

# Benign envy

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**Abstract** Envy has long been held to be a harmful emotion involving the desire to deprive others of the qualities or possessions that they possess and we covet. When the various religious injunctions against such malicious envy were conceived, the consumption landscape was vastly different. There was no branding, advertising, mass media, consumer credit, or Internet; neighbors knew neighbors; social hierarchies were relatively fixed; and discretionary income was largely unknown. This conceptual synthesis suggests that contemporary consumption is driven far more by benign envy involving a desire to “level up” through consumption emulation rather than “level down” by harming others. The concept of benign envy is developed along with an analysis of the forces leading to its displacement of malicious envy and its key role as a motivator of consumption. The paper concludes with a theoretical development of forms of envy and being envied and derives implications for theory and research.

**Keywords** Envy · Social comparison · Benign envy · Leveling · Aspirational goods · Desire · Emulation · Covetousness · Relative deprivation · Positional goods · Conspicuous consumption · Cultural capital

One instructive story of consumer envy is the fairy tale we know as Cinderella. It is an enduring tale that some have traced to early civilizations (e.g., Bettelheim 1977; Philip 1989). There are hundreds of versions of the tale, but the

Brothers Grimm (1997) version offers a more telling account of envy than the more familiar Disney version of the story. In the Grimm tale Cinderella’s stepsisters take away her pretty clothes, make her wear an old grey bed gown and wooden shoes, confine her to dirty kitchen tasks, and dub her Cinderella. When their father is going to a fair one day, he asks the three girls what presents he can bring them. The stepsisters ask for pearls, jewels, and beautiful dresses, while Cinderella asks only for a twig. She takes the twig and plants it on her mother’s grave, where she waters it with her tears. It grows into a tree inhabited by birds that grant her wishes. When the king organizes a ball so that his son may choose a bride, the sisters have Cinderella help them into their finery and then tell her she cannot come because she is dirty and has no gown or fine shoes. But Cinderella goes to the ball with the help of the birds which deck her out in a ball gown and slippers made of silver and silk. At the ball Cinderella dances with the captivated prince, but her sisters do not recognize her. Leaving hurriedly at midnight, she loses a slipper which the prince uses to seek his bride. At Cinderella’s house, at the behest of their mother, one of the stepsisters cuts off her toe in an effort to fit into the shoe and the other cuts off her heel. Nevertheless, the prince ultimately claims Cinderella as his bride. The sisters attend the wedding in order to claim their share of the royal largesse, but the birds peck out their eyes as punishment for their wickedness.

As others have suggested (e.g., Ulanov and Ulanov 2008), this is a morality tale about envy and being envied. The sisters are cruel to Cinderella out of envy, while Cinderella remains modest and humble, doing nothing to provoke their envy. As the marriage to a prince and the pivotal role of fine dresses and slippers make clear, this is a story about upward status mobility and consumer behavior. It illustrates a number of issues that are the focus of this theoretical treatment. I will consider what envy is and how

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it differs from other emotions like jealousy and resentment. I will show that there is a realm of consumption where a more benign form of envy exists that contrasts with the malicious envy of the Cinderella story. I will also consider the relationship of envy to a number of interconnected consumption phenomena including social comparison, covetousness, pecuniary emulation, positional goods, conspicuous consumption, relative deprivation, and cultural capital. I will argue that the old conception of envy seen in the Cinderella story is outmoded and inappropriate for understanding envy in contemporary consumer behavior. I then offer an expanded view of different types of envy and different ways of regarding others' envy, with implications for consumer theory and research.

### Key neglected concepts in consumer research

The concept of envy has long been of interest in such diverse fields as anthropology, economics, psychology, sociology, psychoanalysis, philosophy, neuroscience, English literature, history, organizational behavior, and religion. Yet envy has received scant attention within consumer research where it would seem to be among the most fundamental factors influencing consumption processes and outcomes. We are quite familiar with characterizations of consumption motivations based on social comparisons, including “keeping up with the Joneses” (Matt 2003), invidious distinction seeking, vicarious consumption, and snobbery (Veblen 1899), status seeking (Packard 1959), status symbols (Levy 1959), and status anxiety (de Botton 2004). Yet these terms are seldom encountered in consumer research. Reference groups, fashion, celebrity endorsements, word of mouth, and interpersonal influence are among the areas of consumer research that recognize the role of others in consumption processes. But none of these areas of research deals explicitly with envy.

As Belk (1988) concludes, consumer-object relations are seldom simply about a person and a thing. Rather they are almost always person-thing-person relationships. Directly or indirectly we consume the things that we do based upon the desires and reactions of other people. What we drive, where we live, how we furnish our homes, what we wear, and how we amuse ourselves are all choices guided by our beliefs that these things are seen by others as expressive signs of our identity (Belk 1988). Mimetic consumption is the rule even in imaginary online worlds where we are cloaked by a pseudonym or avatar (Boellstorff 2008). De Botton (2004) suggests that our concern for social status and the social comparisons that we make to see how we stand are underwritten by a desire to receive some evidence that we are loved or respected by those who are important to us. As Adam Smith (1759) argued, success is seldom absolute, but depends upon the good opinion of our neighbors and equals.

If it were merely the case that we care what others think of us and that this influences our consumption choices, this would be interesting, but not particularly problematic. Where the problems lie are in the relative nature of social comparison and in the malicious nature of envy, at least as it is classically conceived. In that conception, if there are winners, there must also be losers. The relative nature of most conceptions of status means that our absolute gains mean little if those against whom we compare ourselves gain an equal or greater amount (Easterlin 1995). Being on the losing end of a social comparison can create strong negative emotions that, in most views of envy, include animosity toward those on the winning end:

Envy is a feeling of pain a person experiences when he or she perceives that another individual possesses some object, quality, or status that he or she desires but does not possess. When the envious person is unable to obtain the desired object, quality, or status that individual usually hopes that the envied person will lose the desired thing and may even conspire to make it happen (Schimmel 2008, p. 18).

It seems little wonder that one of the Bible's ten commandments condemns coveting your neighbor's spouse, property, or other belongings as well as the related sin of envy. At a more aggregate level, envy between groups, religions, and nations has been characterized as driving such antipathies as *Jihad vs. McWorld* (Barber 1995) and the poor masses versus wealthy ethnic minorities (Chua 2004). Yet envy has been characterized as “a driving wheel of our modern world” and “the passion that governs our economic life” (Palaver 2005, p. 139). In light of such arguments, envy is foremost among the concepts deserving more attention in consumer research.

### Objectives and outline

I will begin by reviewing traditional perspectives on envy and social comparison as well as some of the key findings and debates about these phenomena. I then present an alternative view of envy. I argue that there has been a largely unrecognized change in the nature of envy and social comparison processes. This thesis is developed and is followed by a consideration of how marketing utilizes and influences benign envy. The concept of benign envy is then refined and a model of envy and feeling envied is derived.

### Envy and related concepts in traditional views

Envy, jealousy, covetousness, and desire

Joseph Epstein (2003) begins his short book on envy by noting that envy and anger are the only vices among the

seven deadly sins that are not much fun. Pride, gluttony, lust, greed, and sloth all have their pleasures and even the release of anger may prove emotionally satisfying. But envy is a gnawing bitterness that is only relieved if the person envied is brought low. Ever since Plato there has been a tradition connecting envy to *Schadenfreude*, the pleasure taken from another's misfortune (Powell et al. 2008; Sundie et al. 2009). Did the neighbor who just got an impressive new car get into a fender-bender? Great; we secretly chuckle. Does the woman with the great body and the Jimmy Choo heels have spinach on her teeth? We smirk. Is our over-achieving professional colleague headed for an acrimonious divorce? We gloat and feel much better. Contrary to most assumptions of self-interest, some studies have shown that many people will even pay their own money in order to reduce the earnings of envied others (e.g., Zizzo 2003; Zizzo and Oswald 2001). Such "money burning" confirms that our sense of well-being is dependent on others' apparent well-being.

When a friend tells us of the fabulous vacation she is taking, we might respond with either one of the English expressions "I'm so jealous" or "I'm so envious of you," taking them as equivalent. They are not. We are jealous about what we possess and envious of what others possess. Thus, we may be jealous when someone shows too keen an interest in our significant other, but envious of someone else whose wedding celebration is clearly superior to our own. Both jealousy and envy can evoke passionate, if not violent, responses. But when jealousy is sexual, as it often is, we are apt to empathize with the perpetrator of the act of violence (Stearns 1999). However if we act out of envious malice to ruin someone's vacation or wedding, this is apt to be seen as horrid. Envy is a more shameful emotion and one we are likely to suppress or hide. There may however sometimes be a relationship between jealousy and envy. As Schoeck (1966) observes, a child may feel that although she has the love of her parents, another sibling has more. She is therefore jealous of her parents' attention to the other child with whom she feels an intense sibling rivalry (e.g., Cinderella). Although Schoeck does not discuss it, it is reasonable to assume that if the child sees a gift to her sibling as a token of the parents' love, it is natural that she would feel envious when the sibling receives a gift and she does not. Starting in the 1920s, some child-rearing experts began telling parents to minimize sibling envy and rivalry by providing gifts to all of their children when one of them has a birthday (Matt 2002, 2003). This is a message congruent with the rise of consumer culture, since it implies that rather than suppress the urges of envy, children were to be taught that there was no need for malicious envy since they could have whatever they want (Matt 2002; Stearns 1999). They are effectively being taught to replace malicious envy with benign envy, as we shall see. This was a lesson

lost upon Cinderella's stepsisters who received far more beautiful gifts than Cinderella but nevertheless remained intensely envious of her. They harbored a malicious zero-sum mentality.

A distinction also must be made between enviousness and covetousness. We may envy another person when they possess a good that we covet. Coveting is wishing to have what the other has, while envy is the ill will we feel toward its possessor. That is, coveting is directed at the object and envy is directed toward the person. But coveting is not the same as consumer desire (Belk et al. 2003). Coveting is rather the wish for a *particular* good that is in the possession of a *particular* other person. Although the Bible condemns envy per se in stories like that of Cain killing Abel (Schimmel 2008), the Biblical commandment instead condemns coveting the things that others own. The Mahabharata condemns covetousness not as a sin in itself, but as leading to the sins of deception, pride, arrogance, malice, vindictiveness, and malevolence (SantiParva, Section CLVIII, quoted in Tickle [2004], p. 13). As Schoeck (1966) and Alicke and Zell (2008) point out, the envious person can covet something without actually desiring to own it. For instance, we can covet a person's yacht without ever intending to set foot on a ship. The mere ownership of this object by an envied other increases its importance for us. We can also envy the body, beauty, or mind of another person (Lyman 1978). This may suggest that when we envy a person because they possess a particular coveted good, what we really wish is that we *were* that other person—something that Belk et al. (2003) found in their study of consumer desire, especially in less affluent Turkey. Thus, in the classic view covetousness differs from consumer desire because it is focused on a particular person's possession and because the coveted object may be a mere synecdoche for the envied person.

#### Envy avoidance and limited good societies

The phenomenon of envy may or may not be culturally universal (Lindholm 2008), but it is clearly widespread, ancient, and feared. Gell (1986) describes the Muria Gond in India who strive to avoid others' envy by avoiding fine clothes, fashionable hair styles, and wearing jewelry. Those who have more wealth avoid displaying it and do not buy conspicuous goods beyond basic bicycles, wristwatches, or radios, even though they could well afford more. In Foster's (1972) terms, the Muria, through their conformity and unwillingness to stand out, are practicing concealment, which is one of the chief means of avoiding others' envy. Other means include denial ("It's really nothing; just an old rag I had lying around"), the sop (a token form of sharing to deflect others' envy), and true sharing (e.g. throwing lavish community feasts).

In an earlier paper Foster (1969) characterized envy avoidance as being especially common in limited good societies in which it is assumed that one person's gain is another's loss. This is equivalent to the zero-sum game that psychologists and behavioral economists are fond of setting up experimentally. It is also a critical assumption for philosophers like Rawls (1971) and sociologists like Schoeck (1966). This is sometimes a reasonable assumption, as in the case of fans of rival sports teams for example (Theodoropoulou 2007). On the other hand, in unlimited good societies, the pie is not perceived as finite and everyone can get a piece.

#### Social comparison, social justice, and cultural capital

If we did not compare ourselves to others, there would be no envy. According to Festinger (1954) we compare our opinions and abilities to others with the result that there is upward pressure in competitive arenas like athletics and academic grades, and a tendency toward group uniformity in opinions. While Festinger stipulated that social comparisons are made to similar people and those who are slightly "upward" in terms of the comparison of interest, subsequent research has documented downward social comparisons as well (Buunk and Gibbons 2007), although they are thought to be less common. Apart from the Freudian concept of penis envy and a few treatments of envy between men and women (e.g., Lyman 1978; Petersson 2004), most conceptions of envy assume that same sex comparisons are dominant (Epstein 2003).

Stereotypes suggest that wealthy high status people deserve what they have due to higher intelligence, diligence, and competence, and that the poor deserve their lowly status due to a lack of such traits. Fiske and Cuddy (2006) have found that these stereotypes are prevalent among both rich and poor from around the world, but with some differences. North Americans, who are more inclined to believe in a just-world, are also more likely to see such traits as deriving from dispositions rather than structural inequalities. Such stereotypes and just-world beliefs raise issues of social justice and relative deprivation. Deprivation may be felt relative to specific others, specific groups of others, our past experience, expectations we hold for our future, or some external standard like reaching a milestone income level (Leach 2008). We may feel relatively deprived with regard to possessions, income, rewards, or procedural treatment. But the majority of relative deprivation research does not invoke the concept of envy (Walker and Smith 2002). Still, Smith and others (Ortony et al. 1988; Smith 1991; Smith et al. 1994) maintain that a sense of injustice is essential to envy. When we lack what those perceived as less deserving have, we feel deprived and envy the less deserving others. Since Aristotle, philosophers have labeled

this moral emotion "resentment" and have regarded envy as being more about competitive struggles for social status rather than striving for social justice (e.g., D'Arms and Kerr 2008; Rawls 1971). Whether or not it is a motivating force behind the ill will felt toward a rival, no doubt feelings of injustice intensify this feeling of envy.

Most researchers do agree that envy involves feelings of competition and rivalry, striving for relative prestige or power within some hierarchical status group. This desire for status is the reason we feel envy according to D'Arms and Kerr (2008). But rather than a Hobbesian war of all against all, we may have some choice of the particular groups within which we seek status (Frank 1985). It could be within our work organization, our profession, our favorite online multi-player game, or our antique car collectors club. We can also conceive of status in more dichotomous terms as when someone either is or is not accepted as a member of a high status group. Although consumer goods may well be symbols asserting status claims or marker goods proclaiming membership in a group (Douglas and Isherwood 1979), according to traditional thought they are generally not *determinants* of status, despite economists' concern with positional goods and the envy theory of needs which contend otherwise (Hirsch 1976). Status is a purely social phenomenon; it must be awarded by others. Bourdieu (1984) also regards status as social, but argues that it is articulated much more through taste cultures deriving from *habitus* (upbringing and education) rather than from the possession of status symbols. That is, it is our preferences, knowledge, and opinions much more than our wealth per se that determine cultural capital (Holt 1998). Thus the futility of the conspicuous consumption, conspicuous waste, and conspicuous leisure that were critiqued by Veblen (1899, p. 95) as marks of the nouveau riche trying in vain to demonstrate taste through "costliness masquerading under the name of beauty."

Like Bourdieu, Veblen recognized that in the modern world taste was ultimately a more useful marker of high status than the trophies of accumulated possessions, slaves, servants, and partners that may have sufficed in earlier eras. He called these taste markers immaterial goods:

In our time there is the knowledge of dead languages and the occult sciences; of correct spelling; of syntax and prosody; of various forms of domestic music and household art; of the latest proprieties of dress, furniture, and equipage; of games, sports, and fancy bred animals, such as dogs and race horses (Veblen 1899, p. 47).

Manners too are a part of the status code in Veblen's view. Like Veblen (1899), Vance Packard (1959) emphasized conspicuous consumption and status display, but he also recognized that this alone was not enough to carry off a

status claim. He listed more subtle and taste-related behaviors involving language, vocabulary, expertise in restaurant ordering, and our games and entertainments as being among the “behaviors that give us away.”

Luxury, like status itself, is an ever-changing social judgment. Schoeck (1966, p. 218) stipulates that “to indulge in luxury is to provoke envy.” Historically, at times and in places when the luxurious status symbols of the elite were in danger of being democratized and used by those of less elite heritage, sumptuary laws were enacted to forbid commoners from, for example, wearing silk, eating red meat, or having more than a certain number of guests at their weddings. Although there are multiple reasons for sumptuary laws (Belk 1995b), chief among them has been this attempt to keep the emulative masses from copying the status symbols of the elite. And with virtually all of these laws, consumers have found ways around them. For example, when gold and silver clothing fabrics were forbidden in Europe, consumers began to line their clothes with such fabrics and slash the sleeves so that these luxurious linings would show through (Hughes 1983). There are few sumptuary constraints today so visible luxury goods are a common focus of reference group influence with comparison others (Bearden and Etzel 1982).

Leibenstein (1950) distinguished between three types of conspicuous consumption, depending of the consumer’s motivations and strategies. *Veblen effects* involve consumers using expensive products to display wealth and thereby gain social status. Those who employ *snob effects* seek high quality scarce objects in order to gain distinction by the rarity of their purchases. And *bandwagon effects* involve buying objects in order to be identified with a particular social group. Of these three, Veblen effects are closest to what is normally meant by status symbols. Bandwagon effects are most conformist, while snob effects are most individuating.

While Mason (1981, 1998) traces conspicuous consumption to 18th century Europe, even in the contemporary sense of buying status signalling goods, it goes back at least a hundred years earlier to late Ming China and Golden Age Netherlands (Belk 1995b) and sumptuary laws go back to ancient civilizations. Economists and socio-biologists view such consumption as costly signalling to demonstrate fitness and attract mates or gain other social advantages (e.g., Miller 2009). Evidence of the rivalrous and competitive nature of such displays is suggested by the heightened testosterone and serotonin levels in males seeking higher status (Elias 1981; Madsen 1994; Mazur and Lamb 1980). Such aggressive arousal is consistent with the malicious anger involved in the traditional view of envy. Such *Schadenfreude* has also been suggested by fMRI brain scans of people who are imaging envied others (Joseph et al. 2008).

## Summary of the traditional view of consumer envy

In the traditional view shared by most of the social sciences as well as philosophy, neuroscience, and psychoanalysis, *envy is malicious ill will directed toward a referent other who possesses something of importance to us that we covet*. Whether conscious or unconscious, it is an intense emotion. We long to have the envied other lose the thing we covet more than we long to acquire this object ourselves. The envied other is usually someone close to us who is equal or slightly above us in social status. When this envied other flaunts his or her superiority via status symbols and conspicuous consumption, our feeling of envy is likely to be even more intense. Status symbols are likely to be expensive, rare, and visible. The scarcity and assumption of limited good means that someone else’s gain is our loss.

Within organizational behavior the social comparisons and relative positions of greatest interest involve income and promotions. Within consumer research the relevant comparisons of interest are possessions, consumption-related taste cultures, and, to the extent they are regarded as malleable or capable of enhancement, others’ bodies, beauty, and brains. In each context the focal concept is status, conceived of as standing or prestige within some social hierarchy. Status is conferred by social consensus of our reference groups and is likely to result in deference, honor, acceptance, prestige, and other social advantages such as more and “better” mates.

## An alternative view of envy

### Key historical changes

During the times that the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Sutras, the Talmud, the Bible, and the Quran were written, there was no advertising, no mass production, no mass consumption, no mass media, no Internet, and no brands. Thus, the objects that these foundational religious tracts enjoin us not to covet were not the sort of possessions we are familiar with today. The same was true when Aristotle, Plato, and other early philosophers were writing about envy. Furthermore, most people lived in rural villages or small cities and even those within larger cities were usually familiar with others in their communities and neighborhoods. Kinship and clans were often quite important and for the most part rulers were hereditary and those who were ruled understood their “station in life.” Someone who stood out by having especially good crops, attractive and strong children, or a fine piece of clothing like Jacob’s “coat of many colors” (Genesis 37) was likely to attract envy and potentially suffer its malicious consequences. Protective amulets, incantations, incense, and other forms of apotropaic magic to ward off the evil eye (an envious

embodiment of the wish to do harm) were prevalent in many parts of the world (Dundes 1981; Maloney 1976). As noted earlier, such strong fear of others' envy is seen in the anthropological literature to lead to a variety of strategies to minimize or avoid this envy (Foster 1972). Lyman (1978) adds that when modesty, charity, and self-effacement are not enough to deflect others' envy the enviable rich may resort to the use of military or police protection or, more subtly, wage a campaign against the sinfulness or psychopathology of envy.

While evil eye practices and fear of others' envy have not entirely disappeared, their strength is much diminished in most societies today. Much has changed since the initial religious condemnations of envy and covetousness, although most social science approaches to envy do not reflect these changes. In the subsections below I highlight some of the major changes in the environment of social comparison, covetousness, and ostentation and how I believe these shifts should change our conceptualization of consumer envy.

*Democratization, differentiation, and the cultivation effect* Envy in today's consumer cultures is qualitatively quite different than it was when the earliest and still very influential critiques of envy were formulated. Miles (1998) offers a summary of the role of consumption in contemporary consumer cultures:

Our city centers are more remarkable as sites of consumption than they are as cultural centres; our homes might be described as temples to the religion of consumerism; our lives apparently amount to little more than a constant juxtaposition of diverse consumer styles and tastes (p. 1).

It is this constant juxtaposition of consumer styles and tastes that provokes envy. What makes this description of contemporary life in consumer culture fundamentally different from that of several thousand or even several hundred years ago can be highlighted in structural terms.

1. We have far more possessions now and they have brand and model names, often with personalities created by marketing, even though they are mass produced.
2. We have greater discretionary income and more access to consumer credit that we use to purchase goods and services in the marketplace.
3. A more urbanized population allows better distribution of goods and services with more diverse product assortments.
4. Our identity and the initial impressions we form of others are often dominated by possessions as visible signs.
5. Advertising, store displays, and mass media provide us with attractive views of consumer goods and services as well as images of those who purportedly use them.
6. The Internet not only provides opportunities to buy consumer goods and services, but also to see what

others have bought and what they have to say about these goods.

The first three of these changes affect the ability to acquire mass produced branded objects. Boorstin (1973) refers to the impact of these changes as the democratization of luxury, while Leach (1993) refers to the outcome as the democratization of consumer desire. The last three changes highlight our expanded ability to use these goods to make social comparisons between ourselves and others. Schudson (1984) suggests that these changes lead to more widespread envy:

Luxury was not democratized so much as made much more visible, more public, and more often articulate—through advertising—than it had been before. The department stores did less to provide equality in consumption than to encourage a democracy of aspirations and desire. They contributed to the democratization of envy (p. 151).

In considering the impact of these changes on the nature of envy, it is also important to recognize several more subtle changes. One such change is the rise of anonymity that accompanied the growth of urban centers. Greater anonymity can lead to greater loneliness, anomie, and crime, but it also means that we come out into society literally without a name and without a status. It is now possible for most of us to appear in the center of our city and be reasonably certain that we will not be recognized by others who know us, our job, our family, and our place of residence. With more geographic mobility and tourism, we experience more far flung and complete anonymity. This means that others' assumptions about our status derive more from our possessions and appearance than was once the case. The influx of rural people to the cities has meant a continual supply of people relying, in part, on their appearance and clothing to make a good impression and get a good job (Matt 2003). We assume, often rightly, that we will be treated better by others if they perceive us as having higher status (e.g., Doob and Gross 1968; Rosenbaum 2005). Goffman (1967) calls these behaviors status rituals. Only as we begin to interact with people do we become less anonymous and does cultural capital or the possession of immaterial goods and habitus come into play (Bourdieu 1984; Holt 1998). But for the majority of daily urban encounters our anonymity means that our presumed status and treatment are based almost entirely on our appearance and visible possessions.

Veblen (1899) recognized the impact of anonymity on the ways we demonstrate status:

One's neighbors, mechanically speaking, often are socially not one's neighbors, or even acquaintances; and still their transient good opinion has a high degree

of utility. The only practicable means of impressing one's pecuniary ability on these unsympathetic observers of one's everyday life is an unremitting demonstration of ability to pay. In the modern community there is also a more frequent attendance at large gatherings of people to whom one's everyday life is unknown; in such places as churches, theaters, ballrooms, hotels, parks, shops, and the like. In order to impress these transient observers, and to retain one's self-complacency under their observation, the signature of one's pecuniary strength should be written in characters which he who runs may read (pp. 71–72).

Today standard, visible, and identifiable brands with brand personalities and known degrees of costliness make it easy for "he who runs" to read signs of our status and personality. The democratization of envy that Schudson (1984) discerns, involves different types of goods as well as different types of others than the envy of old. The goods and people are *both* anonymous. While the people are anonymous because they have no known name or background, the goods are anonymous because they have a known but shared name and features common to all other goods endowed with this brand name. As we shall see, this leads to a different type of envy and a different type of covetousness than those envisioned by religious writers, philosophers, and most social scientists. Moreover, although Veblen did not anticipate it, anonymity combined with consumer credit and scrimping on less visible portions of our expenditures can lead to false or misleading presentations of self through presentations of luxuries that are atypical of the rest of our consumer lifestyles, much like the transformation of Cinderella for the ball.

The flowering of the overt display of the unique individual self within the anonymity of the city echoes a similar blossoming of display within commercial spaces. Thanks in part to the development of plate glass windows, grand department stores began to present lavish displays of merchandise not only to shoppers, but to anyone passing by (see Leach 1993). Mannequins presented images of fashion ideals that, coupled with new lighting techniques, showed off new consumer goods both day and night. This too contributed to the development of a new type of envy. The development of big lavish hotels, restaurants, and theaters in cities also contributed to this new spirit of showing off as they simultaneously provided images of grand and conspicuous consumption (May 1980). That is, the conspicuous display of sumptuous luxury in retail spaces very likely disinhibited and encouraged a similar display by individual consumers.

A further complimentary influence on conspicuous display was the rise of mass media and mass media advertising. The effects of advertising in cultivating exaggerated images of the

role of consumption in the good life are easy to appreciate (Belk and Pollay 1985). But there are more subtle effects of general media exposure suggested by cultivation theory (Gerbner and Gross 1976; Gerbner et al. 1980). The theory observes that television and film portray a more upscale world than actually exists, even (or especially) in the affluent United States. This prediction is borne out by the evidence (e.g., Shrum 2001). Heavier viewers of television are especially likely to overestimate American affluence, including the incidences of swimming pools, maids, expensive automobiles, and millionaires (Fox and Phylliber 1978; O'Guinn and Shrum 1997; Shrum et al. 2005). These inflated images of average lifestyles in turn stimulate consumer aspirations, expectations, and desires (Englis and Solomon 1997). To the extent that these mediated images of others enjoying unrealistically affluent lifestyles are taken to be representative of what *most others* have, they are likely to inspire a particular type of envy that has no concrete or personally known referent other. Like digital avatars and plastic mannequins, the conspicuous objects of our envy are arguably becoming increasingly virtual.

Besides increased anonymity, the rise in individualism, and the growth of conspicuous display in advertising, retailing, and mass media, one final factor in the recent environment that has given rise to a new type of envy is the emergence of the Internet. Schau and Gilly (2003) analyzed the role of consumption on personal web sites before the explosion of the popularity of social networking sites, online forums, blogs, and virtual worlds. Nevertheless, they find that web sites encourage social comparisons and envy. But such acts of identity presentation through possessions and other manifestations of the extended self are far more prevalent in more recent social networking Internet spaces (Westlake 2008). We can see participants' many friends, read about their latest travels, see photos and discussions of their pets, cars, and clothes, link to their favorite films, get instant "status" updates, and much more. There are both individuating and affiliative motives revealed in such self-expressions. Those inclined to show off can reproduce the equivalent of the braggadocio found in the yearly "family Christmas letter" but with daily or even more frequent updates. Such entries may be expressions of the blogger's interests, but they may also be a form of bragging calculated to build self image and incite the envy of others. The Internet also contains a number of fan sites where those with common interests can compete with one another for expertise and ownership of enviable possessions, as well as celebrate common tastes. The nearly instantaneous online reactions to the latest fashions, music, and technological innovations are instrumental in shortening fashion cycles and exacerbating attentiveness to fashion trends. These media also exponentially expand the set of others whose consumption we might envy, far beyond our

friends and neighbors. This too helps set the stage for a new type of envy.

*Benign envy* Matt (2002) quotes an incident from early 20th century America that provides a concise illustration of the shift in the nature of envy:

An Alabama minister reported that “a little girl in one of my church schools was asked the other day, What was the Tenth Commandment? The reply was ‘Thou shalt not covet.’ When asked what covet meant, she replied, ‘not to want other folks [sic] things, but to get Sears, Roebuck Catalogue and buy for yourself’” (p. 298).

Belk (2008) suggests that branded consumer goods have now become the chief object of our covetousness. We may still desire others traits and friendships, but people are convinced that these things too would be theirs if only they had others’ “stuff.” Recognizing that malevolent envy can lead to hatred, violence, or vandalism, Belk suggests instead that most contemporary consumer envy is better characterized as “benign.” Benign envy is a characterization suggested by several others (e.g., Smith and Kim 2007; D’Arms and Kerr 2008) who distinguish it from “envy proper” because it lacks a sufficiently malicious nature. Rather than being motivated by a desire to cause the other to lose their coveted possessions, benign envy inspires the envier to purchase the equivalent of this same possession. And given the changes described in the preceding section, this is hardly surprising. How seriously could we want to hurt the anonymous others we see with these goods, much less the non-human mannequins or avatars we see in store windows or online? Stearns (1999) documents how during the early 20th century, the moral condemnation of envy in the West gave way to embracing envy as a healthy motivator of consumption and a strong competitive work ethic. Matt (2003) detects in popular culture of the 1920s the related concept of aspirational envy, but this refers more to the work domain than the consumption domain. Aspirational envy is

also the type of positive envy that Adam Smith refers to in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759). Rawls (1971) recognizes benign envy as well as the related constructs of emulative envy and excusable envy. His emulative envy, in which the envier is motivated to achieve what the other has achieved, is closest to the current use of benign envy.

Lyman (1978) suggests that benign envy is sublimated malicious envy. But if Lyman (1978) is right about this, benign and malicious envy are very likely parts of a continuum where the middle state is a combination of benign and malicious envy. Thus rather than two types of envy, it is more useful to consider three points on this continuum as depicted in Table 1.

Thus far, I have argued that anonymity and the presence of generalized others in the cases of advertising, display, and encountering strangers facilitate benign envy. We do not feel malicious envy toward these others, partly because we do not know them. But there are other possibilities, especially when the envied other is known. One alternative reaction when such an other possesses a desirable object or trait is admiration. Rather than resent or feel maliciously envious toward this person, we might regard them as a role model or consumption hero (Alicke and Zell 2008). In *The Rhetoric*, Aristotle referred to this as “emulation” or “good envy” (Epstein 2003; Palaver 2005). Here too, rather than attempt to tear down the envied other, we desire to be more like them. Or we might simply be in awe of them, as with sports heroes before the days of performance enhancing drugs and media publicity of moral indiscretions.

An even more positive reaction to a potentially envious situation in which another person possesses or accomplishes something that might otherwise provoke malicious envy is to instead feel vicarious pride in their achievement, as we do with our partner’s or children’s successes (Belk 1988). This shared sense of enhanced self esteem is especially likely when the other is part of our extended sense of self. And it is evident in the feeling of basking in the reflected glory (BIRGing) of successes by “our” sports team or members of

**Table 1** Types of consumer envy

Characteristic	Benign	Mixed	Malicious
Emotion toward the other	Admire	Mixed	Hate
Behavioral inclination	Emulate, BIRG	Outdo	Harm
Target others	Known or mediated	Known or mediated	Known
Goal	Level up	Invert	Level down
Relation to coveted good	Actionable	Partly actionable	Impotent
Relevant moral discourse	Upward Mobility	Social justice	Sin, crime, psychopathology
Relevant hierarchy	Individuality/affiliative cool	Individualistic cool	Social status
Amount of good	Unlimited	Scarce	Limited



our in-group (Alicke and Zell 2008; Cialdini et al. 1976). Here too the difference seems to lie in whether the others are part of our extended self, inasmuch as superior accomplishments by members of an out-group may cause the resentment and the *schadenfreude* of malicious envy. In a multicultural society of diversity and difference, we may have multiple group identifications within which we potentially share multiple in-group BIRGing tendencies.

As van de Ven et al. (2009, 2011) demonstrate experimentally, benign envy aims at moving-up by improving the envier's position relative to the envied person's, whereas malicious envy aims at altering their relative positions by pulling-down the envied person. In contrast, as suggested by money burning studies (Zizzo 2003; Zizzo and Oswald 2001), acting on malicious envy may not even improve the relative position of the envier.

The potential for benign rather than malicious envy toward another person is facilitated by their possession of a branded good that can be acquired by the envier. It is actionable envy rather than impotent envy and thus leads to purchase rather than rage (Lyman 1978). This differs from a pre-brand, pre-mass-production era, when the coveted objects were far less replicable. However, this emulation potential appears less tempting in the case of malicious envy. Van de Ven (2009) found that when an envied other was described as having an iPhone, those who experienced benign envy were willing to pay more to get an iPhone themselves, whereas those who experienced malicious envy were not. On the other hand, those who felt malicious envy were willing to pay more to buy a BlackBerry, while those who experienced benign envy were not. Van de Ven (2009) attributes this to what Lemaine (1974) called social differentiation. It can be thought of as a form of one-upsmanship in which the maliciously envious person seeks to differentiate him or herself by imagining that they would then be able to claim that they own a "more serious" BlackBerry compared to the envied other's "frivolous" iPhone. Although van de Ven (2009) does not address the point, the BlackBerry versus iPhone context also suggests another difference in the new conceptions of envy and covetousness. Unlike the focus of Veblen (1899) and many other discussions of luxury focusing solely on dimensions of social class and social status (e.g., Berry 1994; Twitchell 2002), there is reason to desire goods owned by (benignly) envied others apart from the singular motive of status competition. In the case of the iPhone and BlackBerry at the time of van de Ven's (2009) study, we might instead see the underlying motivation as the pursuit of cool (e.g., Frank 1997; Pountain and Robins 2000). Although coolness may simply be another status system (Belk et al. 2010), it is an alternative system that opposes mainstream status hierarchies and social class (see Fraiman 2002; Majors and Billson 1992).

In Asia, Chadha and Husband (2006) suggest that coolness may be at least as important as status-seeking in the purchase

of luxury brands. Coolness may not be the only alternative to status seeking as a motivational basis for emulating benignly envied others. McCracken (2008) sees upward envy based on social status as being a pre-modern phenomenon from Veblen's era and earlier which gave way to a modern concern with radical individualism. He suggests that we have now moved on to a postmodern era in which there is no singular coherent self to express. Rather, the self is freely changeable and there are no more elites; popular culture *is* culture. This suggests that we no longer envy the elites, only those who have more currency within popular culture. The production side counterpart of this consumption shift is moving from an emphasis on designing products to appeal to a certain social class of consumers (e.g., Alfred Sloan's approach to automobile segments at General Motors) to designing products to appeal to certain lifestyles.

Partly as a result of such trends, others (see Matt 2003; Stearns 1999) have observed that envy has become much less of a feared deadly sin than it was once held to be. Another important reason is likely the concomitant rise of benign envy. Benign envy seems at worst a mild affliction, something to be laughed at in a television sitcom. And so perhaps it is understandable that we now have perfumes named Envy and Covet, but we lack eponymous brands for most other deadly sins, such as food products with gluttony in their names.

Between benign and malicious envy lies the mixed motive envy described in Table 1. While the more socially desirable admiring emotions of benign envy may be displayed, the consumer with mixed envy harbors a secret hatred of the envied other. This mix of benign and malicious feelings may, for instance, explain our seeming love/hate relationship with celebrities and our delight in seeing them fall (e.g., Johansson 2006). When the target of mixed motive envy is known and possesses an enviable possession, we may express our admiration, but feel that we are more deserving. As a result we may seek to both undermine the target's well-being (levelling down) and simultaneously seek to acquire the coveted good. In this case we not only seek to match the target person's consumption, but to outdo them and thereby invert the our relative positions. If the target responds similarly, an escalating consumption race could ensue.

*Summary of the alternate view of envy* Unlike early conceptions of malicious envy and its associated covetousness, benign envy and its desire are directed toward consumption models and replicable branded goods. This is possible because both the goods and most other people with whom we have contact are anonymous. These others do not know the rest of our life beyond what they see in our visible consumption. The branded goods are fungible with other goods bearing the same logo. Because we can aspire to own the desired consumer goods that inspire benign envy, we wish to "level up" by acquiring them rather than "level

down” by depriving other owners of the goods we long for. These others are comprised not only of the those we encounter in person, but also the mannequins, Internet participants, and mediated images we see in advertising as well as in the editorial and entertainment content of mass media.

The objects of our desire in the case of benign envy are not as much symbols of status as they are lifestyle goods that we see as contributing to our individualistic or affiliative identity. To the extent that cool, stylish, or novel goods operate within a status system, it is apt to be a bounded status system of those sharing similar lifestyle interests. At the other end of the familiarity continuum from anonymous strangers are those who form a part of our extended self—not just family and close friends, but those within our consumption communities, fan groups, and interest groups. With these others we are not only more likely to feel benign envy rather than malicious envy, we may also vicariously bask in their reflected glory such that their consumption-related happiness becomes our own. Mixed envy lies between these two extremes and displays characteristics that could lead to a coolness race in which each person envies the other and strives to have the coolest car, clothes, sneakers, MP3 player, travel destinations, and so forth. Such competition strives to outdo the other and invert our relative statuses in such a way that the envier considers the desired outcome to be more just.

Given these distinctions between benign and malicious envy, it is useful to consider how marketing attempts to take advantage of these differences. The literature on malicious envy has little to say about these strategies and tactics, but benign envy presents a number of possibilities.

### Marketing and benign envy

*Be the envy of your friends* John Berger (1972) describes how publicity (promotion) takes advantage of our benign envy at the same time that it contributes to it:

It proposes to each of us that we transform ourselves, or our lives, by buying something more. This more, it proposes, will make us in some way richer .... Publicity persuades us of such a transformation by showing us people who have apparently been transformed and are, as a result, enviable. The state of being envied is what constitutes glamour. And publicity is the process of manufacturing glamour.... The image then makes him envious of himself as he might be. Yet what makes this self-which-he-might-be enviable? The envy of others. Publicity is about social relations, not objects. Its promise is not of pleasure, but of happiness: happiness as judged from the outside by others. The happiness of being envied is glamour (pp. 131–132; see also Thrift 2008).

Berger (1972) goes on to suggest that to be envied, besides possessing enviable goods, we must feign indifference to the gaze of envious others. In other analyses, this is highlighted as the essence of being cool (e.g., Majors and Billson 1992). But accomplishing this is a three-step process in Berger’s view. First we become envious of our self-as-we-might-be, as represented by promotional images. We then acquire the good that has been suggested to make our future self the object of envy. And thirdly, by displaying this good and wearing a mask of cool indifference, we become the object of others’ envy.

*Use of celebrity spokespersons* In McCracken’s (2008) view, status demarcated by social class is either dead or chaotically confused. Others, like Bauman (2000) and Touraine (1998) agree. McCracken (2008) offers three evidences of the decline of status: 1) Many in the upper classes refuse to participate in making claims of status; 2) The newly wealthy no longer strive to become upper class, and 3) We are no longer envious toward those of high social standing and expect them to be dishonest and unfulfilled. Although I would instead argue that mixed envy underwrites our regard for the famous, fostering a love-hate relationship toward them, I agree with McCracken’s (2008, pp. 381–382) contentions that old conceptions of status are in decline and that celebrities have become our new elite.

Even though celebrities supplanting the upper classes as targets of admiration may be new, the elite status of celebrities is not. Some have pointed to the collapse of distance between celebrities and their fans (e.g., Hills 2006; Jenkins 2006). The old thinking centered on malicious envy was that superstars are like kings and so far “above” the masses that they would not provoke envy in the way that a friend or neighbor might. As Alicke and Zell (2008) put it, “There is not shame...in comparing unfavorably to a superstar. Thus, envy can be forestalled via the belief that the superior performer’s status renders him or her beyond reach” (p. 87). But with the rise of benign envy and the collapse of boundaries between celebrities and fans, this all changes. Rather than being so distant as to forestall malicious envy, celebrities have become so close as to prompt benign envy (Ditmar 2008; Richins 1991, 1992). This means that even fabulously rich or otherwise privileged celebrities potentially become models for emulation. We now think that we too can be like the celebrity, merely by acquiring the branded good that he or she endorses (e.g., Gatorade’s “I want to be like Mike” campaign using Michael Jordan—Goldman and Papson 1998).

*Luxury, populuxe, and counterfeits* Luxury has long been part of various moral discourses and has been condemned as being feminizing, debilitating, sinful, decadent, and

wasteful. Behind these charges there was often a more profound concern with social injustice and malicious envy provocation (Berry 1994; Sassatelli 2005). From a discursive perspective, the concept of benign envy can be seen as a key part of a strategy by the rich and their apologists to justify their lavish consumption. If malicious envy is castigated as sinful, criminal, or psychopathic (Table 1), then un-begrudging benignity is the cure. In addition to arguments that benign envy is motivating and that it stimulates emulation which spurs economic growth, Simmel's (1904) trickle-down theory is invoked to explain how the luxuries of today's elite will be adopted by successively lower social classes as greater demand drives down their price (e.g., de Tarde 1962). A variation of this argument is seen in the Deng Xiaopeng apology for the rise of the consumer class in China, stressing that it is ideologically correct "to make some people rich first, so as to lead all the people to wealth" (Schell 1984, p. 14). Rather than relying on the declining prices of consumer luxuries pushing them toward being regarded as necessities, Deng's argument is that everyone will become wealthy enough to afford luxuries in the future, thanks to the expenditures of the economic avant-garde. For certain luxuries like fans, air conditioners, radios, televisions, and wrist-watches, evidence of their increasingly broad global adoption suggests that both processes (lowering prices and rising incomes) are occurring. Moreover, as Schoeck (1966) notes, U.S. President Woodrow Wilson's dire prediction in 1920 that class warfare would be incited by the envious gaze of the masses seeing the elite in their motor cars has certainly not come to pass in either the U.S. of the 1920s or China today. No longer is mere ownership of a car a luxury in the more affluent world and today's luxury model becomes tomorrow's base model (Frank 1997). According to Twitchell (2002), such democratization of luxury is the most significant marketing phenomenon of our times. Still, there are classes of luxuries that seem to be immune from democratization, such as mansions, exotic automobiles, rare vintage wines, exclusive club memberships, and luxury brands of like Louis Vuitton, Gucci, and Prada. However, at least in the latter category, marketers have begun to cater to the mass desire for luxuries previously available only to the elite. This probably first showed up in ready-to-wear clothing imitating bespoke tailored clothing, knockoff dresses replicating the latest haute couture styles, and clothing patterns for home sewing of otherwise unaffordable garments in the latest fashion styles (Matt 1998).

A second way of emulating unaffordable luxuries is with what Thomas Hine (1987) called populuxe goods. Popular in postwar America, these goods were faux luxury goods made of cheaper materials such as Naugahyde for leather furniture, plastic laminate instead of marble kitchen countertops, and wood-grained Con-Tact paper applied to walls (Twitchell 2002). While admitting that such goods are

vulgar imitations, Hine (1987, p. 12) explained their appeal: "People wanted to be known for their good taste, but they wanted to have great showy things that demonstrated that they had arrived." Along with large suburban lots with the equivalent of mass-produced houses, multicolored appliances, and cars with jet-like tail-fins, this too was perceived as levelling up and trading up, although ultimately it was a mass market movement that did more to placate pent up desire for "luxuries" than to ameliorate class inequalities (McCracken 2005).

A third strategy for acquiring luxury on limited means is through goods that Twitchell (2002) calls opuluxe. Examples he cites are brands like Prada, Montblanc, Mercedes, Ralph Lauren, Gucci, Lexus, and Armani. They have become more affordable because their brands have brought out more mass market versions (Danziger 2005; Nueno and Quelch 1998). The clothing that many of these luxury brands are known for actually comprises less than 25 percent of their sales (Nueno and Quelch 1998). The majority of their sales revenues comes from less expensive accessories, fragrances, and ancillary goods like key-chains, wallets, and socks, that provide a taste of luxury without costing thousands of dollars. These goods are especially popular in the more affluent and emerging Asian economies that now constitute the biggest market for many of these brands (Chadha and Husband 2006; Wong and Ahuvia 1998).

A fourth means of acquiring luxuries when they are unaffordable by some sober reckoning is to sacrifice "necessities" for "luxuries." In the less affluent world, Belk (1999) has called such improbable appearances of luxury goods "leaping luxuries," implying that their possessors have leapt over supposedly more fundamental hierarchical need categories in order to service higher order needs. An example would be sacrificing food to buy a refrigerator into which the new owners cannot afford to put food. In cases such as this, the trade-off may be pursuing desires for status, prestige, and material achievement rather than satisfying needs for adequate nutrition, comfort, and safety (Ger 1992).

A final consumer strategy for acquiring unaffordable luxury goods is buying counterfeit imitations, including "genuine fakes" that cannot be distinguished from the original (Chadha and Husband 2006). It is a way around sumptuary constraints, intended to provide a feeling of status that, it is hoped, accompanies the purchase and display of the fake brand (Belk et al. 2005). To the extent that others perceive the fake as genuine, it may prompt envy of the owner. However, as Chadha and Husband (2006) point out, it is easier for the wealthy to successfully pull off such a deception than for poorer people to do so, for they are less suspect of having done so. Furthermore, since the owner is generally aware of the counterfeit status of their purchase, it is unclear whether it is truly

effective in reducing their own envy of others who own “the real thing.”

Thus, there are a variety of ways in which marketers and consumers conspire to facilitate the sort of consumer emulation that is characteristic of benign and mixed envy. The democratization of luxury (Boorstin 1973; Twitchell 2002), the democratization of envy (Schudson 1984), and the democratization of desire (Leach 1993) have all combined to facilitate mimetic imitation of those we admire. While this may involve specific known referent others, it is now more likely to be models and celebrity others as well as the imagined others whom we encounter on the Internet and in retail and advertising displays. Compared to the impotent rage and hatred provoked by malicious envy, the emulative urges prompted by the benign envy, into which malicious envy has been partly sublimated, seem relatively innocent. Just what it feels like to envy and be envied within this more benign framework is the subject of the next section.

## The experience of envy

### From envy avoidance to envy provocation

Just as envy has been split into benign and malicious varieties, the phenomenon of being envied may be split into benign and malicious types. Here too there is likely a middle ground, but to keep it simple I deal with only the benign and malicious extremes in Table 2, which compares envying and being envied. Under communism in Eastern Europe and the USSR and during the Cultural Revolution in China (1966–1976), there was a great levelling down. In China this went as far as the standardized Sun Yat-sen suit for both men and women

(Finnane 2008). Consumers feared conspicuous consumption, not only because it could provoke envy in what were officially classless societies, but also out of concern that others might turn the conspicuous consumer over to authorities as a hated “capitalist roader” (e.g., Schell 1984). In the early 1990s, after the demise of communism in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, Ger and Belk (1996) measured materialism in 12 countries including the U.S., Turkey, and India as well as countries in Eastern and Western Europe. They found the highest levels of materialism and envy in two recently communist countries: Romania and the Ukraine. In addition they found a significant increase in materialism and envy in Germany between pre-unification and post-unification. These findings as well as a separate qualitative study by these authors (Ger and Belk 1999) suggest a dramatic shift from avoiding others’ envy to provoking others’ envy.

What is seen in these rapid shifts from communism to capitalism is arguably seen more gradually in the rise of consumer cultures generally. Despite some temporal and regional variations, with the rise of consumer culture we would expect to see a concomitant rise in benign envy over malicious envy, as documented in the U.S. by Matt (2003). The rapid growth of mass luxury and counterfeiting discussed in the previous section is further evidence of this trend. In Foster’s (1969) conceptualization, we should expect that there is also a shift from a limited good worldview to an unlimited good worldview. If there is enough for everyone, then some of the guilt that conspicuous consumption might otherwise evoke is attenuated. Rhetorically, framing escalations in consumption in terms of deservingness, social justice, and decency—a category mid-way between necessity and luxury—is a potentially effective discursive strategy. As

**Table 2** Envy and being envied—benign and malicious

Type	Characteristic	Envying	Being Envied
Benign			
	Deservingness	Close to what I deserve	More than I deserve
	Motivation	Striving	Humility, gratitude
	Behavior	Desire/buy	Give/share
	Related Emotions	Admiration	Guilt, sympathy
	Desired Effect	Be loved, respected	Be loved respected; make other feel better
Malicious			
	Deservingness	Less than I deserve	What I deserve
	Motivation	Harm envied other	Conspicuousness
	Behavior	Destroy other’s possession <sup>a</sup> ; one-upsmanship; ignore	Flaunt it, guard it, demonize envy
	Related Emotions	Hatred	Pride, pity
	Desired Effect	Make other feel worse	Make other feel worse

<sup>a</sup> In a world of branded replicable commodities and property insurance, this strategy is limited or temporary in its ability to achieve the desired effect.

Drakulić (1991) observed just after the demise of communism in Eastern and Central Europe:

What is the minimum you must have so you don't feel humiliated as a woman? It makes me understand a complaint I heard repeatedly from women in Warsaw, Budapest, Prague, Sofia, East Berlin: "Look at us—we don't even look like women. There are no deodorants, perfumes, sometimes even no soap or toothpaste. There is no fine underwear, no pantyhose, no nice lingerie. Worst of all there are no sanitary napkins. What can one say except that it is humiliating?" (p. 31).

With arguments like these the switch to conspicuous consumption and intentional envy provocation was easy to justify. It could even be seen as striking a blow for social justice.

### Cultural differences

The benign versus malicious envy distinction is recognized in many languages. In Russian the two types are called white and black envy. In Spanish benign envy is called "good envy" (*envidia de la buena*) or "healthy envy" (*envidiasana*), whereas malicious envy is simply *envidia*. In Dutch, *benijden* is benign envy and *afgunst* is malicious envy. In Polish and Thai there are also separate words for benign and malicious envy (van de Ven 2009). In German we have encountered the term *schadenfreude* for joy in the other's misery, whereas in Sanskrit there is a separate word, *mudita*, for sympathetic joy in others' happiness, and this is an important virtue in Buddhism. In Norwegian *unne* has a similar meaning to *mudita*, while *misunne* means envy. More accurately *unne* means to not begrudge and the sentence "*Jeg unner deg dette*" means "I feel you deserve this." Perhaps this sentiment is related to the principle of *Janteloven* (the law of Jante) suggesting that we are all the same and no one is better than anyone else, although this involves more of a levelling down rather than a levelling up. This is a strong Scandinavian norm that was codified and given the term *Janteloven* in a 1933 novel by Aksel Sandemose, after which it became both a sociological term and a part of the vernacular language in Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and Finland. There are likely some further cultural differences suggested by these linguistic shades of meaning involved in the emotions of benign, mixed, and malicious envy, but they must await further research.

In Islamic cultures like that of the Pukhun in Pakistan, envy is bound up with systems of honor and hospitality (Lindholm 2008). Hospitality is a Muslim ideal that, like Mexican peasant fiestas (Foster 1972), should serve to dissipate envy by sharing. However, unlike the Mexican case, Lindholm (2008) notes that the Pukhun seek to excite the envy of their neighbors with their banquets. At the same time both the Mexicans studied by Foster and the Pakistanis

studied by Lindholm seek to avoid the malicious envy of their possessions by building walls around their property with activity concentrated in an inner courtyard that is not visible from the street; and both cultures share a strong belief in the evil eye.

Modesty and avoiding the envious (female) or lustful (male) gaze of others is also the rationale for the covering or veil within Islam (Sandikci and Ger 2010; Sobh and Belk 2011). Notably, however, both the envy-avoiding modesty and concern with honor are not as much individual matters in Arabian Gulf Islamic cultures as they are concerns for the family or clan. Thus a woman may cover in public even if she does not believe in the practice because to fail to do so would bring dishonor to her family (Sobh and Belk 2011). Still Sobh and Belk (2011) find that in Qatar and United Arab Emirates an influx of Western media, foreign visitors outnumbering locals, and great wealth created by petrodollars, are causing an increasing display of wealth and individualism both in coverings for women and in facades of homes. Far from the envy-deflecting ostensive purpose of veils, new trends in the design and wearing of these coverings by including jewels, allowing some of the hair to show, using heavy makeup and designer sunglasses, handbags, and watches, and allowing *abayas* (robes) to be open enough to reveal expensive Western clothing beneath, all suggest envy-provoking, if not lust-provoking, attempts to attract attention.

Like Islamic Gulf cultures, in the Confucian cultures of East Asia there is also a concern with family or clan more than individual reputation, framed in terms of face (Bond 1992; Wong and Ahuvia 1998). As Douglas and Isherwood (1979) suggest, collectivist or interdependent societies tend to stress modesty and humility as the proper means to suppress envy. Saving face is thus a matter of avoiding provoking envy. This may seem at odds with the previously noted boom in the luxury goods market in these same countries. Chadha and Husband (2006) summarize a study of Tokyo women in their 20s in which 94 percent reported owning at least one Louis Vuitton item, 92 percent reportedly owned Gucci, and the figures for Prada (57 percent) and Chanel (51 percent) were also amazingly high. In Seoul more than 50 percent of all women reported owning a Louis Vuitton bag—either genuine or fake. But with figures this high, such consumption is luxurious, but not ostentatious. That is, owning such items becomes more a matter of fitting in than standing out. Not to own such items is not only to fail to fit in, but also to lose face. It is clear that there is a burgeoning luxury goods demand in China as well. Even more dramatically than the shift from communism to capitalism in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, the conformity of Sun Yat-sen jackets in China has given way to the conformity of high fashion. But as Wong and Ahuvia (1998) conclude, the younger generations of Chinese consumers may be changing and flaunting their wealth in a more nouveau riche manner

than prior generations. Still, hierarchical society is also a foundation of Confucianism and the implications of individual behavior for family face are never far out of mind.

In a demonstration of fitting in rather than standing out in Asian versus Western societies, Ariely (2008) and Ariely and Levav (2000) found that Westerners at a restaurant table tended to all order different beverages and meals from one another in order to assert their independence, whereas Hong Kong Chinese tended to follow the choices of others in the party in a demonstration of their interdependence and face-saving.

The changing patterns of conspicuous consumption between the Cultural Revolution and today's China also serve to remind that while cultural differences in patterns of envy and consumption may be enduring, social sanctions or incentives for consumer luxuries can also change (e.g., see Chaudhuri and Majumdar 2006 on change in India; Üstüner and Holt 2010 on change in Turkey). The generational shifts in luxury consumption in China also suggest that we should pay attention not only to generational cohorts, but also to changes in envy and envious consumption over the life-span (e.g., Suls 1986). And more generally, as we have seen, the rise of benign envy concepts and the decline of the fear of malicious envy are also trends that have accelerated over time but that proceed at different paces in different cultures.

## Conclusions

### The role of benign envy in consumption

Malicious envy is not entirely dead in the contemporary world. But the view that all envy is malicious is an outmoded characterization that was developed in a pre-brand era when the social, technological, and economic environments were all decidedly different. If the stepsisters were at the ball today, they would most likely ask Cinderella where she got the slippers and how much they cost. Or if their envy was more mixed and retained a tinge of maliciousness, they would try to trump her with an even nicer pair of Manolo Blahniks. Rather than ad hoc heel and toe surgery they would more likely try to enhance their beauty with a face lift, Botox injections, liposuction, laser treatments, and other surgical and non-surgical enhancements. And they would buy Versace gowns and hire a chauffeured Rolls Royce to carry them to the ball. In other words, their envy would have become largely benign. Although benign envy lacks the destructive nature of malicious envy, it is equally rivalrous and competitive. But rather than attempt to harm rivals or bring them down to the envier's level, benign envy motivates striving for consumption that will make others envious of us. We not only bear their envy, but seek it, because what is ultimately sought is admiration, respect, and love.

I have also argued that rather than the envious pursuit of moving up in social class status as envisioned by Veblen and others, we now strive for a combination of individuating and affiliative distinctions that relate more to lifestyle and personality. The envious images we draw from in this pursuit are more anonymous and the brands that we choose are also anonymous in the sense of being part of an identical stock of goods bearing a common brand logo. Limited editions and very high prices for luxury goods may increase the scarcity of some brands, but in most cases they are available to anyone with the money to buy them. Such democratization of envy does not mean a democratization of desire; we do not all want the same things. But it does mean that we in the more affluent world have a far broader set of potential remedies for the insecurities fostered by encountering others' consumption. The Greeks may have feared that the hubris of overly lavish consumption would evoke the envy and wrath of their gods, but if celebrities are our contemporary gods, we show no fear of enraging them by imitating their consumption. And if we cannot recreate their entire lifestyle, then we can at least buy a fragment of it, perhaps some Prada sunglasses, to contribute to the fragmented pastiche that is our own lifestyle.

The metaphorical referents of benign and malicious (or malignant) envy are potentially cancerous tumors. The fact that a tumor is found to be benign is a great relief, but it does not mean that having the tumor is a good thing. The same is true with envy. While benign envy may be a key engine of economic growth, fashion, and the passionate material pursuit of respect and love, it is not in itself a good thing. As Ackerman et al. (2000) find, benign envy that motivates consumption desire still feels bad. Others have found that the social comparisons we make to models' bodies can lead not only to positive emulation, but also negative self derogation (e.g., Belk 2001; Stevens and Maclaren 2005). But like a benign tumor, benign envy is a fact of life. As a powerful emotion that has been at work for millennia, and perhaps as long as humankind, envy can be counted on to continue indefinitely. As Schoeck (1966) concludes, even with attempts to level societies, humans will always find someone else to envy because they possess something we covet or desire. But this careful scrutiny also means that we can potentially envy others' greener consumption, healthier foods, or more active lifestyles. And these too are subject to benign envy; there is enough for all.

The traditional assumptions have been that we are inherently competitive and that we live in a limited good world (e.g., Gouldner 1965). If we long to know how we are doing, comparisons to others provide an easily accessible benchmark, even if specific referents are replaced by an image of "most others." It is difficult to change our fitness, physique, or personality, but it is relatively easy to change much of our consumption, especially in an unlimited good

world (Belk 1995a). In a fashion-oriented consumer culture this is mandatory if we do not wish to appear old-fashioned. While other motives like novelty-seeking may help drive the fashion system, it is likely, as Simmel (1904) suggested, that envy is responsible for much of the impetus to renew our wardrobes. And what applies to wardrobes applies to most of our visible consumption. It is my contention that benign envy now drives such consumption.

#### Future research

I have presented benign envy as qualitatively different from malicious envy because it is actionable and aims to level up rather than level down. I have argued that as participants in an affluent society with ample consumer credit, we can acquire the same fashions or other branded goods owned by those whom we envy. Moreover, with leaping luxury sacrifices, populuxe goods, the democratization of luxury, and counterfeits, more and more of us can transform otherwise malicious envy into benign consumer envy. Just how this theorized transformation takes place and the degree to which benign envy truly supplants any feelings of animosity, are topics for future research.

Although van de Ven (2009) found that those who feel that they are the object of benign envy do not seem to mind it and do not feel motivated to engage in prosocial acts toward enviers as do those who feel themselves to be the objects of malicious envy, this is still a finding based on feeling guilt or no guilt. It has been suggested here that instead of merely feeling guiltless, in turning from avoiding others' envy to intentionally provoking it, we may quite enjoy the feeling of being envied. This is the glamour to which Berger (1972) refers. It is the malicious state of being envied in Table 2. Wooten's (2006) findings are suggestive of the desire to be envied among adolescents with cool possessions, but perhaps this braggadocio is either compensatory for youthful insecurity or due to a lack of nuance similar to that displayed by stereotypical nouveaux riches (Costa and Belk 1990; LaBarbera 1988). We can see the same flaunting of friends, possessions, and experiences on many blogs and social networking sites, especially among relatively young participants. This suggests that a life-course perspective on envy and social comparison can be particularly useful. Perhaps we outgrow our own feelings of envy (benign, mixed, or malicious) and the malicious desire to provoke others' envy, but research is needed here too.

The most basic challenge posed by the rise of benign envy is to the economic, psychological, and philosophical assumption that life is a zero-sum game in a world of limited good. Competition exists to be sure, and we set up most sports and games, including political contexts, within this framework. But no longer do others' possessions of fine clothes, cool cars, or fashionable gadgets preclude us from acquiring the same

desiderata. Quite the opposite; enviable others' possession of these things *increases* the likelihood we will acquire them. And even though benign envy sustains and promotes consumer culture, this may be preferable to a society of festering malicious envy.

The cultural differences discussed here raise some intriguing and promising topics for future research as well. The changing status of veiling within Islam, as well as the debates that such practices have recently engendered about modesty, vanity, and privacy (e.g., Sobh et al. 2009) suggest a possible shift from avoiding others' malicious envy to provoking others' benign envy in some Islamic cultures. Just as people in maliciously envious societies may eat in private to avoid envy provocation and avoid the necessity of sharing (Foster 1972), hiding beauty may ostensibly be intended to serve a similar purpose. But as veiling in the Middle East Gulf States becomes more ostentatious, it appears that a shift to envy provocation is taking place. This bears further investigation. So does the difference between avoiding other's envy and saving face in Confucian societies versus rampant luxury consumption which may have opposite effects in these same societies (Wong and Ahuvia 1998). Because cultures differ in the particular consumption practices they deem excessively ostentatious, appropriate, or laudable, further work on the factors leading to these shifting distinctions across cultures and time periods is also needed. Recent world economic events suggest that definitions of "obscenely" ostentatious consumption can change rather quickly. Given the rapid economic changes taking place in many world cultures, these cultures are likely to prove instructive arenas for investigating changing consumption practices as presumably more benign envy becomes dominant.

Given the democratization of luxury that has been discussed here, it is doubtful that Schoeck's (1966) claim that luxury consumption necessarily provokes envy can be sustained. The "inflation of signs" that occurs when nearly everyone seems to drive a Mercedes and carry an LV handbag likely makes these status markers less envy provoking than was once the case. Perhaps this is just an indication that trickle down fashion has transformed another of yesterday's luxuries into today's necessities. But longitudinal research is needed to test for sign inflation.

Hopefully many more issues have been raised in this article that can prompt meaningful research. I will end with one more example that has not been emphasized: the development of benign and malicious envy in children. Just when and how these envious feelings arise, how they are dealt with, and whether the case of children is special because they must depend more on parents and relatives to make their envy actionable (e.g., the gifts from Cinderella's father), are topics that call for investigation. Zhao and Murdock (1996) refer to the unevenly distributed rise of consumerism and conspicuous consumption in China as fueling "reservoirs of envy," probably

no more so than among children and the poor who cannot act upon their feelings of envy and frustration. Near the dawn of the 20th Century, relatively poor American elementary school children were found to exaggerate and lie about the possessions that they or their families owned (Hall and Smith 1903; Kline and France 1899). When you cannot actually level or invert status hierarchies, deception may have to suffice. And while the Brothers Grimm version of the Cinderella story may have warned earlier generations of children about the shallowness of envy and the retribution that awaits the maliciously envious, the moral that children are more apt to glean from the now dominant Disney version of the tale is that with the magic of the right consumption, they too can marry the prince, become the object of others' envy, and live a totally transformed and wonderful life.

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