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# WHAT DRIVES STUDENT ENGAGEMENT? THE ROLE OF LEARNING GOAL ORIENTATION, FEELING ENVIED, AND ETHICAL CLIMATE

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Students' engagement in their studies during their time at university is a fundamental building block of a high-quality learning experience. In this paper, we investigate learning goal orientation as a predictor of student engagement in the context of higher education. Moreover, we examine whether the perception of feeling envied mediates this effect and investigate the moderating effect of ethical climate in this regard. The proposed moderated mediation model was tested on a sample of 230 business students. Results reveal that learning goal orientation is positively related with study engagement and that feeling envied mediates this relationship. We also affirm the moderating role of ethical climate in the relationship between learning goal orientation and study engagement. Specifically, in schools where the climate is perceived to be more ethical, student engagement is higher, regardless of how envied students feel. The paper concludes with a list of practical implications that may serve educators in their attempts to create conditions that foster students' engagement in class.

Keywords: student engagement, learning goal orientation, feeling envied, ethical climate, business school



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## INTRODUCTION

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The learning environment in the 21st century is characterized by rapid changes and technological suffusion (Yang & Wu, 2012), where students are spending less time studying since their entertainment choices often interfere with time spent studying (Hanson et al., 2010). However, learning and succeeding in school depends on engagement in school activities, reflected in the time and effort students put into their studies (Quaye et al., 2020). Thus, students' engagement during their university years has attracted growing interest, since it is a fundamental building block of a high-quality learning experience.

Engagement, which has been subject to diverse research perspectives (Zepke, 2014), is characterized as a state (Salanova et al., 2005) that comprises commitment, passion, enthusiasm, and involvement in an activity (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2010). It can also be conceptualized as a multidimensional construct, described as an ongoing, fulfilling state of mind that encompasses three aspects: vigor, dedication and absorption (Salanova et al., 2010; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2010). Yet, the existing research often treats engagement as a single concept. Study engagement is considered to be an important determinant of learning, achievement, and personal growth (Kahu, 2013; Salanova et al., 2010). Specifically, in the educational context, engagement is viewed as a means to achieve success (Morgan-Thomas & Dudau, 2019) and has a positive effect on academic performance, as it correlates positively with perceived learning, the number of passed exams (Schaufeli et al., 2002), and GPA, among others.

Engaged students will more likely enjoy the process of learning and benefit more generally from the learning experience (Noe et al., 2010) than those who are not engaged. Therefore, it is not surprising that education scholars have attempted to find ways to increase the engagement of students in classes (eg. Everett, 2017). In an attempt to understand what causes a student to be engaged, various studies have been conducted over the years. Among the predictors of student engagement were a sense of community (Vayre & Vonthron, 2017) and the teaching and learning environment (Kahu et al., 2017). However, our understanding of personal-level determinants of students' engagement remains limited. Among the very few studies exploring personality characteristics, it was found that psychological capital, motivation, self-efficacy, and individual interest elevated the engagement (Kahu et al., 2017; Vayre & Vonthron, 2017) of university students.

In this paper, we are interested in the psychological conditions of a student's engagement at university. Specifically, we explore how learning goal orientation – a desire to learn, de-

velop one's competences, and master new settings (Vande-Walle, 1997) – is linked with engagement. In developing our model, we follow Kahu's reasoning (Kahu, 2013) that student engagement can be understood as a psychosocial process that is affected by personal and institutional factors in a given context. Students enter social relationships and interactions with peers on a daily basis, and to account for this social aspect of the university experience, we explore what role feeling envied (Vecchio, 2005), a negative emotion that entails resentment of others, plays in student engagement. We also add perceptions of an ethical climate as an institutional factor. We aim to fulfill the following objectives: 1) test the relationship between learning goal orientation and business students' engagement; 2) investigate the mediating role of feeling envied in this relationship, and 3) evaluate the moderating effect of ethical climate in the proposed moderated mediation model. While the moderating effects of ethical climate on other relationships might be theoretically plausible, our intention is to investigate the interplay between ethical climate and feeling envied, therefore emphasizing both individual (i.e., feelings of envy) and institutional (i.e., ethical climate) notions of ethics in student engagement.

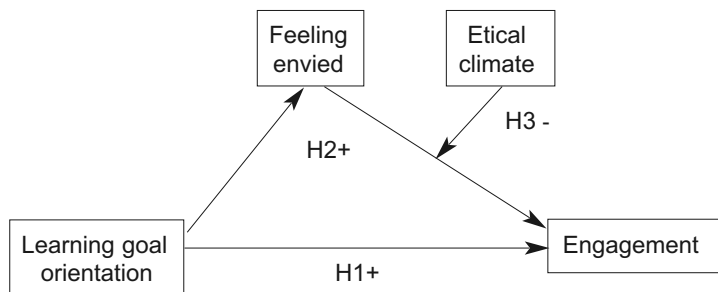
Our research offers four main contributions to the literature on management education. First, we introduce the concept of feeling envied as an important but neglected influence on students' engagement. Unlike being envious of others, the opposite, feeling envied by others, is a relatively understudied concept (Vecchio, 2005). By investigating envy in higher education, we respond to calls for exploring the effect of emotions on student engagement (Kahu, 2013). The second contribution lies in a more profound understanding of how contextual factors play out in an individual's study experience. We offer a new perspective on student engagement by including ethical climate as a moderating variable, while it was previously considered as a predictor (eg. Tseng & Fan, 2011). Specifically, our research reveals that contextual factors (i.e., ethical climate) play an important role in whether envious peers will promote or inhibit the engagement of students who are feeling envied. Third, we improve the understanding of predictors (i.e., a learning goal orientation) and consequences (i.e., engagement) of the feeling of being envied. Fourth, although scholars acknowledged the importance of ethical climate in co-creating students' ethical value systems and behaviors, studies on ethical climate in the educational context are still relatively rare. We enrich our understanding of how ethical climate can shape the desirable behaviors in an educational context (i.e., engagement).

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

At university, students' engagement in their studies can be viewed as one of the building blocks of a high-quality learning experience (Liem & Chong, 2017), leading to the development of a set of competences and knowledge of the studied area. As noted by Kahn (1990), "In engagement, people express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances" (p. 964). An engaged student invests a lot of effort in studying, which in turn leads to new knowledge and skills. Engagement is reflected in the time spent in the classroom, interactions with faculty members and peers, time spent preparing for class, attending extracurricular activities, etc. In sum, an engaged student actively co-creates his/her study experience.

Kahu (2013) recently offered a comprehensive conceptual framework of student engagement to outline the complex nature of the phenomenon and the factors that influence its occurrence alongside the consequences. Accordingly, student engagement can be understood as a psychosocial process that is impacted by personal and institutional factors in a given context. The student is positioned in the center, indicating the importance of considering the psychological perspective when exploring the engagement phenomenon. Two groups of influences are relevant in explaining engagement: psychosocial influences and structural influences. Following Kahu's (2013) propositions, our conceptual model focuses on the psychological conditions of student engagement, exploring goal orientation as the individual predictor, but including interrelational influences (i.e. the feeling of envy) and institutional influences (represented by ethical climate).

FIGURE 1  
Conceptual model



Note: H1 proposes a direct relationship between learning goal orientation and engagement. Next, a mediating effect of feeling envied (H2) and a moderating effect of ethical climate on the indirect relationship between learning goal orientation and engagement, as mediated by feeling envied (H3), are depicted.

## Learning goal orientation and engagement

Goal orientation is defined as the self-development beliefs and motivational orientation that frame the individuals' approach, interpretation, and response in a situation in which their performance is evaluated (Ames, 1992). When individuals approach a task from a learning (or mastery) goal orientation, they aim to increase the level of their competence or to understand the novel aspects of a given activity (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). Individuals can also adopt a performance goal orientation toward learning, thereby seeking to "demonstrate and validate the adequacy of their competence by seeking favorable judgments and avoiding negative judgments about their competence" (VandeWalle, 1997, p. 997). While learning goal orientation refers to the purpose of developing competence, performance goal orientation refers to the purpose of demonstrating the competence (Ames, 1992).

Student engagement can be defined as "the student's psychological investment in, and effort directed toward, learning, understanding, or mastering the knowledge, skills, and crafts that academic work is intended to promote" (Newmann, 1992, p. 12). As per the dominant conceptualization, engagement consists of vigor, dedication, and absorption. Evidence suggests that the dimension of absorption plays a different role in the construct of engagement; thus, recent work argues that dedication and vigor form the core of engagement (Mano et al., 2007; Salanova et al., 2010; Schaufeli & Salanova, 2011). In line with these developments, in the present study, engagement is explored as a single construct, consisting of the two dimensions.

While learning goal orientation is associated with adaptive outcomes and leads to deeper engagement, performance goal orientation was found to be associated with less adaptive outcomes (Vansteenkiste et al., 2006). Building on previous findings, in this study we focus our attention on exploring the relationships between learning goal orientation and student engagement. Specifically, we argue that students with stronger learning goal orientation are more likely to be engaged. Namely, when students adopt a learning goal orientation, they become focused on the development of competences, task mastery, and mastery and learning of the material (Wolters et al., 1996). Students are thus seeking challenging tasks and maintaining tenacious efforts to learn also under difficult conditions, as a challenging task provides a means to develop their skills and knowledge (Hirst et al., 2009).

A learning goal orientation increases the likelihood that students will invest effort and persist in completing the challenging task even in the situation when they do not expect ex-

trinsic rewards (Dweck, 1999). A learning orientation, and thereby related focus on skill development leads to a deeper engagement with the task (Hirst et al., 2009). Learning goal oriented students will attend class and complete assignments because the material captures their interest or because they experience a sense of pride when mastering the specific task. In addition, when confronted with obstacles, learning-oriented individuals also tend to exert effort to develop and master new skills, show resilience, and persist in the face of obstacles (VandeWalle et al., 2001).

*Hypothesis 1: Learning goal orientation is positively related with engagement.*

### **The mediating role of feeling envied**

Research has shown that peers' acceptance of rejection is a predictor of participation, interest, and satisfaction in school (Fredricks et al., 2004). Envy is one of the negative emotions, rooted in feelings of inferiority. It encompasses a motivation to derogate other people (Smith & Kim, 2007). Feeling envious is brought about when individuals compare themselves with another person and feel annoyed after they realize their colleague possesses something that they desire to have (Parrott & Smith, 1993). Yet, there is another side to envy that has been considerably less frequently investigated: namely, feeling envied, an individual's perception or a feeling that other people wish to possess a desirable skill or talents he or she is known to have or a material thing he or she owns (Vecchio, 2005).

Because feeling envied has the potential to activate and energize an individual, we assume that it is an important factor that may further explain the relationship between learning goal orientation and engagement. When peers envy a student, it may be because that student has outperformed them on exams and assignments (e.g., has finished all exams on time). Usually, the learning goal oriented students who look for opportunities to develop new skills and actively seek challenging tasks may become targets of envy. For the learning goal oriented students, feeling envied by others may signify success and thereby affirm their achievement, imply higher social status, and increase their satisfaction and self-esteem (Parrott & Rodriguez Mosquera, 2008). In turn, the realization that peers are envious may motivate them to engage even more in their studies. Namely, individuals who notice others' envy, as a result have a higher appreciation for their own success, which improves their self-image (Parrott & Rodriguez Mosquera, 2008). We also propose that feeling envied is the mechanism which explains the relationship between student learning goal orientation and student engagement.

*Hypothesis 2: Feeling envied mediates the relationship between learning goal orientation and engagement.*

### **The moderating role of ethical climate**

We further propose that ethical climate – the perception of which constitutes right behavior in an institution (Martin & Cullen, 2006) – will influence the association between a learning goal orientation and engagement, mediated by the perception of being envied. Victor and Cullen (1987) argue that "the prevailing perceptions of typical organizational practices and procedures that have ethical content constitute the ethical work climate" (Martin & Cullen, 2006, p. 101). Through formal and informal socialization, individuals learn which values are desirable and rewarded within an institution (Appelbaum et al., 2005). In a strong ethical climate, the expected behavior is clear and unambiguous (Appelbaum et al., 2005) because "the organization sends a clear message about what behaviors are expected, and the rewards and punishments within the organization reinforce those messages" (Bartels et al., 1998, p. 800).

A strong ethical climate has been shown to positively influence a sense of belonging within a school, encourage positive student attitudes, increase motivation and participation in school, and enhance both the understanding and the prevention of school violence (Welsh, 2000). However, the influence of a weak ethical climate on individuals' behavior within an institution has largely been ignored in the literature. When the school's ethical climate is unclear, students will more likely rely on peers' opinion on how to handle ethical dilemmas. Research shows that peers are important role models for others, and that their actions often create norms within an institution (Deshpande & Joseph, 2009). Therefore, when the ethical climate is weak, students will be more inclined to learn from interactions and experiences with their peers and through observation, identification, and imitation of their peers (Peterson, 2002).

We argue that when the ethical climate in the school is weak, students who feel envied will become less engaged. Envy is a consequence of perceptions of loss of a social position in response to another individual obtaining results that are personally desired (Dogan & Vecchio, 2001). Being the target of peers' envy may represent a source of personal satisfaction and interpersonal strain (Exline & Lobel, 1999). When expected behavior is not clearly expressed (i.e., when the ethical climate is weak), a student who is the target of envy may be concerned about increased competition, decreased cooperation, or malicious gossip resulting from their good fortune (Parrott & Rodriguez Mosquera, 2008). Feeling envied can evoke

fear- and worry-related appraisals (e.g., being worried that envious peers will become less friendly and even hostile toward them) (Parrott & Rodriguez Mosquera, 2008). Due to the fear of the potential negative consequences, students who feel envied may adapt their behavior and make it more acceptable for envious peers, thereby decreasing the level of engagement in school activities. This decrease in the level of engagement can be understood as a coping strategy that students employ to master, reduce, or minimize the negative consequences of feeling envied.

*Hypothesis 3: Ethical climate moderates the indirect relationship between learning goal orientation and engagement, as mediated by feeling envied. The less ethical the perceived climate, the more negative the relationship.*

## METHODS

### Sample and procedures

Data were collected at two time intervals at a public business school in Slovenia, which holds the three most renowned international accreditations (i.e. EQUIS, AACSB, AMBA). All students of an undergraduate Organizational behavior course were invited to participate in this survey via an announcement through the course website. They were informed about the purpose of the study and invited to visit a link with the questionnaire. Participation was voluntary and students could withdraw from the study at any point. The final sample comprised 230 responses. 57% of participants were female. 34% of students had had work experience at the time of study, while 67% had not. Their GPA was 7.3 ( $SD = 0.91$ ), on a grading system spanning from 6 (low) to 10 (high).

### Measures

5-point Likert-type scales ranging from 1 ("completely disagree") to 5 ("completely agree") were used. Where appropriate, the term "work" was substituted with the term "study".

*Goal orientation.* Academic learning goal orientation was measured with four items proposed by Vandevaille (1997). A sample item included "I am willing to select a challenging study assignment that I can learn a lot from" ( $\alpha = 0.81$ ).

*Ethical climate.* Following Birtch and Chiang (2014) ethical climate was assessed with four items from Deshpande et al. (2000). A sample item included "It is important to follow rules and procedures in this university" ( $\alpha = 0.71$ ).

*Feeling envied.* Three items were used to measure an individual's perception of being envied by peers (Vecchio, 2005). A sample item is "Some of my peers are envious of my accomplishments" ( $\alpha = 0.83$ ).



*Engagement.* Engagement was assessed with six items from Utrecht Work Engagement Scale – UWES (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004), measuring two core dimensions of engagement: dedication and vigor. Based on previous studies, the third dimension, absorption, does not adequately represent the engagement construct (Mauno et al., 2007); therefore, it was not used here. The two dimensions representing this construct were used in previous studies involving students (eg. Salanova et al., 2010). The reliability coefficient for this scale was 0.89. Sample items are "I find my studies full of meaning and purpose," and "When I get up in the morning I feel like going to class."

*Control variables.* Participants' gender, GPA, work experience (coded binary variable as yes or no), and type of work experience (i.e., students could choose from the following categories: administrative work, physical work, sales work, promotional work, hospitality work, IT, marketing, professional work), were included as control variables.

## RESULTS

Table 1 displays the descriptive characteristics and correlations among variables.

Variable	M	SD	Skew-ness	Kurto-sis	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1 Gender	1.57	0.50	-0.28	-1.94								
2 GPA	7.30	0.91	0.25	0.37	0.14							
3 Work experience	1.33	0.47	0.71	-1.51	0.17**	-0.07						
4 Type of work experience	1.58	2.83	1.69	1.50	0.09	-0.04	0.79**					
5 Learning goal orientation	3.83	0.70	-0.23	-0.42	0.01	0.24**	0.12	0.06	(0.81)			
6 Feeling envied	2.37	1.03	0.40	-0.42	0.01	0.19**	0.08	0.14*	0.23**	(0.83)		
7 Ethical climate	3.99	0.57	-0.85	2.25	0.22**	0.02	0.12	0.09	0.06	-0.08	(0.71)	
8 Engagement	2.87	0.77	-0.10	0.05	0.02	0.22**	0.04	0.06	0.44**	0.30**	-0.011	(0.89)

TABLE 1  
Descriptive statistics,  
correlations, and scale  
reliabilities<sup>a, b, c, d</sup>

Notes: \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; <sup>a</sup>  $N = 230$ ; <sup>b</sup> Coefficient alphas are on the diagonal in parentheses; <sup>c</sup> For gender, 1 = "male", 2 = "female"; <sup>d</sup> Work experience: 1 = no, 2 = yes

The results in the first column of Table 2 show that learning goal orientation is positively and significantly related to engagement (Model 1:  $\beta = 0.46$ ,  $SE = 0.07$ ,  $p = 0.00$ ). Thus, Hypothesis 1 was supported.

Furthermore, we used a model 4 in PROCESS macro developed by Hayes (2015) to test the proposed mediating effect of feeling envied in the relationship between learning goal orientation and engagement (Hypothesis 2). As shown in Table 3, learning goal orientation and feeling envied accounted for 23% of the variance in engagement [ $F(2, 227) = 34.58$ ,  $p = 0.00$ ].

There was a significant indirect effect (i.e. mediation) of learning goal orientation on engagement through feeling envied ( $\beta = 0.05$ ,  $SE = 0.02$ ,  $LL\ 95\% \text{ CI} = 0.01$ ,  $UL\ 95\% \text{ CI} = 0.10$ ).

Variable	Model 1	Model 2
	LGO <sup>d</sup> → Engagement	Moderated mediation model Dependent variable: engagement
(Constant)	0.55 (0.45)	-1.59† (0.93)
Gender	0.02 (0.09)	0.04 (0.09)
GPA	0.09† (0.05)	0.08 (0.05)
Work experience	-0.18 (0.16)	-0.16 (0.16)
Type of work experience	0.03 (0.03)	0.03 (0.03)
Learning goal orientation	<i>0.46*** (0.07)</i>	<i>0.42*** (0.07)</i>
Feeling envied		1.01** (0.31)
Ethical climate		-0.51** (0.21)
Interaction effects: Feeling envied × Ethical climate		-0.22** (0.08)
R <sup>2</sup>	0.46	0.27
F (df)	12.13 (5, 724)	10.26 (8, 221)

TABLE 2  
Results for linear regression and the moderated mediation model<sup>a, b, c</sup>

Notes: \*\*\* $p = 0.00$ , \*\* $p < 0.05$ , † $p \leq 0.10$ ; <sup>a</sup> $N = 230$ ; <sup>b</sup>Robust standard errors are presented next to fixed effects in parentheses; <sup>c</sup>Values in italics are relevant to tests of hypotheses; <sup>d</sup>LGO = learning goal orientation

Proposed mediation	Direct effects					Indirect effects			
	R <sup>2</sup>	Path <sup>b</sup>	Coeff	SE <sup>c</sup>	$p$	Effect	SE	LL 95% CI <sup>d</sup>	UL 95% CI <sup>e</sup>
LGO <sup>a</sup> → feeling envied → engagement	0.23***	a	0.34	0.09	< 0.001	0.05	0.02	0.01	0.10
		b	0.15	0.04	< 0.001				
		c	0.48	0.07	= 0.000				
		c'	0.43	0.07	= 0.000				

TABLE 3  
Results for the mediation model

Notes: \*\*\* $p = 0.000$ ;  $N = 230$ ; <sup>a</sup>LGO = learning goal orientation; <sup>b</sup> $a =$  learning goal orientation → feeling envied;  $b =$  feeling envied → engagement;  $c =$  learning goal orientation → engagement (total effect);  $c' =$  learning goal orientation → engagement (direct effect); <sup>c</sup>SE = standard error; <sup>d</sup>LL95%CI = lower level of the 95% confidence interval; <sup>e</sup>UL95%CI = upper level of the 95% confidence interval

Further analysis indicated that there was a significant total effect of learning goal orientation practicing level of engagement ( $c: \beta = 0.48$ ,  $SE = 0.07$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ). Learning goal orientation was also a significant predictor of feeling envied ( $a: \beta = 0.34$ ,  $SE = 0.09$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), while feeling envied significantly predicted engagement ( $b: \beta = 0.15$ ,  $SE = 0.04$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Finally, when both learning goal orientation and feeling envied were included in the mediation model, the direct effect

of learning goal orientation on engagement decreased, but remained significant ( $c': \beta = 0.43, SE = 0.07, p = 0.000$ ). In addition, the lower and upper limits of the Bootstrap 95% confidence interval for the direct effect of learning goal orientation on engagement and the mediation effect of feeling envied did not include zero, indicating that feeling envied played a partial mediating effect. These results provide support for Hypothesis 2.

We then evaluated the full model using 5,000 bootstrapped samples. The results showed that the model was significant [ $F(8, 221) = 10.26, p = 0.000$ ], accounting for 27% of the variance in engagement. As depicted in Table 2 (see Model 2), the predicting outcome variables (i.e., learning goal orientation, feeling envied, ethical climate) emerged as significant predictors of engagement. The interaction effect was significant ( $\beta = -0.22, SE = 0.08, p < 0.05$ ). Although the results show that ethical climate interacts with feeling envied to influence engagement, they do not directly assess the conditional indirect effect depicted in Figure 1. Based on the recommendations of Preacher et al. (2007), we examined the conditional indirect effect of learning goal orientation on engagement through feeling envied at three values of ethical climate (corresponding to the mean, one standard deviation above and below the mean value), and generated a confidence interval at each level of the proposed moderator. The post hoc probing results at the different ethical climate levels are presented in Table 4.

☞ TABLE 4  
 Conditional indirect effects of learning goal orientation on engagement at three different levels of the moderator

Ethical climate	Effect size	BC 95% bootstrapped CI <sup>a</sup>	
		Lower	Upper
Mean – SD <sup>c</sup>	0.08	0.0342 <sup>b</sup>	0.1511
Mean	0.04	0.0070 <sup>b</sup>	0.0852
Mean + SD <sup>c</sup>	0.00	-0.0381	0.0475

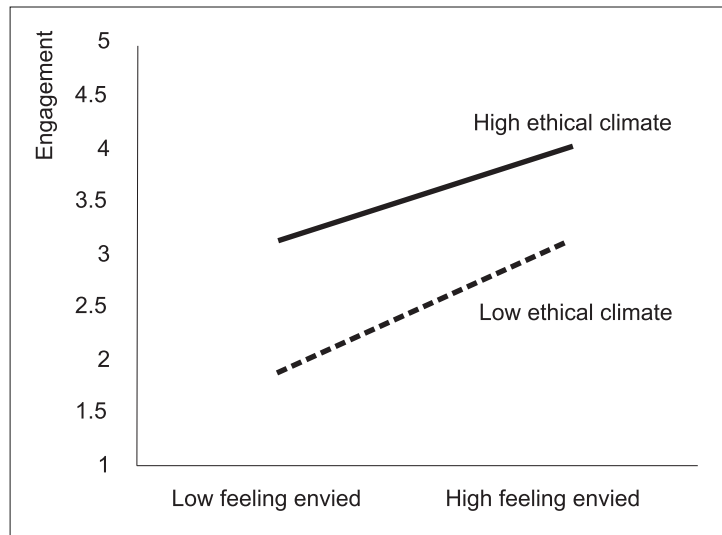
Notes: <sup>a</sup> BC confidence intervals are bias-corrected; <sup>b</sup> Confidence intervals that do not contain zero are deemed to be significant; <sup>c</sup> SD = standard deviation

The mediating effect of feeling envied varied as a function of the proposed model (Table 4). Specifically, the indirect effect of learning goal orientation on engagement through feeling envied was significant and stronger when ethical climate was low, whereas feeling envied was not a significant mediator of the relationship between learning goal orientation and engagement when ethical climate was high. Thus, Hypothesis 3 was partially supported. The results demonstrated that the perception of ethical climate moderated the indirect relationship between learning goal orientation and

engagement, as mediated by feeling envied. However, the results show that the lower the ethical climate, the more positive the relationship.

We plotted the moderating effect of ethical climate on the feeling envied – engagement relationship. The results show that the interaction between feeling envied and ethical climate was significant ( $\beta = -0.22, p = 0.01$ ). As depicted in Figure 2, feeling envied was positively associated with engagement for low and high levels of ethical climate, and this positive relation was larger in magnitude at low levels of ethical climate. However, when the perception of feeling envied is high, engagement will be higher in strong ethical climates as compared to weak ethical climates.

➔ FIGURE 2  
The moderating effect  
of ethical climate on  
the feeling envied-en-  
gagement relationship



## DISCUSSION

The present research offers four central implications. First, the study presents a novel perspective on the role of feeling envied in student engagement. Research shows that the relationships with school peers when positive, increase academic motivation (Furrer & Skinner, 2003) and academic performance (Veiga et al., 2014). Although evidence suggests that negative treatment by peers can have a negative impact on engagement over time (Li et al., 2011), the influence of being the target of envy on engagement in school activities has largely been ignored in the literature (Vecchio, 2005). Envy is a common social emotion that affects the behavior of at least two individuals: the envious one and the one who is the target of the envious individual. Specifically, our research takes a step

toward understanding the influence of the perception of being envied on students' engagement. We show that students with a strong learning goal orientation tend to feel envy from their peers. Consequently, feeling envied is positively related with their engagement, albeit only in certain contexts, which are outlined below. However, given the cross-sectional design, which does not allow us to examine the causal effect, we must be cautious in interpreting certain relationships.

Second, we demonstrate that the influence of the perception of being envied and its interaction with the ethical climate must be taken into account when examining student engagement. More specifically, ethical climate may play an important role in whether feelings of envy have a positive relationship with the envied student's engagement. However, to the best of our knowledge, no study has theoretically conceptualized the relationships between feeling envied, ethical climate, and student engagement. While the interaction effect is indeed negative, we found that the indirect effect of learning goal orientation on engagement through feeling envied was significant and stronger when the ethical climate was low, whereas feeling envied was not a significant mediator of the relationship between learning goal orientation and engagement when the ethical climate was high. Thus, the results suggest that ethical climate positively moderates the relationship between learning goal orientation and engagement, mediated by feeling envied, but only when the ethical climate is weak. It could be argued that when the ethical climate is weak, students perceive feeling envied as an acceptable phenomenon, which may enhance their engagement. However, the stronger the ethical climate, the less positive the relationship between learning goal orientation and engagement, mediated by feeling envied. Thus, this study contributes to engagement theory by suggesting that ethical climate plays an important role in how students will perceive feeling envied and how it influences their engagement.

Third, the study also provides an improved understanding of the feeling envied concept. Even though studies show that feeling envied can influence the behavior of the target individual, our current understanding of the consequences of feeling envied remains limited (Van de Ven et al., 2010). The study demonstrates that feeling envied by peers mediates the relationship between a learning goal orientation and engagement. We therefore contribute an important piece of theoretical conceptualization and empirical research on both antecedents and novel outcomes of feeling envied. Generally, it has been theorized that individuals tend to view envy along two distinct axes: the competitive axis, referring to ways in which peers'

envy is desirable, including elevation of the target's own status; and the fear axis, addressing ways in which peers' envy is threatening (Parrott & Rodriguez Mosquera, 2008). We are not suggesting that envy should be reinforced in universities in order to increase competitiveness among students. Rather, we attempted to uncover how ethical climate may serve as an explanatory factor for why envy varies across the two axes. We contribute to the envy literature by examining the conditions under which feeling envied at university will be perceived as more or less desirable. Specifically, the study demonstrated that when the ethical climate is weak, the competitive axis prevails; thus, being the target of peer envy is perceived as an acceptable phenomenon, which may promote students' engagement.

Finally, although the ethical climate of a business school can play a significant role in shaping its students' ethical values and behaviors (Birtch & Chiang, 2014), studies on ethical climate in the school context are still relatively rare. With strong ethical climates, schools clearly communicate desirable and acceptable behavior. Although it is very difficult to manage relationships with peers with rules and institutional policies, the latter can be a source of support when the relationship between peers becomes threatening. Namely, our results show that irrespective of whether the perception of being envied is low or high, students' engagement is higher when the ethical climate is stronger. Our study thus suggests that a strong ethical climate enables students to achieve higher levels of engagement in school activities even when they feel envied. Current literature has emphasized the importance of interventions, such as changing curriculum and standards, teaching and learning techniques as a route to increased learning and engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004). However, the influence of ethical climate on students' engagement remains under-researched. We provide empirical evidence that in order to promote students' engagement, schools should also establish a strong ethical climate.

## **Practical implications**

Our results suggest that learning goal oriented students tend to be less vulnerable to consequences of being the target of envious peers. To boost students' engagement, we find learning goal orientation to be one of the key drivers and therefore encourage faculty to foster a school environment that enhances learning goal orientation. In doing so, students would be able to nurture their ambitions, and achieve their academic goals. Although outstanding performers are more often the target of peer envy, we find that, under certain conditions,

learning goal oriented students tend to view peer envy as something that increases their engagement. Given the impact that learning goal orientation holds in academic performance, it is important that teachers help all students understand how to set learning goals and follow through with such commitments.

Schools' ethical climate can indirectly regulate the social relationships between peers and thereby promote students' engagement. Research shows that the likelihood of experiencing envy from others is increased in competitive environments and in environments in which others are judged to be highly similar (Salovey & Rodin, 1991). Students are similar in terms of having the same opportunities to obtain good grades. At the same time, the grading system, which allows grade-related comparison between students, creates competition and with this an opportunity for envy. In order to protect the students who are the target of peers' envy, schools should create a strong ethical environment and thereby send clear messages about desirable behaviors (Schulte, 2001). From the perspective of our study, this means explicitly communicating that student engagement is desired and leads to knowledge acquisition, which is at the core of the pursuit of education. Faculty members and students are responsible for establishing a humane and collaborative (Quaye et al., 2020) learning environment, characterized by a positive and strong ethical climate (Schulte, 2001).

### **Limitations and suggestions for future research**

The contributions of this study should be qualified in light of its limitations, several of which point to productive directions for future research. First, our theoretical model implies the causal effects of a learning goal orientation and the perception of being envied on engagement. However, our data are cross-sectional and as such do not allow us to draw conclusions about cause-effect relationships. Future studies could test the proposed model using a longitudinal research design in order to establish temporal precedence. Second, although we collected data over two different time intervals, the possibility of common method variance associated with self-report measures remains (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Adopting a mixed-methods research design and incorporating additional methods may help improve our understanding of the relationships between the observed variables.

While the findings of this study suggest that the relationships between the studied variables exist, further research is needed to examine more closely the complexities of these relationships. We assessed and found empirical support

that the ethical climate moderates the relationship between a learning goal orientation and engagement when mediated by the perception of being envied. Along with ethical climate, other personal (e.g., self-esteem, identity, resilience) and contextual (e.g., supportive communities, teachers' support, time pressure) factors should also be considered as potential moderators in future research. Studies could also examine whether personal factors moderate the relationship between the perception of being envied and engagement. Finally, while students can simultaneously pursue both learning and performance goals (Anderson & Lawton, 2009), future research could also examine the relationship between performance goal orientation, envy, ethical climate, and student engagement.

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## Što pokreće studentsku uključenost? Uloga ciljne orijentacije na učenje, osjećaja zavisti i etičke klime

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Uključenost studenata na studiju predstavlja temeljni element visokokvalitetnog iskustva učenja. U ovom radu istražujemo ciljnu orijentaciju na učenje kao prediktor studentske uključenosti u kontekstu visokog obrazovanja. Nadalje, u radu istražujemo i medijacijski utjecaj percepcije osjećaja zavisti te moderatorski utjecaj etičke klime na odnos ciljne orijentacije na učenje i studentske uključenosti. Predloženi moderatorsko-medijacijski model testiran je na uzorku od 230 studenata. Rezultati otkrivaju da je ciljna orijentacija na učenje pozitivno povezana s uključenosti i da je osjećaj zavisti medijator u ovom odnosu. Potvrđujemo i moderatorski učinak etičke klime u odnosu između ciljne orijentacije na učenje i uključenosti na studiju. Preciznije, u visokoobrazovnim ustanovama, u kojima se klima percipira kao etičnija, uključenost studenta je veća, neovisno o osjećaju zavisti. Rad zaključujemo popisom praktičnih implikacija koje bi mogle poslužiti nastavnicima u njihovim pokušajima da stvore uvjete koji potiču uključenost studenata u nastavi.

Ključne riječi: studentska uključenost, ciljna orijentacija na učenje, osjećaj zavisti, etička klima, poslovne škole



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