

## How to Regulate Consumption Triggered by Upward Comparison? Self-esteem Is the Ultimate Shield

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### ABSTRACT

This research investigates possible ways to reduce envious consumption resulting from upward comparison. Drawing on the social comparison theory and on research on envy and self-regulation, we argue that more upward comparison leads to a higher willingness to buy and to pay with benign envy, but not malicious envy, mediating this effect. We also propose two moderators to the relationship between upward comparison and willingness to buy/pay: (1) one's self-esteem, and (2) considering the opportunity costs of one's spending. Findings of a laboratory experiment in a social media context reveal that a higher level of upward comparison leads to higher levels of benign envy, higher willingness to buy and to pay only among consumers with low levels of self-esteem. Our results show that considering opportunity costs of their spending attenuates consumers' willingness to buy and to pay only among those experiencing low levels of benign envy.

**Keywords:** Envy, Upward comparison, Consumption, Self-esteem, Willingness to buy, Envious consumption

### INTRODUCTION

Consumption driven by envy is well-documented [1,2]. de Ven, Zeelenberg and Pieters [3] demonstrated an “envy premium” with consumers willing to pay more to acquire products others have. Consumption driven by envy can have negative effects on society and the mental and financial well-being of individuals [4]. People spending beyond their means trying to keep up with wealthier others may end up depressed and in-debt [5].

The purpose of this research is to investigate possible ways to reduce envious consumption resulting from upward comparison (comparison to a higher entity). There have been two fundamentally different views of envy [6]. The first view argues that envy is automatic and occurs without much thinking [7,8]. The second view is based on the idea that people are skilled to control their envious feelings [9]. In this paper, we combine the two views by introducing two moderators to the relationship between upward comparison and willingness to buy (WTB) and willingness to pay (WTP): (1) one's self-esteem, and (2) considering the opportunity costs of one's spending.

### THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

**Upward Comparison:** The social comparison theory posits that individuals compare themselves to others for self-evaluation purposes [10]. People need to evaluate their abilities and/or opinions [11]. In the absence of objective criteria for self-evaluation, people tend to compare

themselves to others [12]. Usually, people compare to a similar other, i.e., to the average or to a hypothetical “prototype” in their population [11,13]. However, individuals also engage in upward social comparison, when the target of the comparison is perceived as superior to oneself, or downward social comparison, when this target is seen as inferior to oneself [10].

People react to upward comparison in different ways. Reviewing 60+ years of social comparison research, Gerber, Wheeler and Suls [14] concluded that people mostly chose to compare to superior others which resulted in worsened mood and lower ability assessment. Morse and Gergen [15] found that upward comparison led to a decrease in self-esteem. In contrast, Collins [16] found that upward comparison contributes to a positive self-regard through self-improvement and enhancing the self.

In the consumption field, previous research tends to support a positive link between upward comparison and consumer's

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desire to acquire a product, particularly in contexts involving conspicuous consumption. For instance, Taylor and Strutton [17] found Facebook usage to be positively correlated with online conspicuous consumption. Moreover, Gunaseran and Khalid [5] found Instagram usage to increase consumers' WTP for product object of envy. Liu [49] found a higher desire to visit a specific luxurious destination after exposure to a social network of similar person. Furthermore, Zheng, Baskin and Peng [18] show that upward comparison even has a spillover effect where comparison in a prior, non-consumption circumstance increases consumers' subsequent spending propensity.

**Envy:** Envy is an emotion that occurs when an individual desires something that another individual has. It develops when an individual compares unfavorably with another individual [9] and is coupled with desire that motivates actions [6]. Although it is often considered as an undesirable and maladaptive emotion, envy can motivate people to improve their performance in order to level off, or even surpass, the differences between them and others [19].

Researchers have identified two main types of envy, benign and malicious. Benign envy can be best represented by the expression "I wish I had what you have" [20]. It is free of hostile feelings and might serve as a motivator for people to improve themselves to level up with the envied party [21,22]. Malicious envy can be best represented by the expression "I wish you did not have what you have" [20]. It is an unpleasant and painful emotion that involves an ill-will toward the envied person [23]. Lange and Crusius [24] related benign envy and malicious envy to hope for success and fear of failure, respectively. In anticipating whether benign or malicious envy is elicited in a particular context, a main determining factor is the deservingness of the envied person [23]. If the envied person is perceived as deserving of the possession or achievement, benign envy occurs. Otherwise, malicious envy might arise due to a feeling of injustice leading to hostile emotions.

### CONCEPTUAL MODEL

Envy in its various forms is seen often as a consequence to comparison. Many researchers included upward comparison in their definition of envy. For instance, Crusius and Mussweiler [6] state "envy is usually portrayed as a complex and multifaceted emotion that follows from an upward social comparison." Constructing an integrative framework of envy, Ferreira and Botelho [23] argue that individuals who encounter upward social comparison feel a threat to their ego; facing this threat, many will experience benign envy and, to cope with this uneasy emotion, might end up consuming the product object of envy. It is worth mentioning that Edith and Morwitz [25] show that downward comparison also can result in envy.

In consumption contexts, the prominent type of envy is benign envy. Examining the historical evolution of markets,

Russell [21] argues that malicious envy is a traditional view of envy that is not in line with contemporary markets characterized by the democratization of consumption and the prevalence of social media where envious consumers do not necessarily know the envied entities. Consumers, therefore, tend to "level up" through trying to acquire the products causing the envy rather than "level down" through depriving other people of the products they long for [21]. Moreover, malicious envy is usually fueled by the perception of a lack of deservingness of the envied party. In contexts where it is hard for consumers to assess this deservingness, such as social media, malicious envy is less likely to occur. These conceptual expectations were empirically supported by researchers such as Correia, de Plaza and Taghian [26] who found benign envy to be a much stronger predictor of desire to purchase luxury fashion items than malicious envy. Similarly, Gunaseran and Khalid [5] found Instagram usage to increase consumers' WTP for product object of envy in the case of benign envy, but not of malicious one.

Envy resulting from social comparison affects consumers' desire to possess the product object of envy. Envy might serve as a motivation to buy regardless of the price. Research shows that upward comparison may result in consumers feeling inferior or at a disadvantage [2]. One way to compensate for this uneasy feeling is to acquire the product/service object of envy at any cost. de Ven, Zeelenberg and Pieters [3] show that consumers are willing to pay more when driven by envy. Based on the above, we hypothesize:

1. H<sub>1a</sub>: The higher the upward comparison made by consumers (i.e., the higher the social status of the person target of comparison), the higher is their WTB the product object of envy.
2. H<sub>1b</sub>: The higher the upward comparison made by consumers (i.e., the higher the social status of the person target of comparison), the higher is their WTP for the product object of envy.
3. H<sub>2a</sub>: The relationship between upward comparison and consumers' WTB the product object of envy is mediated by benign, but not by malicious, envy.
4. H<sub>2b</sub>: The relationship between upward comparison and consumers' WTP for the product object of envy is mediated by benign, but not by malicious, envy.

**The Moderating Role of Self-esteem.** Self-esteem plays a key role in reducing envy resulting from upward social comparison. Self-esteem refers to people's overall self-evaluation or attitude toward themselves [27]. People low in self-esteem tend to perceive themselves as less valuable than others [28]. Those low in self-esteem are expected to feel more envy from unfavorable upward comparison. Veblen [29] argues that people consume to gain the esteem of others. Hence, a gap in consumption realized through upward comparison is likely to be more felt by those lower

in self-esteem. Moreover, those low in self-esteem tend to be uncertain about themselves and derive more emotions from comparing themselves unfavorably to others [30,31]. In contrast, people with high esteem are more comfortable with who they are. Hence, they tend to be less interested in comparative evaluations and less affected by them. Cait [19] found that people with high self-esteem accept compensatory prizes and tend to cope better with unfavorable situations. Similarly, Gibbons and Gerard [13] demonstrated that upward comparison decreased the mood states of low self-esteem participants but had little effect on the high esteem group. Based on the above, we posit:

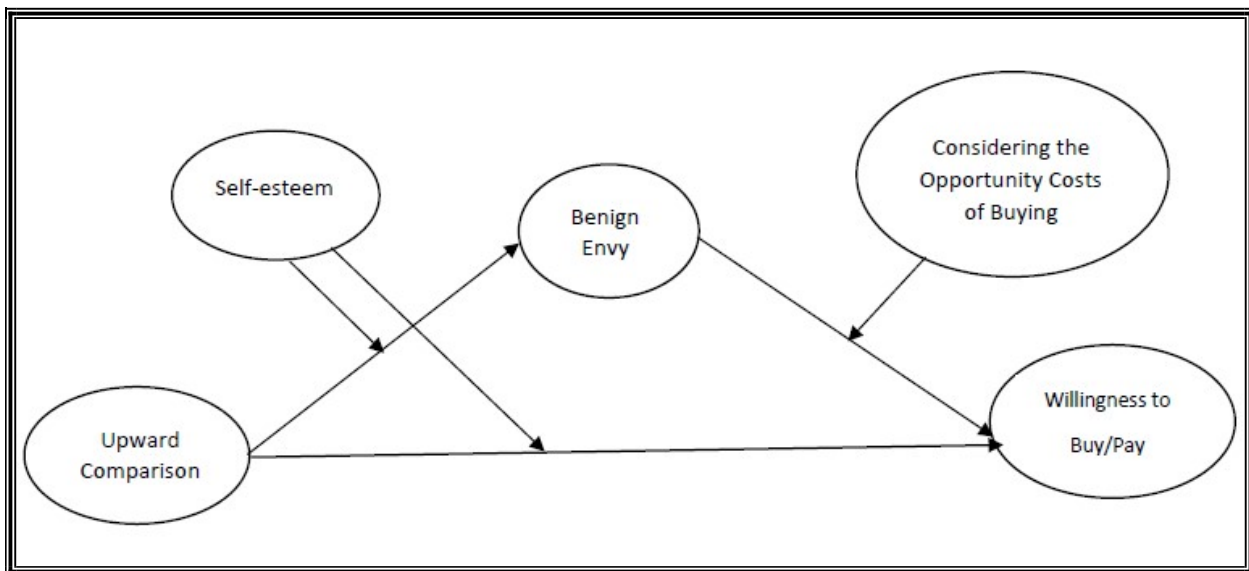
5. H<sub>3a</sub>: Self-esteem moderates the relationship between upward comparison and benign envy; the lower the self-esteem the higher the benign envy resulting from higher upward comparison. When self-esteem is high, the two are not related.
6. H<sub>3b</sub>: Self-esteem moderates the relationship between upward comparison and WTB/P the product object of envy; the lower the self-esteem the higher the WTB/P resulting from upward comparison. When self-esteem is high, the two are not related.

The Moderating Role of Considering the Opportunity Costs of Spending. Although consumers driven by envy may behave irrationally, they can be trained to curb acting on this envy. Crusius and Mussweiler [6] show that upward comparison elicits envy which leads to an increase in

consumers' WTP, only when self-control techniques are taxed. Moreover, Bartels and Urminsky [32] demonstrate that consumers change their valuation of future outcomes and reduce spending when opportunity costs are considered. Researchers also found that even consumers who are low in personal saving orientation are responsive to an intervention to help them save money [33]. The intervention essentially consists of making these consumers think about the opportunity costs of their spending. Furthermore, Spiller found that consumers who consider opportunity costs are less likely to buy focal options than those who do not when opportunity costs are appealing. Accordingly, we hypothesize:

7. H<sub>4a</sub>: Considering the opportunity costs of buying the product object of envy moderates the relationship between benign envy resulting from upward comparison and WTB; individuals considering the opportunity costs will show a lower WTB than those who do not consider these opportunity costs.
8. H<sub>4a</sub>: Considering the opportunity costs of buying the product object of envy moderates the relationship between benign envy resulting from upward comparison and WTP; individuals considering the opportunity costs will show a lower WTP than those who do not consider these opportunity costs.

The **Figure 1** below illustrates the model proposed in this research.



**Figure 1.** Conceptual Model.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

**Procedure:** Our experiment has a 2 (poster's social status: higher, lower) X 2 (Cue to consider opportunity cost: absent, present) between-subject design. In all four conditions, participants read that they saw a Facebook post by an acquaintance in which she implied that she spent five days in

Paris, France. Participants then are asked about their intention to visit Paris and the amount of money they would be willing to pay for each of several products/services including a five-day trip to Paris. Participants' level of benign envy and self-esteem are measured followed by questions to check experimental manipulations and scenario

realism. Finally, participants are asked demographic questions and whether they have visited Paris.

To manipulate the Facebook poster's social status, we altered the description of the person with the post. In the higher social status condition, the person was described as "an architect in a well-known design firm." In the lower social status condition, the description referred to the poster as "a security guard in a mall." Similar manipulations of social status were used by Shalev and Mortwiz [25]. To manipulate the consideration of opportunity costs of spending, we adopted the manipulation by Bartels and Urminsky [32]. When asking participants whether, if they had enough money, they would buy a five-day trip package to Paris, the no answer read "no [I would keep the money for other purchases]" in the condition where a cue to consider opportunity costs was present. In the second condition, i.e., in the absence of such cue, the no answer showed simply as "no."

**Measures:** To measure benign envy, we slightly modified de Ven [34] scale. As shown in the Appendix, the scale consists of six 7-point Likert-type items. A sample item is "Viewing Maya's post makes me envy her." To measure malicious envy, we used items from Lange and Crusius [24] BeMaS scale (see Appendix). A sample item is "I feel ill will towards Maya." To measure self-esteem, we used Morris [35] scale (see Appendix). A sample statement is "I feel that I have a number of good qualities".

**Participants:** A total of 200 undergraduate students at a private Northeastern university participated in the Study for partial course credit. Of these 200 students, 141 reported that they had not visited Paris. The analysis below is based on data collected from these 141 participants (59% females).

## RESULTS

**Manipulation Checks:** Participants in the high upward comparison condition reported significantly more agreement with the statement "Maya has a high social status" than those in the low condition ( $M_{\text{Architect}} = 4.58$  vs.  $M_{\text{Guard}} = 3.29$ ;  $t(139) = 2.37$ ;  $p = .02$ ). To check the manipulation of considering the opportunity costs while deciding on whether or not to buy, we asked participants their level of agreements with two statements: "When asked about whether I would spend my saved money, I thought about what else I could do with the money," and "I considered what other purchases I could do with the money while deciding whether to buy or not" ( $r = 0.86$ ;  $p < .001$ ). The difference between the two experimental conditions was marginally significant ( $M_{\text{Opportunitycost}} = 5.78$  vs.  $M_{\text{Noopportunitycost}} = 5.17$ ;  $t(135) = 1.98$ ;  $p = 0.08$ ). Finally, the mean score for perception of scenario realism was 4.9 on a 1-7 scale indicating an acceptable level of realism.

**Envy:** The items measuring benign envy had a Cronbach's alpha of 0.761. We ran a regression analysis with benign

envy as the dependent variable with the following independent variables: upward comparison, self-esteem, and their interaction. The analysis reveals a main effect for upward comparison ( $p < .001$ ), a main effect of self-esteem ( $p = .001$ ) and an interaction effect ( $p < .001$ ). As illustrated in Figure 2, for those low in self-esteem, a higher level of upward comparison led to higher benign envy. In contrast, those high in self-esteem did not report a difference in the level of benign envy with the increase in upward comparison. These results lend support to hypotheses  $H_1$  and  $H_{3a}$ .

The two items measuring malicious envy had a correlation of .536 ( $p < .001$ ). Regressing malicious envy on upward comparison, self-esteem, and their interaction, no significant effects were found, as expected. It is worth noting that benign and malicious envies were not correlated ( $r = .114$ ;  $p > .1$ ).

**Model Testing:** To test our model, we ran Model 22 of Hayes' PROCESS [36]. The analysis provides support for a significant interaction between upward comparison and self-esteem in predicting benign envy (LLCI -.7027 to ULCI -.2077;  $p = .0004$ ). Upward comparison predicted benign envy at low (LLCI .215 to ULCI .8346;  $p = .001$ ) and moderate (LLCI .0607 to ULCI .4832;  $p = .012$ ) levels of self-esteem. No significant prediction was reported at high levels of self-esteem (LLCI -.3354 to ULCI .07;  $p = .1977$ ). It also supports a moderating role for self-esteem in the direct link between upward comparison and WTB (LLCI -1.9517 to ULCI -.3473;  $p = .005$ ) as per  $H_{3b}$ . More specifically, the link between upward comparison and WTB was significant at both low (LLCI .3787 to ULCI 2.2965;  $p = .0063$ ) and moderate (LLCI .0782 to ULCI 1.3198;  $p = .0273$ ) levels of self-esteem. However, no significant relationship was found at high levels of self-esteem (LLCI -.9204 to ULCI .2749;  $p = .2898$ ). This moderating role of self-esteem is illustrated in Figure 2.

The moderating role for considering opportunity costs on the effect of benign envy on WTB was supported. In the model predicting WTB, the interaction between benign envy and considering opportunity costs is significant (LLCI -2.0315 to ULCI -.0223;  $p = .0492$ ) supporting  $H_{4a}$ . The moderated mediation (mediation of benign envy moderated by self-esteem) on WTB is supported when no opportunity costs are considered (LLCI .0959 to ULCI .7407), but not when they are (LLCI -.2821 to ULCI 2.0806). The index for moderated moderated mediation is significant (LLCI .0843 to ULCI 1.5783). Further analysis reveals, as illustrated in Figure 3, that considering the opportunity costs of spending resulted in lowering WTB, only at low levels of benign envy. Participants who experienced high levels of envy reported similar levels of WTB regardless of whether they were cued to consider opportunity costs. As illustrated in Figure 4, considering opportunity costs dropped participants' WTB only for those high in self-esteem.

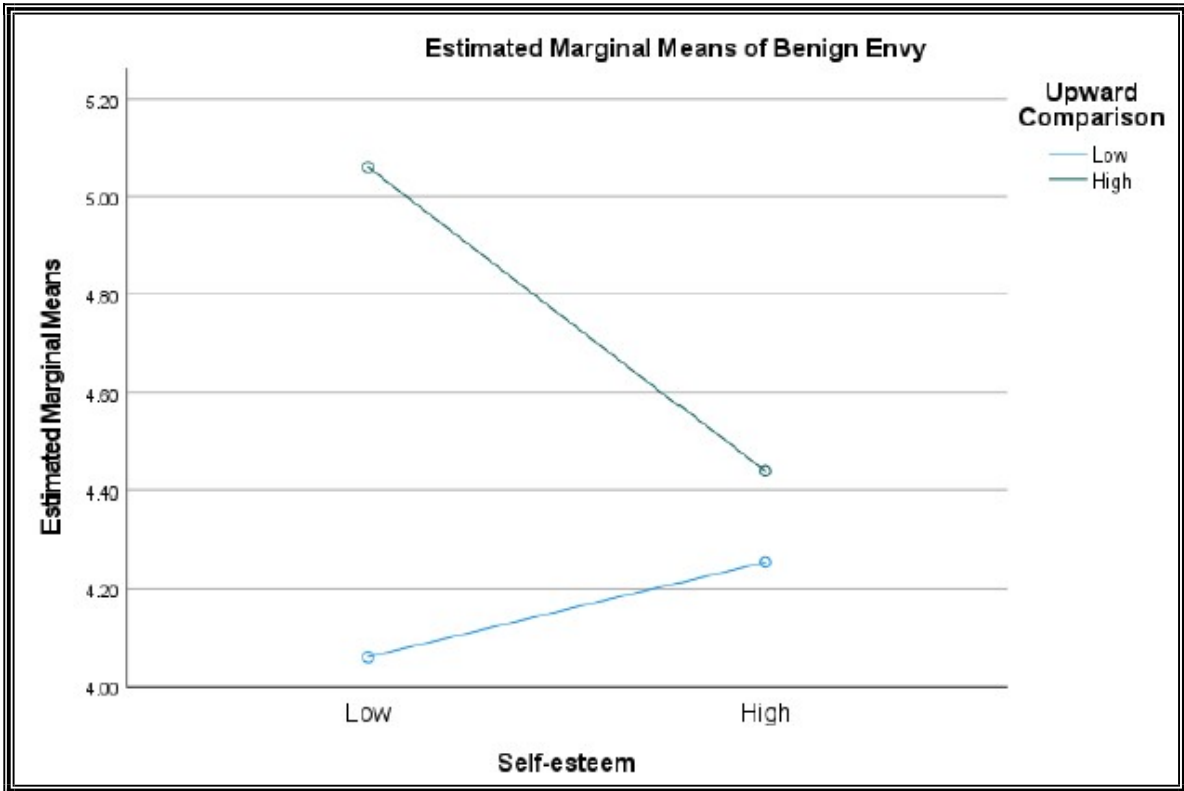


Figure 2. Benign envy by upward comparison X self-esteem.

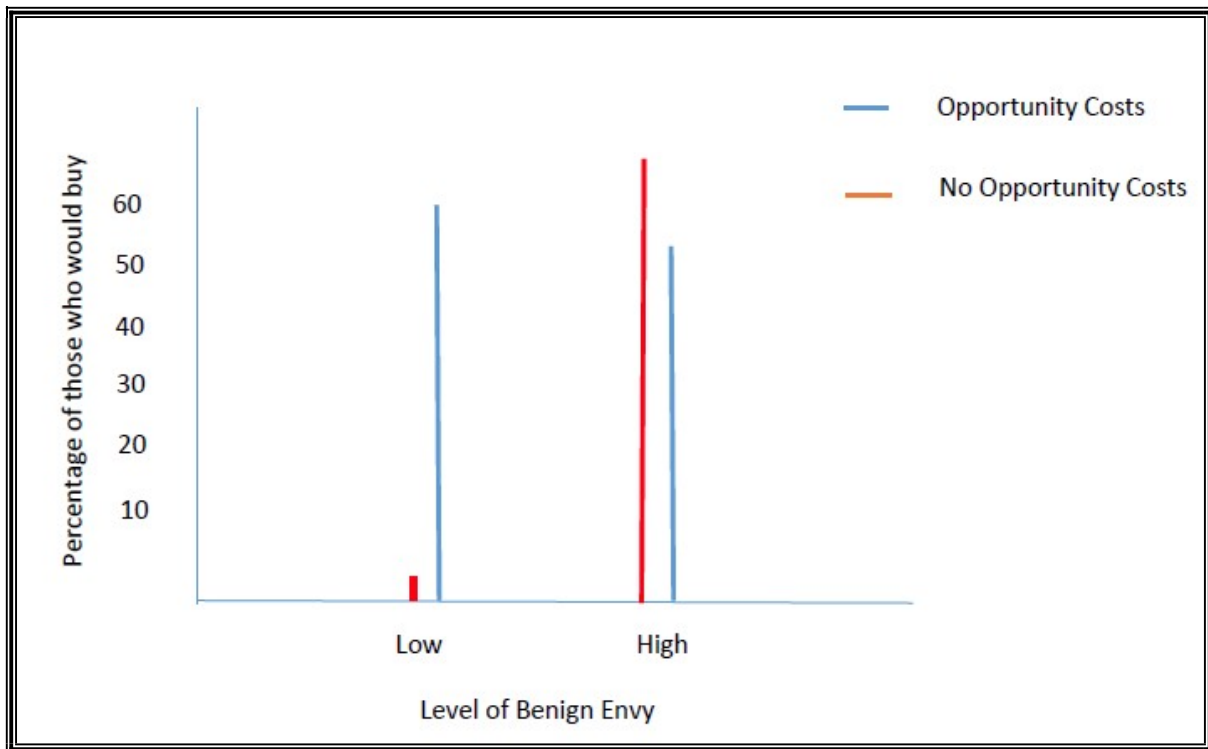


Figure 3. WTB by benign envy X consideration of opportunity costs.

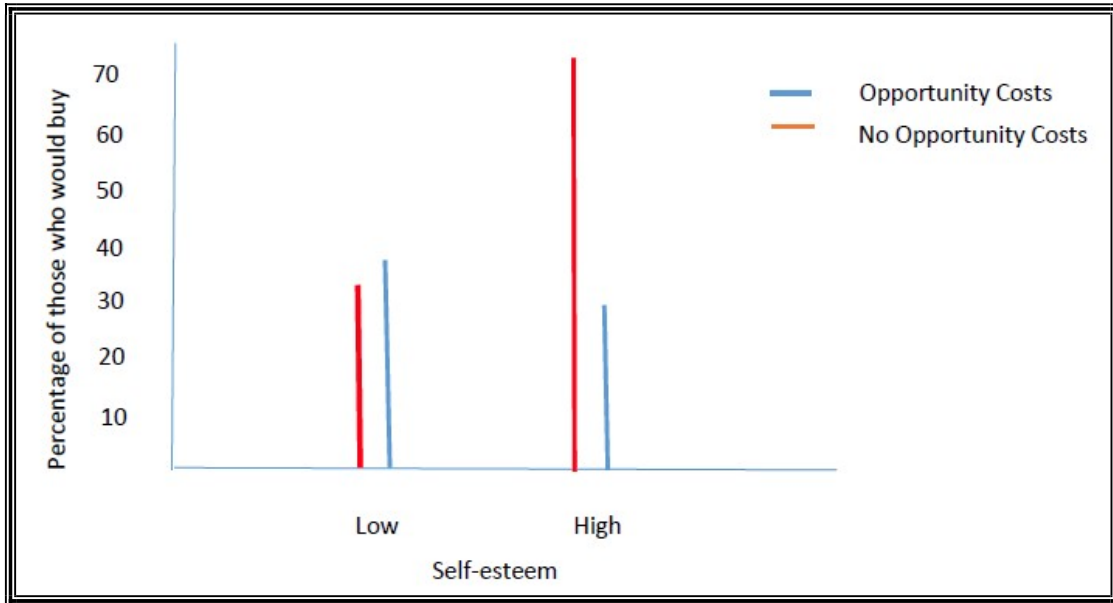


Figure 4. WTB by self-esteem X consideration of opportunity costs.

When WTP was the dependent variable in our analysis, results similar, though not identical, to those of WTB were obtained. Indeed, the interaction between benign envy and considering opportunity costs is marginally significant (LLCI 74.69 to ULCI 472.55;  $p = .0528$ ). The moderated mediation (mediation of benign envy moderated by self-esteem) on WTP is supported, but negative, when opportunity costs are considered (LLCI -773.85 to ULCI -

137.03), but not when they are not (LLCI -451.70 to ULCI 23.44). The index for moderated moderated mediation is significant (LLCI -241.88 to ULCI -3.03). As illustrated in Figure 5, considering the opportunity costs of spending resulted in lowering WTP, only at low levels of benign envy. Additionally, as illustrated in Figure 6, considering opportunity costs dropped participants' WTP only for those high in self-esteem.

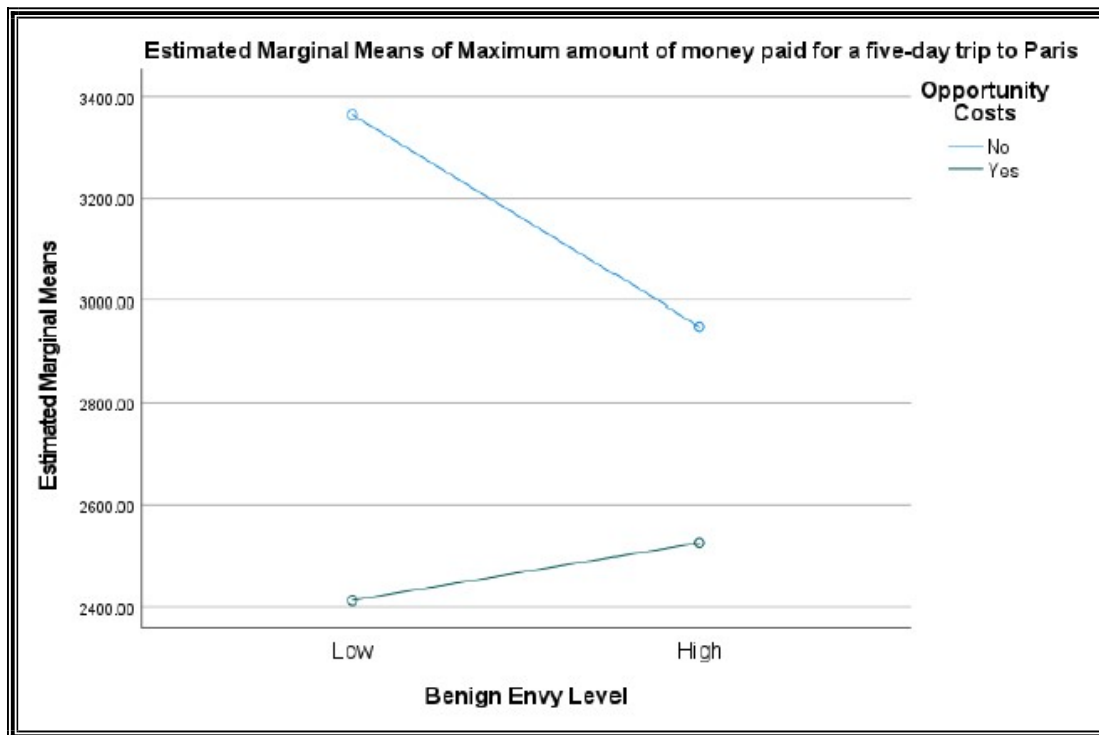
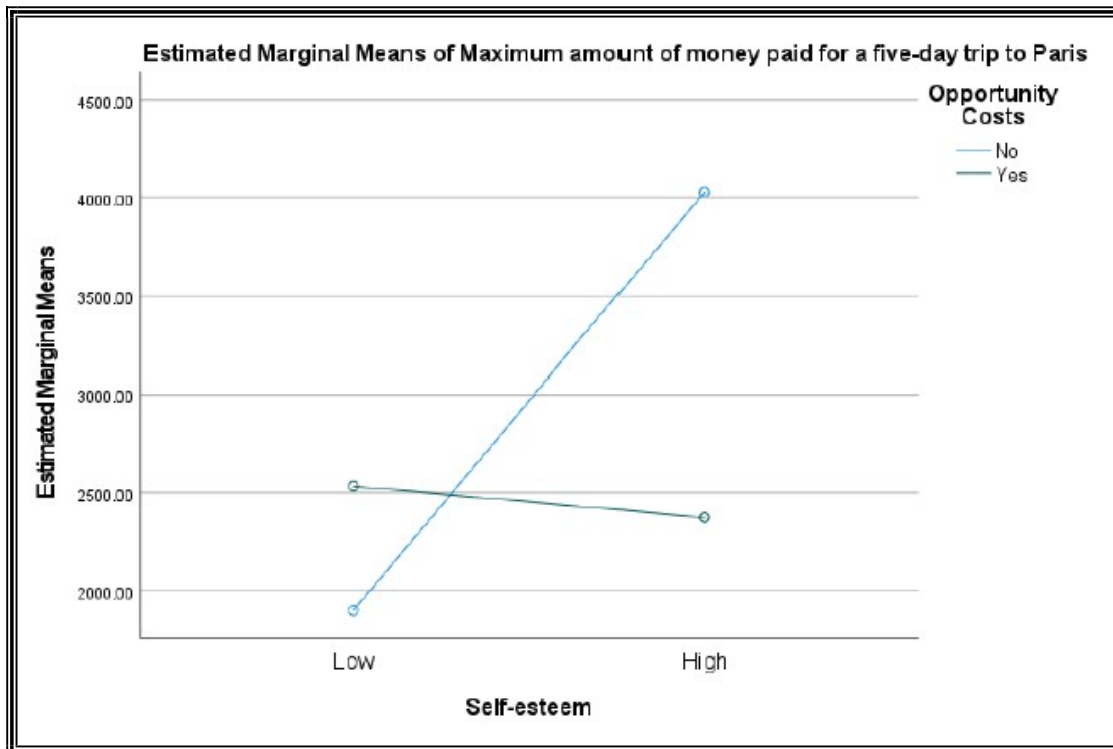


Figure 5. WTP by benign envy X consideration of opportunity costs.



**Figure 6.** WTP by self-esteem X consideration of opportunity costs.

Our findings support the absence of any effect by or related to malicious envy. We reran Model 22 of PROCESS [36] with malicious envy as the mediating variable; we ran the analysis twice with WTB and WTP as dependent variables, respectively. None of the effects mentioned above was significant. These results confirm our expectations that benign, but not malicious, envy is the mediating variable in the model we propose.

**DISCUSSION**

Findings of our research demonstrate that consumers driven by upward comparison are more willing to buy the product possessed by the envied person and even to pay more for it. The Study supports the “envy premium” referred to by de Ven [27]. Our results also demonstrate that the effect of upward comparison on WTB/P is mediated by benign envy, consistent with Hongbo [37]. Moreover, the two factors proposed as moderators in our research seem to attenuate this effect under certain conditions. The first factor, self-esteem, is an individual trait while the second factor, considering opportunity cost of spending, is situational.

While confirming the importance of considering the opportunity costs of spending in regulating one’s WTB/P triggered by upward comparison, this research draws boundaries to the effectiveness of this regulatory factor. Research on self-regulation had found that considering opportunity costs, through merely mentioning that money could be used for other purposes, reduces intended spending [32,38]. Our findings show that this important, and relatively

easy to manipulate, factor is effective in comparison-triggered consumption only when people experience low to moderate levels of envy. This regulatory technique also seems to work best when self-esteem is high.

Our research affirms the quintessential role of self-esteem in envy-related consumption contexts in two ways. First, we show that high levels of self-esteem attenuate people’s envy when they experience upward comparison. Second, our results reveal that considering opportunity costs is effective at high levels of self-esteem and at low levels of envy perhaps resulting from high levels of self-esteem. Our findings are in line with previous research showing the role of self-esteem in reducing envy [19,39] and decreasing one’s intention to buy a product/service. However, it adds to previous research through showing the pivotal role of self-esteem in making the self-regulatory technique examined in this research work. The fact that situational self-esteem can be manipulated with simple exercises [40,41] makes the implications of this research even more relevant.

This research supports the multi-faceted nature of envy. Our findings that the two forms did not correlate and that they had substantially different effects reinforce Van de Ven’s call to treat benign and malicious envies as two different constructs. Our findings are in line with previous research showing that benign envy is what plays a role in upward comparison [5,6]. This finding does not mean that upward comparison is not consequential as the resulting emotion is benign and not malicious. In fact, this benign emotion is a

motivator of behaviors with bad consequences for individuals and society [21]. As Veblen [29] argues, imitation-driven consumption process can be a frustrating endless process where everyone is stretching to look as having a higher social status; this is similar to everyone's standing on tiptoes [42].

### CONTRIBUTION AND IMPLICATIONS

This research contributes to research on envy consumption in many ways. We take a comprehensive approach through offering a model that examines the relationship between upward comparison and consumption through envy with moderation by self-esteem and self-regulation. Previous research had looked at this mostly in parts studying, for example, the relationship between social comparison and envy [23,43] or the moderating role of self-esteem in envy driven consumption [37,39]. Our comprehensive approach allows for understanding the interplay among variables and reveals important interactions.

A main theoretical contribution of this research is the introduction of considering opportunity costs to help control for comparison-driven consumption. Previous researchers have examined the effect of opportunity costs consideration on consumer savings [32] and their choice preferences [44]. To our knowledge, ours is the first research to investigate the impact of considering opportunity costs in comparison-driven consumption. While few researchers argue that envy resulting from social comparison is instantaneous [7,45], identifying factors that could possibly help control potential negative consequences of envy is good for consumers and societies.

Our research has practical implications that can help consumers act responsibly. The main implication of this research is that to curb consumption triggered by upward comparison, one needs to nurture self-esteem among consumers. Considering opportunity costs, a seemingly easy trick to practice, can serve as a regulatory technique. However, Shane [38] shows that, counterintuitively, consumers tend to neglect opportunity costs; they need to be reminded to think about these costs as we do in our Study. Moreover, for this regulation to work, the level of envy must be under a certain level. Our findings imply that, to be effective, this regulatory technique needs to be combined with other factors that decrease envy, such as gratitude [46] or perceived equality [47].

### CONCLUSION

Consumption driven by envy resulting from upward social comparison can be harmful. In this research, we construct and empirically test a comprehensive model to understand the impact of upward comparison on consumers' WTB and WTP for the product object of envy. Our model is the first to incorporate a self-regulation technique, namely the consideration of opportunity costs, in the context of consumption triggered by social comparison. Our findings

reveal that self-esteem is the key reducer of envy and its consequences.

### FUTURE DIRECTION

The execution of this research has limitations that serve as opportunities for future research. First, focusing on upward comparison, this research manipulates social comparison to ensure a wide range of levels of upward comparison. Downward comparison might be qualitatively, not just quantitatively, different from upward comparison [25,48]. Hence, future research manipulating upward social comparison without including cases that might qualify as downward comparison would be interesting to conduct to further test our model. Second, in our Study, we measure self-esteem, an essential construct in our model. Demonstrating that similar effects can be obtained with induced state self-esteem, i.e., a variable manipulated rather than measured by the researcher, amplifies the practical implications of this research.

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**APPENDIX**

Construct Scales

<b>Benign Envy</b>	Source: de Ven [37]	Cronbach's alpha = .761
	Viewing Maya's post makes me intend to visit Paris in the near future.	
	I would take Paris into consideration when planning for my future holidays.	
	Viewing Maya's post makes me have the desire to visit Paris in the near future.	
	I will work hard to get the opportunity to travel to Paris in the future.	
	I would like to compliment (via "thumbs up like" or comment) Maya's post.	
	Viewing Maya's post makes me envy her.	
<b>Malicious Envy</b>	Source: Lange and Crusius [24]	r=.536; p<.001
	I feel ill will towards Maya	
	I tend to dislike Maya	
<b>Self-esteem</b>	Source: Morris [38]	Cronbach's alpha = .901
	On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.	
	At times I think I am no good at all.	
	I feel that I have a number of good qualities.	
	I am able to do things as well as most other people.	
	I feel I do not have much to be proud of.	
	I certainly feel useless at times.	
	I feel that I'm a person of worth.	
	I wish I could have more respect for myself.	
	All in all, I am inclined to think that I am a failure.	
	I take a positive attitude toward myself.	