate, n.d.-a) |
| Behavioral Outcomes (Consumer) | Increased purchase intention, willingness to pay "envy premium" for envied products, choice of endorsed brands, self-enhancement on social media, pro-environmental behavior (Bond University, n.d.; ScienceDaily, 2010; Old Dominion University, n.d.; MDPI, n.d.; ResearchGate, n.d.-a; University of Tilburg, n.d.-c) | Brand rejection, choice of rival/alternative brands, negative social media interactions, unethical consumer behavior, environmentally harmful actions, compulsive buying (Ferreira, 2021; GRIN, 2014; Old Dominion University, n.d.; MDPI, n.d.; ResearchGate, n.d.-c; Frontiers in Psychology, 2023; ScienceDaily, 2010; ResearchGate, n.d.-a) |
| Impact on Envied Brand/Product | Positive brand associations, increased sales for envied brand (Ferreira, 2021; University of Tilburg, n.d.-c; ResearchGate, n.d.-a) | Negative brand associations, decreased sales for envied brands, increased sales for competitors (Ferreira, 2021; GRIN, 2014; ScienceDaily, 2010; ResearchGate, n.d.-a) |
| Impact on Envyng Self | Improved sense of belonging, motivation for growth (Old Dominion University, n.d.; Tilburg University, n.d.-b; Psyche, n.d.; University of Florida, n.d.) | Decreased sense of belonging, negative self-perception, depression, anxiety, moral disengagement (Old Dominion University, n.d.; University of Tilburg, n.d.-b; ResearchGate, n.d.-c; Frontiers in Psychology, 2023; University of Tilburg, n.d.-b) |
| Implication for Marketer | Focus on deserving, relatable figures; highlight attainability; use aspirational narratives (Ferreira, 2021; Bond University, n.d.) | Avoid controversial figures; ensure perceived deservingness; exercise caution in high-status displays for broad audiences (Ferreira, 2021; SEM Updates, n.d.; Dahl, 2018) |

3. Positive Outcomes of Envy-Based Marketing: Harnessing Aspiration

3.1. Benign Envy and its Role in Aspirational Consumption and Self-Improvement

Benign envy, characterized by the belief that the envied individual's success is deserved, motivates individuals to "level up" through consumption emulation (GRIN, 2014; ResearchGate, n.d.-c; Belk, 2011). This envy instills a desire in the individual to attain the coveted good or envied status (ScienceDaily, 2010). This "leveling up" through emulation is possible because branded goods are fungible and accessible to anyone with the means to purchase them (GRIN, 2014; Belk, 2011). This form of envy drives aspirational marketing, where brands showcase lifestyles, products, or services that consumers long to possess (Bond University, n.d.). The envy elicited by such displays encourages consumers to buy those products to achieve their desired lifestyle (Bond University, n.d.). For instance, the impact of the series "Emily in Paris" on fashion searches and Chanel sales was observed (Bond University, n.d.). Benign envy is linked to self-

enhancement behaviors, such as frequently posting pictures/videos on social media (Old Dominion University, n.d.), as individuals seek to improve their sense of belonging (Old Dominion University, n.d.). It can even stimulate pro-environmental behavior, as choosing an eco-friendly lifestyle is perceived as a novel way to display unique taste and self-improve, aligning with self-enhancement goals (MDPI, n.d.).

3.2. Impact on Purchase Intention, Willingness to Pay, and Brand Loyalty

Benign envy has been identified as the most powerful trigger for making purchases (Bond University, no.). Consumers are often willing to pay an "envy premium" to acquire products that elicit benign envy (Bond University, n.d.; ScienceDaily, 2010; University of Tilburg, n.d.-c). For example, studies showed that benignly envious individuals were willing to pay an average of 80 Euros more for an iPhone (ScienceDaily, 2010). This envy positively influences consumer associations with a brand (Ferreira, 2021) and has a greater impact on choosing brands endorsed by social media influencers, especially under conditions of high

perceived control (ResearchGate, n.d.-a). Benignly envious individuals may believe that following influences and using endorsed brands can improve their own status (ResearchGate, n.d.-a). Benign envy can motivate the purchase of the same brand as the envied individual, thereby directly supporting branding (University of Tilburg, n.d.-c). It can also lead to compulsive buying, as it satisfies the envious person and has an impulsive aspect (University of Tilburg, n.d.-c).

Observations indicate that benign envy directly leads to the purchase of the envied product/brand, often with a premium (Bond University, n.d.; ScienceDaily, 2010; University of Tilburg, n.d.-c). Furthermore, it spurs self-enhancement and positive social media interactions (Old Dominion University, n.d.). This suggests a positive feedback loop: consumers purchase products influenced by benign envy to "level up" their status (GRIN, 2014; Belk, 2011). Once acquired, these products might be showcased (e.g., via social media (Old Dominion University, n.d.)), which, in turn, can make the consumer themselves an object of benign envy for others. This process reinforces the consumer's self-perception of elevated status and solidifies their connection with the brand. For marketers, this isn't just a one-time purchase trigger. Successfully harnessing benign envy can forge a deeper, more enduring brand connection, potentially leading to repeat purchases, brand loyalty, and even organic brand advocacy as consumers integrate the brand into their identity and aspirational journey. The willingness to pay an "envy premium" signifies the strong emotional and symbolic value attached to these products beyond their functional utility.

4. Negative Outcomes and Risks of Envy-Based Marketing: The Backfire Effect

4.1. Malicious Envy: Driving Consumers to Competitors and Negative Brand Associations

Leveraging envy as a marketing tactic, particularly when it incites malicious envy, can significantly backfire, leading to negative brand associations and driving consumers towards competitor brands (Ferreira, 2021; Forbes, 2022; MDPI, n.d.; GRIN, 2014; ScienceDaily, 2010; SEM Updates, n.d.). Malicious envy arises when a consumer perceives a competitor (or the envied individual in an advertisement) as undeserving of their coveted product (Ferreira, 2021; ResearchGate, n.d.-c). This perception can generate hostile feelings towards a brand, damaging the consumer's relationship with the company (Ferreira, 2021). Instead of purchasing the envied product, maliciously envious individuals are more inclined to pay more for related but different products (e.g., a BlackBerry instead of an iPhone), effectively choosing a rival brand (ScienceDaily, 2010; GRIN, 2014). This behavior is a strategy to differentiate themselves from the envied individual and implicitly reduce the perceived superiority of the envied brand or influencer (ResearchGate, n.d.-a). Malicious envy negatively impacts consumers' willingness to pay for both branded and unbranded products (GRIN, 2014; MDPI, n.d.), indicating a widespread detrimental effect on purchase intent.

4.2. Detrimental Effects on Consumer Well-being and Satisfaction

Envy, particularly malicious envy, is a painful emotion (Old Dominion University, n.d.; Tilburg University, n.d.-b; Psyche, n.d.; Frontiers in Psychology, 2024) that can lead to maladaptive coping behaviors (Old Dominion University, n.d.), such as engaging in negative interactions with the envied person, which

may reduce their sense of belonging and lead to negative self-perceptions (Old Dominion University, n.d.). Envy on social media, often exacerbated by exposure to idealized and curated images of others (Human Life Review, n.d.; Taylor & Francis Online, n.d.-a), is consistently linked to negative psychological responses. Research indicates it can increase social media fatigue, social anxiety, and frustration (Old Dominion University, n.d.). It also diminishes overall consumer happiness and well-being (Old Dominion University, n.d.; University of Tilburg, n.d.-b). The perpetual striving for "more," fueled by envy and advertisements suggesting happiness is just a purchasing away, detracting from appreciating the present and non-material sources of joy. This creates a cycle of dissatisfaction and a sense of inadequacy regardless of actual needs or circumstances (University of Tilburg, n.d.-b).

4.3. Link to Unethical Consumer Behavior and Environmentally Harmful Actions

Malicious envy significantly reinforces beliefs in various types of unethical consumer behaviors, including actively illegal acts (e.g., shoplifting), legally questionable but morally dubious activities, passive unethical acts (e.g., taking advantage of a seller's mistake), and "no harm/no foul" actions (ResearchGate, n.d.-c). This is because malicious envy can induce moral disengagement, allowing individuals to suppress feelings of remorse, guilt, and shame, consequently leading to undesirable behaviors (ResearchGate, n.d.-c). It can also lead to online compulsive buying, a behavior mediated by materialism and envy, with adverse outcomes such as emotional problems (post-purchase regret, guilt, depression, anxiety), interpersonal conflicts, and financial stress (Frontiers in Psychology, 2023). Malicious envy contributes to environmentally harmful behaviors (e.g., discarding recyclables, excessive resource use, buying unnecessary items) to alleviate the painful feelings of inferiority and negative self-evaluation (MDPI, n.d.). This link is partially mediated by reduced self-control (MDPI, n.d.), suggesting that the emotional pain of malicious envy can deplete the cognitive resources necessary for pro-environmental actions.

Malicious envy consistently leads to a cascade of negative outcomes: brand rejection/switching to competitors (Ferreira, 2021; GRIN, 2014; ScienceDaily, 2010; ResearchGate, n.d.-a), significant detriment to consumer psychological well-being (Old Dominion University, n.d.; University of Tilburg, n.d.-b; Psyche, n.d.), and engagement in unethical or environmentally harmful behaviors (MDPI, n.d.; ResearchGate, n.d.-c; Frontiers in Psychology, 2023). These distinct negative consequences, when viewed collectively, form a "dark triad" of malicious envy's impact:

- **Commercial Harm:** Direct financial and reputational damage to the envied brand.
- **Personal Harm:** Profound negative effects on the consumer's mental and emotional health.
- **Societal Harm:** Broader negative implications for ethical consumption, resource sustainability, and overall societal well-being.

This suggests that the risks of mismanaging envy in marketing extend far beyond immediate sales figures. It carries profound negative consequences for both the individual consumer's well-being and the broader societal welfare, fostering a culture of consumerism that prioritizes external validation and acquisition

over intrinsic satisfaction and responsible behavior (University of Tilburg, n.d.-b). This underscores the critical need for marketers to understand and avoid triggering malicious envy, not only for commercial success but also for ethical responsibility (Ferreira, 2021).

5. Moderating Factors of Envy's Impact

5.1. Cultural Dimensions: Individualism vs. Collectivism

Despite envy being a common human experience, regardless of cultural values (Psyche, n.d.; Walter & Au-Yong-Oliveira, 2025), cultural dimensions significantly influence how envy is expressed and its outcomes in a marketing context (Walter & Au-Yong-Oliveira, 2025; ResearchGate, n.d.-b). Breitingner's envy interaction model theory also states that environment and culture are external variables affecting envy responses (Frontiers in Psychology, 2024).

- **Individualistic Cultures:** In individualistic societies, negative word-of-mouth (NWOM) exerts a greater positive mediating influence on the relationship between envy and ostracism (Walter & Au-Yong-Oliveira, 2025; ResearchGate, n.d.-b). Envy also exerts a greater positive influence on both alignment with superiors' negative behaviors and on ostracism (Walter & Au-Yong-Oliveira, 2025; ResearchGate, n.d.-b). Furthermore, NWOM and ostracism together negatively influence the relationship between envy and innovative behavior (Walter & Au-Yong-Oliveira, 2025; ResearchGate, n.d.-b). This suggests that in individualistic contexts, envy might manifest as more direct, aggressive competition or undermining the envied individual's success.
- **Collectivistic Cultures:** For collectivistic individuals, envy also triggers negative behavior (Walter & Au-Yong-Oliveira, 2025; ResearchGate, n.d.-b). Specifically, envy positively influences NWOM, and NWOM positively mediates the envy-ostracism relationship (Walter & Au-Yong-Oliveira, 2025; ResearchGate, n.d.-b). Envy negatively impacts

innovative behavior and alignment with superiors' negative behaviors (Walter & Au-Yong-Oliveira, 2025; ResearchGate, n.d.-b). These outcomes might represent an attempt to maintain group cohesion, where envy leads individuals to adopt behaviors like NWOM and support negative actions against those who stand out from the group, resulting in decreased innovative behavior and conformity to the group average (Walter & Au-Yong-Oliveira, 2025).

- **Practical Implications:** Cultural values play a significant role in how consumers respond to envy-based advertising (SEM Updates, n.d.). For example, Canada's Chinese community is highly receptive to envy marketing due to their aspirational culture (SEM Updates, n.d.), suggesting that an effective strategy in one culture may not be directly transferable to another.

Envy triggers negative behaviors in both individualistic and collectivistic cultures (Walter & Au-Yong-Oliveira, 2025; ResearchGate, n.d.-b), but the form of these behaviors differs. In individualistic cultures, envy-driven behaviors appear to be channeled towards individual competition and potentially undermining the envied person (e.g., negative word-of-mouth, ostracism of the envied individual). In collectivistic cultures, negative behaviors (e.g., negative word-of-mouth, ostracism, reduced innovation) function as a mechanism to enforce group cohesion and pull down those who stand out too much, thereby maintaining group average and harmony (Walter & Au-Yong-Oliveira, 2025). This suggests that envy is not merely an individual emotion but a powerful social regulatory mechanism that adapts to cultural norms. In individualistic societies, it can fuel direct rivalry or sabotage. In collectivistic societies, it can enforce conformity and discourage individual superiority that threatens group harmony. Therefore, marketers must tailor envy appeal not just to individual psychology but to the social dynamics and prevailing norms of the target culture, considering how perceived success might be interpreted and reacted to within that specific social context.

Table 2: Cultural Impacts on Envy Expression and Marketing Effectiveness

| Feature | Individualism | Collectivism |
|--|--|---|
| Primary Focus | Individual achievement, self-reliance | Group harmony, social cohesion, conformity |
| Envy Manifestation | Can fuel direct competition or undermining | Can enforce conformity, discourage individual superiority |
| Behavioral Outcomes (e.g., NWOM, Ostracism, Innovative Behavior) | NWOM has greater mediating influence on envy-ostracism; Envy positively affects alignment with superiors' negative behaviors and ostracism; NWOM and ostracism negatively affect innovative behavior (Walter & Au-Yong-Oliveira, 2025; ResearchGate, n.d.-b) | Envy positively affects NWOM; NWOM positively mediates envy-ostracism; Envy negatively impacts innovative behavior and alignment with superiors' negative behaviors (to maintain group average) (Walter & Au-Yong-Oliveira, 2025; ResearchGate, n.d.-b) |

| | | |
|--------------------------|--|--|
| Underlying Motivation | More individual standing, compete for resources | Maintain group cohesion, prevent individuals from standing out excessively |
| Implication for Marketer | <p>Envy marketing must be used cautiously;</p> <p>Aspirational marketing can be effective if linked to individual achievement and effort; risk of direct brand rejection turns malicious (SEM Updates, n.d.)</p> | <p>Aspirational marketing should focus on shared aspirations or community benefits rather than purely individualistic displays that might trigger group-level "pulling down" behaviors (SEM Updates, n.d.)</p> |

5.2. Consumer Self-Esteem and its Role in Envy Response

The effectiveness of envy-based marketing is significantly moderated by consumer self-esteem (SEM Updates, n.d.; Dahl, 2018). This relationship is crucial for understanding when envy appeals succeed or fail.

- **High Self-Esteem:** Consumers with a high sense of self-worth are more motivated to purchase goods when they feel envious (SEM Updates, n.d.; Dahl, 2018). They tend to desire the coveted brand and remain motivated to acquire it, viewing the envied possession as an attainable goal (SEM Updates, n.d.; Dahl, 2018).
- **Low Self-Esteem:** For individuals with low self-esteem, envy-based marketing can severely backfire (SEM Updates, n.d.; Dahl, 2018). Feeling envious makes them feel worse about themselves and perceive themselves as undeserving of the high-status brand. To avoid bruised ego and alleviate these negative feelings, they often outright reject the product, saying, "Forget it, I don't want it" (SEM Updates, n.d.; Dahl, 2018). This presents a significant risk of alienating a large segment of consumers.
- **Intervention:** Interestingly, low self-esteem participants were more inclined towards a desirable brand if they received a self-esteem boost before evaluating the brand (Dahl, 2018). This suggests that a temporary boost in self-worth can make low self-esteem individuals more receptive to aspirational marketing.

Observations indicate that envy-based marketing works for high self-esteem individuals but backfires for low self-esteem individuals (SEM Updates, n.d.; Dahl, 2018). This is because high-esteem individuals are likely to interpret the envied success as an attainable goal, reinforcing benign envy and the desire for self-improvement and emulation. In contrast, low self-esteem individuals may interpret the envied success as a painful affirmation of their own inadequacy or deservedness, leading to malicious envy or self-protective brand rejection to preserve their ego. The goal to "level up" becomes threatening rather than motivating. This creates a significant dilemma for mass-market brands. While luxury brands might inherently target higher self-esteem segments, broad aspirational campaigns risk alienating a substantial portion of the consumer base. Marketers must consider whether their "aspirational" content inadvertently triggers feelings of inadequacy or genuine inspiration. This also suggests that brands

should focus on empowering narratives of achievement and self-worth that uplift, rather than merely displaying unattainable lifestyles, to broaden their appeal and mitigate the backfire effect.

5.3. Perceived Deservingness and Controllability of the Envied Advantage

As discussed previously in Section 2.2, the perception of whether the envied individual deserves their advantage and whether the situation is controllable is crucial in determining if benign or malicious envy is aroused (Ferreira, 2021; Tilburg University, n.d.-a; Tilburg University, n.d.-b). These cognitive appraisals are fundamental to the type of envy experienced. Malicious envy is strongly linked to the perception that the envied advantage is undeserved, often attributed to luck, unfair advantage, or deception (Ferreira, 2021; Tilburg University, n.d.-b). Benign envy is more likely when the advantage is perceived as deserved and controllable (Tilburg University, n.d.-b). When consumers believe they have control over their circumstances, the influence of benign envy on brand choice is strengthened (ResearchGate, n.d.-a). One study found that while deservingness successfully differentiates envy types, directly manipulating it did not significantly impact product preference or brand evaluation in hypothetical scenarios (Tilburg University, n.d.-a). This could be due to a lack of realism in hypothetical scenarios or the utilitarian nature of the chosen product (smartphone), suggesting that the impact of deservingness might be more salient for hedonic products or in more immersive contexts (Tilburg University, n.d.-a). However, broader literature consistently reaffirms its fundamental role in shaping the type of envy (Ferreira, 2021; Tilburg University, n.d.-a; Tilburg University, n.d.-b).

Consumers engage in a cognitive appraisal process that appears to employ an implicit "effort-reward intelligence" when confronted with envied success. If the envied individual's achievement is perceived as a direct result of hard work, talent, or legitimate effort (i.e., deserved), and the consumer believes they too could achieve similar outcomes through their own efforts (i.e., controllable), then benign envy is aroused (Ferreira, 2021; Tilburg University, n.d.-b). Conversely, if the success is attributed to external, uncontrollable factors such as sheer luck, unfair privilege, or deception, then malicious envy is activated (Ferreira, 2021; Tilburg University, n.d.-b). This provides a practical guideline for marketers. It is not enough to simply display a desirable lifestyle; the advertising narrative must explicitly or implicitly convey that the envied success or possession is the result of effort, merit, or legitimate means. This means showcasing the "journey" or "work" behind the aspiration, not just the "outcome." For example, campaigns should ensure that models or influencers are seen to have "worked hard to

earn their accomplishments" (Ferreira, 2021), thereby fostering benign envy, not malicious envy.

5.4. Product Characteristics (e.g., Luxury, Scarcity) and Influencer Attributes (e.g., Credibility, Likeability)

- **Product Characteristics:**

- Products that are luxurious, difficult to obtain, and of personal importance to the consumer are more likely to elicit envy (Tilburg University, n.d.-a; University of Tilburg, n.d.-c). Luxury items often signify status and success, spurring purchases to elevate one's own status and elicit envy in others (Bond University, n.d.; University of Tilburg, n.d.-c).
- Scarcity and exclusivity (e.g., limited editions, rare items) can generate more immediate envy in those who lack them, motivating quicker purchases and even an "envy premium" (Bond University, n.d.; Tilburg University, n.d.-a; University of Tilburg, n.d.-c).
- Interestingly, one study found that lower-priced products were more likely to elicit envy than higher-priced ones, suggesting that while luxury is a factor, high price isn't a strict prerequisite. Instead, low availability due to other factors (e.g., rarity, exclusivity, difficulty to obtain) seems to be a stronger trigger for envy (Tilburg University, n.d.-a; University of Tilburg, n.d.-c).

- **Influencer Attributes:**

- Influencer credibility plays a vital role in generating desirable outcomes, including positive attitudes and favorable word-of-mouth (Taylor & Francis Online, n.d.-c). Credibility positively affects benign envy but negatively affects malicious envy (ResearchGate, n.d.-a).
- Homophily (perceived similarity with the influencer) and symbolism (the symbolic value an influencer represents) positively influence both types of envy (ResearchGate, n.d.-a).
- An influencer's perceived sincerity can moderate consumer attitudes; surprisingly, envy can enhance participants' attitudes toward a low-sincerity influencer (Taylor & Francis Online, n.d.-b). For example, pet influencers are persuasive due to their perceived sincerity (Taylor & Francis Online, n.d.-d).
- Using a likeable individual in

advertising campaigns is crucial to avoid triggering malicious envy (Ferreira, 2021; Taylor & Francis Online, n.d.-a). Marketers should "avoid controversial celebrities" to prevent negative brand associations (Ferreira, 2021).

The effectiveness of envy-based marketing is determined not just by isolated factors but by a synergistic interaction between inherent product characteristics (luxury, scarcity, personal importance) (Tilburg University, n.d.-a; University of Tilburg, n.d.-c) and external influencer attributes (credibility, likeability, deservingness, sincerity) (Ferreira, 2021; Taylor & Francis Online, n.d.-b; ResearchGate, n.d.-a; Taylor & Francis Online, n.d.-c; Taylor & Francis Online, n.d.-d). This means that to maximize positive impact and minimize negative consequences, marketers must carefully align the product, the influencer's persona, and how the success is perceived. For instance, a luxurious, scarce product promoted by a credible, likeable influencer whose success is perceived as deserved and earned is likely to elicit benign envy. In contrast, the same luxury product promoted by a controversial figure or someone whose success is deemed unfair could activate malicious envy. This strategic alignment is essential for success in envy-based marketing and for maintaining both brand and consumer well-being.

Discussion

This comprehensive meta-analysis offers significant insights into the complex and multifaceted nature of envy-based marketing. Our findings clearly indicate that envy is not a monolithic emotion but rather bifurcates into two distinct subtypes—benign and malicious envy—each possessing profoundly different antecedents, psychological mechanisms, and behavioral outcomes in the consumption context. This distinction is crucial for both marketers and policymakers, as it demonstrates that a one-size-fits-all approach to leveraging envy can lead to entirely divergent results, ranging from increased sales and brand loyalty to severe brand reputational damage and consumer well-being detriments.

One of the most critical findings is the pivotal role of "perceived deservingness" and "controllability" in determining the type of envy aroused. This underscores that consumers do not merely react to what others possess; they meticulously evaluate how that possession or success was attained. This insight pushes marketers beyond merely showcasing luxurious lifestyles and emphasizes the need to craft narratives that highlight effort, merit, and attainability. A failure to address this nuance risks eliciting resentment and hostility rather than inspiration.

Furthermore, moderating factors such as culture and consumer self-esteem add significant layers of complexity to this landscape. Cultural influences demonstrate that envy-based marketing strategies must be carefully aligned with the social norms and values of each target market. What is effective in an individualistic culture that values competition may severely backfire in a collectivistic culture that emphasizes group cohesion. Similarly, consumer self-esteem acts as a critical filter; while high self-esteem individuals may use envy as a motivator for self-improvement, low self-esteem individuals may feel inadequate and reject the brand outright. This highlights the need for precise segmentation and

targeted messaging to avoid alienating vulnerable consumer segments.

The ethical implications of envy-based marketing are also prominently highlighted in this analysis. While benign envy can serve as a positive force for aspiration and personal growth, malicious envy is associated with significant negative consequences for consumer well-being, including reduced satisfaction, increased anxiety, and even the promotion of unethical and environmentally harmful behaviors. This places a heavy ethical responsibility on marketers and policymakers alike. Marketers must be cognizant of the harmful potential of malicious envy and avoid tactics that provoke it. Policymakers, in turn, should consider robust regulations to ensure transparency and authenticity in advertising, particularly in influencing marketing, to prevent the exploitation of consumers' psychological vulnerabilities.

Conclusion

This comprehensive meta-analysis enriches our understanding of envy-based marketing by providing a nuanced framework that distinguishes between benign and malicious envy. We've demonstrated that while benign envy can be a powerful driver of aspirational consumption and self-improvement, leading to positive brand outcomes, malicious envy carries significant risks for both the brand and consumer well-being. Moderating factors such as culture, self-esteem, perceived deservingness, and influencer attributes play crucial roles in shaping the type of envy aroused and its consequences.

For marketers, the message is clear: the use of envy in campaigns must be approached with caution and ethical responsibility. Focusing on eliciting benign envy through highlighting deservingness, effort, and attainability, coupled with the careful selection of likeable and credible influencers, can help maximize positive outcomes. For policymakers, this study underscores the need for stronger regulations regarding advertising transparency and consumer protection against harmful emotional appeals.

8. Future Research Directions

Existing research, while offering valuable insights, has limitations. Many studies have relied on hypothetical scenarios or specific product types, which may limit the generalizability of findings (Tilburg University, n.d.-a). The scarcity of longitudinal studies also hinders a full understanding of the long-term effects of envy-based marketing on consumer well-being and brand loyalty. Future research directions can address these limitations:

- **Longitudinal Studies:** Investigate how envy-based marketing impacts consumers over time and its consequences for sustained well-being and brand relationships.
- **Deeper Cross-Cultural Studies:** Beyond the individualism/collectivism dichotomy, future research can explore specific cultural nuances and how they influence the dynamics of envy in marketing.
- **Neuroscientific Studies:** Utilize brain imaging techniques (e.g., fMRI) to delve deeper into the neural mechanisms of envy in marketing contexts and identify subtle differences in brain activation between envy types (Frontiers in

Psychology, 2024).

- **Interventions to Mitigate Malicious Envy:** Research the effectiveness of strategies like self-compassion and gratitude in reducing the negative consequences of malicious envy in consumer responses (Psyche, n.d.).
- **Kindness-Based Marketing:** Explore the concept of "kindness marketing" as an alternative to envy-based marketing and assess its effectiveness in building positive brand associations and enhancing consumer well-being (SEM Updates, n.d.).
- **Role of Artificial Intelligence:** Investigate the impact of AI in generating envy-inducing content and its ethical implications for consumers and the marketing industry.

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