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THE SCHADENFREUDE EFFECT: WHEN YOUR LOSSES ARE MORE ENJOYABLE THAN MY WINS

Schadenfreude: Quando as suas derrotas são mais prazerosas que as minhas vitórias

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ABSTRACT

It is not uncommon for people to feel good when bad luck happens to others, especially when there is rivalry. The paper aims to investigate the impact of *schadenfreude* (pleasure in another's misfortune) on decision-making. The first study, a lab experiment, showed that people preferred to send news about one's favorite team victory (pride) over one's rival team loss (*schadenfreude*) when the outcome of the game displayed small score differences and select the *schadenfreude* option when the score differences were large. The second study, conducted in the field, showed that supporters of a rival team increased their probability of betting against the target team when the target team was praised prior to the game. Taken together, the results show that *schadenfreude* is more powerful when the damage to a rival is large (study 1) or when the rival is praised (study 2).

KEYWORDS: Schadenfreude, envy, pride.

RESUMO

Não é incomum que as pessoas se sintam bem quando a má sorte acontece com os outros, especialmente quando há algum tipo de rivalidade. O artigo investiga o impacto de *schadenfreude* (prazer na desgraça alheia) na tomada de decisões. O primeiro estudo, um experimento de laboratório, mostrou que os torcedores preferem enviar notícias sobre a vitória do seu clube de futebol favorito (orgulho) sobre a derrota de um clube rival (*schadenfreude*) quando o resultado do jogo apresenta pequenas diferenças de gols e prefere o *schadenfreude* quando acontecem goleadas. O segundo estudo, realizado no campo, mostrou que torcedores aumentaram a probabilidade de apostar contra um clube rival quando este clube foi elogiado antes do jogo. Em conjunto, os resultados mostram que *schadenfreude* é mais forte que o orgulho quando o dano a um rival é grande (estudo 1) ou quando o rival é louvado (estudo 2).

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Schadenfreude, inveja, orgulho.

1 Introduction

Ireland was knocked out of the 2010 FIFA World Cup because of a hand goal scored by France striker Thierry Henry. The Irish now seemed to have a reason to root against France during the 2016 UEFA Euros and were expected to enjoy seeing them eliminated. Aware of this possibility, two companies developed rather unique promotional tactics. One famous pizzeria offered all Irish consumers free pizzas for each goal against France in the World Cup using the slogan "Pizzas 1, France 0". The other company gave a TV set discount when France was knocked out of the World Cup with the phrase: "When the French lose, the Irish win".

In our daily lives, we observe the success and failures of others, and very often, these observations produce powerful affective responses, including a variety of emotions that range from satisfaction to anger, pride or pity (Leach et al., 2003). An infinite number of factors are likely to influence feelings expressed, including social comparison information or the observer's self-esteem or resentment (how "deserved" the outcome is perceived to be). The act of comparing ourselves to each other occurs universally across human cultures (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999; White & Lehman, 2005). From personal characteristics, such as beauty and intelligence to possessions such as cars and homes, social comparison processes can greatly influence how good one feels about oneself (Festinger, 1954). We do not compare ourselves with everyone, but rather only those who are like us in some aspects. A professor may compare her salary with that of a colleague and feel angry, embarrassed, or overjoyed, but she is unlikely to compare her salary with a child's weekly allowance or to an oil baron's annual income. (Gilbert & Morris, 1995).

Over the past decade, social media networks have substantively been increasing these comparisons as people usually show others their possessions, achievements, and how happy they supposedly are (Kramer et al., 2014). This is particularly strong in social media networks such as Facebook, as emotional states can be transferred to others via emotional contagions, leading people to experience the same emotions without their awareness (Kramer et al., 2014). It is not a new fact that people feel pleased when someone suffers, especially when this emotion is activated by resentment, the desire to fix a perceived injustice (Feather & Sherman, 2002) or envy (Smith et al., 1996). All these motivations are commonly experienced in a sports context (Leach et al., 2003). Such an emotion, known as *schadenfreude*, a German term which denotes a feeling of malicious joy about the misfortunes of others, has been exhaustively discussed in the literature (Heider, 2013; Smith et al., 1996; Brigham et al., 1997; Feather & Sherman, 2002; Hareli & Weiner, 2002; Leach et al., 2003; van Dijk et al., 2005; Takahashi et al., 2009; Sundie et al., 2009; van Dijk et al., 2014).

Most research has focused on the potential contextual factors and feelings that lead people to experience *schadenfreude*. However, to the best of our knowledge, no one has studied how this emotion can affect decision-making. The purpose of the current research is to extend the *schadenfreude* knowledge by assessing how the experience and anticipation of *schadenfreude* can influence decision making in sports related contexts. In two studies, the current research aims to investigate (a) the choice between sharing good news about their team or bad news about their rival (study 1) and (b) the likelihood to bet against a rival after these rivals have been praised (study 2). The results show that *schadenfreude*-eliciting options have a significant impact on people's decisions in both scenarios.

2 Theoretical Background

2.1. Social Comparison Theory: where the rivalry arises

It would not be too common to support another team (different team from the one we usually support) if there was not any friend to gloat over about it. The theory that bases this behavior, called Social Comparison, was proposed by Festinger (1954) and was defined by two natures of comparisons, concerning self and others: invidious or upward comparisons when another individual is perceived to be better than the self, and downward comparisons when the other person is perceived to be worse than the self.

Since the theory has been developed, an extensive discussion has been established, postulating that individuals routinely evaluate themselves by comparing their abilities, achievements, and possession to others' (e.g. Festinger 1954; Wheeler, 1991). When individuals engage in these comparisons, their perceived relative standing has implications for their self-esteem, and thus has emotional consequences (Gilbert & Morris, 1995; Smith, 2000; Tesser, 2000). In addition, these social comparisons are more likely to have a greater impact when they include someone like the comparer than when they involve someone less similar (Salovey & Rodin, 1984; Tesser, 1991). When someone learns that a colleague of the same rank and company earns twice as much as he does, he may experience changes in his views ("Maybe I am not good enough") and consequently, his emotions ("I'm the worst") or envy ("He does not deserve that salary"), but this does not happen when the one learns that the owner of a Facebook page or Google earns several times more than him.

These associations, such as envy, arise from a social comparison motivated by a belief that their means of acquisition was unfair or fraudulent or to find reasons to discredit the envied person (Elster, 1999; Farber, 1966; Smith & Kim, 2007). For instance, Wood and Taylor (1991) suggested that comparisons with dissimilar others are preferred only when the dimensions under evaluations are unfamiliar, and that people prefer to compare with similar others once the parameters are familiar and clearly defined. Nowadays, our social networks are bigger and we are willing to make more unconscious or conscious social comparisons. Sometimes this certainly affects our mood and how we make our decisions. Recent research has shown evidence that Facebook may influence our own emotions through contagion and social comparisons (Kramer et al., 2014). They ran a social experiment with more than 600.000 people, concluding that reduced positive expressions cause people to produce less positive posts and more negative posts; when negative expressions are decreased, the opposite pattern occurs.

Schadenfreude leads to a "tall poppy syndrome" phenomenon in which people who have earned stature in the community are resented, attacked, or criticized because their talents or achievements distinguish them from their peers. Subjects are more willing to experience schadenfreude with high status targets than low status targets when the perceived severity of the target's misconduct was low. However, this status effect disappeared at higher levels of perceived deservingness (Dasborough & Harvey, 2016). Moreover, van Dijk et al. (2006) stated that envy predicts schadenfreude when participants learned about a misfortune of a same gender target, but not when participants learned about a misfortune of a different gender. In general, research has concluded that comparisons with those who are better or worse off are sometimes unavoidable, and both advantages and disadvantages occur for upward and downward comparisons (Festinger, 1954).

2.2. Pleasure in another's misfortune: Schadenfreude

We generally feel happy when good things happen to others and unhappy when misfortunes befall them. However, sometimes we can also feel good when something bad happens to others (Heider, 2013) possibly because every emotion hides a concern (Frijda,

1988). More than two and a half thousand years ago, Socrates wondered: "Did we not say that pleasure in the misfortune of friends was caused by envy?" (Smith et al., 1996). He was talking about *schadenfreude*. These feelings are known and faced by humans every day. *Schadenfreude* is a compound word of the German words *Schaden*, meaning harm, and *Freude*, meaning joy, and is used nowadays as a loanword in the English language. According to the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), it is defined as "malicious enjoyment of the misfortunes of others" (van Dijk et al., 2014).

Hostile feelings are less observed in others species and originate from multiple sources. Emerging research in the field of *schadenfreude* supported relations with envy (Feather, 1989, Brigham et al., 1997; Smith et al., 1996; Van Dijk et al., 2006; Sundie et al., 2009; Takahashi et al., 2009), anger/hate (Hareli and Weiner, 2002), disliked person (van dijk et al, 2005), resentment (Feather & Sherman, 2002), sympathy (Schindler et al., 2015) and even included importance to the self (Ortony et al., 1988; Leach et al., 2003).

The literature has most often focused on the antecedents of *schadenfreude* rather than the consequences of *schadenfreude*-eliciting events. For instance, Smith et al. (1996) conducted a between-subjects experiment showing a video tape of a bright student (vs. an average) who was arrested on a drug-related criminal charge and subsequently banned from entering medical school. The authors found that participants felt significantly more *schadenfreude* when an academically superior versus average student suffered the misfortune. Sundie et al. (2009) ran a consumption context study showing that *schadenfreude* can be precipitated by factors such as the degree of target advantage and product status ostentation. Finally, van Dijk and his colleagues (2011) found that people who experience an acute (situational) self-evaluation threat, and therefore have a greater need to protect their self-view, feel more *schadenfreude* than those who do not experience it.

A recent study about deservingness has investigated the perceptions of fairness in product ownership as an antecedent to the experience of *schadenfreude*. The results suggest that deservingness of product ownership affects how other people perceive product failure (Pancer & Ashworth, 2016). Past research seems to focus only on the factors that antecede *schadenfreude*. The present study aims to go deeper into how current and anticipated *schadenfreude*-eliciting events can affect decision making.

3 Experiments

This present research suggests that the experience of *schadenfreude* will influence how people behave in a sports-related decision-making scenario. In experiment one, participants are exposed to a situation in which they decide between sharing news with their friends about the outcome of a past soccer game. In experiment two, participants are asked to bet on the outcome of a future soccer game. In both cases, the possibility of experiencing *schadenfreude* is higher in one condition than in the other. The studies assess the extent to which the possibility of experiencing *schadenfreude* changes people's choices.

3.1 Experiment 1 – Schadenfreude from a past event

3.1.1 Method

Participants and design: One hundred and fifty-three individuals (58 women) participated voluntarily in an internet-based survey about soccer. The mean age of the sample was 26.85 years (SD = 6.93). The experiment was a single factor within-subjects design with five treatments (outcome of the game: 1x0 vs. 2x0 vs. 3x0 vs. 4x0 vs. 5x0).

Procedure: The cover story stated that the study was about Rio de Janeiro's soccer teams and that we were interested in knowing how people choose to share news about

soccer with their friends on social networks. First, participants informed their interest in soccer in series of questions and indicated their favorite team. They were then asked five questions with two options each. See a sample of the first question below:

"Which of these news articles from an online newspaper are you more inclined to share on a social network?"

- ___ Fluminense [Participant's Favorite Team] 1 x 0 Bahia [Neutral Team]
- ___ Flamengo [Rival Team] 0 x 1 Bahia [Neutral Team].

In other words, the participant had to choose to share either the news of his/her favorite team victory or that of his/her rival team loss. The same question was repeated four more times, with the increment of 1 score for the winner after each question (i.e., Participant's Favorite Team 2 [3, 4, 5] x 0 Neutral Team vs. Rival Team 0 x 2 [3, 4, 5] Neutral Team).

We expected that a rival team's big loss would be more likely to elicit schadenfreude, than a rival team's small loss. As a result, people's propensity to choose to send news about a rival team's loss over a favorite team win should increase along with the score differences in the outcome of the games. After completing this task, participants were presented with each choice made and asked to indicate which emotion best represented what they would feel after sharing the chosen news (Pride vs. Pleasure at another's misfortune vs. Indicate Other). This measure served as a manipulation check. They then described the intensity of the selected emotion on a numerical rating scale (1=not at all; 5=very much). Age and gender were recorded and participants were thanked for their participation.

3.1.2 Results

Manipulation check: To assess the validity of pride and the schadenfreude dichotomy, we asked participants to indicate which emotion best represented the news they chose to share with their friend (pride vs. schadenfreude ["prazer de zoar"] vs. other: indicate___). As Figure 1 shows, the vast majority of participants who chose to send their favorite team's victory to a friend indicated they would experience pride as a result (86%). In the same vein, the vast majority of participants who chose to send the rival team's loss to a friend indicated feeling schadenfreude as a result (94%; $\chi^2(2) = 594.883$, $p < .0001$).

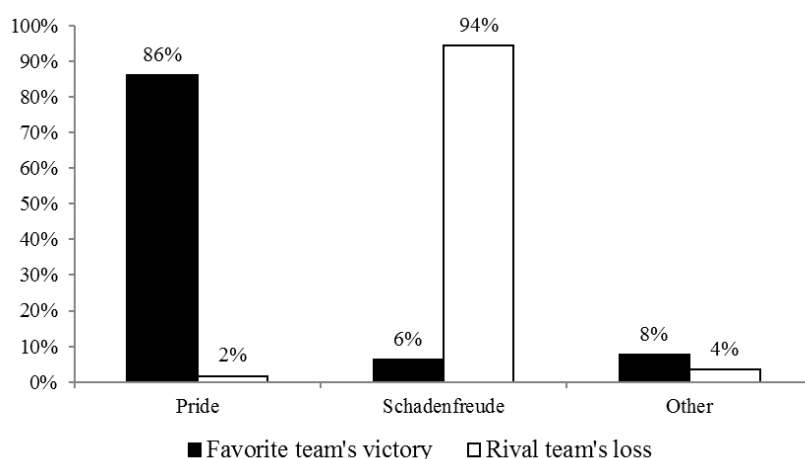


Figure 1 - Manipulation Check

Pride vs. Schadenfreude: The outcome of the game impacted whether people chose to share a favorite team's victory (i.e., pride-eliciting news) or rival team's loss (i.e., schadenfreude-eliciting news) with their friend. The single factor within subject design with

five treatments experiment (outcome of the game: 1x0 vs. 2x0 vs. 3x0 vs. 4x0 vs. 5x0) was analyzed using related-samples Cochran's Q Test modeling. The results of the analysis showed that the omnibus test was statistically significant ($Q(4, 153) = 54,627, p > .001$). As shown in Figure 2, participants are more likely to send pride-eliciting news when the score differences in outcome were small (e.g., when the [favorite team won/rival team lost] by one goal). However, participants were as likely to send schadenfreude-eliciting news when the score differences in outcome of the games were large (e.g., when the favorite team won/rival team lost by 5 goals).

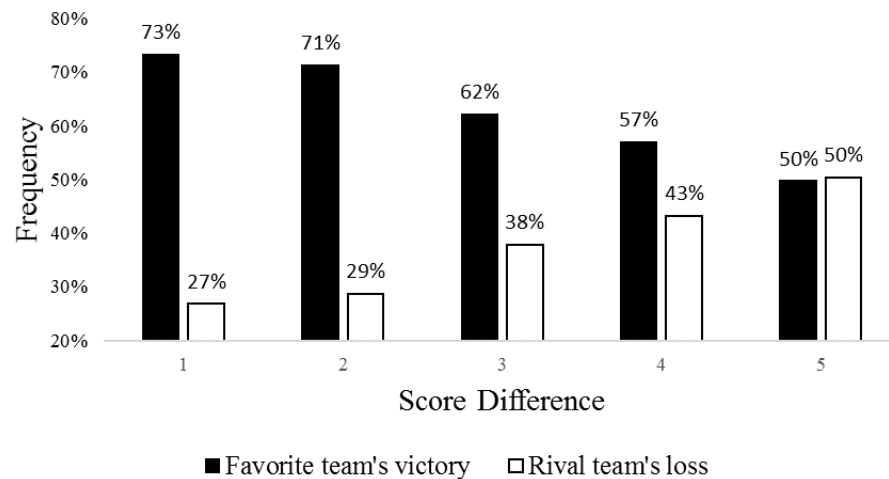


Figure 2 - Pride x Schadenfreude

3.1.3 Discussion

Study 1 confronted the dichotomy of pride and schadenfreude that leads participants to make conscious decisions and change their willingness to share pride content switching to malicious pleasure when the schadenfreude became more appealing (e.g., rival team's big loss). These results contribute to the enrichment of the literature considering what has been researched, since no one has yet studied how schadenfreude changes decision-making processes.

3.2 Experiment 2 – Schadenfreude from a future event

The second study, conducted in the field, examines how schadenfreude influences one's willingness to bet against a rival team. Contrary to experiment 1, in which the impact of schadenfreude was tied to a past event, experiment 2 assesses how schadenfreude impacts decision making tied to a future event. To address this issue, the participant's team preference was assessed (i.e. whether the participant cheers for the target team versus for a rival team) and a praise manipulation was implemented so that the consumers either see or do not praise the target team when they are making a bet. The praise manipulation results from the empirical evidence that envy represents one of the potential antecedents of schadenfreude (Feather, 1989, Brigham et al., 1997; Smith et al., 1996; van Dijk et al., 2006; Sundie et al., 2009; Takahashi et al., 2009). Thus, praising a rival team is more likely to trigger schandenfreude and impact decision making as a result. Precisely, as a result of envy, we expect supporters of rival teams to more frequently bet against the target team when a praise manipulation precedes the wager decision. For supporters of the target team, the praise manipulation should have no impact, given that supporters should predominantly bet on the target team independently.

3.2.1 Method

Participants and design: One hundred twenty-four adults (42 women) participated in this experiment. The experiment employed a 2 (target team: fan vs. foe) by 2 (target team praise: yes vs. no) between subjects design.

Procedure: The experiment was conducted in a sports bar in Rio de Janeiro right before an important soccer game in which one of the city's main soccer teams (Fluminense) attempted to advance to the semi-finals of the Copa Libertadores da America against Olimpia (from Paraguay). The competition is equivalent to the UEFA Champions League in Europe. None of the other teams from Rio were in the competition. Also, there were no Olimpia fans in the bar. Therefore, those in the sample were either cheering for or against Fluminense, or were indifferent to the outcome.

Participants were approached by an interviewer and asked to participate in a short "ipad survey" about soccer as part of a promotion campaign launched by the bar. Participants were informed that their task was simply to fill out a few questions on the main touch screen and to estimate the exact outcome of the upcoming game. The winners would receive a ticket for a beer at the bar (~U\$3.00) as compensation. Participants were asked to provide their answers as privately as possible and not to share it with others even though they were sitting next to each other. The survey asked participants to indicate (a) their favorite team, (b) outcome of the game, (c) interest in soccer, (d) how happy they would feel about winning, and (e) gender. Before the survey started, participants were randomly assigned to either a control or to the target team praise condition. Participants in the former were shown the Copa's main logo prior to the survey and listened to a sports vignette from a national broadcaster. In the praise condition, participants were shown the target team's logo (i.e., Fluminense's) next to a picture of their most important player, and listened to the team's anthem during the survey. The other independent variable represented the participants' favorite team (target team vs. other). Participants were thanked after the survey and winners were paid accordingly after the game. To decide who would qualify for the semi-finals, two games were played between these two teams (one in each country). Thus, data collection happened twice, one week apart from one another, at the exact same place using the exact same procedure. No participant was interviewed twice.

3.2.2 Results

We conducted a Chi-Square Test analysis to see whether participants' type of betting behavior (who would win) varied by praise condition and team preference. A significant interaction is observed such that the praise manipulation had no impact among those who cheered for the target team ($\chi^2(2) = 2.04, p > .10$), but there is a significant impact among those who did not cheer for the target team ($\chi^2(2) = 6.73, p < .05$). As expected, among those who cheered for the target team, the clear majority (> 90%) bet on the target team's victory independent of praise manipulation (see Figure 3).

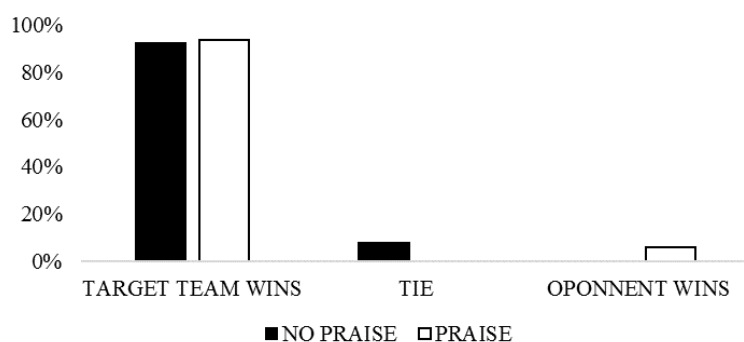


Figure 3 - Target Team Supporter

Also, as we had predicted, among those who did not cheer for the target team, the number of participants betting on the rival teams' victory increased significantly in the condition where the target team was praised prior to the betting decision (see Figure 4).

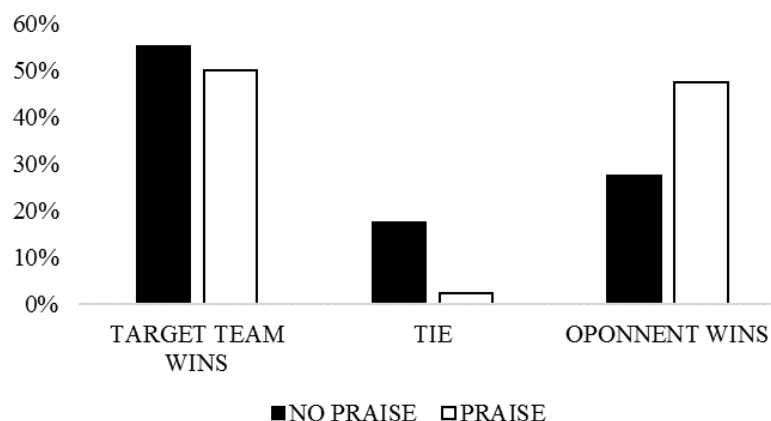


Figure 4 - Rival Team Supporter

4 Conclusion

The literature on *schadenfreude* has thus far focused on the shaping factors that elicit this strange emotion of feeling pleasure at the misfortune of another. Several factors, which include envy, resentment, sympathy, other-directed negative emotions such as “tall poppy syndrome”, and perceived deservingness of the other’s misfortune, have been found to play a role in creating the necessary state of affairs for *schadenfreude* to be experienced. However, most the research on *schadenfreude* has not considered how this feeling can influence our decision-making processes. In a series of two experiments, we show that *schadenfreude*-eliciting events can influence people’s decisions on (a) what sports news to share with friends and (b) how to wage on future sport outcomes.

The study of this feeling is important as there are applications in our day-to-day decisions. Companies around the world have been using this malicious pleasure in their advertising campaigns when there is rivalry between brands (e.g. Coca Cola and Pepsi), magazines and newspapers, or even when people feel resentment for something that was unfair (e.g. Pizza Hut and Ireland disqualification). *Schadenfreude* has been used also in politics as one of the main strategies for unworthiness from opponent through jokes, memes and videos. In the US presidential campaign, Donald Trump calls Hillary Clinton the “Crooked Hillary” while in Brazil, dozens of videos are created about the speeches of President Dilma Rousseff and her mistakes. This kind of propaganda are known as “meme” and almost all the time is about *schadenfreude*. Whatever the applicability, the study of *schadenfreude* is quite significant for a better understanding of human behavior and the psychological influence in our daily lives.

Note from RIMAR

An earlier version of this article was presented at *VI Encontro de Marketing (EMA) da ANPAD* in 2014.

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