

Research Article

Competing for attention: The effects of jealousy on preference for attention-grabbing products[☆]

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Abstract

Jealous individuals often harbor feelings of aggression toward both their relationship partner and their rivals. However, jealousy can also have quite different effects that have implications for people's product preferences. Five experiments converge on the conclusion that jealousy induces a desire to recapture attention from one's partner and that this desire generalizes to unrelated situations in which the partner is not involved. Thus, jealousy increases people's preferences for attention-grabbing products and this is true even when the public display of the products could bring negative attention. The effect of jealousy only occurs when the products are consumed in public. Finally, the influence of jealousy on product evaluations is distinguished from that of other negative emotions such as envy and feelings of powerlessness.

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"I was always jealous of something getting more attention."
Robyn Hitchcock

Rose has been having a romantic relationship with Jack. However, she happens to see Jack in the cafeteria with another female student, flirting with one another and obviously having a good time. Rose feels quite jealous because Jack's new friend is receiving the sort of attention that Jack usually reserves for her. Shortly after witnessing this situation, Rose goes shopping. Will the jealousy she feels affect the type of products she buys? For example, will she prefer a t-shirt with a big eye-catching

logo design or one with a more low-key design? Our research, which investigated how incidental feelings of jealousy can affect consumers' preference for attention-grabbing products, provides an answer to this question.

Jealousy results from the perception that one's position in a social relationship is being usurped by another (Buss & Haselton, 2005; Buss, Larsen, Westen, & Semmelroth, 1992; DeSteno & Salovey, 1996; Harmon-Jones, Peterson, & Harris, 2009; Parrott & Smith, 1993). Thus, it stimulates aggression toward both one's relationship partner and the rival (Daly & Wilson, 1988; de Weerth & Kalma, 1993; Dutton, van Ginkel, & Landolt, 1996; Parker, Low, Walker, & Gamm, 2005; Paul, Foss, & Galloway, 1993). As our research indicates, however, feelings of jealousy can also affect people's behavior in situations that are unrelated to the conditions that gave rise to them. In particular, they can influence people's consumption preferences and the type of products they are likely to purchase.

The effect of jealousy on consumption behavior is not immediately obvious and, to our knowledge, has not previously been

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identified. Our conceptualization of this effect was in part based on our recognition that (a) people's feelings of jealousy are influenced in part by their perception that the attention they normally receive from a significant other is being usurped and (b) this perception motivates them to regain the attention they have lost. Moreover, although jealous individuals are primarily motivated to recapture the attention of the particular person whose attention they are in danger of losing. However, this motivation may have more general implications. As [Wyer, Xu, and Shen \(2012\)](#) and [Custers and Aarts \(2007\)](#) suggest, goal-directed thoughts and behavior that occur in one situation can activate a more general goal concept that, once accessible in memory, can influence the behavior that is performed in an unrelated situation in which this concept is applicable. Thus, for example, if jealousy leads individuals to think about regaining the attention of their relationship partner, these thoughts may activate a more general concept associated with getting attention. If this goal concept is accessible in memory at the time individuals make a purchase decision, it could lead them to choose a product that consistent with this goal, that is, a product that is likely to capture others' attention. Moreover, this could occur independently of the jealousy-eliciting situation that stimulated the motive.

The present research investigated this possibility. In the following pages, we first conceptualize the construct of jealousy more precisely and distinguish it from other, related constructs that might potentially influence behavioral decisions. We then elaborate the processes we assume to underlie the effect of jealousy on consumer behavior (in particular, product preferences) and circumscribe the conditions in which it occurs. Finally, we report five studies that confirm the implications of our conceptualization. These studies extend our knowledge in several ways. First, the implications of feeling jealous for behavior in situations that are unrelated to the conditions that gave rise to these feelings have seldom if ever before been identified. Second, the effects of these feelings on product preferences have implications for the impact of advertisements that promote attention-getting products.

Theoretical background

To reiterate, jealousy arises when either a real or imagined rival is perceived to threaten an important social relationship (e.g., [Buss et al., 1992](#)). It is particularly likely to be experienced when people in a romantic relationship suspect that their partner is becoming interested in someone else ([Parrott & Smith, 1993](#)). However, jealousy can emerge in other types of relationships as well. For instance, children can be jealous of a sibling's relationship with their parents ([Masciuch & Kienapple, 1993](#); [Volling, McElwain, & Miller, 2002](#)), workers might be jealous of a colleague's close relationship with a supervisor ([Vecchio, 2000](#)), and consumers might be jealous of another's relationship with a salesperson ([Chan & Sengupta, 2013](#)).

In a typical jealousy-related experience, one's own interpersonal loss is another's gain ([Parrott & Smith, 1993](#); [White & Mullen, 1989](#)). As a consequence, jealousy is likely to induce a motive to compete with the other for the resources that one is in danger of losing. These resources can sometimes be tangible.

For example, a boy might be jealous of his parents' inclination to spend more money on gifts for his sister than on gifts for him. More generally, however, a key determinant of jealousy is the loss of attention. That is, jealousy results from the perception that the attention that one has come to expect from someone has been usurped.

Relation to other constructs

Jealousy should be distinguished from that of other emotional reactions. For one thing, jealousy does not result from a lack of attention in general. Rather, as [Tov-Rauch \(1980\)](#) note, it is a reaction to a specific person whose lack of attention is personally threatening. However, feelings of jealousy should be distinguished from feelings of rejection. [Lee and Shrum \(2012\)](#) identified two types of social exclusion, being ignored and being rejected, which exert very different effects on conspicuous consumption. Being ignored threatens efficacy needs and increases the desire for conspicuous consumption, whereas being rejected threatens relational needs and consequently increases prosocial behavior. If jealousy is the result of a lack of attention, its effects are likely to be similar to the effect of being ignored.

Jealousy should also be distinguished from two other emotions that can result from negative interpersonal relations: envy and feelings of powerlessness.

Jealousy versus envy

First, the effect of jealousy should be distinguished from the effect of envy ([Miceli & Castelfranchi, 2007](#); [Smith & Kim, 2007](#)). Envy typically emerges when people find that another person is superior to themselves or has a possession that they do not. This contrasts with jealousy, which results from the loss of something that one already has. Thus, a man might envy a colleague whose spouse is attractive, intelligent and wealthy. However, he would be jealous if he finds that his own attractive, intelligent and wealthy partner is spending time with someone else. Individuals who experience envy are motivated to eliminate the discrepancy between themselves and the target of their emotion, either by pulling the other down or by pulling themselves up ([van de Ven, Zeelenberg, & Pieters, 2009](#)). Thus, lack of attention is not the central focus of envious individuals.

Jealousy versus powerlessness

People who feel that their relationship with a significant other is being threatened may experience a sense of powerlessness and consequently might be motivated to regain social power. This might be done by acquiring material possessions (e.g., luxury products) that convey high social status ([Rucker & Galinsky, 2008](#)). Thus, if high-status products attract attention, feelings of powerlessness could often have an effect similar to that of jealousy. However, attention-grabbing products do not always convey high status. Thus, feeling powerless may increase the desire for high-end clothing with conspicuous designs ([Rucker & Galinsky, 2009](#), Experiment 5). However, it should have little effect on the desire for attention-grabbing products that do not convey high social status. In contrast, jealousy induces a more general desire to seek attention that

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