Schadenfreude As a Consumption-Related Emotion: Feeling Happiness About the Downfall of Another's Product

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Schadenfreude is the joy experienced when people observe another’s downfall. Our research investigated schadenfreude in a status consumption context, and explored schadenfreude in response to observing another’s product failure. An experiment and structural model mapped the relationships between upward social comparisons involving status products and envy, and between envy and schadenfreude provoked by the failure of a status symbol. We also assessed the relative ability of envy and admiration to incite schadenfreude. Moreover, our study introduces theory that predicts schadenfreude will be a prompt to malicious product-related gossip. Implications of schadenfreude for word-of-mouth about the failed brand are addressed.

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**EXTENDED ABSTRACT**

*Achenteur* is the joy a person experiences when he or she observes another’s downfall. Prior research on schadenfreude has focused largely on interpersonal judgments of an academically and socially successful target before and after a personal failure. We were interested in whether the emotion schadenfreude is generated spontaneously not only based on the downfall of an individual, but by the downfall of an individual’s product. For example, if one is jealous of a neighbor’s recent deluxe kitchen renovation, does news that the new appliances are malfunctioning bring one joy? And, if schadenfreude is experienced after witnessing a product failure, are the antecedents of this emotional response the same as they are for personal failure? This research extends the literature on schadenfreude by exploring its role as a consumption-related emotion, and by identifying specific emotional antecedents, such as resentment and jealousy, that drive the experience of joy after witnessing product failure.

Social comparison theory provides the conceptual framework for our research (e.g., Festinger 1954; Suls and Wheeler 2000). In the schadenfreude literature, the experience of this emotion was greater when the target was portrayed as being superior as opposed to average (e.g., Brigham et al. 1997). High status products are desired not only for their refinements, but for the positive image they help their owners project to others (Corrigan 1997; Belk 1988). When people consume and display status symbols, this may prompt observers to engage in upward social comparisons. Such upward comparisons can result in positive emotional responses such as admiration, but frequently prompt jealousy and other negative emotions such as anger and resentment. If a person then observes an envied status symbol fail, a disconcerting upward comparison may turn into a gratifying downward comparison, resulting in schadenfreude.

Literature in the area of services marketing has examined in depth the emotional reactions of consumers when they personally experience a product or service failure (e.g., Oliver and Westbrook 1991), the negative word-of-mouth a wronged consumer may spread after a failure (Richins 1983; Curren and Folkes 1987; Anderson 2003), and the implications of such failures for brand image (e.g., Folkes 1984). These product or service failures do not happen in social isolation, but are sometimes witnessed by others. As far as we know, there is no literature addressing how consumers respond to observing other's product or service failures, and how likely they are to spread malicious gossip about the product or brand after witnessing such events. (We employ the term malicious gossip to distinguish such behavior from negative word-of-mouth, which has traditionally been conceptualized as being prompted by a consumer’s own product or service experiences). In the kitchen renovation example above, how likely would the jealous neighbor be to recount the story about the failure of the high-priced appliances to his or her friends, co-workers, or other like-minded neighbors? In this research we explore the role product-related schadenfreude plays in prompting malicious gossip, and suggest what kind of content this gossip is likely to contain. Our contribution to the literature on word-of-mouth is the exploration of how observations of, rather than personal experiences of, and emotional reactions to others’ product failures might also serve to prompt the spread of negative product-related information.

Status competition between individuals can take place on many dimensions, one of which is the purchase and display of status symbols. Multiple theories can be employed to predict sex differences in the modes of status competition, including but not limited to the evolutionary psychological perspective (e.g., Kenrick, Trost and Sundie 2004) and biosocial theory (e.g., Wood and Eagly 2002). Because men are more likely to compete with one another via displays of economic resources, they may experience more joy when another’s status product fails—particularly if the owner is another man.

The objectives of the present study included:

- Exploring the extent to which observing the failure of a high (versus a low) status product evokes schadenfreude
- Assessing the extent to which the relationship between status symbol failure and schadenfreude is mediated by negative emotions induced by the target’s product ownership
- Measuring the relationship between dispositional envy (a chronic tendency to be envious) and schadenfreude provoked by status symbol failure
- Assessing the extent to which schadenfreude provoked by failure of a status symbol prompts malicious gossip about the owner and his or her failed product
- Exploring sex differences in emotional reactions to the failure of others’ status symbols

Participants in the study were 395 Southeastern university students (177 men, 218 women), randomly assigned to the conditions of a 2 (car type: high status (Mercedes CLK) vs. lower status (Ford Focus)) x 2 (sex of target: male vs. female) x 2 (sex of participant: male vs. female) between subjects design. Participants learned about a student similar to them that had recently acquired either a new Ford Focus or Mercedes CLK Coupe, and then subsequently experienced a public product failure when the car broke down at an upscale shopping mall. Emotional responses to both the student’s car ownership, and the subsequent downfall, were collected. Participants rated their likelihood of spreading malicious gossip regarding such a product failure, and provided written responses indicating what specifically they might communicate to others regarding such an event. The data were analyzed using Partial Least Squares (PLS), a structural equation modeling technique (Chin 1998, Hulland 1999, Wold 1982).

Participants felt more schadenfreude after witnessing the failure of the high-status product, as opposed to the low-status product. This effect was mediated by negative initial feelings about the student’s car ownership. The strongest predictors of...
schadenfreude were the negative initial emotions jealousy and resentment. Participants pre-disposed to feel envy felt more schadenfreude, and this effect was partially mediated by the negative initial feelings. Men felt more schadenfreude than women, irrespective of the sex of the target. Experiencing schadenfreude after observing the product failure significantly predicted a willingness to spread malicious gossip about such an incident, and independent coding of the open-ended responses indicated that the gossip would frequently involve negative statements about the product/brand.