

## **TORN BETWEEN ONLINE MEDIA STORIES: TRAIT AMBIVALENCE'S INFLUENCE ON SCHADENFREUDE**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Schadenfreude, a bittersweet social phenomenon, is considered an atypical and complicated state that might reflect ambivalent types of sentiments — a mix of both positive and negative reactions and complaints towards others' misfortunes. This research note reports an exploratory study examining the association between trait ambivalence and four different online marketing schadenfreude stimuli. Based on the results, trait ambivalence appears to provide a novel explanation for schadenfreude responses, suggesting a link between schadenfreude and trait ambivalence when consumers encounter online information about a disliked or rival entity's misfortune.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

As a phenomenon, schadenfreude is a potent, unkind marketplace force, which has been implicated in accounts of rivalry in politics, management, consumers complaints, and slapstick comedy, to name a few. A bittersweet social phenomenon (e.g., Hornik, et al., 2015; 2021a), schadenfreude proliferates in almost every sphere of human life, and especially tweets (e.g., Ceconi et al., 2020). Schadenfreude is considered an atypical and complicated state that might reflect ambivalent types of sentiments -- a mix of both positive and negative reactions towards others' misfortunes. Despite a lack of direct evidence, researchers from divergent traditions have alluded to possible links between schadenfreude and ambivalence. To more systematically investigate these links, we conducted a preliminary study, which shows an association between online schadenfreude and trait ambivalence.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### *Schadenfreude*

A review of scholarly articles on the topic reveals confusion concerning the fundamental nature of schadenfreude responses. A novel analysis by Smith and van Dijk (2018), for instance, has inspired rejoinders and comments by Roseman and Steele (2018) and Hess (2018). Van Dijk and Smith (2019) summarized this debate by arguing that schadenfreude emotions have some overlaps with joy (happiness) and sadness (or anger), but "...schadenfreude and *gluckschmerz* [negative emotion that arises when positive events further assist advantaged individuals] (Smith & van Dijk 2018) differ from joy and anger" (p. 263). Complicating matters, different terminologies can be found in the literature on schadenfreude, starting with Heider (1958), who argues that schadenfreude is malicious because it is a discordant social reaction to another's suffering. Elsewhere schadenfreude is characterized as atypical, complex, incongruent, bittersweet, disruptive, poisoning, socially improper, antagonistic, immoral, etc. (e.g. Ceconi et al. 2020; Cikara & Fiske, 2014; Hoogland et al., 2015), leading Li et al., (2019) to use the term "counterfeit emotions." All have been used rather haphazardly and interchangeably, creating jingle-jangle fallacies surrounding the term, which further obfuscate the literature.

What is so atypical about *schadenfreude* is that the experience is subjectively positive, but the observable expression of pleasure is negative. This might also explain why *schadenfreude* is seldom accounted for by commonly used frameworks of emotions, including Ekman's basic emotions framework, and does not tend to be standard term in most languages (Van Dijk & Smith, 2019). We suggest that in view of this inherent tension between positive and negative emotions, *schadenfreude* could be an outcome of ambivalence. Just as pleasure and displeasure are regarded as two distinct sensations experienced concurrently, the same might be applied to *schadenfreude*. Indeed, in conceptualizing *schadenfreude*, some researchers have used the term 'ambivalent' synonymously with terms like 'torn' and 'conflicting sentiments.' Li et al., (2019), for example, have used the term "ambivalent *schadenfreude*" in reference to those instances in which an individual perceives another's misfortune as somewhat disproportional and malicious joy may lack social legitimacy. Hoogland et al. (2015), for their part, have proposed that "schadenfreude and sympathy may well coexist, reflecting the ambivalent feelings about a rival's misfortune and the resulting consequences" (P. 269). Similarly, Hess (2018) characterizes *schadenfreude* as "a joy tinged with sadness" (p. 393).

This view has also been supported to a certain extent by recent *schadenfreude* facial electromyography research. For example, in a recent study, Cecconi et al. (2020) show that "beside the facial expression of enjoyment, also a sign of negative emotion might stem either from the need to conceal sanctioned pleasure or from the blending of positive and negative feelings... such as joy, anger or taunt and perhaps gratification" (p. 2), leading Malti et al. (2020) to characterize *schadenfreude* as "evil pleasures", and thus a marker of ambivalent emotions. Likewise, Combs et al., (2009) claim that most experiences of *schadenfreude* may be examples of mixed social feelings, suggesting that future research might employ analytical approaches to better understand more precisely the nature of people's online reactions to the suffering of others. Finally, Phillips-Melancon and Dalakas (2014) have provided interesting anecdotal evidence showing that Apple customers tend to express high online *schadenfreude* sentiments when misfortune befalls the company's chief rival, Microsoft, while at the same time revealing profound admiration towards Microsoft founder Bill Gates. Evidently, some people may take pleasure in rivals' misfortunes, while also respecting their reputation (Hornik et al., 2021b).

### *Ambivalence*

Experiences of ambivalence pervade daily life (e.g., Pillaud et al., 2018). Indeed, recent studies have shown that mixed feelings not only make up more than 30% of people's emotional experiences (Trampe, et al., 2015), but also play a role in key domains of their social lives (for a review, see Berrios et al., 2017). This is especially the case when dealing with controversial and sensitive issues (Pillaud et al., 2018). Research on behavioral change in various domains suggests that ambivalence is a state of tension that arises from constant dispositional conflict between positive and negative consequences in some people (e.g., Berrios et al., 2015). Moreover, recent studies indicate that there might be substantial individual differences in ambivalence: some people are simply more ambivalent than others. For example, Schneider et al., (2021) show that participants' ambivalence towards different attitude domains reliably co-varied with each other, implying individual differences. In addition, a meta-analysis conducted by Berrios et al., (2015) suggests that while ambivalent reactions are robust and non-artifactual experiences of all people, some people are more stable in their mixed feelings and reactions. People with a higher disposition toward ambivalence are confronted with a discrepancy between their actual attitude (cf. ambivalent) and their ideal attitude (cf. univalent), which leads to unwanted affective responses. Such people, then, might experience mixed feelings when

dealing with complex social events, which can readily be appraised as having both pleasant and unpleasant aspects (e.g., Kreibig et al., 2013).

**Summary of Literature Review.** Based on the preceding review, we can conclude that there is considerable fluidity in the conceptualization of *schadenfreude*. Some have tried to reconcile this inconsistency by proposing that ambivalent reactions are linked to *schadenfreude*. Our review suggests that given that mixed emotions are prevalent in daily life, and provided that consumers interact with social entities on a daily basis, resulting in frequent online *schadenfreude* responses, it is unreasonable to assume that emotional reactions towards those entities are uniformly positive or uniformly negative. Therefore, a major premise underlying the present research is that *schadenfreude* may be manifested as a chronic tendency that cuts across different *schadenfreude* situations. To probe the role played by individuals, in this exploratory study we measure personality characteristics that have been implicated in ambivalence, namely, ambivalence propensity, using the Trait Mixed Emotions Scale (TMES; Berrios, et al., 2017). The TMES has been employed in the extant literature to assess the broad, generalized tendency to experience mixed emotions.

## THE CURRENT STUDY

For the present article, a pilot study was conducted to ascertain whether the *schadenfreude* online scenarios of entities' misfortunes would indeed activate *schadenfreude* sentiments. All selected scenarios had been successfully used in our and others' previous research to induce *schadenfreude*. The scenarios were evaluated and selected based on the desire to present various dimensions of marketplace misfortunes. In addition, because the *schadenfreude* literature has emphasized the important role of four moderators — justice restoration (deservingness), malicious envy, personal involvement, and disliking — we interspersed the commonly used items regarding these moderators with the *schadenfreude* measures. The research instrument included single and multi-item scales with seven-point Likert response formats. Based on participants' feedback and analysis of the pretest data, we made minor modifications. The data collected during the pretest was not used in the tests in the main studies. Considering the relatively highly sensitive topic linked to *schadenfreude* reactions (Hornik, et al., 2021a; 2021b), we also performed some of the recommended inter-individual validity checks for possible outliers, flagging participants for providing “low quality data” (LQD) (for a full description of methods and analyses, see Appendix A).

## METHOD

### *Participants*

In case the effect size of the study was inflated, we decided to gather four hundred and three participants. They were recruited via the Amazon Mechanical Turk® platform, employing Qualtrics® online software, using their own computers. An a priori power analysis indicated that 388 participants would be needed to obtain the .80 power necessary to detect a small-to-moderate effect size of  $r = .20$  at  $\alpha = .05$ . The stimuli were presented in random order for each participant. No time limit was imposed for responses.

### *Procedure*

**Trait Ambivalence Scale (TAS).** We followed the standard procedure. First, participants completed the Trait Ambivalence Scale (TAS) validated by Berrios, et al., 2017 and Schneider, 2021; ( $\alpha = .90$ ). e.g., “My thoughts are often contradictory” (see also Appendix C). Total TMES scores were calculated by summing responses to the 10 items and were used as the independent measure.

**Schadenfreude measure.** Participants then rated four pretested scenario stimuli on Wal-Mart, McDonalds, COVID-19, and a rival sports team, employing the commonly used

schadenfreude dependent measure (Hoogland et al., 2015; e.g., “I am pleased by the misfortune that happened to Wal-Mart”;  $\alpha = .89$ ), as well as the four moderators. For a sample scenario see Appendix B.

**Malicious envy.** Three items (Hornik et al., 2018; e.g., “When Wal-Mart succeed, it makes me feel bad”;  $\alpha = .91$ ).

**Deservingness.** Three items (Feather 2008; Wal-Mart deserves this,”;  $\alpha = .81$ ).

**Disliking.** Two items (Feather 2008; e.g. "I never liked Wal-Mart";  $\alpha = .85$ ).

**Personal involvement.** Involvement was measured by asking the participants two questions about whether the issue affected them personally or people whom they care about (Rubin et al., 2020; e.g., “I think this information might affect me personally”;  $\alpha = 0.84$ ).

## RESULTS

### *Inter-individual Validity Measures*

To check for possible outliers, we conducted univariate (via Z-scores) and multivariate (via Mahalanobis Distance and Cook's Distance) outlier analyses, the results of which are provided in Appendix A. The final sample consisted of 391 participants.

### *Primary Analyses*

Descriptive statistics and correlations are displayed in Table 1. First, clear statistical results were obtained corroborating the link between the TMES and schadenfreude. All four schadenfreude events correlated significantly with the TMES. The size of the correlations reached a statistical significance level that was at least below  $p < .05$  ranged from  $|.34|$  to  $|.48|$  (average  $|r| = .41$ ). The results indicate that there were reliable individual differences in the tendency to experience schadenfreude. Second, similar to other studies (e.g. Hoogland et al., 2015), malicious envy, perceived deservingness, personal involvement, and disliking were all found to be significantly associated with schadenfreude. These findings strengthen the validity of the study's procedure and results.

### *Mediation Analyses*

To test if malicious envy, perceived deservingness, personal involvement and disliking served as parallel mediators of the effect of a negative event suffered by a rival on schadenfreude. A mediation analysis with 5,000 bootstrap resamples and bias-corrected confidence intervals (Hayes, 2012) revealed an indirect effect of the event via malicious envy on schadenfreude,  $ab = 0.35$ ,  $SE = 0.10$ , 95% CI [0.15, 0.57], Sobel  $Z = 4.14$ ,  $p < .001$ . The indirect effects for disliking,  $ab = 0.52$ ,  $SE = 0.09$ , 95% CI [0.33, 0.83], Sobel  $Z = 6.41$ ,  $p < .001$ , deservingness,  $ab = 0.46$ ,  $SE = 0.07$ , 95% CI [0.29, 0.43], Sobel  $Z = 4.11$ ,  $p < .001$ , and personal involvement,  $ab = 0.36$ ,  $SE = 0.09$ , 95% CI [0.25, 0.41], Sobel  $Z = 3.97$ ,  $p < .001$ , were also significant. Comparing the central mediators, the indirect effect of malicious envy did not differ significantly from the indirect effects of disliking,  $ab = -0.27$ ,  $SE = 0.16$ , 95% CI [0.56, 0.04], deservingness,  $ab = 0.12$ ,  $SE = 0.13$ , 95% CI [0.13, 0.33], and personal involvement  $ab = 0.36$ ,  $SE = 0.12$ , 95% CI [0.27, 0.9], whereas the latter two did,  $ab = 0.39$ ,  $SE = 0.11$ , 95% CI [0.19, 0.11].

## DISCUSSION

The present findings show that trait ambivalence is linked to schadenfreude. They also imply that these associations are quite robust, having been replicated across all four online commercial schadenfreude stimuli. Thus, by demonstrating empirically that schadenfreude is linked to trait ambivalence, the study provides a novel explanation for online schadenfreude consumers' responses, as well as for some of the confusion surrounding his bittersweet sentiment. Similar to our research, some others work also reported that perceived

deservingness, as well as other antecedents, impact schadenfreude (Hoogland et al., 2015; Hornik et al., 2018; Hornik et al., 2021a). On a macro level, they corroborate prior research addressing the influence of trait ambivalence on complex media events (e.g., Schneider et al., 2021). We hope that marketing researchers will expand our preliminary results and conduct further theoretical and empirical studies using different marketing events and situational ambivalence measures.

**TABLE 1: Descriptive Statistics and Correlation among Study Constructs**

	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>
1. Schadenfreude	----					
2. Malicious envy	.71**	----				
3. Deservingness	.63**	.13	----			
4. Disliking	.65**	.10	.09	----		
5. P. Involvement	.42*	.07	.14	.08	----	
6. Trait ambivalence	.41*	.24*	.21*	.17	.11	----
<u>Descriptive statistics</u>						
Mean	5.32	5.22	5.29	4.81	4.47	4.61
SD	1.27	1.38	1.47	1.38	1.18	1.39
$\alpha$	0.89	0.91	0.81	0.85	0.84	0.90

Note. \*\*P < .01; \*P < .05; 2-tailed  
All measures on a 7-point scale.

### **THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS**

The topic of consumer grudgeholding has garnered limited attention within the fields of marketing and consumer behavior. The act of holding a grudge is of great significance as it encompasses what may appear as irrational, emotionally charged consumer behaviors. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that these behaviors associated with grudgeholding can exert profound and potentially devastating effects on marketing entities (Aron, 2001). The fundamental causes of consumer dissatisfaction and complaints have remained consistent over time. However, the digital landscape in which these issues arise has brought about significant changes in how consumers behave and interact with companies (Aron, 2016). In addition, in the digital era, marketers are tasked with overseeing not only the product offering and the

delivery experience but also the management of consumer responses, including their satisfaction (Larsen & Wright, 2020).

Accordingly, the interconnection between *schadenfreude*, dissatisfaction, and complaint behavior warrants investigation. *Schadenfreude* can serve as a psychological coping mechanism for individuals grappling with dissatisfaction in their lives. When consumers find themselves in a state of unhappiness or discontent with their own circumstances, they may derive a sense of pleasure from the misfortunes of others, providing a temporary respite from their dissatisfaction. Conversely, *schadenfreude* may also paradoxically contribute to heightened dissatisfaction and a propensity for complaint. As consumers focus on the misfortunes of others, they may inadvertently initiate unfavorable self-comparisons to those who are less fortunate, thereby instigating emotions of envy, resentment, and inferiority. These negative emotions can then intensify their existing dissatisfaction. In situations where individuals derive satisfaction from the misfortunes of others, they may also exhibit an increased likelihood of vocalizing their own complaints, whether openly or privately, under the perception that their grievances are more justified when others are similarly afflicted.

Moreover, *schadenfreude*'s impact can extend beyond the individual level, with the potential to damage interpersonal relationships and hinder cooperation. This complicates the pursuit of personal goals and the improvement of one's life circumstances, rendering *schadenfreude* a potentially self-defeating emotion that ultimately exacerbates overall dissatisfaction. It should be noted that satisfied consumers tend to make more purchases, whereas dissatisfied consumers not only cease buying but also express their views, which can impact the buying decisions of others. Hence, it is imperative to elucidate the factors influencing consumer satisfaction and dissatisfaction (Nordstrom & Egan, 2021).

While *schadenfreude* might offer fleeting relief from dissatisfaction, it tends to usher in more negative emotions, making it increasingly challenging to attain enduring happiness and satisfaction in life. In contrast, complaints can also provoke *schadenfreude*. Upon hearing others' grievances, consumers may experience relief in the realization that they are not alone in their discontent, even if their own grievances differ. On occasion, individuals may even take pleasure in the misfortunes of others, particularly when they believe that the complainer deserves their plight.

The interplay between *schadenfreude* and complaints is further explicable through the perspective of complaints as a form of social bonding. When consumers exchange narratives of their negative experiences and feelings through complaints, it serves to strengthen social connections and validate their own dissatisfaction. Consequently, consumers may exhibit a higher propensity to confide their grievances in others, even when they anticipate potential *schadenfreude* in response. *Schadenfreude* can provide individuals with a sense of justification for their complaints. The sight of others who are more unfortunate can lead consumers to believe that their own problems are relatively minor, substantiating their grievances. Likewise, *schadenfreude* can instill consumers with a sense of ease in vocalizing their complaints to others. The knowledge that others are also experiencing misfortune can foster a sense of comfort in individuals, facilitating the expression of their dissatisfactions without the fear of being perceived as overly critical or ungrateful.

In conclusion, the dynamic interplay of *schadenfreude*, dissatisfaction, and complaint behavior is intricate. While *schadenfreude* may offer momentary solace from dissatisfaction, it often leads to a cascade of negative emotions that hinder the pursuit of satisfaction. Exploring these connections deepens our understanding of the human psyche and provides insights into the complex interrelationships between these psychological phenomena.

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## APPENDIX A: MEASURES FOR LOW QUALITY DATA

It is clear that data screening can influence a study's statistical results, and that low-quality data can distort hypothesis testing, research and practice, particularly when it comes to scale construction. It is somewhat surprising that researchers invest considerable effort in measuring data quality and reliability, and yet pay little attention to monitoring participant reliability, which often is more important than other measures. Various direct and unobtrusive screening methods have been introduced in the research methods literature (e.g., DeSimone and Harms, 2018), most of which are low-cost, easy to administer, and simple to measure. Based on our own previous experiences, we strongly recommend that researchers and practitioners incorporate screening methods into their research designs, and before starting data analyses. Accordingly, in this study we employed the four most common screening methods capable of flagging LQD participants. Throughout the study we monitored LQD to detect responses falling into two categories: insufficient effort (e.g., random or invariant) and deceptive (faking good or intentionally dishonest) responses. We make no claim that all forms of LQD are equally egregious or potentially harmful to our research. The following screening methods were used in study 2:

*Bogus Items.* Participants were flagged as potentially providing LQD if they gave illogical responses to bogus items or failed to follow instructions in instructed items.

*Fake Good.* Participants who responded in a manner consistent with social desirability or demand characteristics were assumed to be willing to respond to self-reported effort items in similar ways.

*Mahalanobis Distance.* Outliers need to be usually flagged as potential LQD (DeSimone and Harms, 2018). Mahalanobis distance ( $D$ ) measures the multivariate distance between an individual's response vector and the average response vector for all participants who took the questionnaire.  $D$  values were calculated using the formula where  $\mathbf{x}_i$  represents the vector of mean-centered item responses for participant  $i$  and  $\mathbf{S}^{-1}$  represents the inverted covariance matrix of all items. Larger deviation from the normative response pattern yields higher  $D$  values and is considered a potential indicator of LQD. A single  $D$  statistic was computed for each of the participant using all items. The squared value of  $D$  follows a chi-square distribution with degrees of freedom equal to the number of items used in the calculation of  $D$ . Participants were flagged if their  $D^2$  value placed them in the highest 5% of the chi-square distribution.

*Personal Reliability.* Jackson's (1976) personal reliability coefficient was computed by correlating the average score on even items with the average score on odd items for each subscale. Lower scores indicate LQD in the form of response inconsistency. Personal reliability was computed using a within-person correlation between the vector of even response averages and the vector of odd response averages adjusted for double length using the Spearman-Brown measure. Consistent with Jackson (1976), participants were flagged if their corrected personal reliability coefficient did not exceed 0.30.

To check for possible outliers we conducted a Univariate (via Z-scores) and multivariate (via Mahalanobis Distance and Cook's Distance) outlier analyses. 403 subjects participated in this study. Three cases resulted in both a univariate (critically over the z-score value of 3.30) and multivariate outlier (exceeding the chi-square criterion value of 22.1311 ( $p < .001$ ) by deviating from the expected univariate and multivariate outlier values. For this reason, they were excluded from the sample. Also, we excluded data from three participants who did not answer or missed the attention check for screening out random clicking (i.e., "In this question, we want you to click on number six"), 2 who did not complete all the dependent measures. The final sample consisted of 391 participants. There were no main effects or interactions involving the order of question presentations.

## APPENDIX B: SCENARIO ILLUSTRATION

**This is a university questionnaire about people’s feelings concerning various events.**

The questionnaire is designed to measure what you are thinking at this moment. There are, of course, no right answers. The best answer is what you feel is true of yourself presently. Be sure to answer all of the items, even if you are uncertain of the best answer. Do not spend too much time on any one statement. Circle the number that seems to best describe you using the following scale:

	1-----	2-----	3-----	4-----	5-----	6-----	7
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neutral	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly agree
I am pleased by the misfortune that happened to Walmart	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I'd find it difficult to resist a little smile	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I'm satisfied with what happened to Walmart	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I feel that Walmart deserve this lose	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Feelings of envy cause me to dislike Walmart.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I would be happy to forward this story, with my negative feelings, to other people.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I will have unfavorable remarks about Walmart when discussing this story with others	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

## **APPENDIX C: TRAIT AMBIVALENCE SCALE (TAS)**

Instructions: Please indicate for each statement how much it applies to you. Scale ends: 1 Does not apply to me - 7 Strongly applies to me.

1. My thoughts are often contradictory.
2. Many topics make me feel conflicted.
3. I usually see both the positive as well as the negative side of things.
4. I often experience both sides of an issue pulling on me.
5. I often find that there are pros and cons to everything.
6. I often feel torn between two sides of an issue.
7. Most of the time, my thoughts and feelings are not necessary in accordance with each other.
8. Sometimes when I think about a topic, it almost feels like I am physically switching from side to side.
9. My feelings are often simultaneously positive and negative.
10. I often experience that my thoughts and feelings are in conflict when I'm thinking about a topic.