

Decoding the Interplay of Envy, Motivation, Self-Compassion, and Psychological Distress in the Modern Workplace

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ABSTRACT: In contemporary working environments, competition and social comparison are rampant, resulting in envy being a significant organizational emotion in the good and bad uses. The objective of this study was to investigate relationship between envy with work motivation, self-compassion and psychological distress and to see difference among different gender, difference between organizations types and job sector among 300 employed adults in Sialkot, of having quantitative correlational design. The results showed that there were very important relationships between all study variables, suggesting that envy act as a motivational and psychological stress factor at once. Marked differences were also noted along demographic lines, especially in the case of the corporate workers who exhibited higher rates of envy and psychological distress along with higher levels of self-compassion. The results build on the positive organizational psychology research in two ways: First, they show the intricate relationship of envy and self-compassion in organizational functioning; and second, they illustrate the necessity of studying self-compassion as an important component to healthy competition and emotional coping within organizations, as well as the need for the inclusion of positive organizational interventions to foster both emotional well-being and individual functioning in organizations.

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Introduction

In the modern work environment, with a significant competition, an ever-changing assessment of performance, and almost daily comparison of social status, the emotion of envy has moved from being unlikely to import to the workplace situation to being more frequently cited (Breevaart et al., 2013). Envy has become a more salient organizational emotion, as the intense, continually changing self-evaluation process, combined with frequent social comparisons, makes the negative emotion prevalent in the modern work environment (Sharifnia et al., 2025). Both employees and fellow staff continually judge each other against the other when it comes to promotions, or recognition, or salaries or career accomplishments (Andlib et al., 2022). These comparisons may lead to feelings of lack, discontentment, and have a negative impact on an individual's health and performance of the organization. Envy is generally considered a negative feeling linked to interpersonal conflict, less cooperation, organizational

deviance and poor mental health (Duffy et al., 2021). This shows a one-dimensional view of envy, however, that is not the case as a recent development in organizational psychology indicates that envy is a multidimensional emotion which can bring about both constructive and destructive outcomes depending on how one experiences it and regulates it (). For this reason, it has become more and more significant not only for researchers, but also for practitioners, to understand how envy affects employees' functioning.

Current research study distinguishes between benign but also malicious envy, which gives a more comprehensive knowing of the emotional reactions of workers to social comparison (Lange et al., 2022). Benign envy occurs when one's positive feedback on the other's success is based on the person's earned status and is perceived as attainable and therefore motivates the individual to do more, persist longer and get better at what they do (Li et al., 2023). In fact, those who feel benign envy towards fellow employees are expected to find them more role models, which will lead to greater learning, creativity and professional development (Lathren et al., 2021). Undirect, on the other hand, is malicious envy which arises when a man's good fortune is unfair, out of the reach of the person, and causes resentment, ill will, and the attempt to bring down the successful one (Kotera et al., 2022). This unhealthy kind of jealousy has been linked to operative problems in social interaction, job-related aggression, diminished positive attitudes toward work, and counterproductive attitudes at work, which negatively impact both staff wellbeing and organization performance (Duffy et al., 2021).

Motivation is a topic of central concern in organizational behavior management and generates a lot of focus on the role of envy in motivation to work. Based on the Self-Determination Theory (Gagné et al., 2010), there exists two levels of motivation: intrinsic motivation when employees carry out certain tasks because they enjoy them and value the content, and externally regulated behaviour when they undertake tasks in exchange of a reward or external pressures (Lathren et al., 2021). There is some evidence to suggest that while not inherently malicious, benign envy can positively affect autonomous motivation by inspiring workers to strive for greater achievement levels than their peers, and to emulate those who are successful (Batool et al., 2023; Hussain et al., 2023). In contrast, bad competition can reduce passion, foster helplessness, cause injustice and allow for the emotional depletion of employees, thus making a negative connection between employee and the passion and growth (Ali et al., 2020). The contrasting motivational functions argue that the adaptive and maladaptive effects of envy may depend on other resources of the person.

Self-compassion is one such psychological tool that has gained a lot of importance in both positive psychology and organizational behaviour. Research studies describe self-compassion as treating oneself with kindness when one's self experiences a failure or difficulty, recognizing that imperfect individuals are not unique, and acknowledging the awareness of personal feelings without letting them take over (Rayen et al., 2020). Neff defines self-compassion as showing oneself kindness when one's self fails or experiences difficulty, seeing that all humans are imperfect, and seeing one's feelings without taking them over (Neff, 2003; 2022). Self-compassion has been shown to decrease levels of burnout, anxiety, depression and emotional exhaustion amongst workers, while simultaneously increasing psychological well-being, psychological resilience and work engagement (Irshad et al., 2024). Whereas setbacks or failures tend to trigger harsh self-criticism and reactions in self-compassionate people, there are adjustments or adaptation responses that help to move toward emotional healing and positive long-term professional outcomes (Aftab et al., 2026).

Given the rising pressures of today's working lives and the competitive setting, psychological distress, defined as symptoms of depression, anxiety, stress, as well as emotional exhaustion, has become a serious issue in modern workplaces these days (Sharifnia et al., 2025). The negative consequences of these maladaptive emotional experiences have been repeatedly found, and abuse of emotional jealous marshals into ongoing ruminative thoughts, a feeling of injustice, and negative social comparisons, which are proven to exacerbate employees' psychological distress (Battle & Diab, 2024; Duffy et al., 2021). Self-compassion, on the other hand, serves as a buffer variable that helps people

to lessen self-critical thinking and promotes more positive emotional regulation patterns, which thereby reduce the impact of work stress (Taj et al., 2020). Self-compassionate workers are better equipped to handle challenging emotions, to promote their own psychological wellness and recover from tough interpersonal experiences.

Although there is increasing evidence showing support for the individual relationships between envy, work motivation, self-compassionate, and psychological distress, the interactions among these constructs have not received sufficient attention, especially in organizational contexts outside those within the western organization. Many studies have found a positive effect of benign envy on motivation (Lange et al., 2022), on psychological distress in the case of malicious envy (Kotera et al., 2022), and on psychological well-being in the case of self-compassion (Neff et al., 2022). Aside from relatively limited studies that have combined these variables into a cohesive conceptual model to account for the interplay of employees' emotional responses to social comparison and their motivation and mental health, however, little research has been conducted to date. To fill this gap, the present study examines correlations between Envy, Work Motivation, Self-Compassion and Psychological Distress in job holding adults in Pakistan. The study asks for the literature in environmental psychology and self-compassion to shed light on the adaptive and maladaptive implications of envy and provides implications for the improvement of healthier, more resilient, and more motivated workplaces.

This Study Aims to

- ▶ To investigate how these two negative patterns (envy and motivational problems) relate to each other and to psychological suffering (self-compassion).
- ▶ To evaluate the combined action of envy, self-compassion and motivation on psychological distress of the workers

Hypotheses of the Study

- ▶ There is likely to be a significant relationship between Envy, Motivation, Self-Compassion and Psychological Distress among employees.
- ▶ There are likely to be differences in the factors of Envy, Motivation, Self-Compassion and Psychological Distress among Employees.

Methodology

The present study used a quantitative, correlational research design to investigate the relationships between the variables benign envy, malicious envy, work motivation, self-compassion and psychological distress among employed adults in Pakistan. 300 employees (150 male and 150 female) from public and private sector organisations were selected by purposive sampling method, according to the inclusion criteria of this study. For this, data were gathered by conducting workplace visits and online Google form, with informed consent. All questionnaires used were standardized and had satisfactory reliability and validity: the Benign and Malicious Envy Scale (Lange & Crusius, 2015), Work Motivation Questionnaire (Gagné et al., 2010), Self-Compassion Scale–Short Form (Raes et al., 2011), and Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995).

All institutional review boards for this study have received ethical approval before data are collected. There were voluntary participation, confidentiality and anonymity was assured, and they were informed that they had the right to withdraw from the study in any instance without losing their right or having the use of their data terminated. Data were collected and safely kept and were accuracy checked before analyzed. The data were analysed using SPSS-26, Pearson's correlation was applied to test relationships between the variables in the study, while independent samples t-tests were administered to test the differences between the groups regarding the demographic data (gender, organization type and job category).

Results

Table 1

Correlation Analysis among Envy, Motivation, Self-compassion and Psychological Distress (N=300)

Variables	1	2	3	4
1 Envy	-	.519**	.279**	.437**
2 Motivation		-	.568**	.310**
3 Self-Compassion			-	.300**
4 Psychological Distress				-

Note: **. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Table 2

T-test analysis for Gender and Motivation,

Variable	Male		Female		t	df	p	Cohen's d
	M	SD	M	SD				
Motivation	87.33	16.38	83.08	19.38	2.05	298	.041	0.24

Table 3

T-test Analysis of Organization type and Self-Compassion

Variable	Public		Private		t	df	p	Cohen's d
	M	SD	M	SD				
Self-compassion	37.0	7.59	38.9	6.84	-2.16	298	.03	-0.26

Table 4

T-test Analysis of Job-sector and Envy, Motivation, Self-Compassion and Psychological Distress

Variables	Corporate		Other		t	df	p	Cohen's d
	M	SD	M	SD				
Envy	34.61	8.88	30.2	8.53	4.39	298	.001	0.63
Motivation	87.73	18.24	82.78	17.56	2.39	298	.02	0.28
Self-Compassion	39.44	7.00	37.37	7.03	2.54	298	.01	0.3
Psychological Distress	50.44	13.07	44.57	13.01	3.895	298	.001	0.45

All the study's variables showed significant positive relationships in Pearson correlation analysis (Table 1) Envy was moderately and positively associated with work motivation ($r = .519$, $p < .01$), self-compassion ($r = .279$, $p < .01$), and psychological distress ($r = .437$, $p < .01$). Self-compassion, $r = .568$, $p < .01$ and psychological distress, $r = .310$, $p < .01$, were also found to be positively correlated with work motivation. Moreover, self-compassion was found to have a significant positive correlation with psychological distress ($r = .300$, $p < .01$).

A series of independent-samples t-tests (Tables 2–4) indicated several significant group differences. Male employees also scored significantly higher than female employees on work motivation, $t(298) = 2.05$, $p = .041$ with a relatively small effect size (Cohen's $d = 0.24$). Even though the effect sizes were very small, employees working in private organizations showed significantly greater self-compassion than the employees in public organizations $t(298) = -2.16$, $p = .03$. Means comparisons across job sectors also revealed that corporate employees were significantly higher than others on the Envy Scale across all job sectors, as well as on psychological distress (all $p < .05$) and self-compassion ($p < .01$; $p < .05$). Those that showed the greatest difference were envy (Cohen's $d = 0.63$), which was a moderate effect, while differences in a) motivation, b) self-compassion and c) psychological distress effects were ranging from small to moderate.

Discussion

The present study focused on two groups of interrelationships between envy, job motivation, self-compassion, and psychological distress, and investigated differences among genders, organization type and job sector. The result of the correlation analysis of all the study variables indicated high positive correlations between each other. The positive correlation between work motivation and envy shows that envy can work as a positive motivational mechanism as it is related to benign envy which is a mechanism that encourages employees to work harder to show that they are better than the one they are envious of via healthy social comparison (Li et al., 2023). The findings are in line with Battle & Diab (2024) proposed distinction between benign and malicious envy, and aligns with studies demonstrating that upward social comparison can enhance motivation and goal-directed behaviour (Lange et al., 2022).

One interesting result was that increase in self-compassion was found to be correlated with increases in psychological distress, whereas the earlier research identified self-compassion as a protective factor against psychological problems (Li et al., 2023). It has been suggested that those who are more self-compassionate might have adequate psychological coping mechanisms and be more likely to openly admit their sense of psychological discomfort without losing out on their emotional awareness (Duffy et al., 2021). In addition, the positive relationships between motivation, envy, and psychological distress suggest that high levels of motivation and feeling jealous could simultaneously be associated with psychological strain in the workplace (Andlib et al., 2022). The same has been found in international and Pakistani studies, thus, competition at work can lead to stress even though it improves work performance (Khan & Noor, 2020).

The independent-samples t-tests revealed significant differences between the work-motivation of male and female employees, with a lower level reported by females, but with moderate effect sizes. The results align with prior Pakistani studies indicating that career prospects, expectations, and work-life balances remain as factors impacting employees' motivation (Murtza & Rasheed, 2023). In the same way, the employees of private organizations reported significantly higher self-compassion scores than those working in public organizations, perhaps due to their more tender organizational culture, higher managerial support and higher attention to employees' well-being in private organizations (Li et al., 2023; Ali et al., 2020).

Job sector showed the largest group differences with envy, work motivation, self-compassion and psychological distress being significantly higher in the corporate sector than in other job sectors (Battle & Diab, 2024). The results of this research indicate that in the business context, not only do expectations to achieve perform well, but there are many high levels of pressure as well. Self-compassion scales for employees at the corporate level may indicate the emergence of adaptive coping skills that are required to deal with challenging work demands, whereas the psychological distress scale scores could signal an emotional price tag of ongoing competition in the organization (Hussain & Mohr, 2023).

Conclusion

The current research adds to the pile of organizational psychology literature by providing a foundational example of how envy, work motivation, self-compassion and psychological stress are significantly related among working adults in Pakistan. The results show that envy is a more multifaceted workplace emotion than originally thought, and can serve as a motivational stimulus with a positive connotation. Meanwhile, the positive links between feeling bad and feeling envious reveal emotional costs of rival competition at work. The observed differences between gender, organization type and job sector further suggest that the organizational context has a significant impact on a person's psychological experiences and motivational outcomes. In sum, the researchers' study reminds us of the adaptive and maladaptive roles of envy in people's lives and the important place of self-compassion as a psychological asset to stronger and more productive work communities.

Implications of the Study

The results have implications for both theory and practice of organizational management and health. At a theoretical level, the current study builds upon the previous studies by incorporating feelings of envy, work motivation, self-compassion and psychological distress under one umbrella in the context of working in Pakistan. Organizations can support healthy competition and make interventions to promote greater self-compassion, emotional regulation and psychological resilience, including through employee assistance programs, mindfulness training and leadership development programs, in practice. The findings of the study can be used by human resource workers and human resource or organizational psychologists to create social comparison policies that encourage positive social comparisons, decrease workplace stress, and inspire staff motivation without negatively impacting employee mental health. This can ultimately help to enhance the performance, satisfaction, and effectiveness of the employees, leading to better organizational functioning.

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