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Benign Envy Sells iPhones, but Malicious Envy Drives Consumers to BlackBerries



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People are willing to pay more for products that elicit their envy—but that’s only when they are motivated by a positive, benign form of envy, according to a new study in the [Journal of Consumer Research](#).

“Our studies showed that people who had been made envious of someone who owned an iPhone were willing to pay 80 Euros more on average,” write authors Niels van de Ven, Marcel Zeelenberg, and Rik Pieters (Tilburg University).

The researchers made some important discoveries about the motivations that result from different kinds of envy. “Note that two types of envy exist: benign and malicious envy,” the authors explain. “Benign envy exists if the advantage of the other person is deserved, and motivates people to attain a coveted good or position for themselves. This more motivating type of envy makes people pay an envy premium for the products that elicited their envy.” On the other hand, malicious envy occurs if the other person is thought to be undeserving; it evokes a desire to “pull down” the other person.

In a series of experiments, the authors compared benign envy with its malicious cousin. They found that only benignly envious people were willing to pay more for products that they coveted. Maliciously envious people were more likely to pay more for related but different products. For example, people who felt maliciously envious of someone with an iPhone were more likely to pay more for a BlackBerry.

In the experiments (which involved potential internships as well as products like iPhones), the participants were asked to imagine feeling jealousy and admiration for the fellow student (Benign Envy condition), to imagine feeling jealous and begrudging (the Malicious Envy condition), or just to imagine that they really liked the product (Control condition).

However, companies should be cautious to not evoke the more negative form of envy that drives people away from products. “Advertisers should make sure that the celebrities they want to use in their ads actually deserve their status,” the authors write. “If they do not, these celebrities might actually trigger malicious envy and the sales of products from a competitor could even go up.”

Niels van de Ven, Marcel Zeelenberg, and Rik Pieters. “The Envy Premium in Product Evaluation.” *Journal of Consumer Research*. Contact JCR@bus.wisc.edu for a copy of the study. For further information, see <http://ejcr.org>.

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