

## Hedonic Advertising and Consumers' Subjective Well-Being: An Upward Comparison among Gen Z

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### Abstract

The role of advertising with respect to different types of social comparison is a neglected area in a collectivist culture like Pakistan. The study aims to examine the effects of hedonic advertising on consumer's subjective well-being. The study will also examine the mediating role of materialism, and episodic envy. A true experimental design testing two conditions i.e., hedonic advertising vs control was adopted to gather responses from 200 Gen Z consumers. Single-stage cluster sampling technique has been used to collect data. Data was further analyzed through SPSS and AMOS, where descriptive analysis and MANOVA testing was run through SPSS v.25 and regression and path analysis was run through AMOS v.21. The findings highlighted that after viewing hedonic advertising, consumers were more materialistic, score high on episodic envy, and are dissatisfied with their lives. Furthermore, episodic envy and materialism partially mediates the relationship between hedonic advertising exposure and subjective well-being. The study is first of its kind that has empirically tested the advertising effects on consumer's subjective well-being through social comparison in a collectivist country like Pakistan. In particular, it examined hedonic advertising and study its impact on materialism as well as subjective well-being. The study provides guidelines for advertising agencies for improving the quality of advertising content so that the negative impacts of advertising can be minimized. It also provides guidelines for the controlling authorities at the governmental level to better examine and scrutinize the content with respect to the subjective well-being of the viewer. The study suffers the limitations associated with posttest only control group methodology. Further the results are limited to hedonic advertising and has not examined other appeals.

**Keywords:** Subjective well-being (Life satisfaction), Materialism, Episodic Envy, Upward Social comparison, Hedonic advertising

### Introduction

The examination of the impact of advertising on the subjective well-being of consumers stands as a topic of considerable scholarly interest on a global scale. Individuals on a regular basis are flooded with a profusion of advertising messages disseminated through diverse media

channels (Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010). Such messages manifest in three primary forms: informational, designed to assist individuals in their decision-making processes, altruistic and hedonic, seeking to elicit affective responses that may not be explicitly linked to the promoted product (Hetsroni, 2000). In either type, advertising has the potential to either impede or enhance the subjective well-being of consumers (Royne Stafford & Pounders, 2021).

Many prior studies call for in-depth research in this field as the existing literature is not sufficient to formulate any conclusion (Royne Stafford & Pounders, 2021; Royne Stafford & Taylor, 2022). Further studies should provide guidelines for advertising agencies and content creators to promote more societal-friendly content and minimize the adverse effects of advertising at large (Gurrieri, Tuncay Zayer, & Coleman, 2022; Nairn & Oprea, 2020).

One of the ways advertising affects consumer minds is through social comparison as it provides a platform for viewers to indulge in social comparison with media personnel (Lou & Tse, 2020). Incidental social comparison can bring negative outcomes like stress & life dissatisfaction (Chan & Zhang, 2007; Tiggemann & McGill, 2004). However, social comparison can be upward and downward and there is a need to study different shades of social comparison concerning their impact on materialism and subjective well-being (Gilbert, Stafford, Sheinin, & Pounders, 2021).

Sirgy et al. (2012) noted that the more materialistic content an advertising contains, the more negatively it impacts the subjective well-being of the consumer. Idealized images present in any advertising provide a breeding ground for the materialistic thoughts in the consumer mind. For this study, we focused on hedonic advertising as this kind of advertising includes more idealized images and the themes used in such advertising also revolve around individualism & pleasure-seeking (Hetsroni, 2000). We assumed that by showcasing more idealized images, hedonic advertising would evoke more upward social comparison opportunities in viewers. As a result, the more upward social comparison a viewer makes, the more materialistic thoughts will come to his or her mind and the less favorably he or she will rate the subjective well-being (Markova & Azocar, 2021; McCarthy & Morina, 2020; Zheng, Baskin, & Peng, 2018). We assumed that materialism will mediate the relationship between hedonic advertising and subjective well-being.

Episodic envy is the basic emotion related to upward social comparison (Menghao Ren, 2023). It is an incidental emotion one experiences whenever he or she faces another person better than him/her (Kant, 1997; Van de Ven, 2017). Materialistic pursuits in any person enhance with the increased level of envy (Cui, Zhang, Yin, Li, & Zhong, 2022). Envy is positively linked with depressive symptoms like stress and anxiety and negatively associated with overall subjective well-being (Smith & Kim, 2007). Furthermore, Episodic envy also mediates the relationship between incidental social comparison and subjective well-being (Li, 2019). We also assumed that episodic envy mediates the relationship between hedonic advertising and subjective well-being.

The primary objective of this research is to examine the impact of hedonic advertising on subjective well-being through upward social comparison. Moreover, the mediating role of materialism and episodic envy will also be studied. It is an experimental research design by

adopts a posttest control group only. Participants consisted of college/university students from Haripur university as well as from NRTC Telecom school. Participants were divided into either treatment or control groups on a random basis. A cluster randomized sampling technique was utilized. The treatment group had to see the hedonic advertising before filling out the structured questionnaire whereas the control group filled the questionnaire directly without any intervention. Data will be analyzed using SPSS v 25 and Amos v 21.

### Literature review

#### Social Comparison Theory

The idea of social comparison theory was first coined by Festinger's in 1954 (Festinger, 1954). Festinger believed that people don't like to be inferior and always try to gain superiority over other people. Festinger idea covered only the upward social comparison domain whereas later the downward social comparison domain was also highlighted (Wills, 1991). Wills highlighted that people do compare themselves to inferiors as well. Whenever a person compares himself to inferior others, he feels more satisfied with his current life and less materialistic thoughts come to his mind (Ghuman, Moshadi, & Ayaz, 2022; Shen, 2013). Whereas upward social comparison might result in an adverse fashion with increased materialism and reduced subjective well-being (Markova & Azocar, 2021; McCarthy & Morina, 2020). In this study, we focused only on upward social comparison. Episodic envy is another emotion that is linked with upward social comparison. Van de Ven (2017) argued that whenever we encounter any person better than us in any relevant life domain, we experience envy. Upward social comparison has episodic envy at its core (Menghao Ren, 2023).

#### Hedonic Advertisement

Literature provides us with approximately twenty advertising appeals. However, all these appeal types fall under three basic classifications functional, hedonic & altruistic. Utilitarian or functional advertising usually utilizes a rational or cognitive approach to market the product. However, both hedonic and altruistic advertising use emotional thinking process for the said purpose (Hetsroni, 2000). Hedonic is derived from the word "hedone" which stands for pleasure seeking. The advertising which is more focused on pleasure seeking, joy & leisure greatly promotes the idea of self-satisfaction and individualism (Holland, 2015).

Where altruistic advertising focuses more on collective values hedonic advertising content supports the use of more idealized images than functional and altruistic advertising. We assumed that hedonic advertising through promoting more idealized images & individualism, will provide a better platform for upward social comparison for the viewers. As a result, when viewer indulges in upward social comparison, they will be more envious, will experience enhanced materialistic thoughts, and less happy with their current life.

Hedonic advertising mostly uses idealized media images and their main ad protagonists address happy and satisfied lives which results in upward social comparison. It is assumed that hedonic advertising provides the platform for upward social comparison. So

by priming upward social comparison through hedonic advertising, participants under the experimental condition as compared to a control condition;

- a) score higher on materialism (H1)
- b) lower on subjective well-being (H2)
- c) Higher on episodic envy (H3)

### **Subjective Well-Being (Life satisfaction)**

Subjective well-being is an individual rational as well as emotional assessment of his life which includes emotional satisfaction, general life domain satisfaction, and overall life satisfaction judgments. It has three basic components; life satisfaction judgments, positive and negative effect. According to this, an individual has high subjective well-being if he encounters more positive experiences, and less negative experiences and is satisfied with his current life state.

Where we find a handful of studies concluding a negative relationship between advertising exposure and subjective well-being (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2003a, 2003b; Oprea, Buijzen, & Valkenburg, 2012) still many believe that the relationship is not well understood and has given less importance in the prior literature (Kim, Popova, Halpern-Felsher, & Ling, 2019; Michel, Sovinsky, Proto, & Oswald, 2019). Advertising as a whole has the potential to both hinder or promote consumer well-being so the only thing we can do is dig deep and study various shades or types of advertising to reach any possible conclusion (Royne Stafford & Pounders, 2021). Moreover as highlighted by Gilbert et al. (2021) future studies should also examine the role of social comparison in the relationship between advertising and subjective well-being.

### **Materialism**

Materialism, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, is all about appreciating things and comfort over spiritual things (Dictionary, 2017). It's the idea that people hustle for more money, goods, and wealth to feel happy and keep up their status (Dittmar & Isham, 2022). There are three main ideas behind materialism. First off, there's acquisition centrality, where the main goal in life is just to gather a bunch of stuff. secondly, there's "acquisition as a pursuit to happiness," saying that getting more things is linked to being happy. Thirdly, "possession-defined success" is about how materialistic people often measure their success by comparing what they have with what others have (M. D. Richins, Scott, 1992; M. L. Richins & Dawson, 1992). The whole idea behind this setup is that the people are so focused on getting more stuff and how it affects their happiness. it's like a constant comparison game with no end.

As per the current literature understanding, advertising contributes to enhanced materialism in viewers by leading them toward more consumption (Schudson, 2013). Numerous scholars have investigated the association between advertising and materialistic tendencies across diverse age groups. Extant research suggests that exposure to advertisements exerts a positive longitudinal influence on materialism, with this impact being entirely mediated by an augmented desire to purchase the advertised products (Suzanna J

Opree, Moniek Buijzen, Eva A van Reijmersdal, & Patti M Valkenburg, 2014). Materialism has a negative association with subjective well-being, the more materialistic an individual is the less satisfied he is with his life (Zheng, Ruan, & Zheng, 2021). People with materialistic goals would become even more materialistic after exposure to materialistic advertising. Notably, individuals characterized as heavy viewers exhibit a heightened susceptibility to this effect (Chan & Cai, 2009). Materialistic advertisements like hedonic advertising, contribute to an inclination among individuals to perceive material acquisition as a solution to social issues, fostering the belief that happiness, love, and success can be procured exclusively through the acquisition of material products (Dunkeld, Wright, Banerjee, Easterbrook, & Slade, 2020). Furthermore, materialism demonstrates a negative association with various facets of well-being, encompassing general happiness, evaluations of quality of life, subjective well-being, life satisfaction, religious and family values, and self-esteem (Belk, 1984; Dittmar & Isham, 2022; Kasser & Ahuvia, 2002; M. D. Richins, Scott, 1992; Roberts & Clement, 2007). Notably, (Moldes, Ku, & Marketing, 2020) highlighted a small to medium effect concerning the priming of materialism on overall subjective well-being. This body of research sheds light on the intricate relationship between advertising exposure, materialistic inclinations, and their broader implications for subjective well-being.

H4: Materialism negatively predicts subjective well-being.

H5: Materialism partially mediates the relationship between advertising exposure and subjective well-being.

### Episodic Envy

Episodic envy, characterized as an aversive emotional response arising from specific negative social comparisons, is intricately linked to subjective well-being and materialistic tendencies. By Aristotle's definition from 350 BC, envy manifests as the distress caused by the prosperity of others, particularly when their achievements surpass one's own (Aristotle, 350 BC/1954). Notably, envy is not precipitated by another's success in absolute terms, but rather when that success surpasses the individual's achievements (Menghao Ren, 2023). Kant (1997) argued that upward social comparison with better-off others is the basic cause of episodic envy.

Following an upward social comparison, individuals tend to attribute greater importance to conspicuously visible products and allocate more resources toward material possessions. Importantly, episodic envy assumes a mediating role in the relationship between incidental social comparison and materialism (Cui et al., 2022; Zheng et al., 2018).

It is noteworthy that episodic envy exhibits a positive association with depressive symptoms like stress and anxiety and a negative association with self-esteem and subjective well-being (Smith & Kim, 2007). Li (2019) argued that episodic envy mediates the relationship between upward social comparison and negative outcomes like stress, anxiety, and lower subjective well-being. From the above literature, we have deduced our next three hypotheses.

H6: Episodic Envy negatively predicts subjective well-being.



H7: Episodic Envy partially mediates the relationship between advertising exposure and subjective well-being.

### Research Methodology

#### Design

The study adopted a posttest-only control group experiment as many prior studies have chosen experimental research design to examine the effects of social comparison on materialism and subjective well-being (Ghuman et al., 2022; Jin & Ryu, 2020; Tiggemann & Brown, 2018). 200 university students from Haripur university as well as from NRTC Telecom school participated in this experiment and were randomly assigned to either control or hedonic advertising conditions. Participants' age ranged between 17 to 20 with an education of higher secondary to bachelor. Our sample includes 78 females and 122 males. A randomized cluster sampling technique is used to collect data.

#### Stimulus Material

Advertising stimulus was selected by using two-stage verification. Initially, 08 advertising were selected with the help of 04 industrial and academic experts. Secondly, these advertisements were shown to 30 students who were similar in characteristics to the participants of the main study. Participants rated these advertising on a 07-point Likert scale "1 = not at all hedonic, 7 = completely hedonic advertising". 06 advertisements with an average score of 5 or more were included in the study for final experimentation.

#### Measuring Instrument

Diener, Emmons, Larsen, and Griffin (1985) developed a satisfaction with life scale to measure subjective well-being. This study adopted the same as it is a very promising tool to measure subjective well-being and many prior researchers utilize it in their studies (Dinh, Van Nguyen, Trinh, & Nguyen, 2022; Ghuman et al., 2022; Zhang, He, & Chen, 2022). For materialism, 09-item materialism value scale (MVS) was adopted (M. L. Richins & Dawson, 1992). Lastly, To access episodic envy, a 09-Item episodic Envy Scale developed by Cohen-Charash was adopted (Cohen-Charash, 2009). The final questionnaire consisted of 28 questions including 05 demographical questions was prepared. The questionnaire was tested using 07 point Likert Scale with 7 = strongly agree to 1 = strongly disagree.

#### Analysis & Results

Initially, Participants were randomly assigned to either experiment condition or control. After that, they filled out the structured questionnaire. Data collected against all three variables i.e., Subjective well-being, Materialism & Episodic envy was first tested for reliability. Reliability statistics for all three variables were 0.899, 0.912 & 0.868 respectively. MANOVA results showed that after viewing the hedonic advertising participants scored higher on materialism (Mean Experiment = 5.871 versus Mean Control = 4.448) and episodic envy (Mean Experiment = 5.721 versus Mean Control = 4.379) and lower on life satisfaction (Mean Experiment = 3.329 versus Mean Control = 4.652) as assumed in H1, H2, & H3 (Table-1).

Secondly, further analysis revealed that the F value of all multivariate tests i.e., Pillai's trace, Wilks' Lambda, Hotelling's Trace & Roy's Largest Root was significant. In our data, the homogeneity of variance assumption was violated and in such cases, Wilks' Lambda is the most robust test. As per the result, there was a statistically significant difference in Subjective Well-being, Episodic Envy & Materialism based on different groups with  $F= 49.795, p < .0005$ ; Wilk's  $\Lambda = 0.567$ , partial Eta Squared = 0.433 Table - 2.

Table-1 Descriptive Statistics

	Group	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Episodic Envy	Control Group	4.3797	1.18425	103
	Hedonic Exposure	5.7205	.70220	97
	Total	5.0300	1.18659	200
Materialism	Control Group	4.4477	1.14380	103
	Hedonic Exposure	5.8706	.57101	97
	Total	5.1378	1.15589	200
Subjective Well-being	Control Group	4.6524	1.24521	103
	Hedonic Exposure	3.3258	.79965	97
	Total	4.0090	1.24300	200

Table-2 Multivariate Tests<sup>a</sup>

Effect		Value	F	Hypothesis df	Error df	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Group	Pillai's Trace	.433	49.795 <sup>b</sup>	3.000	196.000	.000	.433
	Wilks' Lambda	.567	49.795 <sup>b</sup>	3.000	196.000	.000	.433
	Hotelling's Trace	.762	49.795 <sup>b</sup>	3.000	196.000	.000	.433
	Roy's Largest Root	.762	49.795 <sup>b</sup>	3.000	196.000	.000	.433

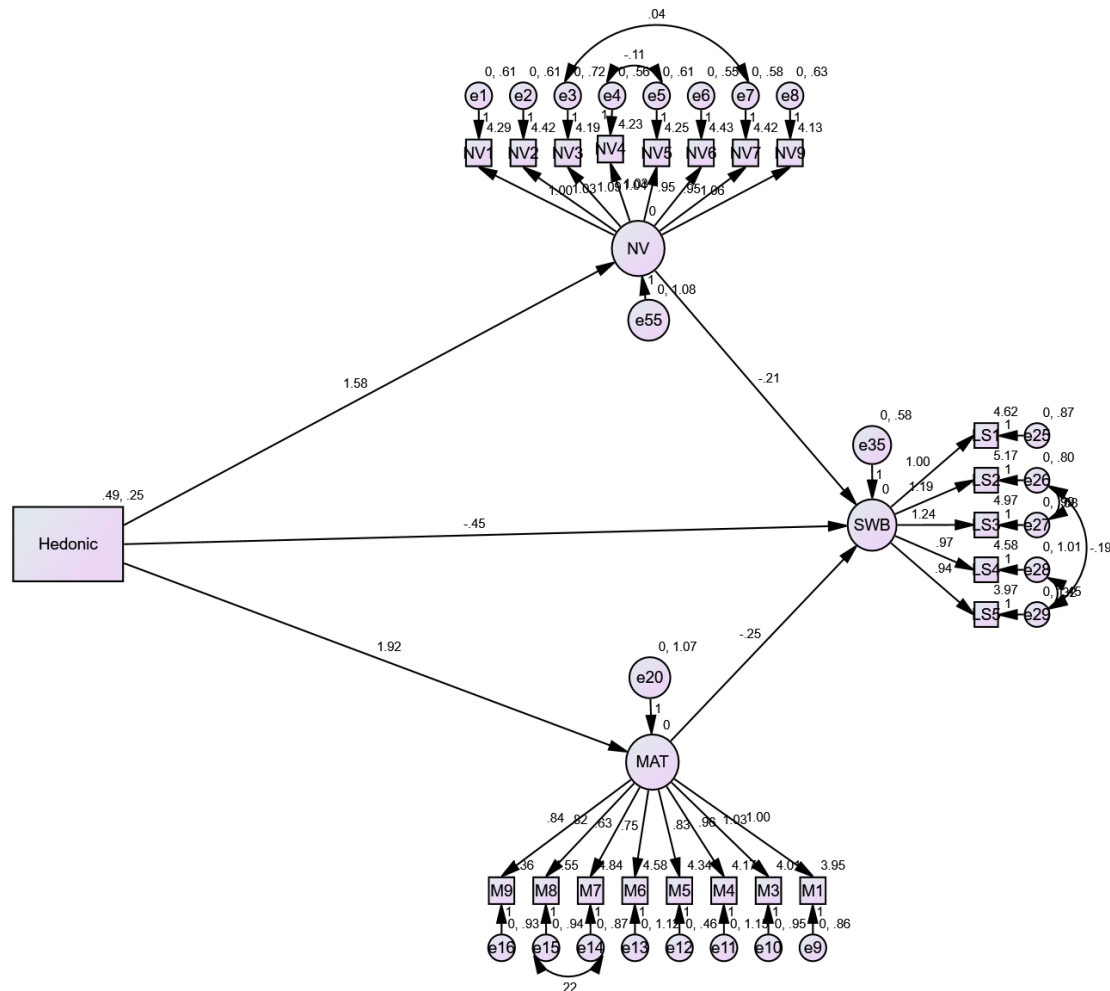


Figure – 1 SCM Model

Note: NV (Episodic Envy), MAT (Materialism), SWB (Subjective Well-being)

SCM & Mediation Analysis

For further analysis, SCM Amos was used. Initially model was run and some modification indices were identified and corrected. The final model was run after necessary modifications and results of RMSEA, PCLOSE, CMIN/df. CFI, GFI, NFI & TLI showed a good fit (Table-3). After model fit, we advanced our analysis further to path analysis. Results showed that hedonic advertising is a good predictor of episodic envy, materialism & subjective well-being (Table-4). Where it positively predicted materialism & and episodic envy with (β)= 0.679, p <0.05 & (β)= 0.605, p <0.05 respectively. Hedonic advertising negatively predicted subjective well-being with (β)= -0.215, p <0.05.



Table - 3: CFA Model Fit Indices

Indices	Criteria for Acceptance	Final Model
P Value	$<0.05$	0.000
CMIN/df	$CMIN \leq 2.0$	1.893
RMSEA	$RMSEA < 0.06$	0.40
PCLOSE	$PCLOSE \geq 0.05$	0.985
GFI	$GFI \geq 0.90$	0.898
NFI	$NFI \geq 0.80$	0.956
CFI	$CFI \geq 0.95$	0.982
TLI		0.979

Table 4: Beta Estimates

			Unstandardized Estimate	Standardized Estimate	S.E	C.R	P
E.Envy	<---	Hedonic	1.581	0.605	.165	9.566	***
MAT	<---	Hedonic	1.919	0.679	.178	10.756	***
SWB	<---	Hedonic	-.449	-0.215	.202	-2.223	.026
SWB	<---	E.Envy	-.213	-0.267	.064	-3.350	***
SWB	<---	MAT	-.246	-0.334	.067	-3.688	***

Mediation analysis showed that both episodic envy and materialism mediated the relationship between hedonic advertising and subjective well-being (Table-5). The direct effect of hedonic advertising on consumer subjective well-being without any mediator was significant with  $(\beta)=-0.601, p < 0.05$ . Mediation analysis further highlighted that in the presence of mediators, the direct effect of hedonic advertising on consumer subjective well-being was significant with  $(\beta)=-0.215, p < 0.05$  as well as indirect effect of advertising on Subjective-Wellbeing was also significant  $(\beta)=-0.388, p < 0.05$ . Here the beta value was changed from  $-0.215$  to  $-0.388$  which confirmed a partial mediation of Episodic Envy and Materialism between hedonic advertising and Subjective Well-being.

Table-5 Mediation Results

IV	MV	DV	Direct without Mediator	Direct with Mediator	Indirect Beta (Bout Strapping)
Hedonic Advertising	-Envy -Materialism	-SWB	-0.601 (0.026)	-0.215 (0.027)	-0.388***

### Discussion

Along with its various benefits, Advertising has the potential to affect consumer subjective well-being (Ghuman et al., 2022). Furthermore, different advertising affect consumer subjective well-being in a different way. Social comparison is one of the ways through which advertising affects the consumer's minds. Young individuals are more vulnerable to advertising unintended effects as they are more emotional in their decision-making and do not have proper defense mechanisms (Ashraf & Merunka, 2017; Buijzen, Van Reijmersdal, & Owen, 2010). We assumed that through upward social comparison, hedonic advertising will result in more materialistic thoughts as well as viewers will experience episodic envy. In addition to that the viewers will experience less subjective well-being. MANOVA results confirmed all three hypotheses as the treatment group scored more on materialism and episodic envy and less on subjective well-being as compared to the control group. The results were in line with the prior studies which emphasized that different advertising impacts subjective well-being and materialism differently through evoking different types of social comparison (Ghuman et al., 2022; Lou & Tse, 2020; M. L. Richins, 2017). So H1, H2, and H3 were hereby accepted. As Sirgy et al. (2012) highlighted the more materialistic content an advertising has, the more adversely it impacts the subjective well-being of the viewer. Secondly we proceeded with analysis with SCM Amos to further examine the relationship between the variables. A dummy variable was created for hedonic advertising and analysis was run. Results confirmed that all paths of the model were significant which means that hedonic advertising has a significant impact on episodic envy, materialism & subjective well-being of the consumer. The result is also consistent with the prior work which showed that advertising is significantly associated with materialism (Suzanna J. Oprea, Moniek Buijzen, Eva A. van Reijmersdal, & Patti M. Valkenburg, 2014; Watkins, Aitken, Robertson, Thyne, & Williams, 2016) & subjective well-being (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2003a, 2003b; Oprea et al., 2012).

Thirdly, mediation analysis revealed that episodic envy and materialism partially mediated the relationship between hedonic advertising and subjective well-being. Episodic envy is one of the prime emotions that results from upward social comparison (Menghao Ren, 2023; Van de Ven, 2017). The mediation results were also consistent with the literature which holds that envy acts as a mediator between upward social comparison & between upward social comparison and depressive symptoms like lower subjective well-being (Li, 2019; Zheng et al., 2018). In the light of above, we accepted H4, H5, H6 & H7.

### Conclusion, limitations & Future Directions

Most of the prior literature is limited to body dissatisfaction and stress when studying the impact of advertising through upward social comparison. This study is the first of its kind which study the impact of hedonic advertising on subjective well-being of the consumer. Secondly, many previous studies have associated advertising with lower subjective well-being. However, this study is one of the pioneers in studying the role of episodic envy and materialism in this relationship. Episodic envy is the prime emotion one faces whenever he makes an upward social comparison. The study confirmed that the more hedonic an advertisement is; the more upward social comparison opportunities it will provide to the viewers. The more upward social comparison a person makes, he or she will experience more episodic envy and more materialistic thought come to his or her mind which ultimately affects his or her subjective well-being.

Our study has some limitations as well. Firstly, the sample is collected through cluster randomized sampling, However, for future studies, stratified random sampling can also be used as it enhances the generalizability. Secondly, our data is cross-sectional; future researchers must focus on longitudinal studies. Thirdly, we adopt a posttest-only control group experimental design, a more robust experimental design like Solomon four group analysis can also be used. Further, we only consider hedonic advertising, for future other types of advertising can also be considered for examination and the data might also have been collected from different respondents having different ages and educational levels.

### Ethics Statement

The ethical Committee of COMSATS University has approved this study.

### Author Contribution:

All the authors who are listed have made a significant contribution to the completion of this study.

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