



## Untangling Leader-Member Exchange and Employee Envy: An Empirical Investigation Within the Indian IT Sector

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### Abstract

Within the framework of envy and its related consequences, this paper inspects the dynamics of superior-subordinate relationships, also known as Leader-member exchange, in the management literature. Based on the Leader-Member Exchange theory, we propose that employees lacking a strong camaraderie with their supervisors (low-quality LMX) will experience envy towards peers who enjoy a high-quality LMX with their supervisors. Subsequently, they will engage in uncivil behaviours and exhibit an "intention to quit." Hypotheses were tested using hierarchical regression on data obtained from two hundred and four software engineers in different Indian information technology (IT) companies. This study provides evidence in favour of all the suggested hypotheses and expands upon existing research on the subject by illustrating the adverse effects of envy in the workplace.

Keywords: Leader-Member Exchange; Employee Envy; Intention to Quit

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## 1. Introduction

Fundamental to leadership research, the LMX theory highlights the dynamic relationship between leaders and subordinates (Fida *et al.*, 2020; Duffy *et al.*, 2012). Employees' commitment to work, job satisfaction and performance are all influenced by the nature of this relationship (Farh *et al.*, 2020; Bamberger & Belogolovsky, 2017). The differential treatment inherent in LMX may invoke negative emotions, such as envy, among employees (Guarana & Barnes, 2021).

Envy, which is believed to be perceived through feelings of inadequacy, hatred, and hostility towards the good things that others are perceived to enjoy, causes workplace cohesion and negative consequences both for the employees and the organisation (Kacmar *et al.*, 2021). This research concentrates on the complex inter-relationship between LMX and envy and how the nature of interactions and exchanges between leaders and their subordinates impacts the development of envy and the subsequent effects on workplace interpersonal relationships (Zhang & Bednall, 2020).

This study discusses the impact of LMX on employee envy and its subsequent consequences on employee hostility (HS) and WI, as described by Wang and Shi (2021). The study also delves into the connection between envy and LMX from the perspective of employee hostility (Wei & Si, 2020). Existing research has shown that personality is a precursor to behaviour (Sung & Choi, 2020). As such, it is essential to consider the study of employee hostility as a personality trait in relation to its impact and implication on EV. Therefore, employee hostility possesses the significant potential to affect behaviours in the workplace.

The Indian IT sector has been booming even in uncertain geopolitical situations. There have been 60,000 hires in the financial year 2023-24, taking the total number of employees' strength to 5.43 million. However, a recent Business Today report (TCS, Infosys, Wipro: How HR issues plague the IT sector) suggests that the IT industry in India is facing several critical challenges, such as dwindling employee loyalty, high attrition, moonlighting, and quiet quitting. Hence, this necessitates an explorative study on organisational issues that lead to disrupting human behaviour in the IT industry.

## 2. Theoretical Background

### 2.1 LMX Theory

According to LMX theory, leaders have dyadic relationships with specific members of their workforce, which vary between high-quality exchanges-including trust, respect, and reciprocal obligation-aspects, and low-quality transactions, which include being mainly transactional and formal (Tepper *et al.*, 2020). In many ways, high-quality leader-member exchange leads to positive benefits for the employees; they attain better access to resources within the organisation as well as opportunities for growth and support within the same institution (Eissa & Wyland, 2016). However, individuals with poor-quality LMX may feel excluded and receive unequal outcomes, which could promote dissatisfaction and cause them to withdraw their engagement (Kim *et al.*, 2019). The differences in LMX characteristics create a hierarchical level of LMX in teams, where some employees are given special treatment compared to their colleagues (Liao *et al.*, 2010). This inequity may also be especially common in scenarios where it is perceived that resources, attention, and opportunities are limited in nature, thus exacerbating jealousy due to self-perceptions of disadvantage (Li & Tan, 2020).

## 2.2 Envy in the Workplace

Envy (EV) is an emotional experience of complexity, triggered whenever a person perceives another person to be in possession of a coveted benefit they do not hold for themselves. In the workplace, feelings of envy might be caused by factors like inequalities in acknowledgment or benefits or by features of communication with superiors (Liu *et al.*, 2020). While envy is oftentimes considered a negative emotion that fosters unproductive work behaviour, it can, at the same time, also be an incentive towards changing one's performance or earning similar rewards. It is very damaging, therefore, to overlook its potential (Meier *et al.*, 2020). A variety of negative outcomes may be developed due to envy, such as reduced job satisfaction, increased intent to leave the job, and even the degradation of interpersonal relationships. Then, in extreme situations, envy causes sabotage, decreased cooperation, and erosion of team cohesion, thus culminating in harming organisational effectiveness (Ng & Feldman, 2015).

In addition, envy may be particularly relevant to any situation in which an individual perceives that their co-workers are receiving “unfair advantages that aren't a result of performance or merit” (Menges *et al.*, 2017). For example, if an employee believes that a co-worker enjoys special treatment at the workplace not because of professional competencies but due to personal bias, the succeeding envy can become more intense and destructive for them (Restubog *et al.*, 2020).

### 3. Conceptual Framework and Formulation of Hypothesis

#### 3.1 *The Intersection of LMX and Envy*

Leader-member exchange is characterised as the quality of the relational exchange between subordinates and their direct supervisor (Shu & Lazatkhan, 2017). LMX underscores that the efficacy of leadership is incomprehensible without analysing the reciprocal influence between supervisors and employees over time (Schaubroeck *et al.*, 2016). The premise posits that a supervisor maintains distinct types of working relationships with each subordinate within the same workgroup (Rowold & Borgmann, 2020). Leaders cultivate high-quality LMX relationships with certain subordinates, characterised by reciprocal exchanges that exceed formal organisational requirements, while with others, they maintain low-quality LMX relationships confined to the execution of tasks stipulated by formal contracts (Peng *et al.*, 2020). The high-quality LMX comes with much more trust, affection, commitment, and respect (Qian *et al.*, 2020).

The association between LMX and feelings of envy is complex and dynamic. The high-quality relationships in LMX are likely to cushion and enhance feelings of jealousy, respectively (Charlier & Guay, 2020). Specifically, employees who have a good relationship with their leader feel more secure and jealous of their peers (Birtch *et al.*, 2021; Cohen-Charash & Mueller, 2017).

In contrast, the existence of robust leader-member exchange (LMX) relationships can potentially provoke feelings of envy in individuals who consider their own exchanges to be of inferior quality. When employees assess their relationship with their leader in comparison to that of their peers, they may experience envy, particularly if they regard the differences in treatment as unjustified. Such circumstances may lead to fragmentation within the team, culminating in increased tension, conflict, and a reduction in overall performance (Bernerth *et al.*, 2021). Consequently, we suggest

H<sub>1</sub>: The quality of Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) will exhibit a negative correlation with envy.

#### 3.2 *LMX, Hostility and Envy*

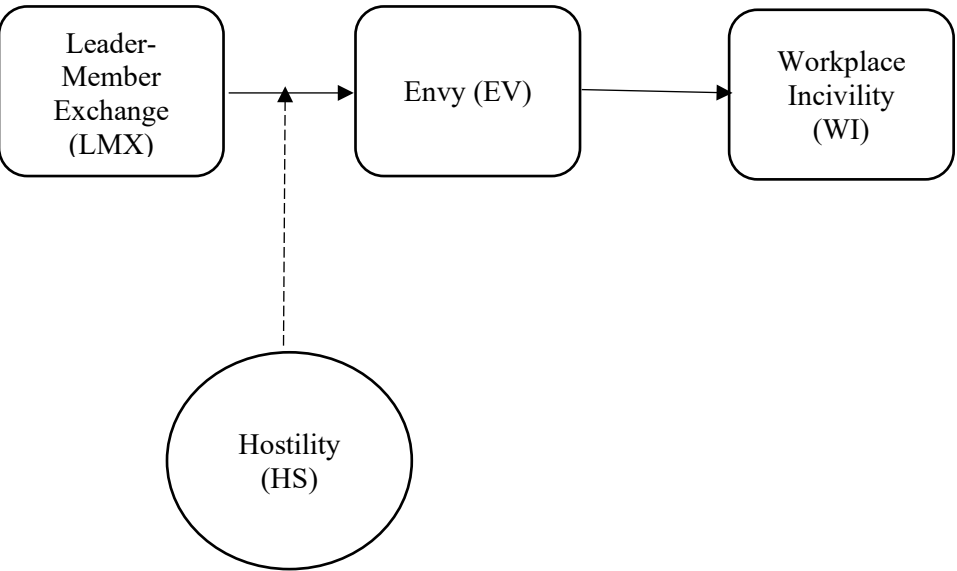
Differentially embedded treatment in LMX could serve as a robust source of envy and hostility, as posed by Bolino *et al.* (2020). Below-average LMX relationship holders experience marginalisation and devaluation, which usually results in resentment towards their leaders and others enjoying a high-quality relationship (Erdogan *et al.*, 2021). This frustration might

emerge in hostility toward the manager as a result of perceived imbalances or towards teammates who are motivated by jealousy. Such jealousy based on what is perceived to be unevenness in LMX bonds could lead to various forms of hostility (Brown *et al.*, 2021). The workers may exhibit passive-aggressive behaviour, for instance, withholding information, providing decreased effort, or negatively impacting the work of any envied peers. For example, at an extreme level, jealousy can be expressed as overt aggression through confrontational behaviour and arguments (Bordia *et al.*, 2021).

The hostilities not only disrupt the dynamics of a team but may also have a ripple effect, thus instigating a detrimental atmosphere at work where trust and cooperation are highly reduced (Eissa & Lester, 2020). In that case, such a cycle promotes an unhealthy loop that can enhance LMX relationships. Hostile behaviours may distance employees from their leaders, and this can deter the effort to enhance the quality of the LMX relationship. When there is hostility, the leader might sever distance from the employee, thereby reinforcing this low-quality exchange, which will continue to fuel envy and hostility (Aryee *et al.*, 2020). This contributes to a vicious cycle of increased dissatisfaction, disengagement, and, consequently, turnover of employees. *Thus, we propose,*

***Hypothesis 2: Employee hostility moderates the negative relationship between leader-member exchange and envy, making it stronger for those with higher hostility.***

**Figure 1:** Framework Proposed by the authors



### *3.3 Envy and Workplace Incivility*

Workplace incivility is defined as low-intensity, deviant behaviour that violates norms of respect yet is generally ambiguous about malicious intent (Meier & Gross, 2015). There are various forms of incivility, including rudeness, dismissal gestures, gossip, or exclusionary practices (Mousa & Puhakka, 2021). Different from the more overt strains of workplace aggression, where bullying and harassment represent the greatest forms, incivility is often covert, making it difficult to address or control. Envy is the most common emotional basis of incivility that impedes relationship quality and can motivate employees to vent against their peers of whom they feel envious (Greenbaum *et al.*, 2020). Employees can vent their feelings about jealousy avoidance through subtle, indirect, and uncivil behaviour to avoid direct conflict with others (Chua & Koay, 2020; Kim & Park, 2020).

Envy interacts with incivility to result in adverse effects on the welfare of employees, such as heightened feelings of stress and anxiety and job dissatisfaction for employees caught in this cycle (Kim *et al.*, 2021). In the long run, these feelings lead to burnout, low productivity, and perhaps higher turnover rates in the organisation. In fact, they destroy trust and cooperation among teams (Chen *et al.*, 2020). When employees act rudely or are victims of incivility, it negates collaboration at the workplace and causes employees to become disengaged in supporting each other (Lee & Duffy, 2020; Choi & Kim, 2021). Such behaviour, if left unattended, can ripen within an organisation's climate and germinate as a culture of disrespect and negativity (Liu & Liu, 2021). These issues can easily tarnish the reputation of the organisation, thus making it hard to recruit and retain high performers and eventually pave the way for long-term declines in organisational performance. Thus, based on the discussion above, we suggest

***Hypothesis 3: Envy is positively related to workplace incivility.***

## **4. METHODOLOGY**

The research sample consisted of software developers from Indian IT organisations who possess advanced technical expertise and actively engage in the exchange of information. Studies indicate that collaborating in teams with a shared objective might result in frequent evaluations of both work-related and non-work-related aspects (Nielsen & Knardahl, 2021). Engaging in comparisons with others and experiencing jealousy might potentially have a negative impact on one's self-esteem (Schilpzand &

Wang, 2020). We believe that IT organisations are appropriate workplace structures for investigating the outcomes of leader-member exchange and envy (Smith & Kim, 2021).

A total of 372 software developers were sent a Google form link to participate in the research. A response rate of 71.77% was attained, with a total of 267 legitimate responses (Singleton & Straits, 2005). The configuration of our sample consisted of 63% males and 37% females. The average age of the responders was 31, with a range of 23 to 35. As per Wu *et al.*'s 2019 recommendations, the respondents were pre-informed about the study's objective, and their participation and confidentiality were ensured. This enhanced the accuracy and efficiency of the data, resulting in a higher rate of response. A precursor was provided to the participants, and they were instructed to select a person (X) from within their company with whom they frequently collaborate and with whom they frequently compare themselves. When it comes to securing a high-quality relationship with their supervisor, which is very important to their sense of self-worth, this individual ought to be perceived by them as being more successful than they are. According to the research that has been done on the subject of eliciting envy, these instructions were appropriate (Zhang *et al.*, 2018)

Most of the scales that were utilised in this research were derived from previously published works, while others were altered to better fit the parameters of this particular investigation. All of the following is a description of the measures that were utilised: All of the items were evaluated using a Likert scale with five points, ranging from 1 in the Strongly Disagree category to 5 in the Strongly Agree category. It was Shu and Lazatkhan's 2017 survey instrument that served as the basis for the Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) survey instrument. The items that were developed by Cohen-Charash and Mueller, 2017 were adapted for use in the current study in order to measure envy. The items that were proposed by Aryee *et al.*, 2020 were used to measure hostility (HS), and finally, the Workplace Incivility (WIC) instrument that was developed by Meier and Gross, 2015 was used to measure workplace misconduct.

## 5. RESULTS

SPSS computes the results of inter-correlations among study variables. All the scales' Cronbach's alpha values are shown in the table along the diagonal and exceed the threshold of 0.70 set by Nunally (1978). We tested for convergent validity and discriminant validity first in search of construct validity. Convergent validity is the extent to which objects of the same construct correlate to the construct (Campbell & Fiske, 1959). SmartPLS

was used to extract factor loadings and cross-loadings of every indicator item to their corresponding latent constructs for convergent validity testing. Table 1 shows that every item loaded on their respective construct from a lower limit of 0.51 to an upper limit of 0.91.

**Table 2** Factor Loadings

Source: SPSS

	LMX	HS	EV	WIC
LMX 1	0.63			
LMX 2	0.71			
LMX 3	0.69			
LMX 4	0.81			
LMX 5	0.83			
LMX 6	0.81			
LMX 7	0.86			
HS 1		0.85		
HS 2		0.76		
HS 3		0.80		
HS 4		0.83		
HS 5		0.91		
EV1			0.80	
EV 2			0.83	
EV 3			0.71	
EV 4			0.86	
EV 5			0.79	
WIC 1				0.76
WIC 2				0.84
WIC 3				0.72
WIC 4				0.71
WIC 5				0.76
WIC 6				0.83
WIC 7				0.76

Furthermore, items significantly outperformed any other construct in terms of their construct loading. A general rule of thumb for determining convergent validity is that all items should load more heavily on their respective construct than on the other constructs. In our findings, the factor loading of each item on its own construct was highly significant, with all factor loadings exceeding 0.63. These latent constructs’ convergent validity measures are verified by the factor loading depicted in Table 2.



We employed the method proposed by Fornell and Larcker (1981) to ensure discriminant validity (Campbell & Fiske, 1959). Discriminant validity is the extent to which items distinguish between constructs or quantify distinct constructs. The measured scales' discriminant validity results are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2 Discriminant validity

Variables	LMX	HS	Envy	WIC
LMX	<b>0.83</b>			
HS	-0.03	<b>0.7</b>		
Envy	-0.53	0.03	<b>0.86</b>	
WIC	-0.30	0.03	0.45	<b>0.72</b>

During the course of the research, we utilised hierarchical regression analysis to test the hypotheses. Envy and workplace incivility were used as dependent variables in the regression model that was used to test the hypothesis. Leader-member exchange and envy were used as independent variables, and hostility was used as the moderating variable. It was hypothesised that the presence of hostility would have a moderating effect on the relationship between leader-member exchange and envy.

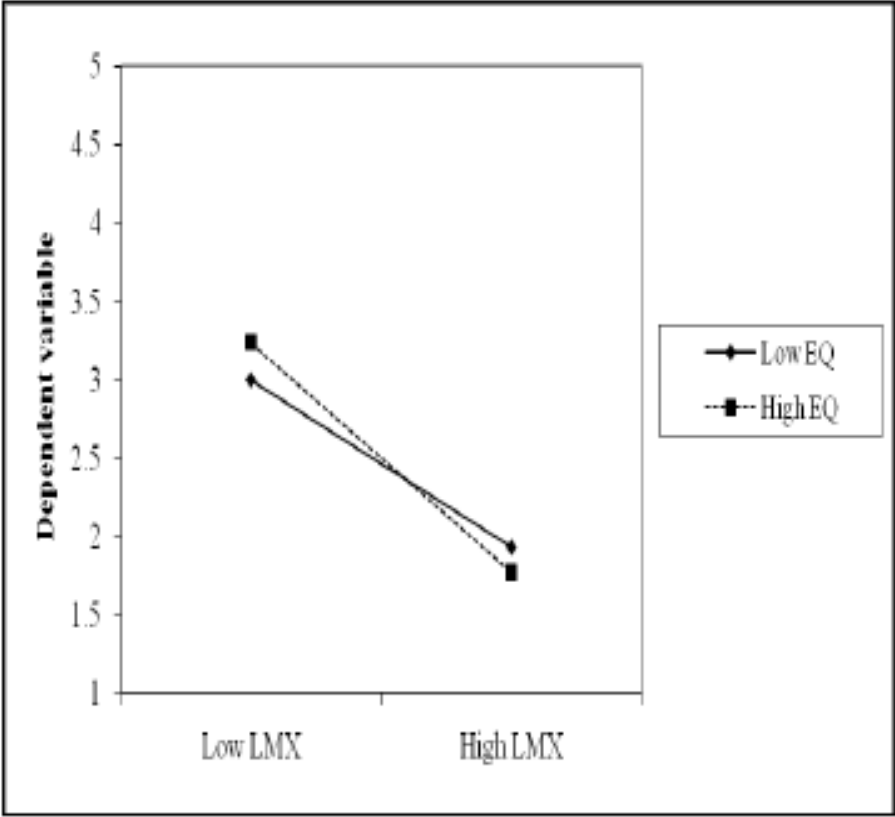
TABLE 4 Results of Hierarchical Regression Model

Dependent variable	Predictor Variable	Std. Coefficient Beta	t-value	Model Fit	R <sup>2</sup>	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>
ENVY	LMX	-0.38***	-2.98	13.97*** *	0.36	0.28
	HS	.23	1.38			
	LMX*HS	-.27*	-1.35			
WIC	ENVY	0.45****	7.03	13.45*** *	0.21	0.20
*p<0.1; ***P<0.01; ****P<0.001						

Based on the regression analysis, it was found that the dependent variable, envy, was significantly explained by leader-member exchange ( $\beta = -0.38$ ,  $t = -2.98$ ,  $R^2 = 0.36$ , according to the results). At the level of significance of 0.01, the independent variable was found to be significant. As a consequence of this, the findings offered substantial backing for hypothesis 1.

There was a significant negative relationship between LMX and envy for individuals who were high in equity sensitivity, as indicated by post hoc analyses (Figure 2), which indicated that the difference was statistically significant ( $\beta = -.66$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

Post hoc Analyses



Although weak, the relationship was significant for individuals with low equity sensitivity ( $\beta = -.41$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). This strengthens hypothesis 1(b).

Envy significantly explained workplace incivility in the final regression analysis. The independent variable envy ( $\beta = 0.45$ ,  $t = 7.03$ ,  $R^2 = 0.21$ ) was significant at 0.001 level. Also, the variance analysis showed a p-value of 0. Thus, the model is valid. Support for hypothesis 3 was found.

## 6.DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study shows that supervisor-subordinate relationships can cause envy. Comparing themselves to in-group (high LMX) subordinates can make out-group (low LMX) subordinates envious. This effect may be stronger for hostile employees. Envy will reduce knowledge sharing, lead to quitting, and increase workplace drama. High LMX has been linked to higher job satisfaction, organisational commitment, organisational citizenship, and lower turnover intentions. This paper tests a supervisor-subordinate envy model and related outcomes to add to the literature on LMX and employee emotions (Tremblay & Rolland, 2020; Wu *et al.*, 2015).

### 6.1 Practical Implications

Comprehending the correlation between Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) and envy holds significant implications for organisations, leaders, and human resource practitioners. These implications can inform strategies to enhance workplace dynamics, improve employee relations, and foster a positive organisational culture.

#### 6.1.1 Leadership Development and Training

Leader-member exchange (LMX) involves unfair treatment, which calls for balanced leadership training programs. Leaders need to learn how to spot and handle jealousy when dealing with their team members (Van den Broeck & De Witte 2020). Giving equal attention to all team members provides them with the same level of support and chances to grow, which helps cut down on jealousy, no matter the quality of the leader-member exchange (LMX).

#### 6.1.2 HR Policies and Practices

HR policies can help lower the risk of envy at work by promoting fairness and honesty in all interactions (Neves & Champion, 2015). A more equitable playing field can be achieved through efforts to promote diversity and inclusion. Also, the best way for HR to find and fix LMX and envy issues before they escalate is to set up anonymous feedback channels where workers can voice their concerns about perceived injustices or favouritism (Pan *et al.*, 2019).

#### 6.1.3 Team Dynamics and Collaboration

When envy arises, LMX can profoundly affect team dynamics. Allowing team goals and rewards instead of individual ones can reduce envy-fuelled competition. Teams that work together can improve relationships and

reduce envy (Nielsen & Knardahl, 2021). Leaders should actively involve team members in decision-making and give them a voice. This can provide a sense of belongingness and reduce envy in lower-quality LMX relationships. Leaders should also detect envy early and correct it by regularly assessing team dynamics. Surveys or focus groups can reveal how employees view team fairness and equity.

#### *6.1.4 Employee Well-being and Retention*

Envy and LMX influence employee well-being and retention. Workers dealing with negative feelings like envy need help from their companies. This help might include counselling, ways to handle stress, and programs to boost wellness (Pan et al. 2019). Workers who feel envious are more likely to quit their jobs. To keep employees and make them happier at work, companies can use smart strategies. These might involve plans to grow careers pairing up with mentors, and regular talks to check in.

#### *6.1.5 Organisational Culture and Ethical Considerations*

LMX and envy have an impact on company culture. Organisations should prioritise fairness and equity. Bosses need to act and set up systems that support these values throughout the company. Higher-ups should treat all staff and steer clear of playing favourites. The workplace environment needs to change to tackle LMX envy (Pan *et al.* 2020). Companies can keep things fair and welcoming by offering diversity training, looking over their policies, and listening to what employees have to say.

### **6.2 Social Implications**

Envy also has profound social implications in organisational contexts that impact individual and collective dynamics. The results suggest that they do so through a propensity of assessing LMX-ratings. These consequences can extend beyond the four walls and manifest in society at large, shaping attitudes to leadership, fairness, as well the broader culture of organisations.

#### *6.2.1 Workplace Equity and Fairness*

Leaders can assimilate or factionalise the workplace, pushing those who are in low-quality exchanges onto the margins and consequently reducing morale, staff attrition may increase and levels of trust in leadership could be further diminished. The social implications are emerging under the concepts of workplace fairness and equity discourse (Mao & Chang, 2021). Such systemic inequalities, brought about by uneven treatment of employees can impact satisfaction and performance levels at work among many more facets that define the organisational climate.

### *6.2.2 Impact on Team Cohesion and Collaboration*

Envy, especially towards leadership-favoured co-workers, can damage team dynamics. Envy can cause teamwork to break down and create a toxic workplace in LMX-diverse environments. This hurts productivity and workplace culture because employees may gossip, exclude, or sabotage. Social implications include normalising such dynamics, which could affect how society values teamwork and collaboration (Lee & Duffy, 2019). If envy and competition become widespread in the workplace, individualism may overshadow collective success, reducing social capital.

### *6.2.3 Leadership Accountability and Social Responsibility*

Envy can be mitigated by leaders who are aware of it and take proactive steps to create an inclusive culture, transparent communication, and equitable resource distribution. This strategy benefits the company and sets a social standard for ethical leadership (Koopman *et al.*, 2020). Fair and inclusive leaders can inspire their employees to live by these values in their personal and social lives. Envy can fester and perpetuate inequality and mistrust in the organisation and community.

### *6.2.4 Organisational Culture and Social Norms*

LMX and envy affect organisational culture by rewarding or discouraging certain behaviours. Openly discussing envy can create a more honest and supportive workplace where employees feel valued regardless of their LMX rank. This can develop social norms around cooperation, respect, and success (Hassan & Hatmaer, 2020).

### *6.2.5 Employee Well-being and Mental Health*

Envy may ruin an employee's well-being and mental health, especially if it is associated with LMX disparities. As Harris *et al.* 2021 state, chronic envy contributes to stress, anxiety, and "depression, and thereby impair relationships at work and at home". Companies that do not attempt to mitigate the envy-inducing factors may foster a toxic and socially dangerous environment since this leads to mental health deterioration in their employees. On a social level, the issue of psychological and emotional effects of workplace factors should be recognised, and companies have to take a holistic approach to the well-being of their employees.

## *6.3 Limitations*

There are some limitations of the study that are worth mentioning. The utilised research model is not fully developed. Other factors, such as

competition-based reward systems (Jiang & Gu, 2020), certain personality traits (Greenbaum *et al.*, 2020), as well as certain aspects of organisations, might actually breed envy. Secondly, this study relies on cross-sectional data; hence, the issue of causal inferences cannot be addressed. Third, the reliance on one type of data collection method is still understandable due to the possibility of self-reports biasing the results: common method variance (Hackney *et al.*, 2020). Also, this study is purely based on the Indian context and hence cannot be generalisable. A Cross-national and cross-industry study would help in determining cultural and organisational factors which intervene in the relationship between the various constructs of the study

7. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Exploring the relationship between Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) and envy offers many opportunities to extend the current research. Envy has also been examined in the context of LMX in various empirical studies over the last several years. However, this area of research is still developing and there are many opportunities to enhance the understanding of how LMX-related processes shape envy and its effects in organisations.

1. Exploration of LMX and Envy Across Different Organizational Levels	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Manifestation of Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) and envy at various organisational levels, can be an interesting area of study. An examination of the progression of these processes across various hierarchical levels may be interesting.</li></ul>
2. Impact of Cultural and Contextual Factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Impact of cultural differences on the relationship between “LMX and envy” should also be explored. Exploring how organisational culture and climate moderate the relationship may help create healthier workplaces.</li></ul>
3. Mechanisms and Interventions to Mitigate Envy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• While the relationship between LMX and envy is well-documented, less is known about the mechanisms that can mitigate envy in the place of work. Forthcoming exploration may concentrate on pinpointing particular leadership behaviours, organisational policies, or team practices that can mitigate the occurrence of envy stemming from LMX differentials.</li></ul>

4. Technological and Virtual Leadership Dynamics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• As remote work and virtual teams become increasingly common, future research could investigate how LMX and envy dynamics play out in digital or virtual environments.</li><li>• Do virtual interactions exacerbate or mitigate the development of envy in LMX relationships?</li><li>• How does the lack of face-to-face interaction influence the perception of fairness and equity among team members?</li><li>• Exploring these questions could provide critical insights into leadership practices in the digital age.</li></ul>
5. Interplay Between LMX, Envy, and Other Workplace Emotions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Research could examine how positive emotions like empathy or gratitude can mitigate the damaging effects of envy in LMX relationships.</li></ul>

The topic “Leader-Member Exchange and envy” offer many research avenues. By studying LMX and envy dynamics across contexts, cultures, and organisational levels, scholars can better understand these complex phenomena. Future research should also identify practical ways to reduce envy's negative effects, creating healthier and more equitable workplaces. Research in this area will be essential for adapting leadership practices to the changing workplace, especially in digital and remote environments.

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