



Approach or Avoid? A Quantitative Study on the Dualistic Nature of Social Media Envy in Undergraduates in a Non-state University in Sri Lanka

^{1*}Ransi Perera, ²Nilanga Abeysinghe, ³Kanjana Galappaththi

^{1,2} Sri Lanka Institute of Information Technology, Sri Lanka

³ University of Mysore, India

Email address of the corresponding author - *ransiuthpala123@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Envy is a complex emotion studied recently, especially with the impact of social media. This study explored the dualistic nature of social media envy in Sri Lankan undergraduates from a non-state university. Using a quantitative design, data from 155 participants were collected via Google Forms and analysed with Spearman's Rank test. Results indicated statistically significant positive moderate relationships between social media usage and both benign envy and malicious envy. However, social media only accounted for 20% of benign envy and 8.8% of malicious envy, suggesting it's only one of many contributors. Furthermore, the association between social media usage and benign envy was stronger than that with malicious envy, implying social media envy may be less severe than perceived in Sri Lanka. The study acknowledges limitations, such as sample size and focus on one university. Future research should address these limitations and explore the dualistic nature of social media envy in different populations and contexts. Overall, the study emphasises the need to understand the complexity of envy and how social media can amplify or alleviate it. Findings have implications for social media usage, regulation, and interventions promoting emotional well-being.

1. INTRODUCTION

In contemporary society, social media has become an integral part of daily routines for millions of individuals. Research suggests that social media can trigger both positive and negative emotions through the process of social comparison, where individuals compare themselves to others (Wang et al., 2021). This comparison occurs even in online as people easily learn about their friends' lives through social media posts (Van Koningsbruggen, 2017). Envy has been a primary focus when examining social comparison on social media.

Envy, described by Yang and Tang (2021), is a painful feeling when one desires something possessed by another. Traditionally seen as harmful, researchers now recognize its multidimensional nature. Sayers (1949) proposed two aspects: negative and positive. This was later supported by Van de Ven et al. (2009), who categorized envy as benign and malicious (Yang & Tang, 2021). Benign envy is the positive aspect, where individuals aspire to achieve similar success (Yang & Tang, 2021). Jafri (2020) suggests that benign envy can motivate individuals to work harder for personal growth. They focus on their own lives and success rather than the envied person.

Conversely, malicious envy is the negative aspect of envy associated with detrimental factors like hostility and aggression. In malicious envy, the envious individual may disrespect and unfairly criticize the success of the person being envied (Yang & Tang, 2021). For instance, individuals with malicious envy may leave negative comments on positive social media posts or spread negative stories about the envied person. Malicious Envy leads to hostility and can shift focus away from personal growth to fixating on the envied individual. It also has negative impacts on teamwork, relationships, and overall well-being (Reyna, 2021). In brief, Benign Envy motivates individuals to strive for excellence, while malicious

envy is associated with a fear of failure and various negative consequences.

Numerous studies on social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, and WeChat have found a positive link between social media usage and envy. For instance, Tandoc et al. (2015) surveyed 736 undergraduates and found that higher Facebook usage correlated with stronger envy. Similarly, Reyna (2021) noted envy among LinkedIn users due to exposure to successful profiles. Zhou and Zhang (2019) surveyed 503 Chinese undergraduates who regularly use WeChat, revealing a positive association between WeChat usage and envy. Instagram studies have highlighted both motivational and negative aspects of envy. Meier and Schäfer (2018) found a positive relationship between Instagram usage intensity and benign envy among 385 users. However, Villanueva-Moya et al. (2022) showed that high Instagram usage increases social comparison, malicious envy, and cyberbullying. Thus, social media usage is linked to both benign and malicious envy, but further research is needed to understand the duality across cultures.

1.1 Envy in Sri Lanka

Envy is influential in Sri Lanka and takes different forms. The Sinhala and Tamil languages have distinct words for envy. In Tamil, envy and jealousy are referred to as "Pooramy." In Sinhala, there are multiple terms for envy, including "irisiya-wa," "Kuduke-dukama," and "Kuhakakama." The belief in the Evil Eye is also prevalent, where the envious gaze is believed to have destructive power. To protect against envy, Sri Lankans employ various strategies such as hanging masks at doorways and drawing black dots on children's foreheads. Consequently, they tend to conceal their true feelings to avoid being seen as envious individuals.

This behaviour's implications on Sri Lankans' social interactions and relationships (De Zoysa et

al., 2021) hinder their personality development due to childhood exposure. Consequently, benign envy can lower self-confidence and self-esteem. Research suggests that envy is less severe in Sri Lanka than perceived. De Zoysa et al. (2021) conducted a study on envy among 1331 Sri Lankan undergraduates, finding that benign envy was more prevalent than malicious envy. Envy levels were comparable or lower than other countries. However, research on envy in Sri Lanka is limited, particularly in the context of social media. Social media usage in Sri Lanka increased by 23% (1.5 million) from 2020 to 2021 (Kemp, 2021). Further study is needed to understand the dualistic nature of envy. This study aims to explore the effects of social media on envy among undergraduates at a private university in Sri Lanka.

Specific objectives are:

1. Determining the relationship between Social Media Usage and *Benign Envy in undergraduates*
2. Determining the relationship between Social Media Usage and *Malicious Envy* in undergraduates
3. Identifying the difference between Social Media Usage and *Benign Envy with Social Media Usage and Malicious Envy*

The researcher has utilised the following hypothesis by considering the above facets and previous research.

H_1 - There is a correlation between *social media usage and benign envy and social media usage and malicious envy*.

H_0 - There is no correlations between *social media usage and benign envy and social media usage and malicious envy*.

H_2 - The correlation between social media usage and benign envy is stronger than the correlation between social media usage and malicious envy.

H_0 - The correlation between social media usage and malicious envy is stronger than the correlation between social media usage and benign envy.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1 Design

The present study is Quantitative Correlation Research. The independent Variable is social media usage, and the dependent Variables are benign or malicious Envy.

2.2 Participants

Convenience sampling was used to select 155 SLIIT undergraduates as participants (109 females and 46 males). Inclusion criteria were ages 18-24, undergraduates who use at least one social media network. Exclusion criteria involved individuals with emotional mental health disorders, such as Envy, to enhance internal validity.

2.3 Measurements

Envy Scale (BeMas). The BeMas scale (Lange & Crusius, 2015) measures benign and malicious Envy. It consists of 10 self-report items, with five items for each Envy type. The scale demonstrates good reliability (Cronbach's alpha = 0.72) (Jafri, 2020).

Social Media Usage Scale (SNAIS). (SNAIS) is a 14-item questionnaire (Li et al., 2016) measuring social media usage. It has a high reliability (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.89) (Redmond, 2019).

2.4 Procedure

The researcher conducted a pilot study using an online survey with five participants. The study aimed to assess scale feasibility and examine variable relationships. With the pilot's success, the survey was shared via WhatsApp with SLIIT undergraduates, receiving 189 responses. Data were imported into SPSS-22 from Microsoft Excel for analysis. After excluding ineligible data, Spearman's Rank Test was performed on a sample of 155 to investigate variable relationships using scatterplots.

2.5 Ethical Issues

Participation was voluntary, allowing participants to withdraw at any time. The researcher prioritized participant safety and ensured data anonymity and confidentiality. Data access was restricted to the researcher and supervisor. Accurate research methods were employed, and open-access scales were utilized. Permission was obtained from the SLIIT Ethics Review Community.

3. RESULTS

Dependent variables *benign envy* and *malicious envy* violated assumptions of normality. Therefore, the researcher analysed the data through a non-parametric Spearman's Rank test to find the correlations between social media usage with benign envy and malicious envy.

Results of the Spearman's Rank Test shown in Table 1 showed that there were statistically significant positive correlations between *Social Media Usage* and *Benign Envy* $r_s(153) = .40, p < .001$; and *Social Media Usage* and *Malicious Envy* $r_s(153) = .33, p < .001$. Therefore, the results proved the H_1 hypothesis stating that there are correlations between *social media usage* and *benign envy* and *social media usage* and *malicious envy*.

Table 1: Correlations between Social Media Usage with Benign Envy, and Malicious Envy

Variables	Benign Envy	Malicious Envy	Social Media Usage
Social Media Usage	.404**		
Benign Envy		.512**	
Malicious Envy			.326**

Note. N = 155

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed).

Scatterplots were developed to find the strengths of correlations between social media usage with benign envy and malicious envy. The results proved the H_2 hypothesis stating that the correlation between social media usage and benign envy is stronger than the correlation between social media usage and malicious envy.

4. DISCUSSION

The results supported literature indicating that social media usage triggers envy through social comparison (Hu et al., 2017; Lin & Utz, 2015; Vogel & Rose, 2016). The study found moderate positive associations between social media usage and benign/malicious envy. De Zoysa et al. (2021) also discovered higher levels of benign envy among Sri Lankan undergraduates compared to malicious envy. This research deepened our understanding of envy's dual nature in Sri Lanka, specifically in the context of online social media. The study demonstrated that the correlation between social media usage and benign envy is stronger than that with malicious envy, suggesting that social media envy is less severe than perceived by Sri Lankans. In this study, Sri Lankan undergraduates experience envy, even online.

Envy is a universal and adaptive emotion that supports survival and reproduction (Tan et al., 2016). Cultural factors, such as comparisons by parents and teachers, contribute to envy. Self-esteem plays a role in the social comparison process (Van Yperen, 2006). Low self-esteem leads to underestimated skills and benign envy, while high self-esteem may result in benign envy towards role models. However, low self-esteem can cause malicious envy and hostility, even on social media. Sociocultural systems and other factors moderate the relationship between social media usage and envy. According to De Zoysa et al. (2021), benign envy prevails over malicious envy in collectivist cultures like Sri Lanka due to a focus on interpersonal harmony. Sri Lankan social norms and cultural beliefs promote expressing envy in a benign manner. Buddhism, the dominant religion in Sri Lanka, teaches the negative consequences of envy, influencing even young children who fear suffering in this life and the afterlife. Additionally, optimism towards others' success, known as "Muditha," is celebrated among Sri Lankan Buddhists. These cultural and religious factors may impact social media users' social comparison and envy.

When someone attempts to cyberbully superior individuals on social media, fellow users often comment and condemn the envious behavior, reflecting the widespread aversion to envy in Sri Lanka. As a result, Sri Lankan individuals consistently avoid malicious envy, prioritizing a positive approach. Liu and Ma (2018) suggest that individuals may unconsciously experience envy when perceiving others as superior, which Sri Lankans may hide rather than avoid due to social pressure. They may suppress their genuine feelings on social media to avoid being labeled as envious individuals. Despite feeling malicious envy, Sri Lankans tend to admire and follow the envied person instead of spreading negativity. Over time, the influence of religion and cultural beliefs may transform their hostile envy into benign envy.

Additionally, Lin (2018) found that individuals reduce negative envy feelings by bridging the gap between themselves and superior others on social media. They may follow these superior-performing individuals and purchase the desired objects they possess. However, if they fail to close this gap, their benign envy may turn malicious if they follow false role models. The current study indicates a positive relationship between benign social media envy and malicious envy, but further research is needed to determine the direction of causality. Based on the influence of social, cultural, and religious beliefs, it is likely that malicious envy becomes benign over time in Sri Lankans' mindset. As a result, Sri Lankan individuals typically express benign envy rather than malicious envy.

4.1 Implications

The study's findings on the relationship between envy and social media usage can help social media users recognize, acknowledge, and manage their feelings of envy. By understanding whether their envy is benign or malicious, individuals can employ appropriate coping strategies (Chmielinski et al., 2020). This awareness can help mitigate negative consequences associated with envy, such as shame, anger, low self-esteem, strained relationships, and cyberbullying. Additionally, these insights empower social media users to make informed decisions regarding their engagement with social media. Embracing benign envy can foster personal growth and motivation, while identifying and avoiding malicious envy can protect both oneself and others. The current study's findings contribute to enhancing the well-being of social media users.

4.2 Limitations

Male representation (29.7%) was lower than females (70.3%), potentially impacting findings. Random sampling could enhance generalizability. Limitations include reliance on English survey;

future studies should include Sinhala and Tamil versions. Current findings: social media predicts 20% benign envy, 8.8% malicious envy via scatterplots. Prior research identified self-esteem, relationships, and cultural beliefs as envy predictors. Multiple regression analysis can deepen understanding of social media envy's dualistic nature and causal effects. Excluding 27 participants with mental health disorders could be addressed with a control group for better knowledge and results.

4.3 Future Studies

The study found a positive relationship between benign envy and malicious envy ($r_s = .51$, $p < .001$). Benign envy may be equally harmful as malicious envy (Lange et al., 2017), suggesting a need for further research on their relationship and influences. Qualitative studies should explore causes, impacts, and coping mechanisms of both types of envy. Longitudinal studies can examine age-related variations in envy and inform interventions.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This study explored the impact of social media on benign and malicious envy. Results supported prior research indicating a positive link between social media use and envy. The study highlighted a stronger association between social media use and benign envy compared to malicious envy. It emphasized the importance of considering cultural beliefs, self-esteem, social norms, and other factors when studying envy, rather than solely focusing on social media. The study recommended including a control group of individuals with mental health disorders in future envy-related studies. Understanding the dual nature of social media envy has implications for user well-being, emphasizing the need for further research to inform social media engagement and envy.

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