

The joy of inflicting pain leads to increased prosocial behavior, study finds

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Oh, the joy of inflicting pain upon others. The Germans have a word for it: "schadenfreude," meaning "malicious pleasure." And tapping into its sentiment properly can, ironically, do a lot of good by raising money for

charity.

In a paper, titled "The Ironic Impact of Schadenfreude: When the Joy of Inflicting Pain Leads to Increased Prosocial Behavior," published in the *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, UC Riverside School of Business marketing professor and associate dean Thomas Kramer and co-authors articulate and quantify the appeal of schadenfreude (pronounced Schaden-froid-e) through the lens of marketing psychology.

Through a series of behavioral scenario studies, their paper provides insights for the highly competitive charitable fundraising industry, which gathers some \$485 billion in the United States annually.

Firstly, those organizing fundraisers appealing to schadenfreude shouldn't get too carried away. Schadenfreude is about inflicting mild misfortune that falls comfortably short of sadism on those seen as deserving of the misfortune. We're talking about pies thrown into faces and plunges into water tanks—not anything too painful or damaging.

In fact, when participants of Kramer's studies imagined celebrities they disliked getting shocked with a taser gun, the fundraising potential wasn't as strong as seeing the same celebrities receive the milder misfortune of getting drenched with a bucket of ice water.

"If a disliked person gets more than their just desserts, and they're severely punished, you no longer feel happy about that punishment, and donations go down," explained Kramer, who applies his expertise in behavioral psychology to marketing science.

Kramer's other key findings include:

- To maximize [donations](#), the donor can inflict or observe the mild misfortune, and those who inflict donate roughly the same as

those who watch.

- The donors also must have disdain for the person receiving the misfortune, which elicits pleasure when they see that person get their punishment.

The study was conducted by having hundreds of participants at the University of Florida and those recruited through a crowdsourcing service called Amazon Mechanical Turk imagine various Schadenfreude scenarios.

In one example, they rated levels of dislike and deservingness of the person receiving the misfortune and how much they would donate (between zero and \$10) to throw a pie into that person's face. Higher levels of deservingness resulted in higher payments. In another scenario, more mild misfortune paid better than severe misfortune.

More information: Yael Zemack-Rugar et al, The ironic impact of schadenfreude: When the joy of inflicting pain leads to increased prosocial behavior, *Journal of Consumer Psychology* (2024). DOI: [10.1002/jcpy.1426](https://doi.org/10.1002/jcpy.1426)

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