

**Information Search in Benign and Malicious Envy**

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### **Abstract**

For the most part envy has been seen as a socially undesirable and maladaptive emotion. However, research on envy as an emotion has made a distinction between two types of envy: benign and malicious. Benign envy motivates people to focus on themselves and on what they could have done better to obtain the same advantage as the person they envy. With malicious envy people focus on bringing the person they envy down. Therefore, benign envy has been seen as a functional emotion, while this functionality has not been seen for malicious envy. The goal of current research is to investigate functionality for malicious envy by studying the relationship between envy and information search. Envy can follow from feelings of injustice, which might encourage people to start looking for information that proves that the advantage is unfair. If these envious people actually find the information regarding the injustice that has been done, it could motivate them to correct the injustice, which could be beneficial for society. If this is the case, then malicious envy could potentially be seen as a functional emotion as well. Envy was manipulated by the display of pride. We found more malicious envy in hubristic pride than in authentic pride. For the relationship between envy and injustice we did not find significant results. Benign and malicious envy did not show a difference in the types of information they seek. Hence, the functionality of malicious envy remains to be discovered.

*Keywords:* envy, injustice, information search

For a long time envy has exclusively been seen as an evil and dysfunctional emotion. Envy can be defined as a painful emotion that may result from feelings of inferiority towards another person, who owns a valued possession, characteristic or achievement (Parrott, 1991; Parrott & Smith, 1993; Smith & Kim, 2007). The experience of envy might help with maintaining our self-esteem, when the harming effects of threatening social comparisons are being reduced (Tesser, 1988; Tesser, 2000). However, envy can serve for other purposes as well. Recently, researchers have been taking on a more functional approach towards envy. This approach describes the social function of envy, whereas it regulates social status, as well as pain by reducing the negative comparison towards another person (Fiske, 2010; Belk, 2011; Crusius & Lange, 2017).

Within this field, researchers make a distinction between two qualitatively different types of envy: benign and malicious envy (Crusius & Lange, 2020; Falcon, 2015; Lange et al., 2018a; Lange et al., 2018b; Lange & Protasi, 2021; Van de Ven et al., 2009). Both types can be characterized by negative affect from the experience of painful inferiority. Therefore, both types are described as highly aversive emotions (Lange et al., 2018b; Van de Ven et al., 2009). The difference between the forms of envy lies in the strategy that is used to reduce the cause of envy. Since envy arises from comparison to a superior other, it can be reduced by decreasing the gap between oneself and the other (Van de Ven et al., 2009). Benign enviers feel more positively regarding the envied person, they intent to mimic the superior other in order to attain a similar position as them. Consequently, benignly envious people are mainly motivated to improve themselves and their position in order to reduce the gap between the envier and the envied person (Lange & Protasi, 2021; Van de Ven et al., 2009). Malicious envy is characterized as a much more negative and hostile emotion. Maliciously envious people feel frustrated towards the envied person and feel like they are treated unjust (Van de Ven et al., 2009). Here, the strategy to reduce the gap between the envier and the envied

person will mainly be focused on bringing the other person down (Crusius & Lange, 2020; Lange & Protasi, 2021).

Furthermore, allocation of attention differs between malicious and benign envy. Within malicious envy attention is mostly directed at the envied person instead of the object that was causing the envy. For benign envy there is no difference in attention allocation between the envied person and the envied object. Benignly envious people also elicit attention toward means for improvement, whereas this is not the case for maliciously envious people. These findings indicate a difference in motivational relevance of the superior other and envied object for benignly and maliciously envious people (Crusius & Lange, 2014).

Benign and malicious envy are also related to contrasting outcomes, which shapes the perception of functionality for both types of envy separately. Benign envy is related to different beneficial outcomes such as performance increases (Khan et al., 2017; Lange & Crusius, 2015b; Salerno et al., 2019; Van de Ven et al., 2011), higher well-being (Briki, 2019) and more positive perceptions from their peers (Lange et al., 2016), this makes it easy to see this type of envy as a functional emotion. For malicious envy, it might be harder to see the functionality of the emotion. It is related to more negative outcomes such as hostility and actual harming behaviour (Lange & Crusius, 2015a; Lange et al., 2018; Van de Ven et al., 2015; Yusainy et al., 2019).

The envious responses, that involve anger and hostility, are ascribable to feelings of injustice (Brown, 1985; Smith et al., 1994). If people subjectively believe that the envied superiority is unfair and unjust, they are likely to feel hostility towards the superior other (Smith et al., 1994). The feelings of injustice follow from subjective evaluation of the envied superiority which is not entirely validated by others. The lack of social validation can be cause for most people to privately believe that the advantage is unfair, as envy is mostly seen as a socially undesirable emotion. However, due to the subjective feelings of injustice,

malicious envy might transmute into righteous resentment, which is seen as an emotion that can be publicly shown without fear of social reprisal (Smith et al., 1994). The envier could then try to convince others of the injustice that has taken place (Smith & Kim, 2007).

Objective injustice is even more strongly related to hostility. Objective feelings of injustice follow from a person's belief that others would view a certain situation in the same way (Smith et al., 1994). The envier could believe that other people would view a certain advantage as unjust or unfair as well. This leads to feelings of social validation, which might motivate the envier to express resentment through hostility and attempt to convince others of the injustice (Smith et al., 1994; Smith & Kim, 2007).

Studies on the functionality of other emotions, such as anger, fear and hope, include information search for such emotions. Emotions can guide attention in rather predictable ways. A certain type of emotion can induce a corresponding motivation, which will lead to an action tendency that is in line with the emotion or to an emotion-induced goal. Such emotion-induced goals regulate people in their information seeking behaviour and their will to process information (de los Santos & Nabi, 2019). People search for information that is in line with the type of emotion they are experiencing and the goal connected to the emotion. Moreover, at the absence of goal-relevant information, most people still seek out information related to the topic that induced the emotion (de los Santos & Nabi, 2019).

Since benignly and maliciously envious people allocate their attention and focus in different ways, it could lead to obtaining of different kinds of information. However, there has not been research on the types of information people (actively) seek in order to reach their goal when experiencing envy. Therefore, in order to investigate the functionality of envy, this study will focus on the question of whether there is a difference in the kind of information benignly and maliciously envious people seek. As people experiencing benign envy focus on moving up to the desired position, they will likely seek information that can help them

improve themselves in order to obtain this goal. People who experience malicious envy are more strongly motivated by feelings of injustice, which makes them want to pull the superior other down. Therefore, these people will likely search for information that is more (in)justice related. If these maliciously envious people actually find information regarding an injustice that has been done, the envy could transmute into righteous resentment (Smith & Kim, 2007). The sense of resentment could motivate someone to correct the injustice, which could be beneficial for society. If this is the case, then malicious envy could potentially be seen as a functional emotion as well.

### **Hypotheses**

Benignly envious people are mainly focused on improving themselves to obtain the same advantage as the envied person, while maliciously envious people are mostly focused on bringing the envied person down. Therefore, we predict:

*H<sub>1</sub>*: Benign envy will lead to a higher ranking of self-improvement information relative to justice information than malicious envy.

Experiences of subjective injustice generally lack social validation, leading to envious responses that involve anger and hostility. These responses are characterizing for malicious envy. Experiences of objective injustice generally feel socially validated, which can be associated more closely with resentment than with both types of envy. Hence, we predict:

*H<sub>2</sub>*: Benign envy compared to malicious envy will lead to a lower ascription of subjective injustice, relative to the difference between benign envy and malicious envy for objective injustice.

Benign envy compared to malicious envy is expected to lead to lower ascription of subjective injustice and to more interest in self-improvement information than in justice information. If with lower ascription of subjective injustice, justice information is likely to appear less relevant then, we predict:

*H*<sub>3</sub>: There will be an indirect effect such that benign envy relative to malicious envy leads to lower subjective injustice, itself predicting a higher interest in self-improvement information relative to justice information.

### **Current Research**

This study was designed to investigate whether there is a difference between benignly and maliciously envious people in the type of information they seek. In order to do so, half of the participants were activated to experience an episode of benign envy, whereas the other half was activated to experience an episode of malicious envy. Envy was elicited by the display of pride, which can have two forms: authentic and hubristic pride. Authentic pride follows from success that is attributed to internal, unstable, controllable causes, whereas for hubristic pride these causes are internal, stable and uncontrollable (Tracy & Robins, 2007). Researchers have found authentic pride to cause likeable impressions and perceptions of prestige. On the other hand, hubristic pride can cause less likeable impressions and perceptions of dominance. Consequently, a display of authentic pride can induce benign envy in observers, while a display of hubristic pride is likely to induce malicious envy (Lange & Crusius, 2015b). This principle was used in current study to manipulate envy in the participants. Then, we assessed whether there was a difference across both conditions in the kind of information participants seek by presenting them with an information search task. Additionally, participants' perception of objective and subjective injustice regarding the envied subject was examined to see if this perception differs for maliciously and benignly envious people.

## **Methods**

### **Participants and design**

This study's desired sample size, included variables, hypotheses, and planned analyses were preregistered on AsPredicted.org ([https://aspredicted.org/see\\_one.php](https://aspredicted.org/see_one.php)) prior to any data being collected.

Participants were first being gathered with a convenience sampling strategy where people were asked to voluntarily fill out the survey (e.g. via social networks, friends, family, acquaintances, etc.). However, the intended sample size was not reached in time and additional participants were acquired via a crowd sourcing platform (Prolific). For this study, we used a between-subjects design with two conditions. Therefore, the intended sample size consisted of at least 200 participants; 100 participants per condition. This sample size would allow for 80% power to find a between-subjects mean difference of Cohen's  $d = .35$  (small to medium size) and to find a correlation of  $r = .17$  with an  $\alpha = .05$ . Eventually, we gathered data of 236 participants. Only 159 of these participants completed the survey, therefore data of these participants were included in the analyses. Of the sample 51.6% identified as female ( $n = 82$ ), 47.2% identified as male ( $n = 75$ ) and 1.2% identified as non-binary or another gender. The age of participants ranged between 15 and 80 years old ( $M = 27.68$ ,  $SD = 11.49$ ).

In order to study if there was a difference between benignly and maliciously envious people in the type of information they seek, information search was used as the dependent variable. Type of envy and type of injustice served as independent variables. Participants were asked to fill out an online survey, where they were first presented with an informed consent form and some demographic questions. After this participants were assigned to a benign envy condition or a malicious envy condition through the activation of an authentic or hubristic pride scenario, followed by a pride and manipulation check. Next, participants' sense of subjective and objective injustice regarding the envy situation was measured. Lastly, they were presented with an information search task to determine if they seek more self-improvement related or more justice-related information.

## **Materials**

### ***Manipulation of Envy***

First participants were introduced to a problem related to their work, that is, they were asked to imagine that a colleague is getting a promotion that was desired by the participant as well. After this, participants were presented with a video that shows the pride reaction of the more successful colleague (envied person), which could either be an authentic or a hubristic pride reaction. The gender of the person in the video was matched to the participant's gender, since people experience more envy to a similar other (e.g. Heider, 1958; Parrot, 1991; Tesser, 1991). After seeing the video, the participant should feel more benign or malicious envy towards the colleague who got promoted.

### ***Pride Check***

To test whether the videos induces the right type of pride perception, we presented the participants with a pride check question. Participants had to choose one out of three options with descriptions of how they thought the colleague might have felt. The options were: “accomplished, achieving, confident, fulfilled, productive, successful, and has self-worth” (authentic pride), “arrogant, conceited, egotistical, pompous, smug, snobbish, and stuck-up” (hubristic pride) or felt neither of these (Tracy & Prehn, 2012).

### ***Manipulation Check***

Manipulation check questions were adapted from the Pain Driven Dual Envy Scale (PaDE) by Lange et al. (2018). The envied person was being referred to as “the colleague” and the envied object, in this case the promotion, was being referred to as “the promotion”. It included four questions related to benign envy (e.g. “I wanted to work harder to also obtain the promotion”), four questions related to malicious envy (e.g. “I secretly wished that the colleague would lose the promotion”) and three items related to pain (e.g. “I felt bothered”). The internal consistency for the benign envy items was considered to be satisfactory ( $\alpha = .62$ ),

while for the malicious envy items the internal consistency was good ( $\alpha = .81$ ). Participants were asked to respond with the use of a 7-point Likert-scale ranging from 1 (does not apply at all) to 7 (applies very much).

### ***Measure of Subjective and Objective Injustice***

Items for measuring the sense of subjective and objective injustice regarding the envy situation were taken from Smith et al. (1994). The items had been adjusted, so that they fit the scenario that was described to the participants. The measure included three items related to subjective feelings of injustice (e.g. “I would feel like I was dealt an unfair hand by life”) and three items related to objective injustice (e.g. “anyone would agree that the colleague’s promotion was unfairly obtained”). The items were scored on a Likert-scale ranging from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 7 (“strongly agree”). The internal consistency of the subjective feelings items was considered to be very high ( $\alpha = .90$ ), and the internal consistency of the objective feelings items was good ( $\alpha = .84$ ).

### ***Information Search Task***

For the information search task, we adapted a strategy that is similar to the strategy that Shani et al. (2009) used. Participants were presented with different kinds of information, which they would then be asked to rank in terms of what information they would be most interested in. The different types of information were self-improvement information, justice information and no or unrelated information. The self-improvement information consisted of a list of qualities that are important for the promotion, information on how to improve yourself to qualify for the promotion or information on how to get ahead. The justice information consisted of information that helps figure out whether the colleague is deserving of the promotion. A benefit of ranking the information is that it requires participants to assign relative importance to the different types of information. A downside of the procedure might be that it might result in ceiling effects (e.g. if all participants consider self-improvement

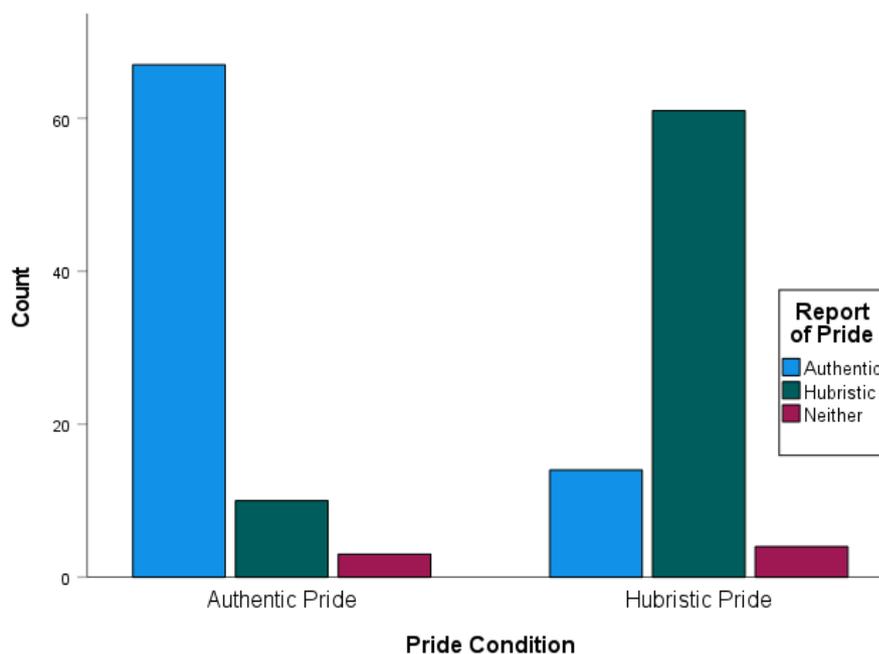
information to be highly important). To address this possibility, after the ranking, the participants were asked to rate how interested they would be in the information for each type of information separately as a complementary measure of information search.

## Results

The statistical program SPSS 27 was used to analyse data. The analyses were started off by testing whether the manipulation of envy from pride worked where we found that there is a significant relationship between the different displays of pride and the answer participants chose in the pride check question  $\chi^2(2, N = 159) = 71.45, p < .001$ , as depicted in Figure 1.

**Figure 1**

*Bar Chart Including the Pride Manipulation Check Responses For Participants per Condition.*

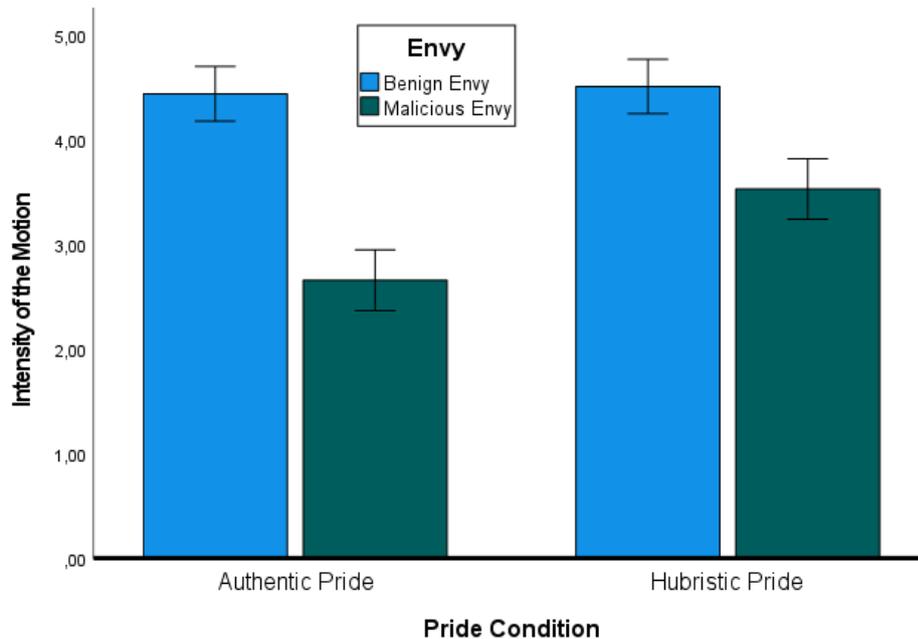


A repeated measures 2 (pride: authentic vs. hubristic) x 2 (envy: benign vs. malicious) with pride as between-subjects factor and envy as repeated measure factor showed a significant main effect of envy  $F(1, 157) = 96.67, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .38$ , which indicates a significant difference between benign envy ( $M = 4.57, SD = 1.19$ ) and malicious envy ( $M = 3.13, SD =$

1.45). The interaction between envy and pride was also significant  $F(1, 157) = 6.47, p < .05, \eta_p^2 = .04$ . The plot of this analysis can be found in Figure 2, it shows more malicious envy in hubristic pride than in authentic pride.

**Figure 2**

*Graph Describing the Interaction Effect and Main Effects of Envy and Pride Condition.*

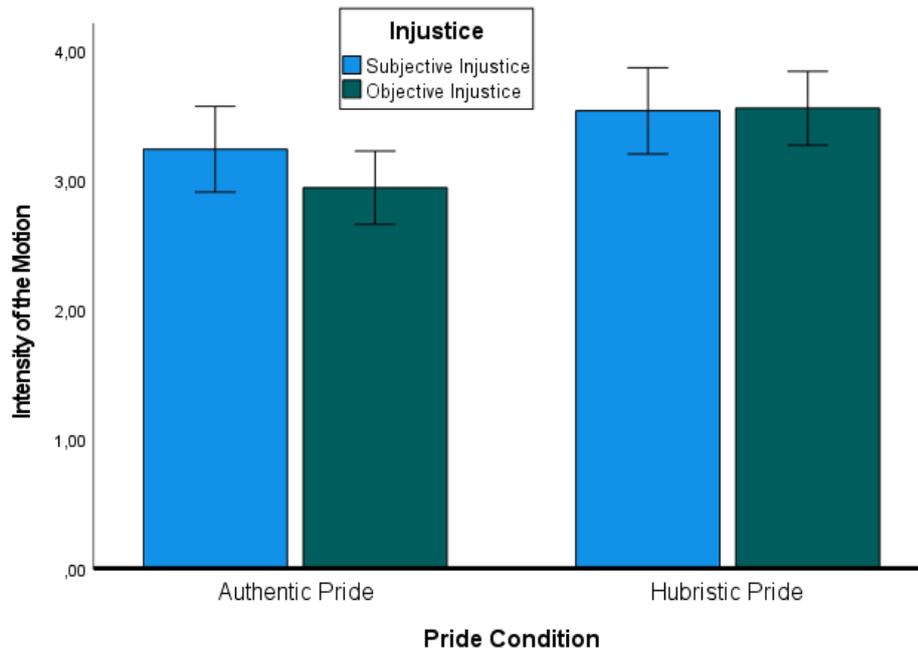


*Note.* Error bars: 95% CI.

A repeated measures 2 (pride: authentic vs. hubristic) x 2 (injustice: subjective vs. objective) with pride as between-subjects factor and injustice as repeated measure factor showed no significant main effect for injustice  $F(1, 157) = 3.54, p = .06, \eta_p^2 = .02$ , which means no significant difference between subjective injustice ( $M = 3.41, SD = 1.55$ ) and objective injustice ( $M = 3.22, SD = 1.36$ ) was found. The interaction effect between injustice and pride also did not show significance  $F(1, 157) = 2.55, p = .11, \eta_p^2 = .02$ . The plot of this analysis can be seen in Figure 3.

**Figure 3**

*Graph Describing the Interaction Effect and Main Effects of Injustice and Pride Condition.*



*Note.* Error bars: 95% CI.

The participants in the authentic pride condition ( $M = 48.10$ ,  $SD = 25.26$ ) did not significantly differ from participants in the hubristic pride condition ( $M = 53.31$ ,  $SD = 23.90$ ) in their interest in justice information  $t(157) = -1.33$ ,  $p = .18$ . The difference between authentic pride ( $M = 78.69$ ,  $SD = 19.02$ ) and hubristic pride ( $M = 81.76$ ,  $SD = 18.69$ ) for interest in self-improvement information was also not found to be significant,  $t(157) = -1.03$ ,  $p = .31$ . Participants in the authentic pride condition ( $M = -1.65$ ,  $SD = 3.38$ ) also did not significantly differ from participants in the hubristic pride condition ( $M = -1.58$ ,  $SD = 3.15$ ) on the information ranking,  $t(153) = -.13$ ,  $p = .90$

### Explorative Analyses

For exploratory purposes, a mediation analysis was conducted to examine whether injustice mediated the relationship between pride condition and interest in justice information. To test this for the information ranking score, the 95% CI of the percentile-based indirect effect of envy condition via injustice as parallel mediator on the ranking score will be estimated via PROCESS script with 5000 resamples. The correlation between envy and

injustice scores are depicted in Table 1. Following from the mediation analysis as shown in Figure 4, it was found that subjective injustice did not significantly mediate the relationship between pride condition and interest in justice information,  $B = 1.57$ , 95% CI [-1.44, 4.97].

**Table 1**

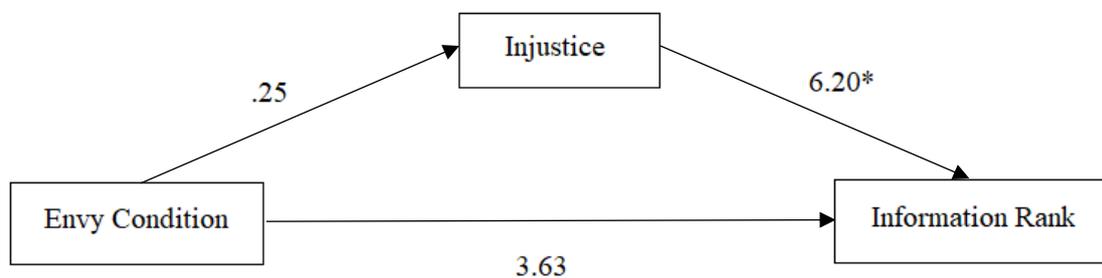
*Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Coefficients for Envy and Injustice Scores.*

Construct	1	2
1. Envy		
2. Injustice	.10	
N =	159	
M	1.44	.20
SD	1.88	1.32

\*\*  $p < 0.01$  (2-tailed); \*  $p < 0.05$

**Figure 4**

*Mediation Model With Subjective Injustice as Mediator Between Pride Condition and Interest in Justice Information.*



Gender and age were included in the explorative analyses as well. To test whether gender had an influence on envy, an independent samples t-test compared male ( $M = 1.63$ ,  $SD = 1.81$ ) and female ( $M = 1.14$ ,  $SD = 1.85$ ) participants' envy scores with each other. No significant difference between genders regarding the envy scores was found,  $t(173) = 1.76$ ,  $p = .08$ . The same type of analysis was conducted for comparison of information rank, justice information interest and self-improvement information interest between male and female participants. For information rank, male participants ( $M = -1.42$ ,  $SD = 3.38$ ) did not

significantly differ from female participants ( $M = -1.75$ ,  $SD = 3.18$ ),  $t(151) = .61$ ,  $p = .54$ . There was no significant difference between male ( $M = 50.63$ ,  $SD = 23.16$ ) and female ( $M = 50.76$ ,  $SD = 26.36$ ) participants on interest in justice information,  $t(155) = -.03$ ,  $p = .97$ . Male ( $M = 78.72$ ,  $SD = 19.43$ ) and female ( $M = 81.39$ ,  $SD = 18.55$ ) participants also did not differ significantly on their interest in self-improvement information,  $t(155) = -.88$ ,  $p = .38$ . Then, the relationship between age and envy was assessed through a correlational analysis. The analysis revealed no significant age differences regarding envy,  $r(176) = -.13$ ,  $p = .08$ , 95% CI [-.27, .02].

### Discussion

With this study, we aimed to find out whether there is a difference between benignly and maliciously envious people in the type of information they seek. Benignly envious people tend to focus on improving themselves to reduce the gap between the envier and the envied person. Maliciously envious people try to reduce this gap by bringing the envied person down. Therefore, we expected benign envy to lead to a higher ranking of self-improvement information relative to justice information than malicious envy. We also predicted that benign envy would lead to a lower ascription of subjective injustice than malicious envy. For objective injustice, we did not expect such a difference. Additionally, we expected an indirect effect where benign envy relative to malicious envy would lead to lower subjective injustice, predicting a higher interest in self-improvement information relative to justice information.

Envy was instigated by presentation of pride, where presentation of authentic pride would lead to benign envy and presentation of hubristic pride would lead to malicious envy. To test whether the videos that were shown actually activated the right form of pride in the participants, we conducted a manipulation check for pride. This way of manipulating envy was found to be significantly effective. The analysis revealed a significant interaction effect of envy and pride, which means that there was more malicious envy in the hubristic pride

condition than in the authentic pride condition. Overall, we found there to be more benign envy in both the hubristic and the authentic pride condition. These results differ a bit from the results of the Lange and Crusius (2015) study, as they found authentic pride to be higher for both benign and malicious envy, as well as lower levels of hubristic pride in benign envy than in malicious envy.

Contrary to the hypotheses, we did not find subjective injustice to significantly differ across envy conditions. However, the results showed that this comparison was close to significance, so the relationship should not be instantly neglected. There might have been other factors, such as semantic interpretation of the items, visual interpretation of the videos, or the number of items, influencing the relationship between subjective injustice and envy condition. Objective injustice also did not differ across envy conditions, which was more in line with our expectations. Future research might take (some of) the other factors into account when studying the relationship between objective and subjective injustice and both benign and malicious envy.

Smith & Kim (2007) hypothesized that malicious envy could transmute into righteous resentment because of subjective feelings of injustice, where the envying person might try to convince others of the injustice that was done. Resentment comes with more hostility than envy, but also with more social validation. This social validation can lead people to express their hostility more openly (Smith et al., 1994). In order to convince others of injustice, it would probably be beneficial to have some information to convince them with. However, subjective injustice did not mediate the relationship between pride condition and interest in justice information. Therefore, no evidence was found for the assumption made by Smith & Kim (2007). In the future, it might be interesting to investigate envy in combination with resentment and injustice, in order to get more insight into the course these emotions take and

the directions of the relationships. As social validation can lead to suppressing or expressing of the hostile emotions, this should also be taken into account in future research.

Even though benignly and maliciously envious people allocate their attention and motivation in different ways (Crusius & Lange, 2014), findings from this study suggest that there was no difference between participants in the authentic pride condition and participants in the hubristic pride condition regarding their interest in self-improvement information and justice information. They also did not differ on the ranking of the information items. This means that we did not find a difference in the type of information benignly and maliciously envious people seek. Consequently, the functionality of malicious envy as an emotion has yet to be discovered. For the difference between benign and malicious envy, researchers have described that benignly envious people's goal would improve themselves to attain the desired position (Lange & Protasi, 2021; Van de Ven et al., 2009). For maliciously envious people the goal would be to bring the envied person down (Crusius & Lange, 2020; Lange & Protasi, 2021). However, participants might not have gained such strong feelings and emotion-induced goals from such a short scenario and video, as they would in everyday life. Therefore, they might not have had such clear goals in mind, as research suggests. In the future, researchers might focus on the time it takes someone to feel a certain degree of an emotion. Researchers could also try to investigate these and other emotions in everyday scenarios without manipulation. However, they should acknowledge the importance of ethics in this regard.

This study was conducted fully online with a questionnaire, which might have limited insights into participants' truthfulness. Some participants might have felt that they should respond in a socially desirable way, leaving the data to be less reliable. For future research, participants could be introduced to the study by agreeing to a text which states that they will respond in a truthful manner. Additionally, there could be an item at the end of the study asking the participant if they completed the questionnaire in honesty. Moreover, because of)

the slow gathering of data, a crowd sourcing platform was used to reach the intended sample size. This means that the sample now consisted of participants from a grand variety of countries and thus cultures, which might have also had an influence on the results. Therefore, it would be wise to handle the generalisation of the results with caution. Future research could take the cultural differences into consideration in order to know better if the results can be generalized for specific cultures and countries.

For current study we came up with information seeking items on our own. Therefore, reliability and validity of these items remain unsure. Future research could focus on other types of information seeking and might use more scientifically established types of information search. For example, de los Santos & Nabi (2019) have made a distinction between approach, avoidance and accordance action tendency's, which result from different types of emotions. In their research they investigate anger as an approach emotion, fear as an avoidance emotion and they use hope as the emotion that should people should act in accordance with. In the future, this type of research could be extended to other emotions, such as envy.

Results demonstrated that envy can be derived from the display of pride. Envy was found to interact with pride, but did not show effects with injustice. Benign and malicious envy did not differ in the types of information they seek.

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