Schadenfreude and the Self: the Effect of Self-Construal on Malicious Delight At Others’ Unfortunate Decisions

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We introduce schadenfreude to the marketing literature and examine conditions under which others’ unfortunate decisions elicit such malicious pleasure. Four studies show that schadenfreude in response to others’ bad decisions is greater for individuals with an independent (vs. interdependent) self. Furthermore, we demonstrate that the differential levels of schadenfreude are driven by differences in competitive tendencies associated with an independent versus interdependent self-construal. We then find that self-construal has a greater impact on schadenfreude for others’ bad choices of unconventional (vs. conventional) options. Finally, schadenfreude is shown to lead to more conventional choices for individuals with a predominant independent self-construal.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

“Mr. Borovina is indulging in what seems to be the summer’s favorite guilty pleasure—delighting in others’ misfortune, or schadenfreude. Between Martha Stewart, Michael Ovitz, L. Dennis Kozlowski, Kenneth Lay and Jeffrey Skilling, and Samuel D. Waksal, there is plenty of misfortune going around, and, as it turns out, plenty of delight.”

St. John (2002)

Usually, we feel happy when good things happen to others, and sad when misfortunes befall them. However, at times it is others’ bad luck that makes us happy and induces schadenfreude—pleasure in their misfortunes (Heider 1958). Referred to as a socially reprehensible emotion that is elicited through social comparison in response to others’ failure (Feather and Sherman 2002; Foster 1972), schadenfreude is certainly not a new phenomenon. Socrates ruminated on a trigger for malicious pleasure over 2,500 years ago: “Did we not say that pleasure in the misfortunes of friends was caused by envy?” (cited by Smith et al. 1996). In another recent instance of malicious joy, or schadenfreude, coffee drinkers rejoiced at Starbucks’ financial woes and its subsequent decision to close down 600 stores: “I’m so happy; I’m so not a Starbucks person,” says one aficionado of small independent cafes (Wulfhorst 2008). Finally, persuasive messages often seek to elicit schadenfreude. For example, the recent “more bars in more places” AT&T advertising campaign featured comical situations in which misfortunes (such as a house destroyed by an exploding deep-fried frozen turkey) befall cell phone owners because they had made the wrong choice of cell phone service and could hence not be reached in time to avert the calamity.

Yet, even though schadenfreude is often discussed in the popular press and may indeed arise in many situations, it has received surprisingly little attention in the psychology and marketing literatures. Recent research has started to examine empirically the antecedents of schadenfreude, including envy (Smith et al. 1996), liking (Hareli and Weiner 2002), resentment (Feather and Nairn 2005; Feather and Sherman 2002), and deservingness (Brigham et al. 1997; van Dijk et al. 2005). For example, Smith et al. (1996) found that student subjects felt significantly more schadenfreude when an academically superior versus average student was caught stealing amphetamines, even when controlling for subjects’ level of self esteem and liking for the target student.

Furthermore, the degree to which everyday choices can elicit schadenfreude has not been explored. For example, do individuals find delight in others’ decisions that turn out badly, such as their choice of a risky over a safe option and losing, and if so, under which conditions? Clearly, others’ unfortunate choices will not elicit the same level of schadenfreude in all individuals alike. We propose that self-construal is one important variable likely to impact schadenfreude in decision-making that has not received any attention, even though a great deal of literature suggests that differences in self-construal have robust effects on everyday experiences, including on cognition, affect, and motivation (e.g., Aaker and Williams 1998; Markus and Kitayama 1991; Mesquita and Frijda 1992). Self-construal describes how individuals construe the self, others, and the interdependence between the two (Markus and Kitayama 1991). An independent self-construal is associated with an emphasis on separateness, individuals’ internal attributes, and the importance of uniqueness. Conversely, individuals with an interdependent self tend to be more relationship-driven and stress relationships with others, connectedness, and the social context.

We expect that those individuals who are relatively close to others, care for others, or in general feel more interdependent with them, will get less pleasure out of others’ unfortunate choices. Although many people may feel happy when a competitor’s choices turn out badly, one would hardly expect the same kind of response following the unfortunate choices of close others, like family or friends. Further, individuals with interdependent selves, for whom maintaining connectedness and harmony with others is important, tend to be more sensitive to others. For these individuals, feelings of schadenfreude would be detrimental to their focus on maintaining close social relationships.

The purpose of the current research is therefore to explore the effect of self-construal on schadenfreude in decision-making to start filling this gap in the literature. In particular, we seek to examine if, or more specifically, under which conditions others’ choices of options that turn out badly elicit schadenfreude. Study 1 shows that schadenfreude in response to others’ unfortunate choices of a granola bar is greater for individuals with a predominant independent (vs. interdependent) self-construal. Next, study 2 replicates this finding for others’ unfortunate choices of a bet option and also demonstrates that the differential levels of schadenfreude are driven by differences in competitive tendencies associated with an independent versus interdependent self-construal. Based on our proposition that others’ choices that go against the norm may be perceived as more deserving of misfortune, study 3 finds that self-construal has a greater impact on schadenfreude when others’ choices of an unconventional (i.e., a hedonic option: a foot massage), as compared to a conventional (i.e., a utilitarian option: school supplies) option turns out badly. Finally, our last study demonstrates the impact of schadenfreude on decision-making of individuals who differ in their self-construal, and differentiates it from that of happiness. In particular, we show that the experience of schadenfreude, as compared to happiness, increased the choice share of a conventional (i.e., compromise) option for individuals with a predominant independent self. Presumably, once schadenfreude is accessible, individuals with an independent self seek to avoid a misfortune similar to the one they feel happy about, and become more risk-averse by choosing a compromise option. In contrast, self-construal has no effect on choice share of the compromise option for those who had been primed with happiness. Overall, these results suggest that schadenfreude as happiness in response to others’ misfortunes has a unique impact on choice for individuals differing in their self-construal; an impact distinct from that of happiness in response to others’ fortunes.

REFERENCES


