

## **Schadenfreude and Sport Celebrity Worship**

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### Abstract

We administered either a Guilty or an Ambiguous version of a fatal hit-and-run accident involving one's favorite sport celebrity, a measure of schadenfreude, and a version of the *Celebrity Attitude Scale* (CAS) modified to target one's favorite sport celebrity to 77 Black and 119 White college students. Results of two ANOVAs showed that Black students who chose Black favorite sport celebrities showed a significantly stronger admiration for their favorite sport celebrity, but significantly greater schadenfreude as compared to White students who chose favorite sport celebrities who were White. There were no other main effects or interactions. Schadenfreude scores were lower as compared to previous studies in which target persons were maliciously envied or deserving of misfortune. There was an inverse correlation between schadenfreude scores and reported strength of the bond with the favorite sport celebrity as measured by the single item "How strongly do you feel about your favorite sport celebrity?" and scores on the sport version of the *Celebrity Attitude Scale*. Results were discussed with a focus on racial differences and the failure to find a difference due to certainty of guilt.

Schadenfreude has been defined as taking pleasure in the misfortunes of other persons, a malicious sort of joy one gets when learning that certain others have fallen from grace, or experienced a setback (Greenier, 2015; Leach, Spears, Branscombe, & Doosje, 2002; van Dijk, Ouwerkerk, & Goslinga, 2009). When bad things happen to others, decent people often feel sorrow or sympathy, but schadenfreude is a joyful exception, occurring more frequently when the target person is disliked (Greenier, 2015; Hareli & Weiner, 2002), maliciously envied (van de Ven, Hoogland, Smith, van Dijk, Breugelmans & Zeelenberg, 2014), and/or perceived to be deserving of the misfortune (Feather, 1999; Feather & Sherman, 2002; van Dijk, et al, 2009; van de Ven, et al., 2014; van Dijk, Ouwerkerk, Goslinga, & Nieweg, 2005). This occurs frequently in the context of televised sports – so often that one frequently hears “I root for Athlete X and whoever is playing against Athlete Y” (usually a bitter and envied rival of Athlete X). Schadenfreude can also occur when the target is a group of disliked people (Cikara & Fiske, 2012), giving rise to “I root for Team X and whoever is playing against Team Y.”

One of us was recently asked on a radio sports talk show, in the wake of the accusations leveled against star football player, Payton Manning, “What would happen if one’s favorite celebrity athlete was found guilty of a serious crime?” What if there was some ambiguity about his/her guilt? More specifically, how would loyal fans of that athlete feel about the ambiguity of the accusations or the finding of guilt? I answered that “I don’t know, because to my knowledge there is no research bearing directly on these questions.” I opined that fans who identified strongly with the athlete, those who would probably score high on the second or third level of celebrity worship, would probably remain loyal to the accused, especially if there was considerable ambiguity about his/her guilt.

Prior to 2001 progress in the study of celebrity worshipers was hindered by the lack of a reliable and valid measure of attitudes toward celebrities. Development of the *Celebrity Attitude Scale* (CAS) led to considerable progress in the effort to understand

celebrity worshipers.

For about a decade and a half there has been a large amount of research on persons who are enthralled with celebrities – persons who have been termed “celebrity worshippers.” Numerous studies have been published on this topic, and much has been learned about those who have a very strong attraction to celebrities (see McCutcheon, Maltby, Houran & Ashe, 2004 for a summary of the early research; see McCutcheon, Aruguete, McCarley, & Jenkins, 2016, and McCutcheon, Wong, Black, Maynard, Frey, & Rich, 2014, for recent examples).

A byproduct of research with the CAS is a theoretical model that attempts to explain how one can become increasingly involved with a celebrity. Briefly, the model, based partly on Rasch scaling and partly on factor analysis, holds that persons become attached to their favorite celebrity largely because that celebrity provides entertainment and social value. This first level is relatively benign, but a few persons move to a second level by becoming intensely involved with the personal lives of their favorite celebrity, and a few of these individuals eventually become so obsessed with details of their celebrity’s life that support for their celebrity borders on the pathological (Maltby, Houran, & McCutcheon, 2003; McCutcheon, et al., 2004). These level three worshippers are more likely to endorse irresponsible attitudes and behaviors than those who are on levels one or two (McCutcheon, Aruguete, McCarley, & Jenkins, 2016; McCutcheon, Wong, Black, Maynard, Frey & Rich, 2014), and to admit that they would break laws on behalf of their favorite celebrity (McCutcheon, Lange, & Houran, 2002; McCutcheon, et al., 2004).

There is some reason to believe that race might be a relevant variable in research involving attitudes toward celebrities. Two recent studies reported in the same paper have shown that Black participants score significantly higher than White participants on the CAS (McCutcheon, Aruguete, Jenkins, McCarley, & Yockey, 2016). This may have occurred because most Black participants chose Black persons as their favorite celebrities, and “group identification is typically more pronounced among members of minority

than majority groups” (Huddy, 2013, p. 42). According to Huddy (2013), African-Americans in the U.S. have an especially well developed sense of group identification, in part because skin color is an external cue that increases the likelihood that group members will internalize group identity, and, according to Doane (1997), partly because of lesser power, discrimination, and smaller numbers relative to the White majority. Ellemers, Wilke, and Van Knippenberg found that the highest levels of group identification occurred in groups that were randomly assigned to a low status even when that assignment was not based on performance (1993), a condition that often seemingly mimics that of Black Americans.

However, when it comes to choosing favorite celebrities, two studies show small differences in opposite directions. In the earlier of the two, Blacks chose Black persons as a favorite celebrity 81% of the time, compared to Whites, who chose White persons as a favorite celebrity 73% of the time (McCutcheon, et al., 2004). In the more recent one, Blacks chose Black celebrities 73% of the time, and Whites chose White celebrities 90% of the time (McCutcheon, et al., study 2, 2016). However, it could be argued that the mere choice of a favorite celebrity is relatively benign. Seemingly, few people would care if a Black person chose a White person as a favorite celebrity. But, if a Black celebrity is accused of a crime this might be perceived by Blacks as a threat to Blacks in general. Given the present level of distrust of a justice system widely perceived among Blacks to be unfair, would Black persons be more likely to support a Black sport celebrity, as compared to Whites supporting a White celebrity, especially if the evidence was ambiguous?

Race may also be relevant to *schadenfreude*. If Black Americans really do tend to identify more strongly with Black celebrities, at least in the presence of a perceived threat, than White Americans identify with White celebrities, then Black persons whose favorite sport celebrity is Black should show even less *schadenfreude* than White persons show when their favorite White sport celebrity experiences misfortune.

In keeping with previous research, we predict that Black participants will score significantly higher on the CAS (H1) and lower on schadenfreude (H2) than White participants. We predict that CAS scores will be higher (H3) and schadenfreude scores lower (H4) for those participants randomly assigned to the ambiguous hit-and-run condition as compared to the guilty condition, since, according to the scenario, there would be a distinct possibility that the sport celebrity is innocent. In keeping with the hypothesis that Blacks have a stronger sense of group identification than Whites when they perceive an ambiguous threat to their group, we predict an interaction. Specifically we predict that Blacks who choose a black favorite sport celebrity and are assigned to the ambiguous condition will score significantly higher on the CAS (H5) than participants who were assigned to the other three conditions. We further predict that schadenfreude scores will generally be low for our participants (H6), relative to scores from previous studies in which the target person was one who was maliciously envied and/or disliked, since presumably participants would neither maliciously envy nor dislike their favorite sport celebrity. Finally, we asked participants "How strongly do you feel about this (favorite) sport celebrity?" We predicted an inverse relationship between schadenfreude scores and scores on this item (H7), as well as an inverse relationship between schadenfreude scores and scores on the CAS, since previous research shows that scores on "How strongly do you Feel" correlate positively with CAS scores (McCutcheon, et al, 2004). In other words, as attachments to their favorite sport celebrities grow stronger, schadenfreude over the hit-and-run incident would grow weaker.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Our sample consisted of students from four universities in the eastern, southeastern, and western United States, ranging in age from 18 to 51 years old ( $M = 20.91$  years,  $SD = 3.84$ ). Most participants identified as women (74.2%). There were  $N = 77$  Black

participants who chose favorite Black sport celebrities (including two multiethnic sport celebrities with Black as one of their identities). Participants who identified as Black in addition to another racial/ethnic group were included in this group ( $N = 17$ ). Among White participants,  $N = 119$  chose favorite White sport celebrities (including four multiethnic sport celebrities with White as one of their identities). Participants who identified as White in addition to another racial/ethnic group were included in this group ( $N = 2$ ). Approximately half of the participants ( $N = 99$ ) were randomly assigned to the Ambiguous scenario ( $N = 39$  Black,  $N = 60$  White participants) and half ( $N = 97$ ) were randomly assigned to the Guilty scenario ( $N = 38$  Black,  $N = 59$  White participants).

Some participants were removed from the data set. Since our interest was in White participants who chose a White favorite celebrity and Black participants who chose a Black favorite celebrity, participants from other racial/ethnic groups were excluded ( $N = 173$ ), as were Black and White participants who chose a favorite celebrity from another racial/ethnic group ( $N = 103$ ). Another group did not provide answers to the celebrity question or did not report their own race/ethnicity ( $N = 30$ ) and were therefore eliminated from data analyses. Of the students who were Black or White and chose a favorite celebrity of the same racial/ethnic group,  $N = 2$  were removed due to not meeting the age criteria for the study, and  $N = 4$  were removed for having extensive missing data. An additional 13 participants were removed for incorrectly responding to the manipulation check question (see manipulation check section below). After removing all these participants from the data set, the final sample consisted of  $N = 196$  students.

## Measures

The *Celebrity Attitude Scale* (CAS). The CAS is a 23-item Likert scale with "strongly agree" equal to 5 and "strongly disagree" equal to 1. High scores indicate a tendency toward celebrity worship. Sample items include "My friends and I like to discuss what my favorite sport celebrity has done" and "I am obsessed by details of my favorite sport

celebrity's life." It has good reliability and validity, and is unrelated to social desirability (Griffith, Aruguete, Edman, Green, & McCutcheon, 2013; McCutcheon, et al, 2002; McCutcheon, et al, 2004). The CAS was modified slightly for the purpose of the present study. Participants were first asked to identify their favorite celebrity from the world of sports, and estimate "How strongly do you feel about this sport celebrity on a scale from 1 to 7, with "1" being "very weak" and "7" being "very strong ." They also answered an open-ended question about why their favorite sport celebrity is famous (e.g., which sport they play) to help the research team identify their favorite celebrity. These items were not included in the CAS total score. Then they responded to slightly modified versions of the original 23 items, created by adding the word "sport" at appropriate places in each item.. For the present study we used total CAS scores as a dependent variable. Cronbach's alpha for the CAS in the present study was .94.

*The Fatal Accident scenario.* The fatal accident scenario was presented to all participants. It described a hit-and-run accident involving drinking on the part of one's favorite sport celebrity that resulted in a fatality. One version (Guilty) strongly indicates that the favorite sport celebrity is the driver of the hit-and-run vehicle. The other version (Ambiguous) suggests that the favorite sport celebrity might have been innocent. See both versions in Appendix One.

*The Measure of Schadenfreude.* We used a five-item measure of schadenfreude adapted from vanDijk, Ouwerkerk, Van Koningsbruggen, and Wesseling (2012), Van Dijk, Goslinga, and Ouwerkerk (2008), and van Dijk, Ouwerkerk, Wesseling, and van Koningsbruggen (2011) that captures taking pleasure in other people's misfortunes. Two items read "I enjoy what happened to the sport celebrity" and "I couldn't resist a little smile." Strongly disagree is equal to 1, and strongly agree equals 5. High scores indicate a high amount of schadenfreude. Cronbach's alpha for this scale in the present study was .86.

*Manipulation Check.* To make sure that participants read the fatal accident scenario carefully we inserted this single item, "The sport celebrity is almost certainly guilty." Strongly disagree is equal to 1, and strongly agree equals 5. We deleted data from  $N = 9$  participants in the Guilty condition who responded with a 1 (strongly disagree). Of these 9 participants, 4 were Black participants who chose Black favorite celebrities and 5 were White participants who chose a White favorite celebrity. We also removed data from  $N = 4$  participants in the Ambiguous condition who responded with a 5 (strongly agree). Of these 4 participants, 1 was a Black participant who chose a Black favorite celebrity and 3 were White participants who chose White favorite celebrities. The manipulation check item was presented after the five-item measure of schadenfreude on the same page.

### **Procedure**

Students were recruited from their respective institutions to participate in a study about sports and celebrities. Participants completed the study either on an electronic device (e.g., computer) or in a paper and pencil format. All students received course credit for participation. In accordance with IRB policy they were told that they could leave the study at any time for any reason without fear of reprisal. The first part of the questionnaire included demographic questions (i.e., gender, age, race/ethnicity). Next, participants were asked to name their favorite sport celebrity, indicate how strongly they feel about this celebrity (1 = very weak to 7 = very strong), and to describe why their favorite sport celebrity is famous. Keeping this favorite sport celebrity in mind, participants read a randomly assigned a hit-and-run scenario involving this celebrity, where the celebrity's guilt was ambiguous or made very clear. After reading the scenario, participants completed the schadenfreude scale and the 23-item Celebrity Attitude Scale.

## RESULTS

The *Celebrity Attitude* and *Schadenfreude* scales were screened for normality to determine if there were any outliers. The *Celebrity Attitude Scale* did not have any problems with skew (skewness = 0.10, *SE* skewness = 0.18) or kurtosis (kurtosis = -0.50, *SE* kurtosis = 0.35) yet the *Schadenfreude* scale did show some evidence of skewness to the right (skewness = 1.94, *SE* skewness = 0.18) and a relatively spread distribution (kurtosis = 5.82, *SE* kurtosis = 0.36), largely due to an outlier. Although the outlier was unusually high on this scale, it was retained because it is within the range of possible values on the scale.

To test hypotheses 1 through 5 we performed two Analyses of Variance (ANOVAs) (see Table 1). The ANOVAs included a 2 (Blacks who chose Black favorite celebrities vs. Whites who chose White favorite celebrities)  $\times$  2 (Guilty vs. Ambiguous accident scenario) design with the *Celebrity Attitude* and *Schadenfreude* Scales as dependent variables. Results showed significant main effects for race on both *Celebrity Attitudes* and *Schadenfreude*. Black students had significantly higher scores than White students on both variables. That is, Black students reported stronger feelings about their favorite celebrities, supporting hypothesis one, but took greater pleasure in their favorite celebrity's misfortunes than White students, which failed to support hypothesis two. Results showed no significant main effects for condition, or any significant interactions between race and condition. Thus, hypotheses three, four, and five were not supported by the evidence.

Hypothesis 6 was that *schadenfreude* scores would generally be low for our participants relative to scores from previous studies in which the target person was one who was maliciously envied, deserving of misfortune, and/or disliked. Participants reported moderate to strong feelings about their favorite sport celebrities ( $M = 5.15$ ,  $SD = 1.54$ , range 1 - 7). They also reported levels of favorite sport celebrity attraction ( $M = 52.84$ ,  $SD = 17.40$ , range 23 - 100) that were in the average range by comparison with typical

CAS scores (McCutcheon, et al. 2004). Levels of schadenfreude were low ( $M = 7.18$ ,  $SD = 3.06$ , range 5 - 25). Adjusted to a five-point scale, the schadenfreude score in our study is .545. Van Dijk, Gosling, and Ouwerkerk (2008) obtained a schadenfreude score adjusted to a five-point scale of 2.255 for target persons who deserved their misfortune, and Van Dijk, Ouwerkerk, Wesseling, and van Koningsbruggen (2011) found a mean schadenfreude score adjusted to a five-point scale of 2.38. The target person in that study was probably envied, but not necessarily deserving of misfortune or disliked. Thus schadenfreude scores for the two previous studies cited here were more than four times higher than the schadenfreude scores we obtained.

To test hypothesis 7, we performed a correlation between scores on the question "How strongly do you feel about this (favorite) sport celebrity?" and schadenfreude. As predicted, there was a significant inverse association between these variables,  $r = -.19$ ,  $p = .009$ . We also found a significant inverse correlation between schadenfreude scores and scores on the sport celebrity version of the CAS,  $r = -.16$ ,  $p < .029$ . That is, individuals who felt more strongly about their favorite sport celebrity tended to report slightly less schadenfreude over the apparent hit-and-run accident involving their favorite celebrity.

## DISCUSSION

Our prediction that Blacks would score higher on the sport celebrity version of the CAS than Whites(H1), indicating that the former are more attracted to their favorite sport celebrity than the latter, did reach statistical significance, with a mean difference of almost seven points. In the two studies reported by McCutcheon, et al., (2016), the mean differences were 11.38 and 9.90, with sample sizes of Blacks ( $Ns = 57$  &  $78$ ) and Whites ( $Ns = 71$  &  $87$ ) that were slightly smaller than what we obtained in the present study ( $Ns = 77$  &  $119$ ). It is possible that racial differences for a favorite sport celebrity are not as large as for favorite celebrities in general. This makes sense to us, since the selection of a

favorite sport celebrity might not be the first choice of a favorite celebrity overall, for at least several of our participants. Further research might clarify this situation.

Our second prediction, that Blacks would score lower than Whites on schadenfreude, was not confirmed, and Blacks actually scored slightly higher. Does this suggest that Black identification with Black athletes is modified slightly by malicious envy/jealousy (van de Ven, et al., 2014)? Do Black persons who strongly identify with Black athletes feel enough jealousy that if and when that athlete gets in trouble, there is a schadenfreude reaction? Perhaps some of our Black participants, more so than our White participants, felt forced to choose an athlete they did not really admire very much. Then, reading that this athlete might have committed a crime, felt more schadenfreude than one would expect. Further research is needed to resolve this issue.

In hypotheses three and four we predicted that the sport celebrity version of CAS scores would be higher for participants exposed to the ambiguous scenario, and that schadenfreude scores would be lower for participants exposed to the ambiguous scenario. When hypotheses turn out to be rejected by the evidence there may be several reasons why this occurred. One possible explanation is that many of our participants simply could not believe that their favorite sport celebrity could actually be guilty of the hit-and-run accident, *in spite of the instructions*. Another possibility is that some fans are so loyal to their favorite sport celebrity that even the knowledge of a likely crime committed by that celebrity would not influence their attitudes toward that celebrity.

The lack of statistical significance on schadenfreude scores may result from a “floor” effect. As noted in Results, our participants scored very low on the Schadenfreude Scale. Many of our participants indicated no schadenfreude at all in response to several of the items.

We expected that Blacks in the Ambiguous condition would score higher on the Sport Celebrity version of CAS than individuals in the other three conditions (H5). This expectation was based on the assumption that Blacks would perceive that a Black sport

celebrity would be unfairly convicted in spite of the weak evidence against him/her, and that might result in stronger identification with that sport celebrity's plight. This did not result in higher scores on the Sport Celebrity version of the CAS . With the wisdom of hindsight perhaps we should have used a measure of sympathy instead.

Hypothesis 6 was that schadenfreude scores would generally be low for our participants, as compared to studies in which target persons were envied or perceived to be deserving of misfortune. The target persons for our participants were chosen by them because they were admired. The mean schadenfreude scores were considerably lower for our sample, as compared to the two studies cited above. This finding also tends to confirm our belief that most of our participants took our study seriously.

Hypothesis 7 was that schadenfreude scores would become weaker as scores on two measures of the strength of the admiration of one's favorite sport celebrity grew stronger. This hypothesis was confirmed for both measures. We take this to mean that in general, participants who were strongly enamored of their favorite sport celebrity took little pleasure in the prospect of that celebrity's fall from grace.

One limitation of our research is that it depended entirely on self report. Another drawback is that our "guilt" instructions might not have been as clearly different from the "ambiguous" instructions as they could have been, although the manipulation check we used negated this possibility to a certain extent.

In summary, our research replicates a previous finding that Blacks tend to have a stronger attraction to a favorite celebrity than do Whites. A new finding is that Blacks had more schadenfreude than Whites when their favorite athlete of the same race might have been guilty of a crime. Regardless of the probability of guilt, our participants remained loyal to their favorite sport celebrity, as reflected in scores on the sport version of the CAS and low schadenfreude scores. Further research is needed to determine why participants were unaffected by the guilt manipulation, and why Black participants showed more schadenfreude than Whites.

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Table 1

*ANOVAs by Race and Guilt Condition for Sport Celebrity Attitude and Schadenfreude Scales*

Variables	M (SD)	F (Race)	F (Condition)	F (Race × Condition)
Celebrity Attitude Scale		6.97**	0.06	0.04
Blacks: Ambig Condition	56.43 (17.51)			
Whites: Ambig Condition	50.17 (17.32)			
Blacks: Guilty Condition	57.60 (17.82)			
Whites: Guilty Condition	50.28 (16.54)			
Schadenfreude Scale		3.82*	1.63	1.44
Blacks: Ambig Condition	7.17 (2.83)			
Whites: Ambig Condition	6.82 (2.26)			
Blacks: Guilty Condition	8.32 (4.55)			
Whites: Guilty Condition	6.86 (2.68)			

Note. \* $p \leq .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ .

## APPENDIX ONE

## Schad Scale

Who is your favorite sport celebrity? \_\_\_\_\_

Keeping this person in mind, please imagine the following scenario:

Your favorite sport celebrity has been accused of a serious crime. According to the sport networks, late last night he/she was intoxicated while driving above the speed limit. He/she allegedly ran a red light and sideswiped another vehicle, killing one of the occupants of the other vehicle. He/she then sped off, leaving the scene of the accident. He/she was arrested this morning.

(GUILT VERSION) The evidence against him/her is overwhelming. Two eyewitnesses identified the celebrity's vehicle at the accident scene, and it has marks and dents consistent with the accident. Friends told police that he/she had been drinking heavily at a party, but when a friend offered to drive, he/she insisted on driving. The fatal accident occurred six minutes after your favorite sport celebrity left the party, driving in the direction where the accident took place, a six minute drive from the location of the party.

(AMBIGUOUS VERSION) The evidence against him/her is weak. There were no eyewitnesses at the accident scene, and marks and dents on the celebrity's vehicle appear too minor to suggest a fatal accident. Friends told police that he/she had consumed one beer, and did not appear drunk when he/she left a party, driving in the direction where the accident took place. The time of the fatal accident is not precisely known, so maybe your favorite sport celebrity passed by the location of the accident a few minutes before it happened.