

**Humour theories:  
Schadenfreude in the media**

**Literature review**

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# 1. Introduction

This review focuses on studies investigating in Schadenfreude. Schadenfreude can be defined as the feeling of pleasure that is experienced at another's misfortune (Feather, 1989). Schadenfreude is, like with envy, resentment and sympathy, an emotion that is often elicited when a third-party observer respond to the success or failure of others (Feather, 1989).

The social relevance of this literature review lies within the question why we can feel pleasure when something bad happens to another person. In life people observe the success and failure of others. These observations can produce different powerful affective responses (Freethey, 2006). For example when we meet someone whose good fortune we can feel happy for them or we can feel envy, a form of pain caused by another's superiority. Also when we meet someone whose fortune is bad, we can feel sympathy for the person but we can also feel schadenfreude, pleasure at another's suffering (Smith & Turner, 1996; Leach, Spears, Branscombe & Doosje, 2003).

Schadenfreude, other than sympathy, is not a socially wanted emotion (Heider 1958, in: Leach et al., 2003). This is why Heider thinks schadenfreude is harmful to social relations (Leach et al., 2003). Because of this it is interesting to research what role this negative emotion has, why people feel this emotion and what causes this emotion.

The scientific relevance of this review lies within the limited amount of research conducted on Schadenfreude. Most of the research conducted in the past is focussing on the real world. This paper focuses on the effect of Schadenfreude in the media.

Because media can reach a large audience at once, it is important to know what the

effect of Schadenfreude is. Can it be harmful for the minority within a society? Do the effects of Schadenfreude in the media enlarge the effects of Schadenfreude in real life, or the other way around?

In the last decade television programs such as 'Idols' became very popular all over the world. This program shows people who perform very bad while they think they are good. This evokes Schadenfreude at the viewers of the program. There is no research done to investigate why people enjoy watching this kind of programs. This paper will review and evaluate past research on the question why people like to see other people's misfortune in the media.

To answer this question this review will explore the past research on Schadenfreude. The next chapter will discuss the methodology of this review, here will be explained in short which keyterms were used to find literature. Next there will be described which theories of humour there are and their link to Schadenfreude. There are three approaches of humour: aggression, incongruity and arousal-safety. We describe the superiority theory and the incongruity theory which explain the emotion of Schadenfreude best. In this chapter the definition of Schadenfreude will be explained further. In chapter four we discuss the different kind of emotions like envy, resentment, domain interest, status and justification and their role as predictors of Schadenfreude. We will review several authors who have a different opinion on the relationship between envy and Schadenfreude. Chapter five will discuss the role of Schadenfreude within social relations. This can be within friendships or between different groups (ingroup versus outgroup). In this chapter there will also be an explanation in the difference of Schadenfreude between the same and the opposite sex. In the sixth chapter of this paper the role of Schadenfreude in the media will be discussed. The focus will

be particularly on reality television, computergames and talent shows which became popular the last decade. This review will end with a discussion. Here will be concluded which part of schadenfreude had not been answered consistently or is missing in the literature of schadenfreude.

## 2. Method

To obtain suitable literature for this review several databases were consulted. Among these were: the digital library of the VU University (UBVU), Google Scholar, ISI Knowledge, ISI Web Science, SAGE Publications and JSTOR (Journal Storage).

In order to be included in the sample, articles had to be published in an academic journal. The search was conducted from April 2008 till June 2008 using the Boolean search method, with the following terms:

'Schadenfreude', 'Schadenfreude AND media', 'Schadenfreude AND Humour', 'Humor AND media', 'Humor AND television', 'Schadenfreude AND television OR tv', 'Schadenfreude AND american Idols', 'Schadenfreude AND big brother', 'Schadenfreude AND Idols', 'Schadenfreude AND talentshows', 'Schadenfreude AND funniest home video's', 'Leedvermaak', 'Misfortune of others', 'Schadenfreude AND friends', 'Schadenfreude AND social relations', 'Schadenfreude AND friendship', 'Schadenfreude AND gender'.

Besides the databases several e-journals were consulted by itself. The e-journals which were used are 'Media Psychology', 'Communication Research', 'Journal of Communication', 'Basic and applied social psychology', 'American Psychologist', 'Emotion', 'Cognition and Emotion', 'Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin', 'Journal of Personality and Social Psychology', 'Psychology Today', 'Medicine' and 'Health Care and Philosophy'.

References in the publications found, were examined in order to trace further journal articles and reports. Finally, online search engines such as Google Scholar and Metasearch. and were used to identify any additional published works.

## 3. What humour is

### 3.1 Different theories on humour

Aggression, incongruity, and arousal-safety are the three explanatory mechanisms where most of humour theories rely on. These approaches try to explain some of the humour factors, but on their own; they're not complete. When a joke teller attacks an other (individual or in groups) by telling the joke this is considered a to be one of the aggression based jokes. These kind of jokes usually contain a lot of stereotypes considered to be funny and popular (Zillmann & Cantor, 1976). Jokes of this nature have basically two important goals: one is to gain solidarity of the joke teller and audience and the second one is to exclude the (victimized and ridiculed) target group (Norrick, 2003). Even when an aggressive element is clearly present, the social "meaning" of the joke is often to be found at a deeper level (Ritchie, 2005). Giora's (2003) salience hypothesis provides a more detailed account of humourous incongruity. According to Giora (2003) people access the most salient meaning first. Humour exploits this tendency by providing an account consistent with a highly salient interpretation; the punch line forces us to revisit initially activated but still contextually suppressed concepts. A crucial feature of Giora's (2003) account is the prediction that jokes involve not merely a surprise ending, but active suppression of the original interpretation. Yus (2003) also mentions the punch line of a joke as being the most salient. It's about discovering the congruous elements. The tension and the relief will come after the meaning or the so called punch line of the joke are figured out. This is called the arousal-safety theory. This theory explains the relief of 'getting it' at the end of a joke. But what is the humourous effect in this? Sperber and Wilson (1986) argue that according to relevance theory searching a relevant context ceases

with the *first* interpretation that provides an adequate balance of effects for efforts. Then the punch-line at the end makes this initial interpretation go away and activates a new interpretation, based on an entirely different context (Giora, 2003). Yus (2003) suggests that the realization that one has been fooled by the joke-teller, coupled with “a positive interaction of the joke with the addressee’s cognitive environment” helps explain the humorous effect.

Laughing is not always a result of humour; according to the relief theory, people sometimes laugh because they need to reduce physiological tension (Meyer, 2000). Relief theory assumes that laughter and mirth results from a release of nervous energy. According to superiority theory, people laugh because they feel some kind of triumph over others or feel superior to them (Meyer, 2000). From this perspective humour has a primarily emotional function, helping the humourist to build confidence and self-esteem (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2004). Laughter and mirth appear when one feels a certain superiority towards the other who is inferior, weak and defeated. Ridicule and making fun of those who are less fortunate in ones point of view are typical themes of humour covered by superiority theory (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2004). From the perspective of incongruity theory, people laugh at unexpected or surprising happenings. According to this theory, it is the unexpected that comes up which provokes humour in the mind of the receiver. Rather than focusing on the physiological (relief theory) or emotional (superiority theory) function of humour, incongruity theory emphasizes cognition. It assumes that the cognitive capacity to note and understand incongruous events is necessary to experience laughter or mirth. The main themes here are absurdity, nonsense, and surprise.

### 3.2 What Schadenfreude is

Why do some people enjoy seeing other ones being hurt? How can this be satisfactorial for some? And when does this occur? The German term 'Schadenfreude' is the word to describe the feeling of joy while noticing someone else's pain or trouble. There is in fact no good English translation for Schadenfreude. Consequently, the English terms commonly used in an attempt to describe *Schadenfreude* are often vague and open to interpretation. For example, Schadenfreude is sometimes described as "pleasure at the suffering of another," but equally as often, the term "pleasure at the misfortune of another" is used. Although these descriptions may ultimately involve similar emotional experiences, the slight distinction between "suffering" and "misfortune" suggests a difference in degree of severity of the unfortunate event befalling the judged individual., it's also often referred to as 'malicious joy ' or 'enjoyment obtained from the troubles of others' In Dutch there is a plain translation: "leedvermaak".

Shamay-Tsoory, Tibi-Elhanany and Aharon-Peretz, (2007) considers SF is as gloating and viewed as a positive emotion It is referred to as a envy-related emotion as shown by Van Dijk, Ouwerkerk, Goslinga, Nieweg and Gallucci (2006).The emotion of SF requires some form of social comparison and thus, are mediated through the mentalizing network; a complex processing. Neuro-imaging shows large active portions of the brain on both sides when a patients experiences SF, more activity than when a patient experiences envy.

According to Leach et al. (2003) Schadenfreude only appears when the misfortune of another is caused by a third party; so it's about having pleasure but not being part of the reason why someone happens to experience the misfortune. This approach is very

similar to the superiority theory where making fun of others helps to make you feel good.

## 4. Predictors of Schadenfreude

### 4.1 Envy

Envy is defined as “the negative emotion that occurs when one desires something that another person has.” (Smith, Turner, Garonzik, Leach, Urch-Druskat & Weston, 1996). Smith et al. (1996) found a causal relationship between envy and Schadenfreude: envy created in participants increased the likelihood that they would experience Schadenfreude. Van Dijk et al.(2006) also found that Schadenfreude and envy are related emotions and that Schadenfreude is frequently experienced towards individuals we envy. McNamee (2007) had similar findings in his research, he claims that envy, and by extension Schadenfreude, is about self esteem: “Envy is a corrosive emotion resulting from a failure properly to estimate one’s selfworth.” The research concludes that Schadenfreude there for hurts no one but the one that feels Schadenfreude: the ‘Schadenfrohe’. With this in mind Herzog’s (2001, in: McNamee, 2007) statement seems plausible. “Envy first leads to sadness, then to gossip, then to Schadenfreude, then to hatred.”

When a person judges an event to be desired by another person one might feel envy. One might rather have that event happening to him/herself. If however the event is judged to be undesirable for another person while one feels good about oneself one experiences gloating. Gloating can be seen as Schadenfreude. There is a link between Schadenfreude and envy (Shamay-Tsoory et al., 2007).

Feather and Nairn (2005) do not that there is a link between Schadenfreude and envy. Their research reveals that envy does not predict Schadenfreude. Van Dijk et al,

(2006) discuss these contrary findings. They found that “envy predicted Schadenfreude when participants learned about a misfortune of a same gender target, whereas envy did not predict Schadenfreude when participants learned about a misfortune of a different gender target.” Van Dijk et al. (2006) explain that earlier findings on the role of envy on Schadenfreude are not wrong and contrary but just incomplete. Envy can be a predictor of Schadenfreude, but the predictor is limited. “Envy predicts someone’s Schadenfreude if a misfortune is befalling a person who is similar and might serve as a relevant social comparison. Envy does not predict someone’s Schadenfreude if a misfortune is befalling a person who is less similar and therefore less likely to serve as a relevant social comparison.” (Van Dijk et al., 2006).

## **4.2 Resentment**

Resentment is found to predict Schadenfreude (Feather & Nairn, 2005). According to the Longman modern English dictionary resentment is “the feeling of displeasure or indignation at some act, remark, person, etc., regarded as causing injury or insult”. Resentment is found to be higher when an outcome for another person seems undeserved (Feather & Nairn, 2005). The same research shows that resentment depends on the effort that the other person has to make for a positive outcome. The lower the effort, the higher the resentment (Feather & Nairn, 2005). The Longman modern English dictionary also names synonyms for resentment, among these is ‘envy’. In their research Feather and Nairn (2005) claim that resentment and envy differ. Resentment is less private, has a more public, sanctioned character and is more objective than envy is (Nairn, 2005). Resentment is not a predictor, resentment is a more extreme emotion than Schadenfreude; resentment is more vicious than Schadenfreude (McNamee, 2007).

### **4.3 Domain interest**

The previous paragraphs explained that Schadenfreude is tied to the self. This is why Nietzsche believed that Schadenfreude is greatest in those domains that are self-relevant (Leach et al., 2003). “This suggests the proposition that intergroup Schadenfreude should be greatest when an out-group suffers in a domain of interest to in-group members.” (Leach et al., 2003). Leach et al. (2003) take soccer as an example. In this example the in-group consists of Dutch soccerfans. The in-group interest is soccer. When an out-group member, for instance a member of the German soccer team, loses a soccer competition, the Dutch soccerfans experience Schadenfreude. When a German waterpolo team loses a game, the in-group does not experience Schadenfreude, because they are not interested in waterpolo. It is more likely to experience Schadenfreude when the misfortunate other falls in the domain interest of people (Leach et al., 2003).

### **4.4 Status**

According to Leach et al. (2003) Schadenfreude increases when the in-group (or an individual's) status is threatened. In most cases this means that the Schadenfrohe has a low status and the misfortunate other has a high status. In this case envy plays an important role. Status is also related to Schadenfreude when the Schadenfrohe has a high status and someone with an equal or even a lower status threatens his or her status by climbing up the statusladder. (Leach et al., 2003)

### **4.5 Justification**

Goslinga, van Dijk and van Hoek (2000) point out that in an experiment they conducted among 166 students, no effect of envy on the experience of Schadenfreude

was found when deservingness was taken into account. “Regression analysis showed that the deservingness of the status of the target person had a significant effect on Schadenfreude...No effects were found for envy and liking, nor for interactions between variables.” (Goslinga et al., 2000). It seems to be that whether or not one deems the unfortunate occurrence to be deserved, is the determining factor to experiencing Schadenfreude.

In 2005 Van Dijk, Ouwerkerk, Goslinga and Nieweg provided “experimental evidence for the often assumed link between deservingness and Schadenfreude.” An experimental design was used in which the target of possible Schadenfreude was more or less responsible for his/her misfortune, which led to more or less feeling of deservingness of the event, which led to more or less Schadenfreude. It is shown that the experience of Schadenfreude depends of the justification of the misfortune. Which in turn depends, at least in part, on whether or not the target is responsible for his own misfortune.

## **5. Schadenfreude and social relations**

This chapter will take a closer look at schadenfreude and social relations. First Schadenfreude in friendships will be discussed. Are our friends similar like us or are they silent enemies? Second schadenfreude between in- and out-groups will be discussed. Why can schadenfreude threaten a social relationship? Finally schadenfreude and gender differences will be discussed. Do man and woman react the same on schadenfreude?

### **5.1 Schadenfreude and friendship**

Seeing rivals fail can be satisfying. It creates an opportunity for us to do better (McGowan, 2004). But Schadenfreude can be more confusing when people experience this feeling toward their friends.

A friendship can have its benefits but the same friendship can also become a threat. Friendship provides many benefits like social support, advice, protection help and favors. However same-sex friendships also involve some risks (Colyn, 2007). Friends know personal information and there is a risk that they would discuss this with others. Friends can also embarrass us in public and do harm to our reputation. Most of the time people tend to be friends with other people who resemble there self. Because of the similarities our friends can also become our rivals (Colyn, 2007). According to Colyn (2007) schadenfreude can be seen as a psychological mechanism that evolved to mate-value, the value of an friendship, and is able to solve the problems associated with intersexual competition among friends.

When a person feels threatened by a succeeding superior individual, they will feel displeased and envious to protect their own self-esteem. When the misfortuned other fails it can also be a self-esteem boost to the person and schadenfreude occurs. When there are no direct comparisons made between the person and the misfortuned other feelings of pleasure will not occur (Freethey, 2006).

If schadenfreude accurse in a friendship, there is a risk that it will turn into a sadistic experience. Especially when the misfortuned other is really suffering. A lack empathy can be seen as the fuel for the felt pleasure (McNamee, 2007). According to McNamee (2007) schadenfreude in social relations can be explained by a lack of compassion or sympathy for the misfortuned other.

## **5.2 Schadenfreude and groups**

Schadenfreude established a conflicting relationship to the misfortuned other. This is why schadenfreude can be harmful to a social relationship (Leach et al., 2003). A good example of these social relationships and schadenfreude is to take a close look at the sport world where superior groups enjoys the misfortune of the inferior group. According to Leach et. al. (2003) there are three reasons why schadenfreude can be harmful to a social relationship. The three reasons will be discussed below.

The first reason is that the domain interest will increase schadenfreude. Although schadenfreude is directed on others, there is a strong connection whit the individual or group self. Leach et al. (2003) suggests that intergroup schadenfreude would be greatest when the out-group suffers in a domain of interest to in-group members. This occurs during soccer games between two nations. The fans of the winning group feel pleasure by the loss of the other group. This happens because greater interest in the

domain increases the self-relevance of other performance within the domain (Leach et al., 2003).

The second reason that schadenfreude should be increased in social relationships is caused by the threats to the status of the in-group. When a group or person feels inferior to another group or person schadenfreude can be seen as a way of revenge (Leach et al., 2003). The inferior group can compensate the feeling of inferiority that threatens their self-worth. In this situation schadenfreude can be seen as a defense mechanism to superior groups who are threatening the social position of the in-group.

According to Leach et al. (2003) legitimating circumstances should also increase schadenfreude. Nietzsche (Leach et al., 2003) has described schadenfreude as something opportunistic. The in-group enjoys the opportunity when misfortune of the out-group occurs. Feather and Sherman. (2002) showed that perceiving a person's achievement as illegitimate increased pleasure at the person's failure. This feeling occurs because the misfortune was undeserved. In group relations the intergroup schadenfreude is sensitive for circumstances that makes the misfortune more or less legitimate. So we can assume that schadenfreude is less legitimate in response to the misfortune of a legitimately superior out-group (Leach et al., 2003). According to Leach et al. (2003) Schadenfreude only appears when the misfortune of another is caused by a third party; so it's about having pleasure but not being part of the reason why someone happens to experience the misfortune.

Not only the three circumstances named above can have influence on schadenfreude. According to Freethy (2006) self-esteem can also influence Schadenfreude, especially when they are involved in a competition. People will experience a self-

esteem boost when they win from the superior group or person. When people lose from a superior group or person this can lower their self-esteem. But when people lose they will never blame their own failures but always blame the high qualities of the superior other.

Smith et al.(1996) argue that Schadenfreude is part of a group feeling. In a research among students they showed that Schadenfreude feelings most did occur among the group who had felt inferior towards the superior who had a misfortune. Smith et al. showed that feeling inferior to the successful peer is what led to Schadenfreude in response to his misfortune.

### **5.3 Schadenfreude and gender**

Schadenfreude is a way of comparison between two persons or groups. The likelihood of comparison being made and the impact on the self depend on the similarity of a person and the compared person. The social comparisons have more impact when a person and the compared person have great similarity (van Dijk et al., 2006). One of the social constructs of comparison is gender. The study of van Dijk et al. (2006) showed that schadenfreude occurs when there is a gender similarity between the target of schadenfreude and the envied person.

In the schadenfreude literature gender is most of the time being ignored. But according to Colyn (2007) schadenfreude is a source to create physical attractiveness among woman but it's not a source to track status for man. So man and woman have both experience Schadenfreude in their own way. According to Colyn (2007) people may experience schadenfreude if a same-sex friend has similarities to the standing of characteristics desired by the other sex. We can assume that man and woman have

their own criteria for failures or success of other persons. So we can assume that there is the possibility that gender differences can be of the subjects of schadenfreude.

## **6. Schadenfreude in the media**

Most of the literature discussed in the previous chapters applies to real life. The researches are meant to generalize the results to the real world. But in most of the research the knife cuts both ways, the results both apply to real life and the media. In this chapter we will focus on schadenfreude in the media.

### **6.1 Schadenfreude in different media**

It seems that the most schadenfreude can be experienced by watching television. There are many different types of programs which can evoke schadenfreude. An example of a type of schadenfreude programs are the well known 'home video'-shows, i.e. the Dutch show 'Funniest home video' (Eertink & Velthausz, 1994). Other examples of schadenfreude-television aren't mentioned in literature. An other well known example of a type programs that can evoke schadenfreude is every type of sports competition on television. Leach et al.(2003) conducted an experiment in which schadenfreude was measured using the rivalry between the Netherlands and Germany in soccer competitions.

Besides television schadenfreude can probably also be evoked by other media such as print media, radio and internet. Most research on schadenfreude doesn't focuses on media particularly, but if media are involved the research is mostly focused on television.

## 6.2 Mediated research

Most research on schadenfreude is conducted by using mediated stimulus. The researches intend to obtain results to use in the 'real world', while they are actually obtaining results for the mediated world.

Van Dijk et al. (2005) concluded that when a person who suffers misfortune is responsible for the misfortune schadenfreude increases. They also concluded that this effect was mediated by the perceived deservingness. The results in the research are obtained through mediated stimuli. The respondents either read an interview, heard an audiotape or watched a videotape. The interview was with either a superior student or an average student, telling about the progress in their study. After the interview the participant got to watch/ hear/ read an other interview with the student's tutor, which was said to be recorded three months after the first interview. This interview was about a setback suffered by the student, either deserved (the student was caught stealing a laptop) or undeserved (the student was wrongly accused of stealing a laptop). In the results no remarks are made about any differences between respondents who read, heard or watch the interviews.

The research of Brigham, Kelso, Jackson and Smith (1997) used the same method as van Dijk et al. (2005), a videotaped interview to evoke schadenfreude. In this research the interview was followed by an epilogue in which the student suffered a deserved or undeserved setback. This research measured the deservingness of the misfortune.

They concluded that sympathy and schadenfreude can not be seen as just opposites of each other. Sympathy and schadenfreude are inversely related.

The research of Mutseers, Renes and van Woerkum (2007) shows that even programs meant to carry a serious message can cause schadenfreude. The research focused on an entertainment-education show about the prevention of over-weight and was broadcasted by one of Holland's most serious television-channels. The viewers criticized the program; they said to experience 'leedvermaak': schadenfreude. The participants in the program were making a fool out of themselves according to the viewers. This example shows that schadenfreude can even occur when least expected, i.e. in serious, educating, programs.

### **6.3 Consequences of schadenfreude in the media**

Schadenfreude in the media can have unintended consequences. The research of Fouts and Burggraf (2000) shows that schadenfreude in sit-coms, i.e. a male making a joke about the weight of a woman, supported by laughter of an audience or a tape results in an increase of stereotypes in real life. These stereotypes can evoke schadenfreude in the 'real world' (Fouts & Burggraf, 2000).

Wong (2001) asks why viewers are interested in shows in which other people's behaviour and misfortune are presented as entertainment. He argues that it might be just interest in other people's lives, or that people seek real, authentic moments of life, and try to find this on television or on the internet.

Normally people have positive feelings to their friends, relatives and other people who are close to them. So this is why celebrities in the media are the best targets for schadenfreude. "Normal" people don't know them and they give people an opportunity to gossip about their failure. According to McGowan (2004) we can conclude that failure is fun to watch.

## 7. Discussion

Why do we do what we do? Some emotion or behaviour surprise us in a negative way but no one escapes the human condition and apparently feeling pleasure at another's misfortune is part of this condition. Experiencing Schadenfreude is part of being human. Schadenfreude seems to be negative socially and yet Schadenfreude related media content such as 'Idols' have become quite popular recently. This leads to the question posed at the beginning of this review: "Why do people like to see other people's misfortune in the media?".

Schadenfreude is a type of humour. The emotional function of humour results in possible Schadenfreude at the same time appealing to the cognitive processes involved in humour. Schadenfreude is a complex process, requiring more than one word to be described in the English language and using more of the brain's processing capacity than for example envy.

The researched predictors of Schadenfreude are envy, resentment, domain interest, status and justification. Envy was first viewed as a cause of Schadenfreude (Smith et al. 1996) but this turned out to be a rather limited picture. Resentment was also found to be a predictor (Feather & Nairn, 2005). Domain interest (Leach et al. 2003) and status are arenas in which subjects and the Schadenfrohe interact in order for Schadenfreude to occur. Justification surfaces as a better predictor, cancelling out the earlier 'proven' effect of envy.

Schadenfreude within friendship can be confusing but serves a purpose in ascertaining a positive self image (Freety 2006) or as a mechanism for dealing with intersexual competition among friends (Coleyn, 2007). Schadenfreude between groups can

increase social distances but also increases social cohesion within the group (Leach et al. 2003).

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