



# Malicious joy: Sadism moderates the relationship between schadenfreude and the severity of others' misfortune



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## ABSTRACT

Sadism was established as a moderator of the relationship between the severity of others' misfortunes and schadenfreude. In Study 1, we measured sadistic personality traits, and afterwards, participants were presented with a video clip of a cyclist's accident that was described as having resulted in minor (low misfortune condition) or severe (high misfortune condition) injuries. Individuals high in sadism experienced greater schadenfreude in the high misfortune condition. Conversely, we found lower schadenfreude in the high misfortune condition for individuals low in sadism. In Study 2, we were able to replicate our findings while controlling for deservingness of the target person and impression management tendencies. Moreover, we manipulated the importance of the cycling race. In line with our expectations, race importance exacerbated the effects observed in Study 1. Results are discussed in light of theoretical and practical implications.

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## 1. Introduction

When watching a video of a misfortune befalling another person, a lot of people have probably experienced the feeling of joy. YouTube's highly frequented 'fail compilation' videos are only one example of people seemingly enjoying seeing others hurt or humiliate themselves. As a German loanword, schadenfreude describes the joy derived from observing the misfortunes of others.

Another's misfortune can provide observers with an opportunity to protect, maintain, or enhance their feelings of self-worth (Van Dijk, Ouwerkerk, Van Koningsbruggen, & Wesseling, 2011; Van Dijk, Ouwerkerk, Van Koningsbruggen, & Wesseling, 2012; Van Dijk, Ouwerkerk, Wesseling, & Van Koningsbruggen, 2011). Therefore, the experience of schadenfreude can be conceived of as a social comparative concern (e.g., Ben-Ze'ev, 2014). Along these lines, observing the downfall of high achievers was found to lead to more pleasant feelings compared to observing the failure of an average person (Feather, 1989, 1994; Van Dijk, Ouwerkerk, Goslinga, & Nieweg, 2005). Likewise, Brigham, Kelso, Jackson, and Smith (1997) found that a setback of a superior student produced more schadenfreude, compared to the setback of an average student. Accordingly, witnessing someone superior fail is a situation providing an observer with the opportunity to reestablish his or her feeling of self-worth.

Previous research on schadenfreude has focused on identifying conditions under which schadenfreude is most likely to occur. For instance,

people are more likely to experience schadenfreude when they envy the target person (Smith et al., 1996). Moreover, deservingness was found to be an important predictor of schadenfreude (e.g. Feather, 1994, 1999, 2006, 2008; Feather & Sherman, 2002; Van Dijk et al., 2005). When people perceive a target person as deserving of a misfortune, they experience greater schadenfreude. For instance, participants showed higher schadenfreude when a student suffering a misfortune was described as being responsible for that misfortune compared to not responsible. Moreover, this effect was mediated by perceived deservingness of the misfortune (Van Dijk et al., 2005).

Furthermore, there are also individual differences associated with the experience of schadenfreude. In general, men report more schadenfreude than women (e.g., Van Dijk et al., 2005). Moreover, schadenfreude was found to be positively related to psychopathy, narcissism, as well as Machiavellianism (James, Kavanagh, Jonason, Chonody, & Scrutton, 2014; Porter, Bhanwer, Woodworth, & Black, 2014). Together, these three personality dimensions represent the *Dark Triad* of personality traits (Jones & Paulhus, 2013). Recently, Buckels and colleagues suggested adding sadism to the Dark Triad, thereby constituting the Dark Tetrad (Buckels, Jones, & Paulhus, 2013).

## 2. The present research

There is increased support for the notion that sadism — as a personality trait — influences everyday behaviors among normal people (Buckels, 2012). In this sense, sadism was found to be associated with the enjoyment of cruelty in mundane situations, among ordinary people in everyday life (Buckels et al., 2013). Sadism, for example, predicted *cyber-trolling* in Internet users (Buckels, Trapnell, & Paulhus, 2014) or

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readiness to kill bugs among a population of undergraduate students in a laboratory experiment (Buckels et al., 2013). Thus, in contrast to the original understanding of sadism, namely as a (forensic) psychiatric disorder and sexual pleasure derived through the pain, suffering, and/or humiliation of others (Krueger, 2010), sadism can also be conceptualized as a personality trait, relating to the experience of joy in response to minor cruelty in normal – everyday – situations among non-clinical populations (O'Meara, Davies, & Hammond, 2011).

Schadenfreude as an emotion and sadism as a personality trait both imply deriving pleasure from someone else's misfortune. Nevertheless, although schadenfreude and sadism share some similarities (Stein, 1992; Whitman & Alexander, 1968), schadenfreude is conceptualized as a social comparative concern, most likely to occur when observing minor misfortunes of others (Ben-Ze'ev, 2014). In contrast to sadism, schadenfreude is not expected to occur in situations in which someone else suffers from a severe misfortune (Ben-Ze'ev, 2014). For instance, we would expect people to experience more schadenfreude if a target person were to slip on a banana peel, and less if he or she were to break a leg while falling. However, this phenomenon might be reversed for individuals particularly high in sadism.

The goal of the present research was to examine the moderating role of sadism in the relationship between severity of other's misfortune and schadenfreude. We tested our hypotheses in two experiments in which we assessed sadism and manipulated the severity of a fictitious target's misfortune. We predicted higher schadenfreude for severe misfortunes, compared to minor ones, for individuals high in sadism, whereas we expected the opposite pattern for individuals low in sadism. Hence, we anticipated lower levels of schadenfreude for minor compared to severe misfortunes for individuals low in sadism. Overall, we expected sadism to be a moderator of the relationship between schadenfreude and the severity of others' misfortune.

### 3. Study 1

Study 1 served as a preliminary test of the moderating role of sadism in the relationship between severity of other's misfortune and schadenfreude. Participants watched a video clip of a racing cyclist's accident depicted as resulting in either minor or severe injuries. Subsequently, schadenfreude was assessed. We hypothesized that participants high in sadism would show higher levels of schadenfreude when others' misfortune is severe. In contrast, we expected lower levels of schadenfreude for participants low in sadism when others' misfortune is severe.

#### 3.1. Method

##### 3.1.1. Participants and design

Eighty-two participants (39 female, 43 male;  $M_{\text{age}} = 34.8$ ,  $SD_{\text{age}} = 12.8$ ) took part in a study, supposedly to study personality and perception. They were recruited via Amazon.com's Mechanical Turk online survey program. All participants were from the USA. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions (minor vs. severe misfortune condition) in our mixed design, which also included an assessment of sadistic personality traits.

##### 3.1.2. Materials and procedure

Participants were provided with a link on Mechanical Turk, which allowed them to access the study, that was programmed using Qualtrics software. First, we measured sadism. Next, participants were informed that they were about to watch a video clip of a racing cyclist's accident ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M\\_8hYBRCE00](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M_8hYBRCE00)). Beforehand, they had been asked to study an excerpt about the accident allegedly taken out of a newspaper report. Participants learned that the racing cyclist, Charles Duguier, fell shortly before reaching the finish line, and lost first place to his rival, Brian Kaufmann. The race was described as part of the Tour de France, and the accident happened at the last stage before the ultimate finish in Paris, Champs-Élysées. Furthermore, we

manipulated the severity of the cyclist's injury (misfortune). Participants in the minor misfortune condition read that the accident did not result in any severe injuries since Duguier had merely twisted an ankle, whereas participants in the severe misfortune condition learned that Duguier had torn his meniscus and that it was unclear if he will be able to continue his career as a professional athlete. Upon completion of the dependent variables (i.e., manipulation check item and schadenfreude) and demographic questions, participants were debriefed, thanked, and paid via their Amazon Mechanical Turk accounts.

**3.1.2.1. Sadism.** We used the Short Sadistic Impulse Scale (SSIS; O'Meara et al., 2011) to assess participants' sadistic personality traits. The scale is comprised of 10 items (e.g., "I would enjoy hurting someone physically, sexually, or emotionally"; "I have humiliated others to keep them in line";  $\alpha = .87$ ) recorded in a dichotomous form using the categories "0 = *Unlike me*", and "1 = *Like me*".

**3.1.2.2. Manipulation check.** To probe whether the manipulation of the severity of misfortune worked, we asked participants to indicate their agreement with the following statement: "The cyclists' injury is pretty bad" (1 = *Strongly disagree*; 5 = *Strongly agree*).

**3.1.2.3. Schadenfreude.** To measure schadenfreude, we employed five items adapted from Van Dijk et al. (2012; "I enjoy what happened to the cyclist," "I'm satisfied with what happened to the cyclist," "I couldn't resist a little smile," "I actually had to laugh a little bit," and "I feel joy watching his misfortune";  $\alpha = .95$ ). This scale was completed on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("*Strongly disagree*") to 5 ("*Strongly agree*").

### 3.2. Results

#### 3.2.1. Preliminary analyses and manipulation check

There were no missing values. Data screening revealed no value higher than three standard deviations from the mean (see Table 1 for  $M$ ,  $SD$ , and correlations of key variables involved in Study 1). A  $t$ -test for condition on the manipulation check item revealed that participants in the severe misfortune condition ( $M = 3.44$ ,  $SD = 1.18$ ) perceived the cyclist's injury as more severe, compared to participants in the minor misfortune condition ( $M = 2.10$ ,  $SD = 1.18$ ),  $t(80) = -5.14$ ,  $p < .001$ . The severity of the cyclist's misfortune manipulation was thus effective.

#### 3.2.2. Main analyses

Hierarchical multiple regression analyses were conducted to examine the main effects and interaction effects of sadism and conditions on schadenfreude (see Table 2). For the purpose of the study, experimental conditions were dummy coded with a score of 1 attributed to the severe misfortune condition and a score of 0 attributed to the minor misfortune condition. According to Aiken and West's (1991) procedures, independent variables (i.e., conditions and sadism) were standardized before calculating the interaction products. In order to take gender variance into account, participants' gender was entered in Step 1. Afterward, condition and sadism were entered in the second step, while the sadism  $\times$  condition interaction was entered in the third step. To interpret interaction effects, we followed the procedures outlined by Aiken and West (1991) for depicting interactions. Furthermore, significant interactions were investigated using regions of significance (Preacher, Curran, &

**Table 1**  
 $M$ ,  $SD$ , and correlations of key variables in study 1 ( $N = 82$ ).

	$M$ ( $SD$ )	Schadenfreude	Gender <sup>a</sup>
Sadism	1.38 (2.34)	.41**	-.06
Schadenfreude	1.91 (1.23)	–	-.47**

<sup>a</sup> 0 = male; 1 = female.

\*\*  $p < .001$ .

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