

From Bonding to Backlash: The Interplay of Social Comparison, Secrecy, and Jealousy in Organizational Politics

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Article History

Received: 06 Nov 2025 Revised: 22 May 2026 Accepted: 02 June 2026 Published: 30 June 2026

Abstract

This study discusses the possible effects of good professional relationships on emotional and behavioral behaviors, such as political activity, social comparison, and jealousy. The total number of participants across four research studies is 1,094, and a between-subjects experimental design has been used. The participants were randomly assigned to a setting in which either a close coworker or an acquaintance of these coworkers was either very successful, routinely appreciated, or received concrete rewards. The study compared non-destructive and destructive social comparison, as well as politically-oriented workplace intentions, with depression and tested for mediation and moderation using ANOVA and regression-based methods. An interesting result was that jealousy was even more intense when they saw extraordinary success among close work friends than when they saw ordinary success or material gain. This relationship was mediated by social comparison, with secrecy further intensifying it. Furthermore, feelings of jealousy were found to increase politically directed self-serving behavior within the workplace. The results generally show that stronger interpersonal relationships are associated with greater emotional and behavioral responses in a politically oriented workplace. Including emotions adds a fresh perspective to the study of organizational politics and shows how achievement and appreciation might, in organizational contexts, unintentionally compromise peer relationships, hence highlighting the necessity of openness and the just sharing of appreciation.

Keywords: organizational politics, workplace friendship, social comparison, jealousy, secrecy, workplace friendships, political behavior.

1. Introduction

Organizational politics are defined as actions people use to influence decisions, access resources, and promote their self-interest in organizations (Mosquera, Tigre, & Alegre, 2025). Organizational politics is not viewed favorably but is an inevitable component of the modern workplace, as organizations inevitably have competing interests, unequal

power dynamics, and unclear decision-making processes (Muhammad & Soumyaja, 2026). Political behavior plays an even more important role in today's leadership processes in flat, multi-functional organizations where work is interdependent (De Clercq, Khan, & Haq, 2023). Politics often helps achieve adaptability, access to resources, and career advancement, though overuse or unethical political behavior can result in stress, decreased job satisfaction, reduced trust, psychological strain, and turnover intentions (Ali et al., 2026). This can lead to a lack of psychological safety and emotional tension among team members, especially if different levels of recognition, compensation, or promotion are perceived as politically motivated or unfair (Khan et al., 2020).

However, previous studies have also demonstrated that coping with work environments that involve politics and personalities requires greater emotional flexibility and interpersonal skills (Wang, Nie, & Chan, 2024). For employees, workplace friendships are a significant relationship that can influence their responses to workplace politics (He et al., 2022). Successful workplace friendships do not simply materialize out of thin air but stem from trust, sharing emotional support, common experiences, and relational closeness and can often lead to a positive impact on psychological safety, team cooperation, innovation, and employees' well-being (Pillemer & Rothbard, 2018). Trust, relational closeness, and interpersonal dependency are considered central mechanisms underlying long-term relational stability and emotional reactions within professional environments. (Moon, Majeed, & Attiq, 2024). Workplace friendships can lead to a boost in innovative behavior (Durrah, 2023), increased interpersonal citizenship in the role, greater relational energy, and a sense of being able to manage difficult organizational conditions and become more productive (Xiao et al., 2020). Hence, positive, co-operative, and supportive interpersonal relationship behaviors are promoted among members to enhance their morale and functioning in the organization. While workplace friendships are usually linked to emotional support, trust, and psychological safety, they can also have a darker side, particularly in politically charged workplace environments (Wang, Liu, Lou, & Chen, 2025). Unfair or unequal recognition, promotion, or treatment of extraordinary accomplishments can make close relationships worse by intensifying social comparison, jealousy, and the feeling of being treated better – and not make things better (Matthews & Kelemen, 2025).

Current research, however, focuses on the benefits of workplace friendships - with less attention to the emotional aspects in politically charged settings (He et al., 2022). Prior research has also demonstrated that psychologically driven social motivations and identity-related comparisons can significantly shape behavioral responses in socially competitive environments. (Farooq & Moon, 2025). The close relationships they have with those around them at work may not always serve as emotional buffers. Rather, when coworkers are given extraordinary recognition, rewards, or status within a sphere considered politically influential, close friendships can intensify rather than reduce the negative

emotional response. In these contexts, for instance, others might spend more time in social comparisons, feel jealous, and perceive the organization's behavior as being characterized by favoritism or political bias (Sustiyatik & Jauhari, 2025). While previous studies have examined the effects of organizational politics, workplace friendships, and social comparison separately, there remains a lack of research that combines these components to understand better how relational closeness can affect emotional and behavioral reactions in political situations. Moreover, the effect of secrecy as a moderator of these emotional responses remains less explored.

This study aims to fill this void by exploring the interaction between workplace friendships and managerial politics, with a focus on emotional and psychological processes. That is, the authors investigate whether, when coworkers excel in a political field, close friendships at the workplace increase jealousy. The study also examines the mediating role of social comparison in the relationship between friendship tie strength and jealousy, the role of liking secrecy in intensifying emotional reactions, and the connection between these factors and politically oriented workplace behaviors. Grounded in Social Comparison Theory, Tie Strength Theory, and Social Exchange Theory, the study proposes an additional explanation of organizational politics that emphasizes its relational and emotional aspects.

This study makes several significant contributions to the literature on organizational behavior. First, it provides a different perspective on jealousy, that it is an autonomous emotional process involved in organizational politics, namely in close interpersonal relationships at the workplace. Second, this study shows that workplace bonds can, at times, make one more emotionally vulnerable rather than systematically providing a protective function under politically ambiguous conditions. Third, the study highlights social comparison as a mediating process and secrecy as a moderating factor, thereby further deepening understanding of the emotional and relational mechanisms by which organizational politics affects employee behaviors. Finally, there are suggestions for organizational leaders to reduce dysfunctional politics and maintain interpersonal harmony through transparent communication, fair systems of rewards and punishments, and fostering a psychologically safe work environment.

The research questions in this study are:

- Does a friendship in the workplace make it all the more difficult to cope with the extraordinary recognition of other employees?
- Is the relationship between friendship tie strength and jealousy mediated by social comparison?
- Do workplace friendships and jealousy reinforce organizational politics?

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Organizational Politics

Organizational politics is political action carried out to influence decision-making and power relations and to serve self-interest within formal systems (Mosquera, Tigre, &

Alegre, 2025). Organizational politics is generally a negative phenomenon, but it is a natural and required aspect of organizational life and stems from internal, inbuilt conflicts over goals, priorities, and power relations (Nyathi, 2024). In the complex, competitive landscape of the modern era, political behavior becomes a frequent, recurring, and determining factor in shaping workplace outcomes (Khan et al., 2020). Political workplace behaviors may be overt or covert and sometimes beneficial to adaptability, but they are increasingly associated with job stress, diminished job satisfaction, and increased thoughts of leaving the company (Mishra, Sharma & Swami, 2016). Today's organizations, with all their flattened hierarchies and cross-functional teams, must build high-interdependence settings, so leaders and HR practitioners must have a more nuanced understanding of the political landscape to foster wellness and productivity within their work environments (Wang, Nie, & Chan, 2024). Politics within organizations can be a problem because power, recognition, and opportunity are sometimes unequally distributed and unrelated to merit. Strategic political behavior can also be a means the agent uses to pursue their own interests, in the form of inconspicuous politics. When organizational politics are unmanaged, it can lead to a loss of trust, damaged relationships, and the demise of psychological safety. If decisions are unclear and perceived favoritism is evident, it can lead to feelings of jealousy, anxiety, and withdrawal (Muhammad & Soumyaja, 2026; Wang & Sung, 2016). The current civil, psychologically safe discourse within organizations, where employees can express their opinions, leads to increased retention, higher morale, and improved intergroup functioning (Ali et al., 2026). Understanding how office politics intertwines with emotional responses and interpersonal interactions is thus very important for organizations to become ethically, emotionally, and inclusively aware.

In the present study, it is these self-serving and potentially harmful behaviors that are examined, specifically aspects of political behavior that may involve favoritism, strategic hiding, and biased decision-making (De Clercq, Khan, & Haq, 2023), rather than constructive political behavior. Confined to this aspect, the research by Kragl, Bental, and Safaynikoo (2025) shows the importance of workplace incentive systems and reward transparency, which can influence organizational dynamics by increasing peer comparison and envy. The results indicate that once differential rewards and/or recognition become tangible, employees are more likely to see outcomes as political, thereby solidifying perceptions of unfair advantage and driving strategic and self-serving behaviors. This not only puts organizational politics in structural terms but also frames the phenomenon emotionally, as a reaction to perceived inequities among individuals in the workplace.

2.2 Jealousy

Jealousy is a combination of negative feelings in response to a perceived threat to a valued relationship or position (Parrott & Smith, 1993). Jealousy and envy are somewhat related feelings but conceptually different psychological experiences and should not be equated. Envy is a feeling or a thought about another person having some benefit, success, or quality

that causes anger, animosity, or sadness in the envious individual, because he or she wants the same thing(s) for him/herself. Jealousy, on the other hand, is purely relational, as it is the fear of losing the relationship or losing the relational position to another person, a rival (Breidenthal et al., 2020). This distinction becomes very important in any work environment. Experiencing envy can be a reaction to another person's success, triggered by an upward comparison. However, this emotion can evolve into jealousy when close interpersonal relationships are present, leading users to experience a negative shift in their sense of balance, inclusion, or mutual recognition. Envy at work occurs when coworkers feel excluded from friendships or perceive preferential treatment.

Jealousy has traditionally been the focus of research within the context of romantic or intimate relationships and is considered an emotional response to the perception of a threat to the valued relationship (Sustiyatik & Jauhari, 2025). The present study focuses specifically on jealousy, which is more likely to threaten relationship equilibrium than the desire for another to succeed, because extraordinary workplace experiences in the context of close friendship relationships are more likely to lead to feelings of jealousy (Muhammad & Soumyaja, 2026). If a close coworker is singled out for special recognition, privileges, or symbolic rewards, this can trigger comparisons of successes and doubts about the fairness and stability of the relationship. In this way, jealousy provides a more complex lens through which to view the relational and emotional implications of differential recognition in close connections in the workplace, thereby enhancing the construct validity and conceptual clarity of the proposed model. Jealousy is the fear of losing a valued relationship to a competitor and is important to one's identity (Wang & Sung, 2016). Jealousy was, for years, seen as more applicable to personal than to work situations. In fact, recent research has shifted to focus on competition at the interpersonal level in close friendships rather than in romantic relationships. In the workplace, jealousy is a psychological response to perceived disparities within a peer group, particularly in a small, close-knit group, regarding attention, opportunity, and/or treatment. Ellis and Thompson (2018) argue that it is perhaps more apparent in those with lower self-esteem, as the emotional state of these individuals may be affected by others' achievements or the evolution of relationships. Wang, Nie, & Chan (2024) explore the dynamics of workplace relationships and the potential for jealousy to emerge in workplace friendships, particularly when access to information, visibility, or opportunities for job promotion is involved.

2.3 Extraordinary Experiences

It is this peculiar and uncommon character of these events that we believe can actually unravel strong friendships more than non-serious or weaker ones, and thus lead to higher levels of jealousy than with them (Duerden et al., 2018). Intimate friendships tend to be established on the grounds of common experience, felt equality, and interpersonal knowing (Heinonen & Lipkin, 2023). If one of the friends has a phenomenal experience that sets them apart from the rest, it can undermine a sense of commonality and parity. A 'routine' team meeting was later used to announce to the team something they had not anticipated -

they had won over HR with the concept they had put forward on something that they thought they had put forward weeks earlier, and a new system was being developed throughout the company that would contain their name as a legacy feature to the project! Occasions like these, when they are openly celebrated and, at times, unintentionally a resounding success, may put the status of such a close friend group at risk.

Watching the dramatic success could make close friends feel jealous or psychologically inferior if they think they have been passed by or overlooked. It could make friends think their friendship was not true to begin with, which may not be intentional on the part of the individual(s) involved, but it can still cause feelings of disconnection or separation. Comparisons with similar others are likely to be more informative and valid than contrasts with unlike individuals. According to the selective accessibility model, when people's information about the comparison target is readily retrievable, they are likely to assimilate and perceive themselves as similar to the target (Muiruri, 2023). Thus, similarity has been an important factor in close friendships. The closer the friends are, the deeper their understanding of each other and the more information is available—thus, an increasing number of comparisons, more complex ones at that. Social comparison processes, defined as the evaluation of oneself against others (Festinger, 1954), play a key role in the dynamics of emotional responses in work relationships, especially in situations of imbalanced recognition and success. Social Comparison Theory suggests that people compare their outcomes with those of similar others, and that staff in workplace settings are likely to be a significant target for comparison. In this vein, Kragl, Bental, and Safaynikoo (2025) find that the visibility of rewards and differential incentives greatly amplifies upward social comparison and increases peer envy. These results indicate that when outstanding accomplishments are made visible, especially when socially close others make them, they enhance a tendency to engage in comparison processes and emotional vibrancy (Moon, Mohel & Farooq, 2021). Given workplace friendships, these exaggerated comparisons are more likely to lead to jealousy, as individuals feel a threat to their personal standing, as well as to relationship balance and inclusion (Wang, Liu, Lou, & Chen, 2025).

The basis of Social Comparison Theory is that people compare their status with others'. This phenomenon is also ubiquitous today in the workplace and is reinforced by organizational architecture, performance systems, and informal interpersonal connections and friendships (Matthews & Kelemen, 2025). The dichotomy of social comparison in the workplace has been increasingly highlighted. For example, Sung, Li, and Choi (2024) demonstrated that upward social comparison within teams can lead to increased performance for some employees, along with increased envy and resentment from others when the reasons for the difference in recognition are not explicitly communicated. To this reaction are added other reactions provoked in more politicized environments where favoritism is perceived. Emotions in organizational politics lead to heightened affective

responses to social contrast, with jealousy intervening as a moderator that attenuates psychological safety and team cohesion (Wang & Li, 2022; Sung, Li, & Choi, 2024).

Therefore, we hypothesize that tie strength affects the jealousy that may arise from a close friend's extraordinary event, and that social comparison is the intervening factor (Heinonen & Lipkin, 2023). People might think that their out-of-the-ordinary experiences will not incite jealousy if they keep them secret; however, the opposite might actually be true because if there is any experience that is considered out of the ordinary, then there is a fear that the person is feeling like they are being excluded, are suspicious, or the relationship is unbalanced between close coworkers (Bianchi et al., 2025). In earlier studies, secrecy is a quite common phenomenon and encompasses a broad spectrum of areas. Secrecy is the deliberate concealment of information (Clarke, Higgs & Garavan, 2025). Research on tacit knowledge further suggests that concealed or selectively shared information can create informational asymmetries that influence interpersonal trust and competitive perceptions among organizational members (Moon & Abbas, 2024). Secrecy may be a strategy for protecting privacy in a friendship, but it can also trigger suspicion and jealousy in other parties (Slepian, Halevy, & Galinsky, 2024). Secrecy within friendships may magnify the others' sense of exclusion and lead to more salacious comparisons and jealousy. So, it is expected that secrecy will amplify the relationship between the strength of the friendship tie and jealousy.

Secrecy in romantic/sexual and family relationships was the main focus in initial investigations. Several recent studies (Bedrov & Gable, 2024) have examined its impact on workplace behaviors, including psychological safety and trust. Secrecy is traditionally considered an important part of human individual-social relations in relationships, power relations, and psychological processes (Tang, 2025). Specifically, concealment was always related to concepts such as power, domination, and ethics. Secrecy was related to deception, manipulation, or morality, depending on circumstances, and was a concern for early philosophers and theorists (Clarke, Higgs & Garavan, 2025).

While good organizational politics can at times serve useful functions such as enhancing innovation and managing uncertainty, it is most often associated with favorites, unspoken objectives and skewed decision-making (Nyathi, 2024). Political undercurrents affect employees' perceptions of justice, respect, and trust in management. In particular, when HR decisions, such as promotions, rewards, or high-profile responsibilities, are unclear or opaque, employees are likely to perceive them as a form of political game (Wang & Li, 2022).

On the psychological side, organizational politics can be a context that triggers emotional and relational reactions, particularly when differential treatment occurs between colleagues. Political environments make people more aware, comparison and rivalry among peers are more pronounced, and reactions to asymmetric outcomes are more likely to be exaggerated, especially when close collaborators perceive them (Einola & Khoreva, 2023). Thus, relational closeness, leading to support and conviviality, may intensify one

partner's experience of exclusion and betrayal if it appears that one member of the close dyad receives an advantage from the political game. Secondly, it can cause suspicion because of withheld information (opportunities or promotions can be misinterpreted as deliberate withholding). Such non-transparency has led to distrust of interdependence and triggered social comparison and envy among close friends who feel similarly entitled (Slepian, Halevy, & Galinsky, 2024).

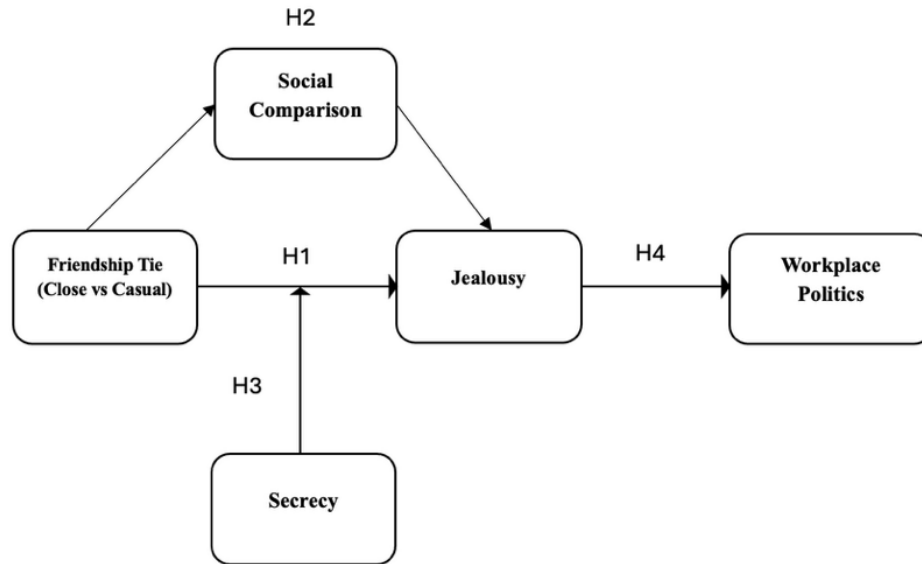


Figure 1: Theoretical Framework

The study of interpersonal distance and intimacy in light of secrecy is recent (Wang, Nie, & Chan, 2024). Having or revealing a secret is both a social phenomenon and cognitively and relationally connected (Slepian, Halevy, & Galinsky, 2024). When one exposes a secret (negative or sensitive info) to someone, it is generally considered a sign of closeness and openness: a form of trust. Secrets, however, especially those that keep others out, can bring about emotional distance, feelings of betrayal, and suspicion. (Bedrov & Gable, 2024) implies that secrecy in intimate friendships demonstrates emotional closeness but can also do damage to relationships if there is no openness. In professional settings, transparency (whether actual or merely perceived) affects team dynamics, social comparisons, and emotions such as jealousy, if it is present at all. In professional settings, transparency (whether actual or the impression thereof) affects team dynamics, collective dynamics, social comparisons, and emotions, such as jealousy, if it is prevalent at all.

- H1: Sharing extraordinary experiences with close friends at work is more likely to trigger feelings of jealousy compared to sharing with more distant colleagues.
- H2: Social comparison serves as a mediating mechanism through which tie strength influences friendship jealousy in response to extraordinary experiences.
- H3: The relationship between tie strength and friendship jealousy becomes stronger when the extraordinary experience is kept secret rather than openly shared.
- H4: Feelings of jealousy resulting from extraordinary experiences shared by close workplace friends increase politically oriented workplace behavior and perceptions of organizational politics.

3. Methodology

The present research employed a multi-study between-subjects experimental design to examine how workplace friendship tie strength influences jealousy, social comparison, secrecy, and politically oriented workplace behavior within organizational settings. Across four studies, participants were recruited from the corporate sector through an online survey platform (Google Forms) and randomly assigned to experimental conditions involving close versus casual workplace friendships, extraordinary workplace experiences, secrecy conditions, and politically relevant workplace outcomes (Tang, 2025).

The main purpose of these studies was to gain an understanding of the mindset behind interpersonal and behavioral reactions and how the emotional meaning of workplace experiences can affect reactions under organizationally sensitive conditions. Cohorts in all studies were adults, aged 24-35 years. The experimental manipulations were between workplace friendship tie strength (close vs. casual), between extraordinary and ordinary workplace experiences, between a material reward condition and a daily reflection condition, and between the secrecy condition and an open disclosure condition.

The research adopted scenario-based experimental procedures to ensure consistency across participants. Respondents were instructed to imagine workplace situations involving coworkers with whom they shared either close or casual workplace relationships. After exposure to the assigned scenario, participants completed structured questionnaire measures assessing jealousy, social comparison, secrecy perceptions, and politically oriented behavioral intentions (Wang, Nie, & Chan, 2024).

Jealousy was measured using multi-item Likert scales adapted from prior organizational and social psychology literature. Social comparison was measured using items adapted from the Iowa–Netherlands Comparison Orientation Scale. Manipulation checks were included in each study to assess the effectiveness of friendship tie strength and secrecy conditions. Reliability of the scales was evaluated using Cronbach’s alpha coefficients, all of which demonstrated acceptable internal consistency.

We used SPSS and ANOVA techniques to examine mean differences and interaction effects across experimental conditions (Moon, 2026). In addition, we conducted regression-based mediation and moderation analyses to examine the indirect and conditional relationships among friendship tie strength, social comparison, secrecy, jealousy, and politically oriented workplace behavior. These analyses allowed the study to evaluate both the emotional and behavioral mechanisms underlying workplace friendship dynamics within organizational politics contexts.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Hypothesis 1: Friendship and Jealousy

Closer friends feel a stronger sense of ownership when someone has an extraordinary experience. To investigate the main hypothesis, we conducted a between-subjects experimental study. People took part in the study by completing a questionnaire that presented scenarios about their friends having extraordinary experiences, being ordinary, or receiving a material reward. We thought that jealousy and tie strength would affect friendship only when (>2000) or only in the presence of extraordinary experiences, which is what they tend to affect most because they cause tremendously different emotional reactions.

4.1.1. Methods

During a regular team meeting, one of my friends was asked to share their idea for enhancing the internal communication, which they had mentioned to HR weeks earlier; this was part of this extraordinary experience. To their surprise, the meeting became a live announcement that their idea not only got approved but was being implemented nationwide, with the employee serving as the project head across all country branches. In a surprise twist, HR announced that the system would continue to be called by the employee's name due to a legacy feature that had yet to be matched in the company, making the day an unforgettable milestone. In ordinary experience, my friend recently had a simple yet meaningful experience with his work. Her manager personally took time out of his busy day some time back to express his gratitude for her diligence and give her some encouragement. It was not a big, flashy moment, but it had a lasting impact. In the material reward condition, participants were told about a friend who had just received a nice bundle of thoughtful gifts from their company. Recently, they received a set of gorgeously framed pictures of faraway beaches, a handcrafted model of a hot-air balloon, and a superb watch. These were not only gifts, but part of a program to reward above-average performance. Following the reading of an assigned scenario, participants answered questions assessing constructs of friendship jealousy. To assess the effectiveness of the tie strength manipulation, two manipulation check items were included: "I had a close association with this friend" and "I communicated with this friend frequently."

Only friendship was coded as an independent variable (1 = close; 0 = casual), and content type was coded as a categorical independent variable (0 = extraordinary experience; 1 = ordinary experience; 2 = material reward). Jealousy, measured as a dependent variable, was rated using a multi-item scale; average responses were used to derive a composite score ($\alpha = 0.94$), indicating high internal consistency.

4.1.2. Results

Closer friends feel a stronger sense of ownership when someone has an extraordinary experience. To investigate the main hypothesis, we conducted a between-subjects experimental study. People took part in the study by completing a questionnaire that presented scenarios about their friends having extraordinary experiences, being ordinary, or receiving a material reward. We thought that jealousy and tie strength would affect friendship only when (>2000) or only in the presence of extraordinary experiences, which is what they tend to affect most because they cause tremendously different emotional reactions.

Table 1: Summary of Results: Hypothesis 1 - Friendship and Jealousy

Scenario	Close Friend	Casual Friend	Main Finding
Extraordinary experience	Higher jealousy	Lower jealousy	Close friendship increased jealousy
Ordinary experience	No significant difference	No significant difference	Tie strength did not affect jealousy
Material reward	No significant difference	No significant difference	Tie strength did not affect

4.1.3. Discussion

Results indicated that the strength of the tie (close friendship compared to a friendship with someone the actor has had everyday experience with) affected feelings of jealousy (Breidenthal et al., 2020; Sustiyatik & Jauhari, 2025). In contrast, we did not find significant differences in jealousy between ordinary experiences and material rewards at different levels of friendship closeness.

4.2 Hypothesis 2: Social Comparison as Mediator

This section of the study investigated the underlying mechanism of the observed effect, with a focus on extraordinary experiences. We considered the reasons why friends in a close relationship are sometimes more jealous. We proposed that because individuals share more private details with close friends, those friends are likely to compare their own situations and feel more jealous. We used a between-subjects design to examine the role of social comparison, dividing subjects into two groups: close friends (strong ties) and casual friends (weak ties).

4.2.1. Method

There were 302 participants in all: 150 close and 152 casual, with friendships between the ages of 24 and 35. The process for manipulating tie strength and scenarios was identical to that in Study 1 in the ordinary experience condition. After completing the emotional reaction evaluation, participants were selected from the corporate sector using Google Forms, a professional online survey platform. Participants rated their level of social comparison after being randomly assigned to either a casual or close friendship bond. Tie strength manipulation followed the same procedure as in Study 1. All participants in the extraordinary experience condition were presented with the same scenarios used in the prior study. Following the assessment of emotional response, participants rated their degree of social comparison using six items from the Iowa-Netherlands Comparison Orientation Scale (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999). Tie strength was coded in terms of dummy variables (1 = close or strong; 0 = casual or weak). Scores of jealousy were the dependent measure, and the scores on social comparison—averaged over items ($\alpha = 0.73$)—were used to measure the mediating effect.

4.2.2. Results

The effect of friendship (close friend vs. casual friend) on jealousy was tested using a one-factor between-subjects ANOVA. As predicted, a significant main effect for friendship was found. Those in the close friendship condition reported significantly higher jealousy ($n = 150$; $M = 2.47$) than those in the casual friendship condition ($n = 152$; $M = 2.22$), $F(1, 300) = 4.41$, $p < 0.05$. The results indicate that the closer the interpersonal relationship, the higher the feeling of jealousy.

Table 2. Summary of Results: Hypothesis 2 - Social Comparison as Mediator

Path	Result	Interpretation
Friendship → Jealousy	Significant	Close friends reported higher jealousy
Friendship → Social Comparison	Significant	Close friends made stronger social comparisons
Social comparison → Jealousy	Significant	Social comparison increased jealousy
Indirect effect	Significant	Social comparison mediated the relationship

A one-way between-subjects ANOVA was conducted to determine whether there were significant differences in the effects of friendship (close vs. casual) on social comparison. The results showed a significant main effect of friendship on the level of social comparison. Participants assigned to the close friendship condition also rated higher on the comparison scale ($M = 4.02$) than those in the casual friendship condition ($M = 3.78$), $F(1, 300) = 11.28$, $p < 0.01$. The results suggest that people make more comparisons with close friends than

with acquaintances, which could increase their jealousy. People tend to make social comparisons with close friends more than with acquaintances, which could lead them to feel more jealous.

The outcomes matched our expectations. Furthermore, it was found that friendliness was a substantial and positive predictor of comparison ($\beta = 0.23$, $SE = 0.05$, $p < 0.01$), which, in turn, was a significant predictor of jealousy ($\beta = 0.33$, $SE = 0.10$, $p < 0.01$). However, after controlling for the secondary pathway (friendship to comparison to jealousy), the direct channel (friendship to jealousy) lost significance ($\beta = 0.17$; $SE = 0.12$; $p > 0.10$). Introducing the mediator eliminated the direct effect, confirming full mediation. The indirect effect of friendship on jealousy via social comparison is statistically significant ($\beta = 0.08$, 95% CI: 0.02 to 0.16). Overall, the aforementioned findings provide credence to the theory that friendship and envy are mediated by social comparison.

4.2.3. Discussion

Study 1 findings hypothesized that people are more jealous of their close friends when those friends have rare or extraordinary experiences. Study 1 findings supported this hypothesis, and the mechanism driving this effect—the comparison of social relations—was also highlighted. Over the course of friendships, the closeness of the relationship increases the tendency to engage in social comparison, thereby heightening feelings of jealousy (Matthews & Kelemen, 2025; Einola & Khoreva, 2023; Breidenthal et al., 2020). The desire to provide those closest to you with a unique or special experience is quite natural and very strong, but it can also create conditions for a negative feeling to emerge. This leads to an important follow-up question: might keeping such extraordinary experiences private reduce these feelings of jealousy? To test this possibility, we conducted Study 3 to investigate whether concealing an exceptional event increases or reduces envy.

4.3. Hypothesis 3: Secrecy as moderator

Experiments 1 and 2 showed that when people experience something extraordinary, their close friends are more likely to experience jealousy, mainly through social comparison. The question is: should one keep their extraordinary experience a secret? Nevertheless, self-disclosure is a core element of close friendships, in which reciprocal sharing of personal experiences strengthens the bond. Therefore, keeping such information a secret could make close friends envious. We conducted an experiment to examine the function of secrecy in moderating the tie strength-jealousy relationship in order to test this hypothesis.

4.3.1. Method

235 close (119) and casual (116) participants aged 24-35 years were recruited from the corporate sector via a professional online survey platform (Google Forms). Further, 117 of them kept the experience secret, and 118 shared it with friends. The experimental procedure in Study 3 was similar to that employed in Studies 1 and 2. The participants were randomly allocated to one of four conditions in a 2 (friendship: close vs. casual) \times 2 (information sharing: secret vs. no secret) between-subjects design. Manipulations of friendship were

similar to those employed in the first set of studies. The passage outlining the extraordinary experience was presented to all participants in the same way as in the previous experiments. In the “secret” condition, participants read the following: “It is worth noting that their extraordinary experience was kept a secret from you. This means you learned about their extraordinary experience from another source. You then learned the full details of what happened.” Conversely, in the “no secret” condition, the participants read: “It’s worth noting that they were very proactive in sharing this extraordinary experience. You learned about it from them directly.” After exposure to these descriptions, participants completed the same set of measures as in the earlier studies. Jealousy was probed with five items translated from Broemer and Diehl (2004), i.e., “If this were to happen to me personally, I would feel...” (e.g., unhappy, angry, depressed, low, and hurt). As a manipulation check to confirm friendship, two items were presented: “I had a close association with this friend” and “I kept in contact with this friend often.” To gauge information source manipulation, participants answered: “This individual, [name], kept their remarkable experience a secret from me” and “This individual, [name], actively shared their remarkable experience with me.” Dummy variables were employed to code the independent variables: friendship (1 = close; 0 = informal) and information sharing (1 = secret; 0 = no secret). The jealousy measure, as the dependent variable, was calculated as the average of the corresponding items ($\alpha = 0.91$).

4.3.2. Results

To assess the validity of the friendship manipulation, a one-factor between-subjects ANOVA was also conducted. As anticipated, a significant difference was found between the close condition ($n = 119$; $M = 5.55$) and the casual condition ($n = 116$; $M = 4.26$) on the outcome, $F(1, 233) = 55.38$, $p < 0.001$. A one-way between-subjects ANOVA was also conducted to examine the effect of manipulating the information source. A substantial effect was observed, $F(1, 233) = 69.72$, $p < 0.001$. The source was successfully altered, as evidenced by a substantial difference between the “keeping secret” condition ($n = 117$; $M = 4.85$) and the “no secret” condition ($n = 118$; $M = 3.43$).

Table 3. Summary of Results: Hypothesis 3- Secrecy as Moderator

Condition	Close Friend	Casual Friend	Finding
Secret	5.15	3.94	Jealousy was higher among close friends.
No secret	4.41	3.95	The difference was weaker
Interaction	Significant	—	Secrecy strengthened jealousy in close friendships.

A two-factor between-subjects ANOVA was used to test the moderating effects of friendship and secrecy on jealousy. Results were consistent with our hypotheses: There

was a significant main effect of friendship on jealousy, $F(1, 231) = 19.72, p < 0.01$; jealousy was not a function of gender. Secrecy had a marginally significant main effect, $F(1, 231) = 3.81, p < 0.10$. Additionally, an interesting Friendship by Secrecy interaction was found, $F(1, 231) = 3.96, p < 0.05$. If the extraordinary experience had not been revealed, pairwise comparisons showed that those in the close relationship group felt substantially more jealous than those in the casual friendship group (strong tie = 5.15 vs. weak tie = 3.94), $F(1, 231) = 20.58, p < 0.01$. Similarly, in the no secret condition, there was still greater jealousy in the strong tie condition than the weak tie condition (strong tie = 4.41, weak tie = 3.95), $F(1, 231) = 3.02, p < 0.10$.

4.3.3. Discussion

In general, though keeping secrets can increase a person's self-happiness, it can severely magnify jealousy among intimate friends (Bianchi et al., 2025). The current study examined the effect of the source of information—how exactly friends learned about an out-of-the-ordinary experience on feelings of jealousy. In accordance with our assumptions, the results showed no significant effect of the source on jealousy when friends were casual relationships, yet it significantly affected jealousy in intimate relationships (Clarke, Higgs & Garavan, 2025; Sustiyatik & Jauhari, 2025; Breidenthal et al., 2020). Although the moderation results were statistically significant, future studies should use larger samples to validate further the interaction effects involving secrecy.

4.4 Hypothesis 4: Organizational Politics

This study aimed to determine whether and to what extent the emotional and psychological mechanisms of jealousy and social comparison investigated in previous studies would also be valid in an emotionally evocative, politically charged work context. We hypothesized that intimate friendships among coworkers would amplify emotional reactions to others' success, especially when success appears politically motivated. In such situations, organizational politics (favoritism, informal coalitions, or political action) can provoke jealousy and prompt employees to take actions to achieve similar results, whether identical-quality work or political tactical action is indistinguishable. The notion that assumed political partiality can lead to unfairness and elicit negative emotional responses, including jealousy, is especially true when success is tied to colleagues / direct reports.

4.4.1 Method

Participants (close and casual friends) were 190 (aged 24-35 years). Recruitment was conducted via a professional online survey platform, Google Forms, from the corporate sector. People took part in a study and were randomly assigned to two groups: close friendship and casual friendship. In the strong-tie condition, participants were instructed to write the name of a close friend with whom they frequently communicate. Participants in the casual friendship condition were asked to list the name of a casual friend they do not often talk to. The participants then read the following scenario: "This person recently had an extraordinary experience. When a friend of mine was required to share their idea to

enhance internal communication, which was casually shared with HR weeks ago during a regular team meeting. The clockwork was perfect timing, as the meeting turned into an actual announcement that their idea not only was accepted but was being adopted company-wide, and that the employee would be the project lead for all national branches. To add a little to the surprise, HR announced that the system will be named after the employee – a title no employee ever received before, making the day an unforgettable milestone.

Participants then rated their jealousy of the individual's extraordinary experience on a 7-point Likert scale. The comparison was conducted in the same manner as in the previous study. The tie strength condition's success in manipulating tie strength was tested using two manipulation check items: "I had a close association with this friend" and "I communicated with this friend frequently." Finally, demographic data were obtained from all the participants. We measured organizational politics on items adopted from Ferris and Kacmar (1991).

4.4.2 Results

A manipulation check ANOVA confirmed that the tie strength manipulation was successful, $F(1, 188) = 391.64, p < .001$, as close ties ($M = 6.28$) were significantly greater than casual ties ($M = 3.03$). The somewhat inflated F-value may indicate that the tie-strength manipulation was highly apparent and salient, thereby increasing participants' sensitivity to the experimental contrast. Results from a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) showed that the mean difference in jealousy feelings was significant between close friendship ($M = 6.06$) and casual friendship ($M = 5.79$), $F(1, 188) = 4.94, p < .05$. Also, close friendship levels were greater behavior reduction ($M = 4.46$) compared to casual friendship ($M = 4.11$) with $F(1, 188) = 4.85, p < 0.05$.

Table 4. Summary of Results: Hypothesis 4 - Organizational Politics

Relationship	Result	Interpretation
Friendship → Social comparison	Significant	Close friendship increased Social Comparison
Social comparison → Jealousy	Significant	Social comparison increased jealousy
Jealousy → Political behavior	Significant	Jealousy increased politically oriented behavior
Indirect effect	Significant but small	A weak practical effect supports the emotional pathway

Close friendship had a strong positive relation with social comparison ($\beta = 0.35, SE = 0.16, p < 0.05$), social comparison with jealousy ($\beta = 0.15, SE = 0.16, p < 0.01$), and jealousy with intention to politically act to achieve the same ($\beta = 0.11, SE = 0.05, p < 0.05$), in turn. While the direct effect of friendship on the intention to engage in political activism was not statistically significant ($\beta = 0.15, SE = 0.10, p > 0.10$), analysis revealed that the indirect

effect of comparison and jealousy was significant ($\beta = 0.01$, 95% CI: 0.01 to 0.05). The indirect link through social comparison and feelings of jealousy was statistically significant ($\beta = 0.01$, 95% CI: 0.01 to 0.05), but the effect size is quite small. This points to the rather weak practical implications of the proposed psychological pathway for political behavior. A possible explanation for this small effect size, however, is the smaller sample size ($N = 190$) used in the analysis of the serial mediation model, which might have limited statistical power to detect stronger indirect links.

Furthermore, organizational politics is a multi-faceted and complex phenomenon that may result from emotional responses, as well as from other aspects of the situation and the individual that may arise in these contexts. As such, jealousy and social comparison are expected to be only part of the network of organizational dynamics that lead to political orientation.

4.4.3. Discussion

This study contributes to earlier research by showing that, in addition to causing discomfort and jealousy, close friends' jealousy and comparison also affect political behaviors in the workplace (Pillemer & Rothbard, 2018; Breidenthal et al., 2020). Especially when success is politically based and a close friend of theirs enjoys it, staff will also be politically motivated (Einola & Khoreva, 2023). This again lends weight to the idea that experiencing negative emotions in the workplace in response to perceived favoritism can not only lead to relationship ruptures but also precipitate counterproductive workplace political behaviors.

The study contributes to the literature on workplace politics by revealing the roles of jealousy and social comparison in the development of politically oriented workplace behavior within close friendships. The results also offer further insight into the potential for emotions arising from perceived favoritism and extraordinary recognition to exacerbate rivalry and competition within organizations and trigger political behavior. The results from the study provide insights into the levels of intensity and emotional dynamics of friendships in the workplace and implications of that intensity and emotionality on employees' responses to perceived inequities in their profession. Thus, for an equitable, merit-based system of intra-promotions to be understood at the team level, there must be a perception that it minimizes politics.

5. General Discussion

The findings from the four studies illustrate how emotional experiences, particularly jealousy, interrelate with one's perceptions of workplace friendships and organizational politics (He et al., 2022; Pillemer & Rothbard, 2018). In these highly politicized settings, close friendships—usually seen as a buffer against stress and discontent—may paradoxically be the source of even greater negative emotions. Of these emotions, jealousy was particularly pronounced when employees believed their closest coworkers were being

prioritized or promoted, especially when the processes seemed private or arbitrary (Breidenthal et al., 2020).

Closest friendships in the workplace caused more pronounced feelings of jealousy when a workmate achieved exceptional success, thereby providing some support for Hypothesis 1. Notably, this effect did not extend to everyday successes or monetary gains (Duerden et al., 2018; Heinonen & Lipkin, 2023). This implies that, in addition to monetary rewards, the inequity caused by a friend's loss in a relational equity partnership and the emotional and psychological unfairness it engenders workplace jealousy. This is consistent with previous work indicating that close relationships within a work group can be a source of discord in situations of organizational competition or within politically sensitive environments where resources are limited (Sustiyatik & Jauhari, 2025; Mosquera, Tigre, & Alegre, 2025).

Hypothesis 2 explained the mechanism of this phenomenon by demonstrating that social comparison operates as a mediator. The extent of jealousy a person feels is dependent on the relational tie's proximity due to the likelihood of vertical social comparisons, a phenomenon in which a person gauges their success with that of a close friend and rivals (Matthews & Kelemen, 2025). This finding builds on Festinger's Social Comparison Theory of 1954 by positing that social ties can serve as a psychological stressor, which heightens social competition within an organizational context (Sung, Li, & Choi, 2024)

Hypothesis 3 focused on secrecy as a moderator. According to the results, recognition or promotions, especially when granted under conditions of secrecy, worsen the emotional consequences of social comparisons, particularly within a friendship context, more than in any other context (Clarke, Higgs & Garavan, 2025). In these scenarios, secrecy fuels feelings of injustice and disempowerment, which causes a risk to psychological safety in already highly politicized contexts (Bianchi et al., 2025). Secrecy erodes trust and creates work-related anxiety, which in turn supports this (Bedrov & Gable, 2024).

For Hypothesis 4, the outcome added to the model was organizational politics, stemming from the jealousy related to social comparisons and highly charged interpersonal relations. Jealousy can provoke political behaviors of self-promotion, alliance building, and informal visibility-seeking. Workers often regard wins of nearby colleagues as personal victories, which, in turn, encroach on territory and lead to hostile actions. As a result, actions within work systems become self-defensive or competitive—the competing behaviors of coroners and self-preservation (Einola & Khoreva, 2023). This advance implies that emotional mechanisms remain unexplored, especially those related to perceptions of favoritism, which are weakly coupled with informal processes that suggest the absence of fairness. This documentation will aid in understanding the impurity of cooperation in social work networks and, more importantly, in political work systems.

6. Theoretical and Practical Implications

6.1 Theoretical Implications

This research adds to the organizational behavior literature by developing a framework for the emotional, relational, and political aspects of working environments. Specifically, it deepens understanding of social comparison and elaborates on the link between social comparison and jealousy in extreme experiences and in secretiveness in close friendships at work. It offers empirical evidence of the differences between envy and jealousy in an organizational context and reveals that, while envy is generally thought of as outcome-oriented, jealousy is primarily relationship-based and is essentially about threats to valued relationships. The clarification enhances construct validity and overcomes conceptual ambiguity within previous research. In addition, the study contributes to the theory by exploring organizational politics as more than a structural or behavioral phenomenon, but as one in which interpersonal aspects such as tie strength, secrecy, and perceived fairness are integral. The study provides a more comprehensive model for examining social comparisons, feelings of jealousy, and workplace-related political actions.

6.2 Practical Implications

The results have implications for organizational leadership, HR practitioners, and managers. Firstly, organizations should be aware that this social comparison is not without emotional implications, especially if the relationship ties are of high quality. Performance systems should focus on individual growth, minimizing relative performance comparisons and, by extension, unhealthy competition. Second, carefully designed recognition practices are needed. Public recognition can encourage staff but can also provoke others in proximity. To mitigate bias, managers should frame recognition in terms of achieving collaborative objectives and ensure the recognition criteria are clear, consistent, and well-understood by everyone. Thirdly, the findings show the danger of opacity in organizational processes. The lack of clarity and understanding of the factors that determine decision-making (e.g., promotions or rewards) increases the likelihood that employees will perceive the results as politically motivated. It is therefore important for organizations to take a transparent approach and articulate the reasons behind their decisions to maintain trust and the stability of relationships. Last but not least, companies need to work on their leaders' relational awareness and emotional intelligence. Emotion, political behavior, and interpersonal sensitivity are all addressed through training and can play a key role in helping managers navigate the relational complexities of the workplace and create a psychologically safe environment.

7. Conclusion

This study contributes to the body of literature on organizational behavior by taking into account workers' emotional and psychological responses to their workplace experience, as well as ideas of friendship and organizational politics. In four studies, it was found that seething jealousy is even more pronounced in friendships. It is a pity that the relationships

that should help animals feel supported and cohesive in the workplace are the ones that make them more sensitive to feeling treated unfairly and less recognized than they should be.

The results importantly place relationships in the organizational context in the literature and distinguish jealousy from envy. The distinction between envy and jealousy is that envy involves wanting the other person's advantage, success, or resources, whereas jealousy involves the fear that the other person sees them as in competition for a valued relationship or relational status. These experiences are driven by a greater organizational interest in pursuing balance, equity, and trust. However, the interrelated dimensions of emotion, relationship, and the political dimensions at the workplace are often left behind, and this paper attempts to outline a framework for integrating these dimensions to impact behavior.

To maintain emotionally healthy organizations, equitable rewards are only part of the equation. A sensitivity to the relational nature of appreciation for achievement can support these. While some exceptional achievements and promotions may benefit individual careers, they may also raise concerns about team harmony. These situations should not be characterized by transparency and inclusiveness. This is important for organizations to acknowledge formally and to create a culture of transparency, empathy, and fairness, so that they can become resilient and sustain purposeful innovation.

7.1 Limitations and Future Recommendations

This study has several limitations. In the first case, the study used experimental workplace scenarios, and in the second, real organizational observations, which may limit the external validity and generalizability of the findings to organizational or work contexts where relations are rather diverse. The data are self-reported, and there are definitional problems with emotions as well as social desirability bias. In addition, other research uses cross-sectional designs, which allow only limited inferences about causal processes or changes in jealousy over time. Furthermore, the study does not consider the role specific workplace factors (such as workplace politics, hierarchy, and competition) might play in jealousy of friendships. Subsequent research must address these shortcomings by expanding the examination of jealousy evoked by atypical experiences to organizational and workplace environments, where power dynamics and competition are more relevant.

It would be interesting to conduct further studies on the same subjects to see how feelings of jealousy and friendship develop over time after numerous unusual events. The mechanisms that affect jealousy and how it shapes the density of interpersonal relations, psychological safety, and justice in the organization, whether physical or virtual, should be studied empirically. Furthermore, future research should examine how other potential intervening variables, such as perceived similarity and emotional intelligence, influence the development of an extensive theoretical model, and how other moderating variables, such as secrecy and organizational climate, could affect the model. It is important to

highlight the role of the current range of digital technologies and social media, and the emotions of jealousy that arise from them, since they involve relationship aspects in today's sharing of remarkable experiences. This kind of scholarship can also improve understanding of current interpersonal and professional relationships.

Research Funding

The authors received no research grant or support for this research study.

Declaration of AI Use

During manuscript preparation, the authors used ChatGPT and Grammarly solely for language editing and improving readability. All content was carefully reviewed and revised by the authors, who take full responsibility for the manuscript. No AI tools were used for data creation, data analysis, or conceptual development.

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