



# Are individualistic employees tolerant of the benefit of others? A multilevel analysis of the relationship between witnessing coworkers i-deals and malicious envy

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**Are individualistic employees tolerant of the benefit of others?  
: A multilevel analysis of the relationship between witnessing  
coworkers i-deals and malicious envy**

**Abstract**

This study focuses on a third party (coworkers) perspective of idiosyncratic deals (i-deals). In more detail, the purpose of this study is to examine the impact of witnessing others' i-deals on coworker's emotional response (malicious envy), and the moderating effect of individualistic values on that response at both individual and national level. In addition, this study examines the impact of two types of witnessing others' i-deals which include not only the other's i-deals that the coworker directly observes, but also the generalized others' i-deals which is an aggregated perception as a result of frequent observation of idiosyncratic deals enjoyed by multiple others. Data were collected from 450 employees from 5 Asian countries at two points. We adopted a hierarchical linear model (HLM) because we assume two levels for both i-deals and individualism. The results show that witnessing other's i-deals is positively related to malicious envy. In addition, individual-level individualism was found to moderate the relationship between witnessing coworkers' i-deals and

malicious envy. Interestingly, it is not individualism at the country level, but that at the individual level that moderates the relationship between witnessing i-deals and malicious envy. This study indicates that i-deals studies on coworkers' reactions to others' i-deals should focus more on the moderating effect of individual cultural values.

**Keywords:** Idiosyncratic deals, Coworker reactions, Individualism, Malicious Envy

## **Introduction**

To attract, recruit, and retain employees with high abilities, skills, and special characteristics, firms often offer special arrangements to certain individuals, which they do not offer to others. Such nonstandard arrangements are known as idiosyncratic deals (i-deals). I-deals are defined as "voluntary, personalized arrangements of a nonstandard nature negotiated between individual employees and their employers regarding terms that benefit each party" (Rousseau et al 2006, 978).

Although the vast majority of i-deals studies has shown that i-deals benefit both the i-dealer and the employer, relatively little attention has been paid to coworkers' reaction (Marescaux *et al.* 2019). While i-deals are highly beneficial to the employer and i-dealer, they imply inequality for co-workers, who are not offered the arrangements

(Rousseau *et al.* 2006). From the perspective of co-workers, i-deals may be perceived as an increase in the outcomes received by the i-dealers, which might ruin the fairness (outcomes/inputs balance) in the workplace and, in turn, damages relationships within the organization including the employment relationships (Marescaux *et al.* 2019). Thus, depending on their reactions, the positive effects of i-deals could be offset (Bal and Lub 2015; Mughal *et al.* 2022).

A small number of empirical studies from this perspective have begun to accumulate (Lai *et al.* 2009; Ng 2017; Marescaux *et al.* 2019; Kong *et al.* 2020). All of these studies suggest that witnessing the i-deals of co-workers leads to social comparisons between colleagues, which leads to negative attitudes and behaviors afterwards such as envy and exit (Lai *et al.* 2009; Ng 2017; Marescaux *et al.* 2019; Kong *et al.* 2020). Such psychological-behavioral reactions depend on the state of the social relationship between the i-dealer and the coworkers.

Despite these emerging studies on coworkers' reaction, it is still unknown if personal factors, especially cultural values, might moderate the impact of witnessing others' i-deals on various outcomes. Although its importance has been pointed out (Marescaux *et al.* 2021), the relationship between i-deals and cultural values has not been fully empirically examined. In fact, cultural values have already been examined in studies

related to the relationship between the i-deals that the individual receives and their outcomes (Liao *et al.* 2016; Hattori *et al.* 2021). Nevertheless, studies on the impact of cultural values on the impact of i-deals are still limited.

The global economy has increasingly required the management of an increasingly diverse range of human resources. Even within a specific country, the management of individuals with different values has become an important issue. This means that even if the same person is offered the same content of i-deals, and given that the i-deal offerings take place in the same social context, different coworkers may have very different reactions to the i-deals they observe. Thus, the exploration of the relationship between reaction and cultural values is important both practically and academically.

The focus of this study is individualism among the various cultural values. Individualism is a dimension that has been presented in almost all cultural studies, and robust scales already existed to measure it (Hofstede 1980; Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 1998; Hofstede 2001). Most of these studies that presented dimensions for capturing cultural difference also presented dimensions corresponding to individualism-collectivism and empirically confirmed their validity (Trompenaars 1993; Schwartz 1994). Bond (1994) states the culture-level contrast between individualism and

collectivism has magnetized cross-cultural researchers over the past years. Indeed, more than one-third of published cross-cultural studies have cited individualism and collectivism as at least partial explanations for observed differences between cultures (Hui and Yee 1994).

Researchers have pointed out that individuals' cultural values influence their choices and interpretations of various acts, events, and others (Liu *et al.* 2013). In particular, it has been noted that when individuals have strong individualistic values, that is, when they are concerned with themselves and oriented toward personal achievement and fulfillment, their reactions to the i-deals they receive are stronger (Liao *et al.* 2013, 2016). According to Liu *et al.* (2013), employees with high levels of individualism are more likely to feel a strong sense of self-efficacy when they receive i-deals. On the other hand, employees with low levels of individualism are more likely to experience perceived organizational support when they receive i-deals. While Liu *et al.* (2013) focused on individualism at the individual level, Liao *et al.* (2016) focused on individualism at the country level. They confirmed that the impact of i-deals received by oneself is stronger in a sample of countries with strong collectivist values than in that with strong individualist values.

To sum up, although we have not found any studies examining reactions to i-deals received by coworkers from cultural point of view, studies on reactions to i-deals received by oneself have empirically confirmed their importance, allowing us to infer this importance indirectly. In addition, though it is clear that individualism and i-deals are closely related, little research has been conducted in the context of coworkers' reactions to i-deals received by others. And more, as discussed below, the existing studies fall into the problem of either overestimating cultural cohesion at the country level or overestimating that culture is based on individual-level values.

This study therefore aims to address this gap. This study contributes to the study of coworkers' reactions to witnessing others' i-deals in two ways.

The first is to examine how individualistic values moderate the coworker's response to i-deals received by others, with direct measurement of individualistic values. As mentioned earlier, previous studies have examined the moderating effect of individualism on the relationship between the i-deals employees receive and their outcomes. Some of those studies, with the exception of Liu *et al.* (2013), substitute cultural values for individualistic values in each country with a dummy variable for that country.

A second contribution is the assumption that there are two levels of individualistic values, both theoretical and empirical. There have been two types of existing studies on this matter. The first type theoretically assumes that cultural values are shared at the country level and uses country-specific dummy variables as proxies when examining their impact (Liao *et al.* 2016; Hattori *et al.* 2021). The other type is one that does not assume the existence of cultural values at the country level and measure those at the individual level instead (Liu *et al.* 2013). Both of these overlook the fact that cultural values can be distributed at least two levels: individual level and national level. To capture the multi-level nature of cultural values, this study employs a multilevel model.

The purpose of this study is to examine the impact of witnessing others' i-deals on the coworker emotional response. At the same time, it aims to investigate the moderating effect of individualistic values on that response at both individual and national level. In addition, this study examines the impact of two types of witnessing others' i-deals which include not only the significant other's i-deals that the coworker directly observes, but also the generalized others' i-deals which is an aggregated perception as a result of frequent observation of idiosyncratic deals enjoyed by multiple others. As will be discussed in more detail later, generalized others' i-deals is the perception that "not a few (not just someone in particular) is receiving i-deals," which is formed as a result of



frequent observation of i-deals enjoyed by multiple others. The present study assumes two levels (individual and national) for each of the generalized others' i-deals and individualism, and examines the impact of their combination on coworker's affective reactions.

This study is structured as follows. In the following sessions, we identify the importance of witnessing other's i-deals in i-deals research, and the lack of studies focusing on it, and develop some hypotheses. The methods session provides details about the sample, data collection, measurement and analytical models. We then present our empirical findings and conclude with a discussion of the results. Finally, we provide implications and suggestions for future research.

### **Theoretical Framework and Research Hypotheses**

It has been confirmed both theoretically and empirically that i-deals are a positive experience for the person who received them and that they have a positive impact on the organization through social exchange and heightened self-efficacy (Liu *et al.* 2013). More recently, the impact on coworkers who did not receive these benefits has been examined both theoretically and empirically. As already mentioned above, witnessing other's i-deals has been confirmed to generate envy in the coworker, which later results

in a decrease in the perception of justice, and even to lead to turnover (Lai *et al.* 2009; Ng 2017; Marescaux *et al.* 2019; Kong *et al.* 2020). However, studies from this perspective are extremely rare. It is important to continue to examine the reactions of others around- to the i-deals receive by an individual and the factors that mitigate them in order to understand whether and under what conditions i-deals are truly beneficial to the organization.

#### *Effect of witnessing i-deals*

According to social comparison theory, employees tend to compare their situations to these of others (Festinger 1954). When lacking objective means for appraisal of their opinions and capabilities, people compare their opinions and capabilities to those of others that are similar to them. Then, they attempt to correct any differences found. As stated by social comparison theory, social comparisons are evoked when (i) the individuals being compared are of strong interest to themselves and (ii) information about their special treatment is available (Kulik and Ambrose 1992).

Since i-deals provide significant benefits to the individual who receives them, whether or not others receive them is an important concern for the coworker. Because of the close psychological and physical distance between the coworker and the i-deal

recipient in the workplace, the coworker should be able to easily obtain information about the i-deals that others receive. Thus, I-deals received by coworkers in the same work place can lead to such an upward comparison (Brown *et al.* 2007).

According to previous research on social comparison, upward comparisons lead to a sense of one's own inferiority to others, which often induces malicious envy toward others (Marescaux *et al.* 2021). Malicious envy is "lacks another's superior quality, achievement, or possession and either desires it or wishes that the other lacked it" (Parrott and Smith, 1993, 906). In general, malicious envy has been confirmed to result in dysfunctional organizational behavior such as decreased effort and triggering social undermining (Marescaux *et al.* 2021). The relationship between witnessing others' i-deals and malicious envy may be moderated by the level of i-deals that the observers themselves are receiving (Marescaux *et al.* 2021). That is, the lower the level of i-deals received by the observers themselves, the stronger the degree to which witnessing other's i-deals leads to malicious envy. What this paper focuses on, however, is the direct relationship between witnessing others' i-deals and outcome. This is because, as Ng (2017) empirically showed, it is quite possible that witnessing others' i-deals can lead to malicious envy, regardless of the amount of i-deals one is receiving.

**Hypothesis 1:** Witnessing other's i-deals at individual-level positively influences malicious envy.

*Witnessing generalized others' i-deals*

Sociologist G. H. Mead argued that in social life we come to recognize two kinds of others: the significant others and the generalized others (Mead 1934). The significant other is a significant real others with whom we interact directly. We learn the right way to do things in society by observing the words and actions of others with whom we have direct interaction, such as parents, friends, and teachers. We tend to internalize or identify with the actions, roles, and attitudes of these people.

In addition, we also learn how to do things in society by assuming more abstract others and imagining what they say and do. For example, we become aware not only of the expectations of others with whom we have direct interaction (e.g., mother and teachers) about not being violent to others, but also of the those of many anonymized surrounding people with whom we have no direct interaction ("everyone also doesn't want me to be violent" for example). This means that in our social life, we are confronted not only with real others with whom we have direct interaction, but also with abstracted others with whom we have no direct interaction at all. For Mead (1934), the distinction between

the significant others and the generalized others was an idea to explain the ego formation of the individual. Likewise, we can use his argument as a framework to distinguish between the two kinds of others that employees face in organization.

Based on Mead's (1934) ideas, we can envision two similar yet different types of i-deals that employees witness. The first one is the i-deals enjoyed by specific employees with direct interaction (significant other's i-deals). This kind of i-deals enjoyed by other who are in direct interaction with themselves and can therefore have a direct and tangible impact on themselves. These are the i-deals that "that specific person" is receiving. The second one is generalized others' i-deals, which is an aggregated perception that is gradually formed within an individual as a result of frequent observation of i-deals enjoyed by multiple others. It is not the perception that "that specific person is enjoying i-deals," but rather " generally speaking, many people are enjoying i-deals". Generalized others' i-deals is the perception of "i-deals that everyone is receiving", which is formed as a result of frequent observation of i-deals enjoyed by multiple others.

Generalized others' i-deals are considered to be transmitted to employees through social talk between individuals. People in a society and in an organization engage in a kind of social talk, which allows them to arrive at a shared and socially constructed interpretation of their surrounding social environment (Zinko *et al.* 2007). This social talk

enables them to collectively define the meaning of events in a society and organization (Degoey 2000). Several organizational studies suggest that employees may believe such social talk such as rumors more than formal communication (Robbins 2000; Zinko *et al.* 2007). It is likely that i-deals received by others are also transmitted through this process of social talk to others who do not directly interact with the person in question.

However, the frequency and degree to which generalized others' i-deals are observed will vary considerably from country to country. Liao *et al.* (2016) point out that within a given organization, there are groups in which many members enjoy i-deals and groups in which only certain individuals enjoy i-deals. In the former, each individual enjoys a separate employment arrangement, and thus people will frequently observe i-deals. In contrast, in the latter, employees are basically subject to standardized employment arrangements and therefore observe i-deals less frequently. The same fact should be true at national level at which i-deals cannot be separated from their ideological origin or from the cultural values of their society (Bal and Lub 2015). Thus, variation among countries should be taken into account as to how often i-deals are observed. For example, i-deals may be more frequent in countries with shared individualistic or neoliberal values than in countries without such values (Bal and Hornung 2019). In

countries where such i-deals are enjoyed by many members, i-deals are frequently observed, whereas in the latter they are seldom observed.

In countries where i-deals are rarely observed, the only i-deals that people observe are probably significant other's i-deals. In contrast, in countries where i-deals are frequently observed, employees perceive generalized others' i-deals separately from significant other's i-deals. In this sense, significant other's i-deals and generalized others' i-deals should have different effects on the coworkers who observe them. As in hypothesis 1, significant other's i-deals will evoke individuals' malicious envy toward others through the process of upward social comparison. In contrast, generalized others' i-deals are related to abstracted others' i-deals and are less likely to evoke social comparison because of the low availability of information.

In addition, if generalized others' i-deals are more likely to be perceived in countries or societies where i-deals are frequently observed, it is likely that people in such countries or societies have become accustomed to the i-deals that others receive. This cumulative experience is likely to blunt excessive reactions to i-deals received by others. Moreover, in such a country or society, the coworker who perceives the i-deals of others may be as an opportunity for himself to enjoy such i-deals in the future (Lai *et al.* 2009). Generalized others' i-deals are i-deals enjoyed by others who are at a social/psychological

distance from the observer, so they do not evoke strong feelings toward that person, but rather are likely to enhance the perception of the possibility that they too will be available in the future. In countries or societies where I-deals are frequently observed, colleagues who perceive i-deals in others may come to expect the opportunity to enjoy such i-deals themselves in the future. Thus, the following hypotheses can be derived.

**Hypothesis 2:** Generalized others' i-deals negatively influences malicious envy.

#### *Individual and national level individualism and i-deals*

One major purpose of this study is to examine the moderating effect of individualism on the relationship between witnessing others' i-deals and malicious envy. Previous studies on culture have shown that the citizens of each country share some cultural values that differ from those of other countries (Hofstede 1980; 2001, House *et al.* 2004). These studies, while acknowledging that cultural values are a multi-level phenomenon distributed at various levels, have been primarily concerned with country-level dispersion. These studies have shown both theoretically and empirically that cultural values shared at the national level powerfully explain the behavior and attitudes among



different nationalities (Hofstede 1980; 2001, House *et al.* 2004). Among the various cultural dimensions, it is the dimension related to individualism-collectivism that has been consistently confirmed for its empirical relevance in the major studies (e.g. Hofstede 1980; 2001; Schwartz 1994; Trompenaars 1997; House *et al.* 2004). Based on a survey of IBM employees, Hofstede (1980) presented four cultural dimensions, including individualism. Several dimensions have since been added, but individualism has consistently remained one of the most important dimensions. Similarly, the importance of individualism is asserted by research related to the GLOBE project (House *et al.* 2004). The GLOBE project also significantly expanded the cultural dimensions, but even there individualism is positioned as one of the most important dimensions. As already mentioned, more than one-third of published cross-cultural studies have cited individualism and collectivism (Hui and Yee 1994).

This study assumes that there are at least two levels of individualism. Previous studies have primarily confirmed that the impact of i-deals varies depending on the culture shared at the national level rather than at the individual level. However, they are not coworker's' reactions to others' i-deals, but their own reactions to the i-deals that they receive themselves (Liao *et al.* 2016; Hattori *et al.* 2021).

In addition, though not in the field of i-deals, there are studies that point out that reactions to social exchange are not uniform across areas/countries, and that they are related to the cultural values of each country. They vary even within East Asia, where every country is often lumped together (Kim and Leung 2007; Bomhoff and Man-Li 2012; Kim *et al.* 2015). All of these suggest that reactions to others' i-deals may differ depending on shared cultural values at the national level.

On the other hand, there is criticism that national culture studies such as Hofstede (1980; 2001) and those that support them, naively assume that there is too high a degree of cohesion within a country (Osland and Bird 2000; Heijes 2011). According to Osland and Bird (2000) and Heijes (2011), by taking the existence of national cultures for granted and naively assuming that they are highly cohesive, pervasive and strongly causal within a country, we fail to capture the variations in people's responses that occur within a particular country. According to these studies, on one hand, it is possible that the citizens of country A have a higher degree of individualism than the citizens of country B. On the other hand, according to these studies, we should not underestimate the fact that some people in country A have both high and low individualism (Heijes 2011). The same criticism applies to studies such as the Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness (GLOBE) study (House *et al.*, 2004). In fact, in i-deals' studies, Liu *et al.*

(2013), for example, found that the relationship between perceived organizational support and outcomes (such as proactive behaviors or affective commitment) and that between self-efficacy and organizational outcomes are moderated by individualism at individual rather than at country level.

These studies suggest that individualism is an important factor that makes a difference in how people respond to i-deals. However, all previous studies focusing on individualism have overlooked that values are distributed at multiple levels, thus there is a clear lack of cross-level research (Tsui *et al.* 2007). Most studies that focus on individualism either measure individualism at the individual level or use country-specific dummy variables as a proxy variable for culture at the country level. The former underestimates cultural cohesion at the country level, while the latter makes too strong an assumption that culture is a collective phenomenon and underestimates that culture is based on individual-level values. Basically, few studies have made international comparisons of individual reactions to the i-deals of others. And, even fewer studies have considered the perspective that cultural values are distributed at multiple levels. Thus, in the end, it is not yet clear to what extent individualism is involved in the response to i-deals of others.

In this study, we use a multilevel model to clearly distinguish two levels of individualism, the individual level and the country level. We also to examine how individualism at each level affects the relationship between perceived others' i-deals and coworkers' envy.

How does individualism moderate the relationship between witnessing others' i-deals and malicious envy? Basically, people with strong individualistic values are highly concerned with their own interests (Hofstede 2010). They believe that the relationship between organizations and individuals is based on a strictly written contract, and that individuals basically act to maximize their own interests. Conversely, those with strong collectivist values prioritize the interests of the group or organization to which they belong rather than the individual. Rather than a strict contract, the relationship between an organization and an individual is a loose exchange of loyalty and protection, and always individuals do not necessarily act to maximize their own interests.

The relationship between witnessing others' i-deals and malicious envy can be moderated by individualistic values, but its moderating effect is not expected to be simple. Generally speaking, for collectivists, who prioritize group interests over individual interests, inequality between certain individuals within a group, such as i-deals, is an undesirable situation. This is because they believe that a situation in which certain

individuals monopolize certain resources will lead to a decline in the wellbeing of the group as a whole. In contrast, individualists, who place the interests of their own above those of the group, seem to welcome this situation. This is because for individualists, maximizing the benefit of each individual person per day is more important than the well-fairness of the group as a whole.

However, it has also been found that individualists are at the same time extremely sensitive to their own interests and disadvantages (Al-Zahrani and Kaplowitz 1993). Al-Zahrani and Kaplowitz's (1993) claimed that individualists are people with strong self-serving tendencies. The result of their quasi-experiment which employed the vignette method found that people from individualistic cultures (The United States for instance) are more likely than those from collectivistic cultures (Saudis for instance) to give self-serving evaluations for others' immoral acts and brilliant achievements. Furthermore, they found that people in individualistic cultures are more sensitive to their own interests than those in collectivistic cultures. That people with strong individualistic tendencies are more sensitive to disparities in their own interests versus those of the other has been noted in studies involving national cultures (Hofstede 1980).

What these studies have suggested is that people with strong individualistic values generally welcome general others' receiving i-deals, but may react negatively to it

when it occurs in their own immediate surroundings. From the above, it is expected that people with strong individualistic values will react negatively to significant other's i-deals, whereas they will react positively to generalized others' i-deals.

Therefore, this study posits the following two hypotheses regarding the relationship between witnessing (significant) other's i-deals and malicious envy.

**Hypothesis 3:** Individual-level individualism moderates the relationship between witnessing coworkers' i-deals (individual level) and malicious envy, such that the positive relationship between witnessing i-deals and malicious envy will be stronger for employees with a high individual-level individualism.

**Hypothesis 4:** National-level individualism will moderate the relationship between witnessing coworkers' i-deals (individual level) and malicious envy, such that the positive relationship between witnessing i-deals and malicious envy will be stronger for employees with a high national-level individualism.

#### *Generalized i-deals and individualism*

As Hypothesis 2 indicates, individuals would not necessarily be expected to react negatively to generalized i-deals. However, a different relationship may be observed

when individualistic values are strong. As already noted, people with strong individualistic tendencies are sensitive to their own interests and to the difference between their own interests and those of others. Even if such people do not perceive the specific i-deals of significant others, the fact that i-deals are taking place (i.e., the perception of generalized i-deals) may increase their negative feelings toward others. Without witnessing others in concrete terms, people form abstracted thoughts such as "I am jealous of the rich," which may cause them to feel malicious envy toward such people. From the above, the following hypotheses are derived.

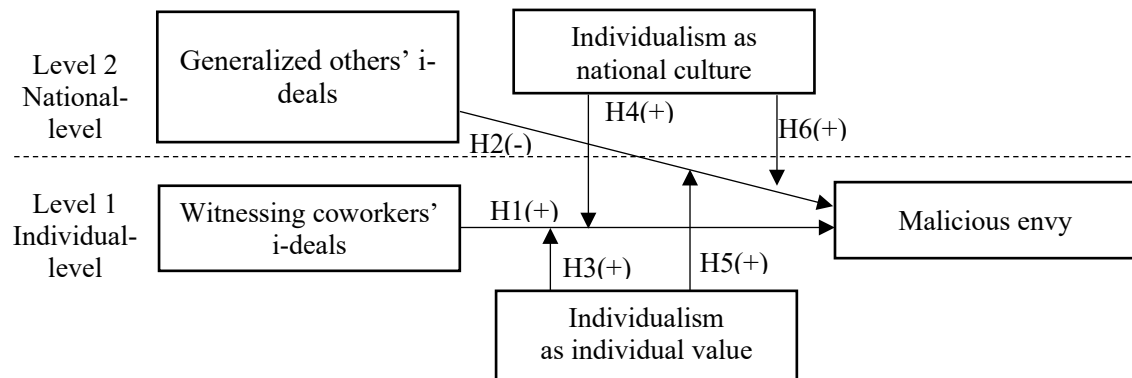
**Hypothesis 5:** Individual-level individualism will moderate the relationship between witnessing coworkers' i-deals (national level) and malicious envy, such that the negative relationship between witnessing i-deals and malicious envy will be stronger for employees with a high individual value.

**Hypothesis 6:** National-level individualism will moderate the relationship between witnessing coworkers' i-deals (national level) and malicious envy, such that the negative relationship between witnessing i-deals and malicious envy will be stronger for employees with a high individual value.

All of the proposed hypotheses are modeled in Figure 1.

**Figure 1**

*Proposed conceptual model*



**Method**

*Participants and procedure*

To examine the impact of country-level individualism and witnessing coworker's i-deals, we collected data from five East Asian nationals. Justice studies have confirmed that there are considerable differences among East Asian nationals in their responses to perceived injustice (Kim and Leung 2007; Bomhoff and Gu 2012). If cross-cultural managers ignore the fact that there are differences within East Asia in reactions to i-deals, they will be hampered in doing business in one of the most formidable markets in the world (Kim and Leung 2007). The five East Asian countries -Japan, Singapore, Vietnam, Thai, and Indonesia - were chosen in this study for several reasons. First, not



only have these countries often been the focus of past international comparative studies (Bomhoff and Man-Li 2012), but it has been confirmed that the people from each of these countries clearly share a particular national culture (Hofstede 2001). Second, in previous comparative cultural studies, these countries have shown different values for the degree of individualism (Hofstede 2001). The highest score for individualism as a national culture is in Japan, while the lowest one is in Indonesia. Comparison of different East Asian groups can contribute to the i-deals study by broadening our understanding about the systematic variation between cultural values and i-deal outcomes.

#### *Data collection and samples*

Data were collected from full-time employees in Japan, Indonesia, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam via an online survey service company. Research comparing traditional paper-based and online surveys revealed that no significant biases are existing between the two methodologies (Mehta and Sivadas 1995). Respondents were recruited through an organization that maintains a large database of employees working in business enterprises. In all countries, respondents were recruited through GMO Research.Inc, an organization that maintains a large database of employees willing to participate in online surveys. GMO Research.Inc has a reputation for being homogeneous with respect to age,

size of firm, income range, and education, while at the same time having as respondents business people who are representative of their respective countries. Through GMO Research.Inc, the link to our survey (i.e. URL) was sent via e-mail to full-time white-collar employees. In all countries, the anonymity of respondents was guaranteed. Respondents were chosen from a wide array of organizations. Each participant completed two surveys that were administered about 30 days apart to mitigate common method bias (MacKenzie and Podsakoff 2012). At time 1 (1<sup>st</sup> November, 2022), those who volunteered to participate were given access to a secure website where they completed the survey. A total number of 450 responses were recorded. The survey was continued until 90 respondents were reached in all countries in order to align the sample size by country, and the survey was terminated when 90 respondents were reached. Then, at time 2 (1<sup>st</sup> December, 2022), after eliminating invalid samples by performing a Satisfice check, the survey was ended up with 397 valid samples. These included 83 Japanese, 79 Vietnamese, 82 Singaporeans, 79 Thais, and 74 Indonesians. 45% of valid samples were female whose ages ranged between 23 and 65 with a mean of 34.89. Participants were employed from a wide variety of industries, most of which were manufacturing (20.3%), banking/finance (11.2%), retail (16.0%), service (15.2%), consulting (8.3%). Table 1 shows the simple size, participants' age, tenure, and gender by country. There were some

cross-national differences as to gender and tenure, but these variables are not significantly associated with the measures used in this study.

The survey questionnaire was initially developed in English and then was translated into Japanese, Thai and Vietnamese using Brislin's (1986) back-translation procedure. All translators were blind to the study's hypotheses. A bilingual individual translator for each country independently translated our survey questionnaire from English to Japanese, Thai and Vietnamese, respectively.

**Table 1**

*Demographics of samples*

Country	Sample size	Age	Gender (%)		Tenure (year)
			Male	Female	
Japan	83	36.73	61.4	38.6	12.57
Vietnam	79	30.08	57.0	43.0	5.78
Singapore	82	34.11	84.1	15.9	4.68
Thai	79	35.42	57.0	43.0	5.11
Indonesia	74	33.07	55.4	44.6	7.07

### *Measures*

At time 1, Witnessing i-deals and Individualism were measured in addition to some demographic variables. At time 2, each participant's malicious envy was measured.

#### *Witnessing i-deals*

All participants reported their perception of their coworker's i-deals by reporting to the adapted items of Rosen *et al.*'s (2013) task and work responsibility i-deals, schedule flexibility i-deals, location flexibility i-deals, and financial incentive i-deals (e.g. "My coworker has successfully asked for extra responsibilities that take advantage of the skills that (s)he brings to the job") on the five-point Likert scale.

We conducted confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to assess their measurement properties, because Witnessing i-deals scale was being used for the first time in Vietnam and Thai study settings. The fit indices for one-factor model fell within a good range, root-mean-square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .074; comparative fit index (CFI) = .95; Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) = .939. On the contrary, four-factor model's fit indices did not show good fit with RMSEA = .21; CFI = .72; TLI = .56, and significantly worse than one-factor model. The Cronbach's alpha of overall Witnessing i-deals scale is .92.

### *Individualism*

We used the scale developed by Dorfman and Howell (1988) to measure individualism. Two sample items are: “Group welfare is more important than individual rewards” (reverse score), and “Individuals may be expected to give up their goals in order to benefit group success” (reverse score). The Cronbach’s alpha of Individualism scale was .87.

### *Malicious envy*

We assessed malicious envy using Smith *et al.* (1999)’s measure. Two sample items are: “I feel envious of my coworkers”, and “Feelings of envy constantly torment me”. Consistent with our study hypotheses, the items above tapped the generic feelings of envy. Following Ng’s (2017) instruction, a validation attempt was performed to justify this focus of generic envy. A focus group discussion with 15 Japanese bilingual employees was conducted. The group discussion took the form of participants freely discussing two questions below - "Can witnessing significant others' i-deals be a cause of envy for the success of colleagues?" and "Can direct observation or indirect hearing through social talk of i-deals enjoyed by others more psychologically and geographically

distant from us be a cause for envy of others' success?" Most of them (86.7%) noted that witnessing coworkers' i-deals caused them to envy the coworkers' overall success. They cited reasons such as seeing coworkers as direct of potential competitors and experiencing difficulty in limiting their malicious envy feeling to just the coworkers i-deals. On the other hand, 60.0% of all respondents indicated that ambivalent feelings arise when they imagine a situation in which they see i-deals more frequently than when they directly see i-deals earned by their colleagues. According to them, such an observation may, on the one hand, decrease envy because it anticipates the possibility of receiving i-deals themselves at some future point, but on the other hand, it may also increase malicious envy toward others because of the realization that they are not currently being offered i-deals. The remaining 40% said that imagining a situation in which i-deals are frequently observed is less malicious envy than directly witnessing the i-deals their colleagues are getting. The reason for this is that the presence of such people means that they too could be approached with such transactions in the future. This result shows the correctness of our assumption of malicious jealousy as a general emotion, rather than malicious jealousy directed at a specific other, as the dependent variable. The Cronbach's alpha of Malicious envy scale was .84.

### *Control variables*

Participants reported their gender (1=female, 0=male), age, organizational tenure, respondents' nationality and managerial position (1=manager, 0=others) at time1.

### *Analytical approach*

To estimate the effect of Individualism and Witnessing i-deals, we included these variables both at individual level (level 1) and national level (level 2). This inclusion follows the recommendation by Zhang *et al.* (2009), who suggested that between-group and within-group effects at different levels should be analyzed separately to avoid conflating these two effects. As suggested by Hypotheses 2, 4, 5, and 6, we are interested in all two levels of influence of the two variables. In the analyses, variables at level 1 were group-mean centered except for the control variables, whereas a variable at level 2 was grand-mean centered, based on guidelines proposed by Hofmann and Gavin (1998). Of these, level 2 Witnessing i-deals corresponds to generalized i-deals, and level 2 individualism corresponds to individualism as a shared culture within each country.

Our hypotheses suggest a conceptual model covering two levels of analysis. The multilevel nature of the data suggests that HLM is the most appropriate analytical method, since we assume two levels for individualism and witnessing i-deals (Raudenbush and

Bryk, 2002). Traditional ordinary-least-squares (OLS) regression methods would neglect such a nested relationship. We used the R software version 4.2.3 for our analyses.

## **Results**

### *Descriptive statistics*

Individualism and witnessing i-deals scale scores were used at both level 1 and level 2. To test the effects of individualism and i-deals shared at the country level in regression models, scores on these measures were aggregated at the country level. To justify aggregation, we calculated internal consistency and within-group agreement. ICC (1) were acceptable in all cases (0.145 for Witnessing i-deals, and 0.144 for Individualism). The internal consistencies (reliabilities) were above .90 for individualism and witnessing i-deal scales. Thus, the rWG(J) of the scales measuring Individualism and Witnessing i-deals can be interpreted as moderate agreement. The first HLM model is a One-way ANOVA (null) model with no predictors. The chi-square test revealed statistically significant variation. Rejecting the null assumes that all countries statistically do not have similar ratings in performance, which permitted us to pursue our hypotheses.

This result indicates that i-deals perceived by individuals are distributed not only among individuals but also between countries. Individual-level variance reflects some



degree of inter-individual variation in witnessing other's i-deals. On the other hand, country-level variance means that the amount and frequency of others' i-deals that people witness are different in each of the five countries. Witnessing others' i-deals aggregated at the country level correspond to generalized others' i-deals.

Descriptive statistics for individual level variables (level 1) are shown in Table 2 and descriptive statistics for national level variables (level 2) are shown in Table 3. According to the perception of the respondents, Individualism and Witnessing i-deals were 3.667 and 2.907 for Japan, 2.859 and 3.457 for Vietnam, 3.570 and 3.804 for Singapore, 3.115 and 3.610 for Thai, and 2.389 and 3.549 for Indonesia.

According to our data, the level of individualistic values of the citizens of the five countries are in the order of Japan > Singapore > Thailand > Vietnam > Indonesia (Table2). This is loosely in line with the order indicated by Hofstede (1980) (Japan > Singapore = Thailand = Vietnam > Indonesia), but it should be noted that Singapore is second only to Japan in height. One of the possible explanations is that the economic development that occurred in these countries after Hofstede's research might have changed the individualistic values of the peoples of each country. For example, the GDP growth rate in 2022 is Singapore > Indonesia > Vietnam > Thailand > Vietnam > Japan, in that order, which to some extent explains Singapore's high level of individualism.

According to Hofstede (2001), individualism generally increases with the economic development of a country.

In addition, East Asia is in an exceptional situation in the world, and it should be noted that collectivism is still strongly maintained even in countries that have achieved economic development (Hofstede 2001). Because of this particularity of East Asia, the level of individualism and the level of economic development do not match perfectly (Hofstede, 1980).. In any case, the above results suggest that the country dummy should not be used to represent the cultural values of a country in international comparisons in East Asia.

**Table 2**

*Individual level (level 1) descriptions and correlation matrix*

		Mean	S.D.	1	2	3	4	5
1	Mallicious envy	2.919	1.018	1				
2	Witnessing i-deals _level 1	3.513	.742	0.39	1			
3	Individualism_level 1	3.133	.853	0.52	0.42	1		
4	Tenure	7.06	7.418	0.04	0.08	-0.1	1	
5	Age	36.01	10.117	-0.04	0.06	-0.17	0.5	1
6	Manager_dummy	.41	.493	0.07	0.1	0.16	0.22	0.11

**Table 3***National level (level 2) descriptions*

	Japan	Vietnam	Singapore	Thai	Indonesia
Individualism_level 2	3.667	2.859	3.570	3.115	2.389
Witnessing i-deals level 2	2.907	3.457	3.804	3.610	3.549

*Estimation of hierarchical linear modeling*

As indicated in table 4, witnessing other's i-deals (individual-level) positively influences malicious envy ( $\beta = .257$ ,  $p < .05$ ), thus hypothesis 1 was supported.

Generalized others' i-deals did not negatively influence malicious envy ( $\beta = .103$ ,  $p > .10$ ).

Hypothesis 2 was not supported. Individual-level individualism did moderate the relationship between Witnessing coworkers' i-deals (individual-level) and malicious envy ( $\beta = .542$ ,  $p < .01$ ). In more detail, the positive relationship between witnessing i-deals and malicious envy was stronger for employees with a high individual value.

**Table 4***Hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) and results*

	Related hypotheses	Estimate	Std. Error	T value	
Intercept		0.142	1.098	0.129	
Tenure		0.010	0.007	1.588	
Age		0.001	0.005	0.109	
Manager_dummy		-0.106	0.086	-1.234	
Witnessing i-deals_L1	Hypothesis 1	0.257	0.083	3.098	*
Witnessing i-deals_L2:	Hypothesis 2	0.103	0.378	0.273	
Individualism_L1		0.542	0.058	9.339	***

Individualism_L2		-0.044	0.347	-0.128	
Witnessing i-deals _L1*Individualism _L1	Hypothesis 3	0.136	0.052	2.635	**
Witnessing i-deals _L1*Individualism _L2	Hypothesis 4	0.488	0.304	1.607	
Witnessing i-deals _L2*Individualism _L1	Hypothesis 5	0.542	0.206	2.635	**
Witnessing i-deals _L2*Individualism _L2	Hypothesis 6	0.208	0.705	0.295	
	$\tau_{00}$	0.010			
	$\sigma^2$	0.370			

\*\*\* 0.001, \*\* 0.01, \* 0.05, † 0.1

N = 397

To test the moderator effect of cultural values, we added individual and national level individualism. Individual-level individualism moderated the relationship between witnessing coworkers' i-deals (individual-level) and malicious envy, such that the positive relationship between witnessing i-deals and malicious envy was stronger for employees with a high individual value ( $\beta = .136$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Therefore, hypothesis 3 was supported. On the other hand, national-level individualism did not moderate the relationship between witnessing coworkers' i-deals (individual-level) and malicious envy ( $\beta = .488$ ,  $p > .10$ ), thus no support was found for hypothesis 4. Individual-level individualism did moderate the relationship between witnessing coworkers' i-deals (national level) and malicious envy, such that the positive relationship between witnessing i-deals and malicious envy will be stronger for employees with a high individual value ( $\beta = .542$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Therefore, hypothesis 5 was supported. National-level

individualism did not moderate the relationship between witnessing coworkers' i-deals (national level) and malicious envy ( $\beta = .208, p > .10$ ). Therefore, hypothesis 6 was not supported.

## **Discussion**

### *Interpretation of the results and theoretical implications*

The results of our analysis of the empirical data generally supported our main hypothesis which claimed that witnessing other's i-deals (individual-level) is positively related to malicious envy, and individual-level individualism will moderate the relationship between witnessing coworkers' i-deals (individual-level) and malicious envy. What i-deals received by coworkers in the same work place can lead to is upward comparison (Brown *et al.* 2007). As social comparison study suggests, upward comparisons lead to a sense of one's own inferiority to others, which often leads to malicious envy toward others (Marescaux *et al.* 2021). People with strong individualistic tendencies are more sensitive to i-deals enjoyed by others than those with strong collectivistic tendencies. Sensitivity to one's own interests and the disparity between one's own interests and those of others may account for such differences.

Judging from the fact that Hypothesis 2 and 6 were rejected, witnessing the generalized i-deals of others may have two effects: an effect of decreasing malicious envy by increasing the perception of the possibility of receiving i-deals oneself at some future point (as we predicted) and an effect of increasing envy stemming from the perception that others are receiving i-deals not currently offered to the respondent. These may cancel each other out, so that the effect of generalized i-deals alone may not be detected.

Interestingly, it is individualism at the individual level and not individualism at the country level that moderates the relationship between witnessing i-deals and malicious envy. This result supports the assertion that national culture studies such as Hofstede (1980; 2001) naively assume a high degree of cultural cohesion within a particular country (Osland and Bird 2000; Heijes 2011). As our descriptive results showed, individualism is indeed loosely shared at the national level. However, it is not the shared cultural values but the values espoused by individuals that actually moderate their reactions to i-deals received by others. One possible explanation is that globalization has led to greater dispersion of cultural values within a country. Hofstede himself cautions against such naive assumptions that subsequent studies have made, which state that individualism is completely shared within a single country (Hofstede 2001). In this sense, the proposition that East Asia remains different in terms of culture is certainly true

(Bomhoff and Man-Li 2012). However, this may be due more to individual differences within each country rather than differences at the national level (Kim and Leung 2007; Bomhoff and Gu 2012).

According to Heijes (2011), management research focusing on culture needs to shift from a homogeneous and coherent view of culture to a heterogeneous and open-ended view. Although research from this perspective is gradually beginning to be conducted within management theory (e.g. McSweeny 2009), the number of empirical researches is still small in number. In these days of diversifying individual values, we should adopt an attitude that does not uncritically accept the cohesiveness, permeability and causality within a culture. Adopting such an attitude should open up further development of management theory.

At least for i-deals' research, when making international comparisons of the influence of cultural values, we should not underestimate the presence of collectivistic individuals in individualistic countries and individualistic individuals in collectivist countries. This implies the need for more international comparative studies employing multilevel analysis. Anyway, most important contribution this study made is to examine how individualistic values moderate the coworker's response to i-deals received by others, with direct measurement of individualistic values.

Our results offer several important theoretical implications. First, research on coworker's reactions to others' i-deals needs to focus not only on the social relationship between the i-dealer and the coworker, but also on the moderating effect of personal cultural values. Yet we still do not know about the influence of personal factors, especially cultural values that affect coworker's reactions to others' i-deals and those that moderate the impact of witnessing others' i-deals on various outcomes. Prior studies overlooked the fact that cultural values can be distributed at at least two levels: those at the level of the individual level and those at the level of the country level. Future studies therefore should employ multilevel models in order to fully capture the nested characteristics of cultural values.

Second, results of the study indicate that the i-deals that generalized others receive do not bring malicious envy. For individualistic individuals, however, they are exceptionally sensitive to i-deals received by generalized others with whom they have no direct interactional relationship. This result is due to the fact that i-deals can be perceived (1) directly through witnessing the i-deals of others in the individual's immediate surroundings, and (2) more indirectly, through the frequent observation of i-deals in the country in the first place, even if not necessarily in the immediate event. This suggests important things. Through frequent observation of i-deals in a country, even if they are



not necessarily a familiar event, there is an effect of fostering a feeling of malicious envy.

In this sense, i-deals are not only a phenomenon that occurs as a result of individualistic values (Bal and Hornung 2019), but they themselves create a climate of individualism through the generation of negative feelings toward others (Mughal *et al.* 2022). The confirmation of this indirect effect, which has been overlooked, is the second theoretical implication of this study.

### *Practical Implications*

Our results show some practical implications. First, employers need to understand that there are important individual differences in the responses to i-deals that others receive. Individuals with strong individualistic values have strong reactions to i-deals received by others in general that they do not directly observe. In workplaces with individualistic employees, i-deals should be implemented carefully so that the negative impact on others who observe them does not outweigh the positive impact on the individuals who enjoy them. In addition, we must understand that i-deals themselves create a climate of individualism through the generation of negative feelings toward others. To attract, recruit, and retain employees with high abilities, skills, and special characteristics, firms offer special arrangements to certain individuals that they do not

offer to others. Idiosyncratic deals like this should not ruin the coworkership of colleagues who work together.

### *Limitation and future direction*

Our study has some limitations. The first one is that we are only considering the dispersion within East Asia, the area where national economic growth has accelerated the process of individualizing values. The countries for which we collected data were those with the individualism index indicated by Hofstede (2001) ranked middle (Japan), low (Indonesia), and between them (Vietnam, Singapore, Thailand). Comparing countries with extremely high levels of individualism, such as the United States, to countries with low levels of individualism, it is possible that values not only at the individual level but also at the country level moderate the relationship between i-deals and their outcomes. The second limitation is that, due to survey design limitations, we are unable to measure cultural values that are in the middle range between national culture and individual values. Individualistic decentralization can occur not only at the individual and national levels, but also at the corporate level (cultural values as corporate culture) and departmental levels (cultural values as departmental culture) as well. Future research then needs to

construct such multilayered multilevel models and adopt research designs and analytical models that allow us to rigorously examine the impact of nested cultural values.

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