



## Full length article

# What triggers envy on Social Network Sites? A comparison between shared experiential and material purchases



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## ABSTRACT

Social network users often see their online friends post about experiential purchases (such as traveling experiences) and material purchases (such as newly purchased gadgets). Three studies (total  $N = 798$ ) were conducted to investigate which type of purchase triggers more envy on Social Network Sites (SNSs) and explored its underlying mechanism. We consistently found that experiential purchases triggered more envy than material purchases did. This effect existed when people looked at instances at their own Facebook News Feeds (Study 1), in a controlled scenario experiment (Study 2), and in a general survey (Study 3). Study 1 and 2 confirmed that experiential purchases increased envy because they were more self-relevant than material purchases. In addition, we found (in Study 1 and 3) that people shared their experiential purchases more frequently than material purchases on Facebook. So why do people often share experiential purchases that are likely to elicit envy in others? One answer provided in Study 3 is that people actually think that material purchases will trigger more envy. This paper provides insight into how browsing SNSs can lead to envy. It contributes to the research on experiential vs. material purchases and the emotion of envy.

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## 1. Introduction and theoretical background

Social network users often share positive news such as their traveling experiences or newly purchased gadgets. Others, who read such posts, may compare themselves unfavorably with the poster (Festinger, 1954), which could lead to the unpleasant feeling of envy (Smith & Kim, 2007). Krasnova, Wenninger, Widjaja, and Buxmann (2013) identified several content categories that often trigger envy on Facebook, including categories such as travel and leisure, money and material possessions, achievements in job and school, relationship and family, and appearance. The first two categories resemble the distinction between experiential and material purchases (Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003, p. 1194), the effects of which are widely investigated in the consumer psychology literature. The current research mainly investigates which type of content (experiential vs. material purchases) on Social Network Sites (SNSs) triggers more envy and why this is the case.

In the following parts, we will first introduce the concept of envy and address why it is so relevant to study envy on SNSs. We then introduce the distinction between experiential and material purchases, and explain why it is important to test whether experiential or material purchases trigger more envy.

### 1.1. Envy and SNSs

Envy is the emotion that “arises when a person lacks another's superior quality, achievement, or possession and either desires it or wishes that the other lacked it” (Parrott & Smith, 1993). The concept of envy involves two parties: the envier (who is in the inferior position) and the envied person (who possesses the envied object). The emotion envy has important consequences. First, envy *feels* negative and contains feelings of frustration (Smith & Kim, 2007). Second, feeling envious can be detrimental for the relationship with the envied person, as envy can lead to negative behavior towards the person being envied (such as gossiping, Wert & Salovey, 2004).

At the same time, envy can also have more positive consequences, as it can motivate people to improve their own position

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(Van de Ven, Zeelenberg, & Pieters, 2011b) and stimulate consumption (Crusius & Mussweiler, 2012; Van de Ven, Zeelenberg, & Pieters, 2011a). Therefore, knowing which type of content on SNSs triggers more envy (and why this is the case) can help social media marketers to utilize this emotion for better advertising.

The current manuscript focuses on the emotion of general envy as a result of SNS consumption. People who share their fabulous new purchases online can trigger envy in others. Indeed, researchers found that passive consumption of SNSs leads to more envy, and this envy in turn decreases life satisfaction and well-being (Appel, Crusius, & Gerlach, 2015; Krasnova, Widjaja, Buxmann, Wenninger, & Benbasat, 2015; Steers, Wickham, & Acitelli, 2014; Tandoc, Ferrucci, & Duffy, 2015; Verduyn, Ybarra, Résibois, Jonides, & Kross, 2017). Given these negative effects of envy on well-being, gaining a better understanding of the causes of envy on SNSs is important. Furthermore, experiencing envy while browsing SNSs also increases the likelihood that someone leaves the SNS platform (Lim & Yang, 2015). As a result, users may stop using the current social network service when too much envy is triggered. It is therefore important for SNS providers to know under which conditions the general negative emotion of envy is likely to be triggered.

### 1.2. Experiential vs. material purchases

We think the distinction between experiential and material purchases can help identify when people are most likely to become envious on SNSs. The distinction between experiential and material purchases was first proposed by Van Boven and Gilovich (2003): Experiential purchases are “those made with the primary intention of acquiring a life experience: an event or series of events that one lives through”, and material purchases are “those made with primary intention of acquiring a material good: a tangible object that is kept in one's possession”. The main difference between experiential and material purchases lies in the intention of the purchase: to do vs. to have (Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003). This distinction between purchase types has turned out to be fruitful in spurring new research questions and understanding the consumer experience.

Previous research on these purchase types mainly focused on investigating which type of purchase brings more happiness, and the results showed that spending money on experiential purchases typically brings more happiness (Gilovich, Kumar, & Jampol, 2015). Three underlying mechanisms for why experiences tend to bring more happiness were summarized by Gilovich et al. (2015). First, experiential purchases enhance social relations more than material purchases do, and thereby improving well-being (Caprariello & Reis, 2013; Kumar & Gilovich, 2015). Second, experiential purchases tend to be more closely associated with one's central identity than material purchases are, acquiring them is therefore likely to have a stronger positive effect on well-being (Carter & Gilovich, 2012). Lastly, experiential purchases are more unique and difficult to be compared with, hence they trigger less social comparisons than material purchases do (Carter & Gilovich, 2010). In the next two sections, we will first introduce some relevant work on envy and then explain why these mechanisms for happiness are also important when studying the effects of purchase types on envy.

### 1.3. The relation between envy and experiential/material purchases

To the best of our knowledge, there are three studies that tested differences in felt envy over experiential and material purchases. However, these do not yet paint a clear picture on the effects of these purchase types on envy. First, Krasnova et al. (2015) found

that people indicated that, from all instances of envy reported, a category posts about travel and leisure was the category that elicited envy on Facebook the most frequently (62.1%); and people were rarely envious about “material possessions” on Facebook (5.9%). This finding, that people report being envious about experiences more frequently than about material objects, could have two causes: 1) experiences are shared more often and are therefore more likely to be a cause of envy (higher base rate), or 2) each instance of a shared experience is more likely to trigger envy than a shared material purchase is. Therefore, the current studies will 1) test if experiential purchases are posted more frequently on SNSs than material purchases (and with more posts in that category, the chance that one triggers envy becomes higher); and 2) test the envy intensity while controlling for the exposure frequency (to see whether experiential or material purchases are likely to elicit more intense envy).

Besides this work of Krasnova et al. (2015), there appear to be two conflicting findings in the literature: Carter and Gilovich (2010, Study 5c) found that jealousy (used in their study to measure envy) was stronger towards someone else who had a better laptop than the participant, compared with the situation in which someone had a better vacation than the participant. This was thought to be due to the idea that material purchases are more comparative than experiential purchases, as the value of an experiential purchase is usually hard to estimate. This would thus lead to the prediction that, in general, sharing a material purchase would be more likely to elicit envy than sharing an experiential purchase would. However, Lin and Utz (2015, in Study 2) found that envy was stronger when they saw a Facebook friend post a picture of a vacation, than when they saw the same person post a picture of a newly bought iPhone. This would suggest that experiential purchases might trigger more envy. These seemingly conflicting results make it important to test whether it is experiential or material purchases that elicit a higher degree of envy (and why they do so).

### 1.4. Hypotheses

#### 1.4.1. Which type of purchase is shared more frequently, and why?

As mentioned above, one mechanism that explains why experiential purchases trigger more happiness is about the social and hedonic value of sharing experiential purchases. Kumar and Gilovich (2015) asserted people tend to talk more about their experiential purchases than material purchases. This is because of three reasons. First, it is more rewarding to talk about one's experiential purchases than material purchases as it helps to build social capital. Van Boven, Campbell, and Gilovich (2010) showed that due to the stigmatization of materialism, others enjoy the conversation and the person more when talking over experiential purchases than material purchases. Second, by talking to others, people can re-live experiences after the experiences have happened (Kumar & Gilovich, 2015). Third, people may even re-create the experience and add a “rosy view” by talking about them (Kumar & Gilovich, 2015). Therefore, more satisfaction and happiness are gained by talking about experiential purchases than material purchases. Based on these reasons, we expected that.

**H1.** Social network users are more likely to post about their experiential purchases than material purchases.

Note that this would imply that even if material and experiential purchases trigger similar levels of envy in intensity, the more frequent sharing of experiential purchases would suggest that these experiences trigger envy more frequently.

#### Which type of purchase triggers more intense envy, and why?

For the question which type of purchase triggers stronger envy

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