Winning Feels Better When Others Lose: Schadenfreude as a Pathway to Sports Gambling Intentions

Erika Katherine Johnson[a], Rachel Son[a], Christine Kowalczyk[b], Marla Stafford[c], Kathrin Rothermich[d,e]

[a]School of Communication, East Carolina University, Greenville, NC, USA

[b]Department of Marketing & Supply Chain Management, East Carolina University, Greenville, NC, USA

[c] Marketing and International Business, UNLV, Las Vegas, NV, USA

[d]Department of Communication Sciences and Disorders, East Carolina University, Greenville, NC, USA

[e]Alliance for Brain Stimulation, East Carolina University, Greenville, NC, USA

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Abstract

This study investigated whether schadenfreude, in combination with other individual differences, predicts gambling intentions as a purchase behavior. An online survey was distributed to students (N = 268) at a large U.S. university to assess the influence of trait schadenfreude, satisfaction with gambling, gambling frequency, and involvement with favorite team on future gambling and state schadenfreude in hypothetical win scenarios. Involvement with favorite team and gambling satisfaction were significant for schadenfreude if team won. Satisfaction with gambling and gambling frequency were significant for future gambling if favorite team won. Mediation results showed that trait schadenfreude influenced gambling intentions indirectly through increased satisfaction with the win. However, another mediation showed that team involvement increases gambling because it heightens schadenfreude during the win. This study expands consumer research on betting and behavior where sports betting and fan experiences go hand in hand.

Keywords: schadenfreude, gambling; sport, choice satisfaction, involvement

Introduction

The Role of Schadenfreude in Sports Gambling as a Purchase Behavior

Schadenfreude is defined as pleasure at another person's or group's misfortune (Smith & van Dijk, 2018). It often emerges in competitive and evaluative settings, and there are many examples of schadenfreude in popular culture; examples include hate watching (watching with the enjoyment of mockery), celebrity roasts (e.g., Tom Brady; Schilken, 2024), and excitement in failure of a rival sports team (e.g., Kornhaber, 2014). Although Schadenfreude ensues ethical discussions due to the enjoyment of other people's suffering, most people feel this as a fleeting state (not as a trait), and it appears early in a child's development (as early as 24 months, Shamay-Tsoory et al., 2014; Biven, 2022). The sports world is full of examples of schadenfreude (Kornhaber, 2014). This phenomenon is rooted in a broader cultural tendency to direct Schadenfreude at highly successful public figures, and is related to managing envy, restoring perceived social imbalance, and the reinforcement of group identity (Smith et al., 2009). In general, these types of Schadenfreude feel justified for people because of the fame and fortune of the person (Smith et al., 2009), or athletic team in this research.

There is limited knowledge on how Schadenfreude influences sports gambling behavior (Moisieiev, Dimitriu, & Jain, 2020; Torrance et al., 2021). Existing studies suggest that Schadenfreude could affect decision-making through mechanisms such as *feelings-as-information theory* (Schwarz, 2012), where individuals evaluate experiences and choices based on feelings. For example, Moisieiev et al. (2020) found that Schadenfreude could influence purchase intentions, and similar effects may apply to gambling decisions as well. The current study builds on this work by exploring whether Schadenfreude drives gambling behavior for individuals who are highly emotionally involved with a sports team. There has been some

scholarship in consumer behavior and marketing on schadenfreude (e.g., Sundie et al., 2009; Phillips-Melancon & Dalakas, 2014). Notably, Kim and Kim (2018) found that people feel schadenfreude when negative outcomes for an opposing team are shown.

Risks of Schadenfreude

Schadenfreude is not harmless, however. One study showed that sports fans felt justified when an opposing team athlete died, which displays a more extreme form of moral disengagement (Dalakas, Phillips Melancon, & Sreboth, 2015). Research has shown that there are three main conditions when schadenfreude occurs: 1) gain from misfortune, specifically regarding ingroup gains (e.g., could occur in terms of sports and team identification or involvement), 2) deserved misfortune based on a moral judgment, and 3) deserved misfortune based on envy (Smith et al., 2009). While the link between gaming and schadenfreude has been established (e.g., Qi et al., 2020), there has been a lack of research on the specific link between schadenfreude, gambling, and sports viewing or involvement in marketing and advertising research. This gap is important to address, as schadenfreude may help explain personality-based patterns of gambling behavior (e.g., stemming from other personality and gambling work like Qi et al., 2020). Understanding the emotional and psychological underpinnings of such behavior could inform the development of targeted interventions and responsible sports gambling advertising.

Social Comparison and Feelings as Information Theory

Although schadenfreude could be seen as a negative emotion, that is not the case. Feelings as information is defined as consumers using positive feelings to make a purchase decision (Schwarz & Clore, 2007; Schwarz, 2012). In this study, we study schadenfreude as a tendency or trait in the individual leads to general and consistent positive feelings from the

misfortune of others (in different scenarios from Yee & Lee, 2022). Within feelings as information, people may misattribute their schadenfreude feelings on others' misfortunes to gambling choices; someone else's failure makes the consumer feel positive about their own choices, even though those outcomes and feelings about others is technically external to the consumer decision (Moisieiev et al., 2020). The process of misattribution in feelings as information as a framework happens automatically, often times when people may lack the processing ability or motivation to consciously self-appraise or reflect on their emotions toward someone or something else as a reasoning for their consumption decision (in this case, gambling choices; Rothman & Schwarz, 1998; Siemer & Reisenzein, 1998). We also explore schadenfreude as more of a feeling derived from schadenfreude when their favorite team won (e.g., "I am happy about what happened to the opposing team."; Moisieiev et al., 2020). Social comparison is also at play here, where people evaluate themselves as compared to peers in a self-evaluation process (Festinger, 1954). Schadenfreude could be considered stemming from feelings of inferiority as compared to an opposing team's fans (other consumers; Feather 1989; 1991) and feel like they are lacking in achievement in terms of the consumer perspective (Sundie et al., 2009). If opposing fans/consumers lose a game to someone's team, they may be engaging in downward social comparison and feel positive or self-affirmed via schadenfreude (van Dijk, Ouwerkerk, Wesseling, & van Koningsbruggen, 2011).

Connections to Sports Fandom and Advertising Media

Although Schadenfreude has been studied in moral judgement and media contexts (Schindler et al., 2015), its connection to fan culture and gambling behavior as a consumer behavior remains underexplored. Sports fans often develop parasocial relationships with athletes and teams (De Jong et al., 202), and this strong emotional involvement can intensify reactions to

a rival team's wins or losses. In this context, fan behavior may cross moral boundaries; in one study, fans of a team indicated that it is justified if a member of the rival team receives serious harm (Cikara & Fiske, 2013). Mobile sports betting platforms (now widely advertised and increasingly legal in the U.S., as we understand that regulations in Europe have been influx) create new ways for fans to be emotionally invested and can lead to risky gambling behavior (McGrane et al., 2023). Furthermore, in addition to Schadenfreude as fuel, gambling advertising creates a "dose–response effect" where the advertising entices audiences to bet more and more (McGrane et al., 2023), which could be concerning from a public health and safety perspective.

The Present Study

Building on research in Moisieiev et al. (2020) and Qi et al. (2020), the current study tests hypotheses that positive feelings derived from Schadenfreude are linked to greater satisfaction with past gambling decisions and stronger intentions to gamble against a rival team. *Trait Schadenfreude* refers to a relatively individual tendency to experience this emotion, whereas *state Schadenfreude* reflects a context-dependent, fleeting reaction (Nai & Otto, 2021). *Gambling satisfaction* is conceptually similar to consumer choice satisfaction as it refers to someone's satisfaction with their gambling behavior, much like a purchase decision, implying that a person may be satisfied with gambling choices regardless of outcome due to its inherent entertainment value or escapism (Moisieiev et al., 2020; Hagfors et al., 2023). Team involvement conceptually captures the importance of viewing the games and the irreplaceable nature of a team in a person's identity (Chen et al., 2018), which has previously been studied in the context of schadenfreude (De Jong et al., 2021). Gambling satisfaction has also been shown to predict future gambling intentions (Lam et al., 2011), and users generally report greater satisfaction with

sports betting compared to other forms of gambling (Parke et al., 2015). Thus, this research poses the following hypotheses:

H1: Trait schadenfreude, satisfaction with gambling, gambling frequency, and involvement with favorite team will predict state schadenfreude in a favorite team win scenario.

H2: Trait schadenfreude, satisfaction with gambling, gambling frequency, and favorite team involvement will predict future gambling when favorite team wins.

H3: Gambling satisfaction will mediate trait schadenfreude and future gambling when favorite team wins.

H4: State schadenfreude in a favorite team win scenario will mediate team involvement and future gambling when favorite team wins.

Method

This online survey research (via Qualtrics and Campus IRB approved) collected data from a convenience sample of college students at a large U.S. university. Upon completion of the questionnaire, they were redirected to a form so they could be given extra credit. College students are an important and relevant population to study regarding sports gambling, with specific potential impact on this susceptible age group and children, based on previous studies (e.g., McGrane et al., 2023). Thus, this research surveyed N = 268 students at a large US southern university via an online administered Qualtrics survey, Mean Age: 21.44; 76% White; 17% Black; 7% Other; 41% Male; 57% Female; 2% Other. This study was Campus IRB approved (used informed consent before students began the survey), and students were given extra credit for their participation. We started with N=322, while n = 270 completed the extra credit form. We eliminated 54 cases and ended up with N = 268 usable cases after cleaning for missing data.

Independent Variables

Schadenfreude as a trait: This is defined as a trait or tendency about the person. Participants were asked to please indicate their agreement with hypothetical statements.; e.g., "I like to see someone successful get fired." from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) (Yee & Lee, 2022; 12 items). α = .72

Gambling satisfaction: These three items were posed in terms of choice satisfaction about gambling in the past on sports ("Think about a time you recently watched a sports game you cared about or when you were rooting for a team you like/are a fan of. REGARDLESS of the game outcome (win or loss)"; adapted from Moisieiev et al., 2020; e.g., "I feel good about the choice I made."; 1 (*Does not describe me*) to 5 (*Describes me extremely well*). α = .80

Involvement with favorite team: Involvement refers to the irreplaceable nature of the team and importance of the team. This was measured by five items about their favorite team e.g., "Watching their games is important to me."; "To me, there is no other team like them." 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) (Chen et al., 2018). α = .89

Gambling frequency: Participants were asked how often they gambled, 1 (*Never*) to 5 (*Always*).

Dependent Variables

Schadenfreude as a state: This fleeting, or in the moment, schadenfreude was phrased in regard to the recent televised or live game they were involved with in three items (e.g., "I am happy about what happened to the opposing team"1 (*describes me not at all*) to 5 (*describes me very much*); from Moisieiev et al., 2020). Participants were asked these questions in the scenario if their favorite team won (resulting in schadenfreude feelings).

Gambling intention: This behavioral intention of gambling was measured by four items adapted from Marticotte and Arcand (2017) and Hayes and Carr (2020) (e.g., "I'm likely to gamble on

them in the future") from 1 (*describes me not at all*) to 5 (*describes me very much*). Participants were asked these questions in the scenario of if their favorite team won.

Results

H1 stated that trait schadenfreude, satisfaction with gambling, involvement with favorite team, and gambling frequency would predict state schadenfreude if team won. A linear regression model was run, $F(3, 145) = 18.01$, $p < .001$, $R2 = .27$, and showed that involvement with favorite team ($B = .39$, $p < .001$), gambling satisfaction ($B = .20$, $p < .05$) were significant for schadenfreude if team won.

H2 stated that trait schadenfreude, satisfaction with gambling, involvement with favorite team, and gambling frequency would predict future gambling if team won. A linear regression model was run, $F(4, 133) = 21.06$, $p < .001$, $R2 = .37$, and showed that satisfaction with gambling ($B = .51$, $p < .001$) and gambling frequency ($B = .34$, $p < .001$) were sig. for future gambling if favorite team won.

H3 stated that gambling satisfaction would mediate trait schadenfreude and future gambling when favorite team wins. A mediation analysis tested whether gambling satisfaction explained the association between trait schadenfreude and willingness to gamble again after a win, controlling for baseline gambling frequency ($N = 151$). The indirect effect was significant, $b = 0.11$, 95% CI [0.01, 0.21], $p = .035$, indicating that higher trait schadenfreude predicted greater satisfaction, which in turn predicted stronger intentions to gamble again. The direct effect was not significant, $b = 0.05$, $p = .58$, and the total effect was also not significant, $p = .12$.

H4 stated that state schadenfreude in a favorite team win scenario would mediate team involvement and future gambling when favorite team wins. A final mediation analysis tested whether schadenfreude experienced after the win explained the relationship between team

involvement and gambling intentions, controlling for trait schadenfreude and gambling frequency ($N = 167$). The indirect effect was significant, $b = 0.15$, 95% CI [0.08, 0.24], $p < .001$, whereas the direct effect was not significant, $b = 0.02$, $p = .80$. The total effect was significant, $b = 0.17$, $p = .003$, with approximately 91% of the effect mediated.

Discussion

This research contributes to the advertising and sport management literature suggesting that sports betting "enhances" the fan experience (Lee et al., 2024). Our study dives in further, providing novel insights into the psychological mechanisms underlying sports gambling intentions among college students, who are increasingly targeted by sports betting platforms (McGrane et al., 2023; Shen, 2023; Mortenson, 2025).

Specifically in our findings, for H1, involvement with favorite team and gambling satisfaction were significant for schadenfreude if team won. For H2, satisfaction with gambling and gambling frequency were sig. for future gambling if favorite team won. Mediation results showed that trait schadenfreude increases gambling after a win because wins feel more satisfying (This suggests that trait schadenfreude influenced gambling intentions indirectly through increased satisfaction with the win). However, another mediation showed that team involvement increases gambling because it heightens schadenfreude during the win (our interpretation). In-group affiliation increases the likelihood of schadenfreude (Ouwerkerk et al., 2018). Future studies should explore if team involvement and concurrent schadenfreude over time could lead a person to make risky gambling choices, especially sports betting. These findings align with the Feelings-as-Information Theory (Schwarz, 2012), which argues that people evaluate experiences and choices based on feelings. In this context, schadenfreude seems to represent a positive cue

that encourages future gambling, reflecting upon trait and state schadenfreude findings in our mediation analyses.

From a public health perspective, this may be a matter of concern. When schadenfreude co-occurs with high team involvement and satisfaction with gambling behavior (in H1), it may lead to potential loss-chasing and repeated betting, especially with easy-to-access online betting platforms. In this case, it could start a potentially harmful feedback loop where schadenfreude is strengthened and the gambler is still satisfied with their gambling behavior, even when chasing losses outside of the study's win scenarios. This behavior could become an easy one, especially in the context of online/application-based gambling. The link between satisfaction and schadenfreude may hold practical implications for sporting leagues, sportsbooks, and sport-related brands. For instance, future work could explore whether satisfaction could prevent someone from having a violent ideation and provide psychological balance. Although prior work has explored the relationship between schadenfreude and fan violence (e.g., Cobbs & Tyler, 2021), the emotional dynamics have rarely been studied in the context of gambling behaviors and other variables considered in the current study. Future studies should explore quantitative approaches that might offer insights for both public health and sports marketing.

Additional studies should focus on gambling advertisement effects, especially those targeted at young people. Prior research has shown that emotionally appealing gambling ads lead to positive emotional responses toward sports gambling and gambling intentions (De Jans, 2023; Di Censo et al., 2024). From a public health and safety perspective, gambling can develop into an addiction, leading to risks such as substantial financial loss (Yang et al., 2025).

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