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The effect of schadenfreude on choice of conventional versus unconventional options

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ABSTRACT

Others' choices that turn out badly often elicit schadenfreude; that is, feelings of malicious joy about the misfortunes of others. We examine the impact of experiencing schadenfreude when choosing between conventional and unconventional options. Results show that individuals are relatively more likely to choose compromise options and safe options when experiencing schadenfreude, in comparison to happiness and to sadness. In support of an affect-as-information mechanism underlying this effect, the influence of schadenfreude on choice is limited to situations in which decision-makers are unaware of the source of their affect. Our last study demonstrates that individuals interpret schadenfreude as information regarding which option they should choose: its experience heightens anticipation of unfavorable outcomes of their own choices. We end with a discussion of the theoretical and organizational implications of our research.

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"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)*

Introduction

Although others' fortunes often make us feel happy, and their misfortunes sad, as the above quote from the *New York Times* illustrates, sometimes it is others' hardships and troubles rather than their good luck that delight us and give us joy. Another recent instance of such schadenfreude, or malicious joy, includes coffee drinkers rejoicing at Starbucks' financial woes and its subsequent decision to close down 600 of its stores: "I'm so happy; I'm so not a Starbucks person," says one aficionado of small independent cafes (*Wulfhorst, 2008*). Persuasive messages may also 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 an unfortunate choice of cell phone service and could hence not be reached in time to avert the calamity.

Although schadenfreude receives considerable attention in the popular press and appears ubiquitous in everyday life, it has received very little attention among psychologists and decision-making researchers. Existing work on schadenfreude mostly focuses on identifying its antecedent triggers; however, the literature is relatively silent about the potential consequences of schadenfreude: particularly if, how, and under which conditions schadenfreude can impact everyday choices. For example, does the experience of schadenfreude have a systematic impact on the choice likelihood of safe over risky options, or of middle-of-the-road over extreme options? Based on our hypothesis that schadenfreude experienced at others' misfortunes leads to anticipation of unfavorable outcomes for oneself, including those related to the choices one makes, we hypothesize that the experience of schadenfreude systematically increases the choice likelihood of conventional options, such as safe or compromise options.

In the next sections we review relevant literature on schadenfreude, affect as information, and the conventional versus unconventional nature of choice options, followed by our hypotheses and a series of studies that tested these predictions. We end with a discussion of the theoretical and managerial implications of our findings and suggest several avenues for future research on schadenfreude and decision-making.

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Theoretical background

Malicious joy: schadenfreude

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 & Sherman, 2002; Foster, 1972), schadenfreude is certainly not a new phenomenon. Socrates ruminated on a trigger for malicious pleasure over 2500 years ago: “Did we not say that pleasure in the misfortunes of friends was caused by envy?” (cited by Smith et al., 1996).

Emerging research examines empirically the antecedents and triggers of schadenfreude, including importance to the self (Leach, Spears, Branscombe, & Doosje, 2003), liking (Hareli & Weiner, 2002), resentment (Feather & Sherman, 2002), and envy (Feather, 1989; Smith et al., 1996; Sundie, Ward, Beal, Chin, & Geiger-Oneto, 2009). For example, Smith et al. (1996) found that student subjects felt significantly more schadenfreude when an academically superior versus average student was caught stealing, even when controlling for subjects' level of self esteem and liking for the target student. These researchers also showed that differences in schadenfreude were driven by levels of both chronic envy and temporarily-induced envy. Further research found the degree to which envy predicts schadenfreude limited to situations of high similarity between the target and the study respondent; when there is relatively high dissimilarity, resentment rather than envy drives malicious pleasure (Feather & Sherman, 2002; van Dijk, Ouwerkerk, Goslinga, Nieweg, & Galucci, 2006).

Importantly for the current research, findings in the literature have confirmed the role of deservingness in the relationship between misfortune and schadenfreude (Brigham, Kelso, Jackson, & Smith, 1997; Feather, 1999; van Dijk, Ouwerkerk, Goslinga, & Nieweg, 2005). For instance, van Dijk and colleagues (2005) showed that the more others were responsible for their misfortune, the more the misfortune was perceived to be deserved, which in turn increased the level of schadenfreude experienced. In particular, subjects' reported schadenfreude was greater when a setback was suffered by a student who was caught stealing a laptop, as compared to when a setback was suffered by a student who was just wrongly accused of stealing a laptop.

Although extant research has thus demonstrated the ubiquity of schadenfreude in everyday life and some its antecedents, an examination into the implications of schadenfreude is currently missing from the literature. Consistent with findings that social comparisons not only engender schadenfreude (Foster, 1972) but also facilitate evaluations of objects based on affect (Hsee, Zhang, Yu, & Xi, 2003), we propose that schadenfreude is likely to have a systematic effect on subsequent choice, because its experience is interpreted as information regarding the option individuals should choose. This proposition is consistent with recent findings (Raghunathan & Pham, 1999; Raghunathan, Pham, & Corfman, 2006) providing evidence for the informational value of sadness versus anxiety in suggesting to consumers which choices they should make. We discuss the informational use of affect in general, and of schadenfreude in particular, next.

Schadenfreude as information

Individuals often make choices based on their affect toward the options under consideration (e.g., Hsee et al., 2003; Pham & Avnet, 2009). That is, they tend to hold each of the options in mind, ask themselves “How do I feel about it?” (e.g., Schwarz & Clore,

1983, 1988), and then infer their liking of them from their feelings. Interestingly, individuals' perceptions that their affect provides diagnostic information about the value of an option have an impact not only when the affect is actually elicited by the targets under consideration, but also when it is incidental to them (Kramer & Yoon, 2007; Schwarz & Clore, 1983). For example, consumers evaluate new products more favorably when induced to be in a positive (versus negative) mood by music, as long as they are unaware of the music as the source of their mood (Gorn, Goldberg, & Basu, 1993). Similarly, students express greater intentions to see a movie when primed by an unrelated task to be in a pleasant versus unpleasant mood, as long as their feelings were perceived to be relevant to evaluating the movie (Pham, 1998).

In the current research, we propose that the experience of schadenfreude following someone else's misfortune informs decision-makers that they, too, could be subject to a misfortune. These heightened anticipations that their own actions or choices might go wrong, or not work out in the way they want them to, are likely to shift their choices away from options that are considered unconventional to those considered more conventional, which we discuss next.

The conventional versus unconventional nature of options

Consistent with previous research (Kramer, Maimaran, & Simonson, 2010; Maimaran & Simonson, 2010; Simonson, Kramer, & Young, 2004; Simonson & Nowlis, 2000), we classify options based on whether they are consistent with prevailing norms or are typically chosen by the majority of people (i.e., conventional) on the one hand, or inconsistent with prevailing norms or are chosen by a minority (i.e., unconventional) on the other hand. Specifically, in choices between gambles that differ in their level of risk, individuals tend to choose the lower-risk option, suggesting that safe or lower-risk (versus higher-risk) options are perceived as more conventional options (e.g., Simonson, 1992; Simonson & Nowlis, 2000). Research examining choices between gambles that differ in their level of risk has confirmed that individuals tend to select the lower-risk or safe options by default (e.g., betting on a “favorite” with a high probability of a small gain over a “long-shot;” Simonson, 1992; Simonson et al., 2004). Choices of risky gambles over sure outcomes are also likely to require more time and effort, such as having to compute expected value, which suggests they are not default choices. Finally, individuals also tend to choose less risky options when motivated to prevent losses and mistakes than when motivated to achieve gains (Liberman, Idson, Camacho, & Higgins, 1999). Note that the above discussion is consistent with Kahneman and Tversky's (1979) Prospect Theory, which states that individuals are risk-averse in the gain domain, but that they become risk-seeking in the loss domain, suggesting that for gambles involving losses, the risky option is the conventional one. However, all gambles in the current research are in the gain domain.

Concerns about criticism tend to increase the choice likelihood not only of safe options, but also of compromise options (e.g., Simonson, 1989). Related research indicates that the middle, compromise option is perceived as the safe choice that is less likely to be criticized (e.g., Huber & Puto, 1983). Safe and compromise options also tend to be preferred when decision-makers are uncertain about their preferences and try to avoid making difficult decisions (Dhar & Simonson, 2003). Finally, individuals who seek to minimize regret and cognitive effort will likely favor a safe over a risky option, and a compromise over an extreme option, given that lower levels of regret are associated with choice of default option (e.g., Ritov & Baron, 1992; Seta, McElroy, & Seta, 2001).

To ascertain that compromise and safe options indeed are perceived to be the conventional options, we conducted a pre-test with 69 undergraduate students from the same subject pool as that used

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