

# How Envy Drives Social Undermining: An Analysis of Employee Behavior

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**Abstract:-** Employees' social undermining can significantly damage workplace relationships and overall organizational health. This study aims to present a model highlighting envy's role in employees' social undermining among the staff of a telecommunication company in Tehran province. Initially, a comprehensive review of the relevant literature was conducted. Data were then collected using a questionnaire, with a sample of 217 employees selected based on the Cochran Formula. The data were analyzed using SPSS and Lisrel 8.80 software, and Structural Equation Modeling was employed to test the research hypotheses. The findings indicate that envy significantly affects social undermining.

**Keyword:-** Social Undermining, Envy, Workplace Envy, Employee Behavior.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Social undermining, a form of detrimental behavior within workplace interactions (Hershcovis, 2011), has garnered significant attention since its introduction by Duffy et al. (2002) (Smith & Webster, 2017). As one of the negative forms of social interaction (Gent et al., 1993), social undermining includes behaviors directed at an individual's received environment (Crayd et al., 2006). According to equity theory, when these perceptions do not align with one's expectations, frustration or weakened social behaviors and work performance may result (Tai, Narayanan, & McAllister, 2012).

Another aspect of social undermining in the workplace is behavior aimed at limiting other employees' abilities, such as creating and maintaining positive working relationships, achieving career success, and gaining credibility and recognition within the organization (Duffy et al., 2006). This passive behavior is a form of aggression that helps individuals attain their goals (Greenbaum, Hill, Mawritz, & Quade, 2014). Social undermining includes deliberate actions intended to damage another's favorable reputation (Crossley, 2009). Duffy et al. found that social undermining is significantly correlated with individual work performance and that employees may engage in such behavior to enhance their position within workgroups (Greenbaum et al., 2014). Examples of social undermining behaviors include humiliating a colleague's ideas or speaking offensively (Isa & Wilde, 2015).

Employees who experience social undermining are more likely to suffer physical discomfort, depression, and a decrease in positive affect. Despite evidence of the adverse effects of social undermining, little research has investigated why employees might seek to diminish their colleagues' success. Understanding this phenomenon can help organizations better control social undermining in the workplace (Greenbaum, Mawritz, & Eissa, 2012). The conceptual framework of this research is based on social learning theory, which helps explain how individuals learn to undermine their colleagues within the organizational environment (Topa, Perez-Larrazabal, Tetrick, & Tetrick, 2016).

Social equity and comparison form the essential foundation for the link between envy and social undermining. One of the primary causes of employee conflict is the comparison of the input-output ratio among employees, with social undermining seen as a potential way to balance perceived disparities (Isa & Wilde, 2015).

In line with these discussions, this study aims to examine the role of envy in social undermining among employees. For this purpose, the Protasi fourfold division of envy is employed. The main focus of the study is to investigate how social undermining, as an organizational issue, affects employees and the role of envy in enhancing social undermining among the staff of the Tehran telecommunication company.

## II. THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

### ➤ Envy

According to the results of research on envy, it can increase the chance of relationship conflict because jealous individuals are less likely to like and build favorable relationships with other individuals. In their research, Isa and Wilde found that conflict features a mediating role between envy and social undermining, while job performance is an indirect moderator of this relationship (Isa and Wilde, 2015). In the social undermining context, resource constraints are a reinforcing factor for the social undermining behavior of Machiavellian individuals (Castiel, Cimca, and Benta, 2017). A political skill could be a moderator of the link between Machiavellianism and social undermining (Smith and Webster, 2017). Duffy et al. found that it is crucial to think about the social context when researching social undermining (Duffy et al., 2006). According to Tapas et al. research, new

entrant's forces learning moderates the link between negative coaching and also the undermining among employees (Tapas et al. 2016). Yu showed that the undermining created by coworkers, supervisors, and customers affects employees' service and their perceptions of their job fit (Yu, 2013). Through work relationships, the positive and negative emotions created in employees, affect the organizational climate. The envy variable as an experimental variable could explain 1.2% of the changes within the organizational climate-dependent variable (Özkoç, & Çaliskan, 2015). Employees who have weaker relationships with supervisors have a greater tendency to point out a better level of tendency, and ultimately employees who are more envy exhibit less organizational citizenship behaviors than other employees (Kim, Anil & Kowa, 2010; Bakker et al., 2017). Although envy was introduced as one construct within the early research, new research has shown that that specialize in promoting one's position or weakening one's envy creates two distinct constructs for envy, which are called as safe and destructive by scientists (Long & Krocius, 2014). Protasi believes that the twin category of envy does not reveal all the truth; but, a brand new dimension, namely the power or incapacity of the individual to attain the goal should be added to the previous division to higher understand envy and accordingly, a quadruple classification including encouraging, static (hidden), passive (potentially destructive) and aggressive (actually destructive), is more comprehensive to hide every kind of envy (Protasi, 2016; Wendsche et al., 2017).

#### ➤ *Social Undermining*

Wincore and Renren first introduced the social undermining concept. Rook is that the person among contemporary theorists actively encouraged researchers to pay more attention to the problematic aspects of social bonds. Wincore et al. have defined social undermining as 'negative emotions and feelings like anger' as negative evaluations of the attitudes, activities, efforts, and behaviors of the intended individual and other behaviors that are designed to limit one's ability to attain instrumental goals. Rook believes that problematic interactions are actions taken by social networking members that cause people to feel embarrassed and hesitant in their relationships with those that have taken action, which he describes as a series of negative social interactions, problematic social bonds and negative social interactions that result in social undermining (Khaefolahi and Alipour Darwish, 2010). This also includes negative evaluation of the person's attitudes, activities, efforts, and other intentional behavior by the supervisor and associates that enhance the undermined person's abilities to disrupting attainable business goals, voluntary passive behaviors, like refusing to supply the critical and essential information and dynamic behaviors like insults, disturbing but silent movements with facial expressions, repeated abuse, and gossip (Yu., 2013: 539-550). Research on social undermining supported psychology research are focused on the extent of problematic social interactions within the individuals' set of experiences. In an exceedingly paper on the negative aspects of social interactions, Rook examined the consequences of psychological well-being on the positive and negative effects of social interactions on the health status of older women, and

concluded that the consequences of negative activities on women's health were far stronger than positive ones (Schreurs and de Ridder, 1997).

It should be noted that preliminary research has focused more on the positive aspects of social interaction and its benefits as social support. The negative concept of social undermining has been raised, specializing in the negative effects of social undermining on physical and mental state. Studying the course of this research reveals that the topic of social undermining is first formed within the property right of psychology then enters into organizational studies (Duffy et al., 2012).

#### ➤ *Envy and Social Undermining*

According to Nietzsche (1887/1967), within the Christian religion in which poor people defeat influential people due to sacred ethics, envy is the root of equality. There are many statements about the widespread role of envy in any respect levels of society by the famous sociologist Helmut Schoeck (1969). In these statements, envy could be a fundamental interpretation of cultural norms that help maintain social stability, though this process ultimately results in personal corruption. For the Christian philosopher, Elme Marie Caro (2004), envy is the core of sinful behavior. Another aspect of envy was discovered by the extraordinarily conservative philosopher Rand (1971), who was, in fact, vituperation of envy, per which the envy mindset spread about half of the 20th century. Since the poor were an outsized part of society at that point, and this class failed to have access to the facilities of the upper classes, there was a sort of "hatred of the goodness" among the people, and also the negative dimension of envy became more highlighted. Also, philosophers who were curious about stimulating people to attain social equality have usually raised envy's difficulty (e.g., Nozick & Rawls, 1974) (Nandedkar, 2011). According to de la Mora (1987), the standards for fair distribution of products, especially capital and income, are more influenced by envy, which suggests another dimension of envy. He argues that philanthropists often demand social and economic justice, but what is best in advancing these demands is envy (Kemp and Bolle 2013). Although researchers mostly examine the negative dimensions and consequences of organizational envy, recent years have also pointed to the positive uses of organizational envy. A brand new concept of envy has been shown in Rawls (1971) as Benign envy. As an example, benign envy is void of the destructive aspects of envy and focuses on its motivational aspects. Since then, this kind of envy in organizations has studied by many researchers like Black (2011), Lang (2014), Ven (2009), etc.

Identifying the causes of envy in any research during this field can help the researcher. Cooper and Payne (1988) believe that many factors contribute to the sensation of envy. These factors are classified into two categories:

- Individual personal characteristics
- Situational factors that cause this sense within the person.

Low self-esteem is one of the individual traits that result in envy. Supported research findings, beliefs, values, and attitudes that someone has acquired during childhood influence his or her behavior within the workplace. Therefore, one's personal life experiences before their appointment to this job can influence one's sense of envy. Situational factors that generate this sentiment in organizational staff include competition, strategic downsizing, reengineering, cultural differentiation, performance appraisal and inappropriate HR applications, including unfair reward/punishment systems and upgrades (Özkoç, A., Çalışkan, 2015). The key points in determining the causes of envy is that envy is sometimes expressed by the concepts of injustice and inequality, as an example, "I tried quite anyone else to attain one thing, but he got more." it is worth noting, however, that inequality does not always exist; sometimes perception of inequality causes envy, and sometimes inequality is an excuse to justify envy, arisen for other reasons, while there is also no inequality within the universe (Smith, 1991). An examination of the determinants of envy shows that almost all researchers are mainly focused on the jealous person. However, in terms of its meanings, envy could be a reasonably social feeling that features a minimum of one jealous person, and one who is exposed to jealousy and future research should also address such cases (Lange and Crusius, 2015).

#### ➤ Hypotheses

According to the explanations provided in this study, on the one hand, we intend to examine the relationship between envy, justice, and social undermining by a predetermined model to conclude the findings stated in the study and on the other hand, we investigate the impact of different types of envy on social undermining. Finally, the fit of the obtained models will be examined. Therefore, the hypotheses of this research are considered in two stages: the main and secondary hypotheses.

Emulative envy, defined as a form of envy where an individual desires to achieve what another person has through self-improvement, can still result in social undermining behaviors. Although emulative envy is generally associated with personal growth and aspiration, it can lead to negative actions if the envious individual perceives the envied person as a competitor or obstacle. This perception may trigger behaviors aimed at undermining the envied individual to level the playing field or diminish their perceived advantage (Smith et al., 1999). Thus, emulative envy can foster social undermining as a way to counteract feelings of inadequacy or jealousy.

*H1: Emulative envy has a positive effect on social undermining.*

Inert envy, characterized by a passive longing for what another person has without proactive attempts to improve oneself, can lead to social undermining. Individuals experiencing inert envy often feel stuck and dissatisfied but lack the motivation to make constructive changes in their own lives (Smith et al., 1999). This passivity can result in destructive behaviors aimed at undermining the envied person's achievements or status as a coping mechanism for their own feelings of inadequacy (Duffy et al., 2006). Consequently, inert envy can contribute to a hostile work environment through passive-aggressive actions.

*H2: Inert envy has a positive effect on social undermining.*

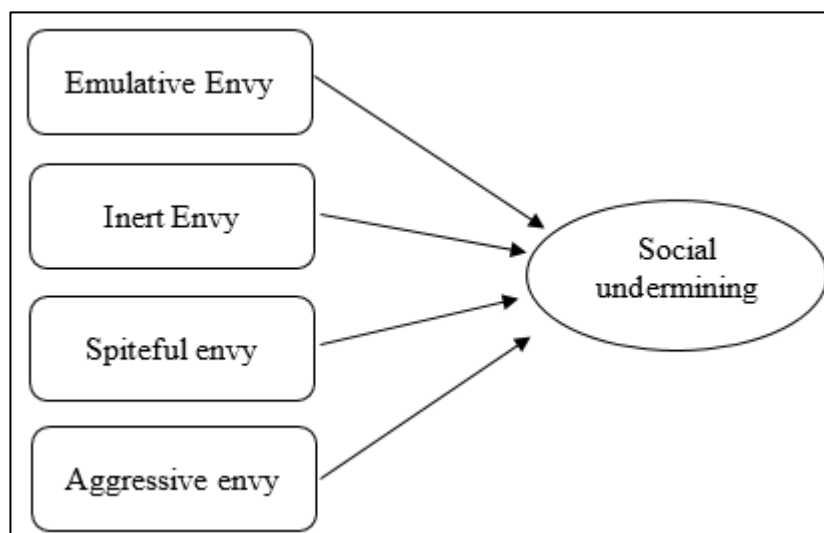
Spiteful envy, marked by a malicious desire to see the envied person lose their advantages, even without benefiting the envious individual, is directly linked to social undermining. This form of envy is characterized by active hostility and a desire to harm the envied individual's reputation or success, regardless of any personal gain (Smith et al., 1999). Individuals driven by spiteful envy are likely to engage in deliberate undermining behaviors, such as sabotaging work or spreading rumors, to bring down the envied person (Greenbaum et al., 2014). Such behaviors are driven by a deep-seated desire to see the envied person suffer.

*H3: Spiteful envy has a positive effect on social undermining.*

Aggressive envy involves overt hostility and direct actions intended to harm the envied individual. This intense form of envy manifests through aggressive behaviors, including sabotage and verbal attacks, aimed at diminishing the envied person's achievements or status (Duffy et al., 2006). Individuals experiencing aggressive envy often act out their hostility through various forms of social undermining, which disrupts workplace harmony and negatively impacts the morale and productivity of the affected individuals (Isa & Wilde, 2015). Aggressive envy thus directly contributes to an increase in social undermining behaviors.

*H4: Aggressive envy has a positive effect on social undermining.*

The research model is based on the model proposed by Eissa & Wyland (2015), which can be depicted as follows.



**Fig1. Hypothesized Theoretical Model**

### III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study is a quantitative and applied research. It is also descriptive-correlational in terms of research methods. The statistical population of the study consists of the telecommunication staff of Tehran province, which is 500 persons. Among these employees, 217 persons were selected as samples required in the LISREL software (according to Cochran formula) using a stratified random sampling method.

The initial version of the research questionnaire was prepared based on previous research literature, and studies and its validity and reliability have been tested. In this research, the content validity and factor validity were investigated for evaluating the questions. The experts' help was used to assess the content validity of this questionnaire. Also, the validity of each construct was obtained by confirmatory factor analysis. Cronbach's alpha method was used to evaluate tool reliability. According to the obtained results provided in Table 1, all dimensions have acceptable reliability (above 70%).

**Table1: Reliability of Questionnaire Variables**

Variable	Cronbach's alpha
Social Undermining	<b>94%</b>
Emulative Envy	<b>85%</b>
Inert Envy	<b>87%</b>
Spiteful envy	<b>93%</b>
Aggressive envy	<b>93%</b>

### IV. DATA ANALYSIS

The analysis of the study's hypotheses regarding the relationship between different types of envy and social undermining reveals significant findings, which provide valuable insights into the impact of envy on workplace behavior. The results are summarized in the following table, detailing the p-values, t-values, path coefficients, and hypothesis confirmations.

The results confirm Hypothesis H1 with a path coefficient of 0.67 and a high t-value of 6.74, indicating a strong positive effect of emulative envy on social undermining. Emulative envy, characterized by a desire to achieve what another person has through self-improvement, leads individuals to engage in social undermining when they perceive the envied person as a competitor (Smith et al., 1999). This behavior can manifest as subtle actions aimed at diminishing the envied person's status to reduce competitive pressure or to equalize the perceived advantages (Duffy et al., 2006). The strong statistical significance ( $p < 0.001$ ) underlines the robustness of this relationship and its relevance in workplace dynamics.

Hypothesis H2 is confirmed with a path coefficient of 0.86 and an even higher t-value of 8.55, suggesting a very strong positive effect of inert envy on social undermining. Inert envy, characterized by passive longing and lack of motivation to self-improve, can lead individuals to undermine their colleagues as a way to cope with their own dissatisfaction and feelings of inadequacy (Smith et al., 1999). The high statistical significance ( $p < 0.001$ ) of this result emphasizes that individuals experiencing inert envy may resort to social undermining as a passive-aggressive strategy to address their unfulfilled desires and frustrations.

The confirmation of Hypothesis H3, with a path coefficient of 0.55 and a t-value of 5.27, indicates a significant positive relationship between spiteful envy and social undermining. Spiteful envy, which involves a malicious desire to see another person fail, directly contributes to social undermining behaviors. Individuals with spiteful envy are likely to engage in deliberate actions designed to harm the envied person's reputation or status, driven by a need to see the envied individual's success diminished (Greenbaum et al., 2014). The significance of this result ( $p < 0.001$ ) underscores the destructive nature of spiteful envy in fostering negative workplace interactions.

Hypothesis H4 is confirmed with a path coefficient of 0.41 and a t-value of 4.14, reflecting a positive effect of aggressive envy on social undermining. Aggressive envy, characterized by overt hostility and active attempts to harm the envied individual, leads to various forms of social

undermining behaviors, such as sabotage and direct attacks (Duffy et al., 2006). The result is statistically significant ( $p < 0.001$ ), suggesting that aggressive envy significantly influences the likelihood of engaging in undermining actions aimed at reducing the envied person's standing or success.

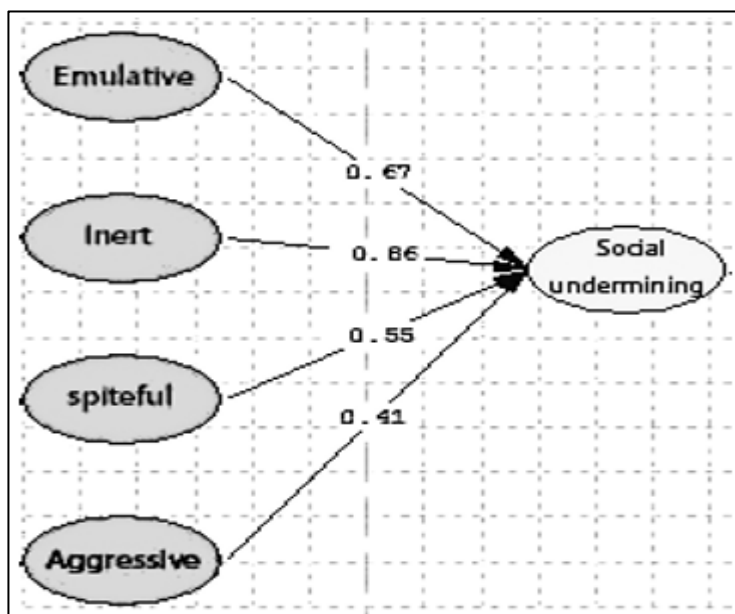


Fig. 3: Structural Equations Model of the Research in the Standard Mode

Table3. Analysis Results for Hypotheses

<i>Ha</i>	Direct path	Path coefficient	T-value	P-value	RESULT
<b>H1</b>	The Emulative envy has a positive effect on social undermining	0.67	6.74	0.000	confirmed
<b>H2</b>	The Inert envy has a positive effect on social undermining	0.86	8.55	0.000	confirmed
<b>H3</b>	The Spiteful envy has a positive effect on social undermining	0.55	5.27	0.000	confirmed
<b>H4</b>	Aggressive envy has a positive effect on social undermining	0.41	4.14	0.000	confirmed

➤ *Assessing the Fitting of the Model*

Two different models were used in this study to test the main and secondary hypotheses. Specific indices are used to check the fit of the model. Table 2 shows the calculated values of these indices compared to the allowed values, which indicate the optimal fit of the model.

Table4. Comparison of Model Fit Indices with allowed value

Indicators	Allowed value	Model calculated factor	Result
<b>GFI</b>	> 0.9	0.96	Good Fit
<b>AGFI</b>	> 0.9	0.95	Good Fit
<b>RMR</b>	Closer to zero the better	0.07	Good Fit
<b>NFI</b>	> 0.9	0.96	Good Fit
<b>IFI</b>	> 0.9	0.94	Good Fit



Based on a rule of thumb, the assumed model (the model under assessing) is fitted when the calculated coefficients of Table 2 are within the permissible range. If the coefficients are outside the permissible range, it means that the index was fitted weakly. A comparison of the column of calculated coefficients with the allowed columns indicates that the model fit indices are suitable.

## V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The study's findings highlight the significant role of various forms of envy in contributing to social undermining within the workplace. The analysis provides robust evidence supporting the positive relationship between emulative, inert, spiteful, and aggressive envy and social undermining behaviors.

Emulative envy was found to have a substantial positive effect on social undermining. This type of envy arises when individuals desire to achieve similar status or success as another person through self-improvement. However, it can also result in undermining behaviors when individuals feel that the envied person's success creates an unfair competitive environment (Smith et al., 1999; Duffy et al., 2006). The significant effect suggests that even envy aimed at self-betterment can manifest negatively in workplace interactions, potentially damaging relationships and overall work atmosphere.

Inert envy demonstrated the strongest positive effect on social undermining. Inert envy, characterized by passive longing without proactive efforts to improve oneself, often leads to social undermining as a form of indirect aggression. This form of envy can exacerbate feelings of frustration and inadequacy, leading individuals to undermine their colleagues as a maladaptive coping mechanism (Smith et al., 1999). The high t-value underscores the pronounced impact inert envy has on workplace behavior.

Spiteful envy was also confirmed to significantly contribute to social undermining. This type of envy involves malicious intent to see another person fail, which aligns with findings that spiteful envy drives individuals to engage in deliberate actions aimed at harming the envied person's reputation and success (Greenbaum et al., 2014). This result indicates that spiteful envy can actively fuel hostile behaviors, undermining colleagues and disrupting workplace harmony.

Aggressive envy showed a positive effect on social undermining, though less pronounced compared to other forms of envy. Aggressive envy, characterized by overt hostility and direct attempts to diminish the envied individual's status, results in various forms of undermining behavior. The effect, while significant, suggests that aggressive envy contributes to social undermining, albeit to a lesser degree compared to other forms (Duffy et al., 2006). This highlights the need for organizations to address not only overt aggressive behaviors but also other, less obvious forms of envy.

The findings of this study underscore the importance of addressing various forms of envy within organizational settings to mitigate their detrimental effects on workplace behavior. Each type of envy—emulative, inert, spiteful, and aggressive—contributes to social undermining in distinct ways, affecting both the individuals involved and the broader organizational environment.

The study extends the understanding of social undermining by incorporating envy as a distinct variable. Previous research has largely focused on the broader impacts of social undermining without isolating envy as a key factor (Isa & Wilde, 2015; Greenbaum et al., 2014). By demonstrating how different types of envy contribute to undermining behaviors, this research provides a nuanced perspective that can inform organizational strategies for managing and reducing such behaviors.

To effectively address social undermining, organizations should implement comprehensive strategies that include promoting positive workplace relationships and managing envy-related conflicts. This can be achieved through fostering an environment of transparency and fairness, as well as offering support and developmental opportunities for employees (Greenbaum et al., 2014; Isa & Wilde, 2015). Managers should focus on creating a culture of collaboration and constructive feedback rather than competition, which can mitigate the impact of envy-driven behaviors.

Furthermore, the study highlights the importance of organizational leaders actively engaging in practices that reduce perceived injustice and promote ethical behavior. Implementing informal negotiation sessions and enhancing ethical standards can help address the underlying causes of envy and social undermining, ultimately leading to a healthier work environment (Kim & Krishna, 2017; Seyed Naghavi & Rafati, 2015).

In conclusion, this research serves as a foundational step toward understanding the complex interplay between envy and social undermining in the workplace. Future research should build upon these findings to explore additional variables and interventions, aiming to develop more targeted strategies for reducing social undermining and fostering positive organizational dynamics.

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