

“Hah, you deserve it”: The Mediating Role of Schadenfreude on Moral Superiority and The Perceived Value Placed on Punishment for Retributive Justice

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Abstract: The current study aims to examine schadenfreude mediating the relationship between perceived moral superiority and the perceived value placed on punishment. Sixty-eight undergraduate students were asked to answer the Self-Perceived Moral Superiority (SPMS), Schadenfreude and Punishment Goals scale. It was hypothesized that there will be a relationship (i) between perceived moral superiority and schadenfreude, (ii) between schadenfreude and the perceived value placed on punishment while controlling for perceived moral superiority, and (iii) schadenfreude mediates this whole relationship. The results indicate a significant correlation matching H2, suggesting that individuals who find joy in others' suffering may seek to punish transgressors as a means to cancel certain behaviours. However, there was no overall mediating role of schadenfreude, suggesting a different means of understanding what drives morally superior people to cancel the immoral outgroup by punishing them.

Keywords: schadenfreude, moral, punishment, behaviour, cancel, justice, retribution

CANCEL CULTURE: A STORY OF SCHADENFREUDE, MORAL SUPERIORITY AND PUNISHMENT

"You are cancelled!" This idea of "cancelling" others may seem new, but this concept has been a prevalent part of modern day culture, despite the term only surfacing roughly in 2017. As people start sharing their thoughts more frequently across social media platforms and taking extreme sides to every discussion, its prevalence grows. It is now something more than just the mere concept of public shaming (Cook et al., 2021; Mueller, 2021).

Understanding cancel culture can be difficult as this new concept has various definitions. Some claim this phenomenon is a collective effort by marginalized communities or by activists to express their extreme disapproval of those more powerful than them through social pressures, essentially calling them out (Ng, 2020; Norris, 2021). Others see it as actions to withdraw support from any person whose behaviours are deemed inappropriate, problematic or unacceptable by a certain standard of society's norms (Haskell, 2021; Mueller, 2021). While there are many different interpretations of cancel culture, research suggests heavy involvement of social media (Anderson-Lopez et al., 2021). It is made salient given the widespread use of social media for the fast spread of information, which is then turned into channels for activism. This includes acts of cancelling others for their extreme points of view or calling them out for perceived immoral acts (Bouvier & Machin, 2021; Clark, 2020; Norris, 2021). This act of cancelling others, preserved through social media, can escalate conflicts, which leads to intense moral outrages (Grubbs et al., 2019).

Those who participate in the act of cancelling others tend to hold a belief of higher moral grounds, serving as a form of privilege to bring others down in the name of correcting them from their problematic behaviours (Chiou, 2020). This personal belief in their moral superiority can lead them to compare others negatively while upholding positive self-perceptions (Polat, 2018; Tappin & McKay, 2017). These self-perceived higher moral standards are important at the group level as it serves a few functions; namely being the foundation for developing group-based self-concepts that contribute to how much one identifies as a group and serves as a guideline on proper behaviour in the group. This results in building a positive image for the group (Ellemers et al., 2008; Leach et al., 2007). A common understanding is that individuals with similar beliefs of high morality tend to see themselves as part of the ingroup, whereas those who oppose their opinions or differ in certain characteristics are considered as the outgroup (Stets & Burke, 2000).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Intergroup Behaviours Driving Moral Superiority

According to Tajfel and Turner (1979), the Social Identity Theory (SIT) explains certain intergroup behaviour, in that once individuals have categorized themselves as part of the group, they do not socialize as their individual self, but rather associate as a member of a group (Stets & Burke, 2000). As such, group identity aids in forming the group's perceived moral superiority, given that intergroup attitudes can create tension between groups, potentially resulting in unfair treatment of outgroup members upon perceiving a certain threat to the ingroup. Essentially, the more negative the perception of the outgroup, the greater the tendency to exclude the outgroup from what the individual deems as good moral regard (Hadarics, 2019; Hadarics et al., 2020).

Socially categorizing oneself serves a cognitive function on how people perceive one another, thereby forming ingroups and outgroups. Individuals tend to sort people based on a prototype of the group's typical member, showing how the characteristics of the prototype

determine the group's norms, and are used to evaluate others' group membership status, thereby taking on the group's identity. This process of categorizing also gives rise to potential ingroup favouritism and outgroup discrimination. Hence, "us" versus "them" creates an ingroup bias that distorts the perception of outgroup members' moral values and behaviours, affecting how open and responsive the ingroup is towards evaluating the outgroup. The outgroup's moral standings are typically disregarded, enforcing the supposed superior and morally accurate ingroup perception (Ellemers & van Nunspeet, 2020; Huddy & Blankert, 2017; Reid, 1987; Tajfel & Turner, 2004). It is not solely restricted to the extent of group identification or social categorization that creates this perception. Emotions are thought to play a big role as well in developing these intergroup behaviours.

From the perceptions formed, different appraisals of circumstances related to their social identity and group membership can evoke various intergroup emotions. Depending on the immediate accessibility of one's social identity at that time, different intergroup emotional responses will surface due to adopting the group's social values as their own, changing one's behaviours and subsequently their intergroup dynamics (Mackie & Smith, 2015; Mackie et al., 2000). Hence, the Intergroup Emotions Theory (IET) suggests that emotions based on group interactions are generated from the social group one identifies with strongly. Evoking any emotion results in different behaviours within the group as they form their understanding of their group conditions and what it means for their ingroup. Based on one's social environment, group emotions can influence the interpretations of social responses, evoking specific emotions and responses accordingly (Mackie et al., 2008; Maitner et al., 2016). Some of these emotional responses evoked are moral emotions, of which the more common emotion in intergroup behaviours is *schadenfreude*. As such, in looking at perceived immoral acts by a transgressor, *schadenfreude* may serve as a significant emotion in acting out towards outgroup transgressors (Berndsen & Tiggemann, 2020).

Schadenfreude as A Moral Emotion

Schadenfreude is an emotion described by the Germans as having happy feelings upon seeing others suffer through their adversity (Van Dijk et al., 2008; Van Dijk & Ouwerkerk, 2014). *Schadenfreude* can be deemed morally legitimate and is exempted from certain social situations revolving around intergroup relations, e.g., when suffering brings about some personal or group gains, or when a transgressor is punished (Berndsen & Feather, 2016; Berndsen & Tiggemann, 2020; Spears & Leach, 2004).

Additionally, *schadenfreude* surfaces when individuals engage in downward social comparisons, where the perception of superiority comes as a result of the comparison as well (Brambilla & Riva, 2017; Rosenthal-von der Pütten et al., 2019). Downward social comparison is especially made known when it comes to different socioeconomic status (SES) differences, indicating that being grouped as either a subjective upper or lower social class, it drives one's prosocial behaviours in a way that creates comparisons between one another (Manstead, 2018). The perception of being different from another group of people results in comparisons, which may potentially drive the feeling of *schadenfreude*. Hence, downward comparisons typically stem from the intention to gain a positive self-view (Ouwerkerk & Johnson, 2016), thereby leading to feelings of *schadenfreude* through a sense of superiority. If no purposeful actions were taken by the individual expressing *schadenfreude* to cause intentional suffering on another, the feeling of joy would be derived from seeing the individual get what they deserve, hence the term "just deserts". Just deserts explain that humans tend to factor in the consequences of our actions, resulting in deserved punishment when justice is at stake, wanting to achieve the innate desire for fairness via our emotional response of *schadenfreude* (Darley

et al., 2000; Spurgin, 2015). Per all instances, any injustice needs to be resolved by showing justice.

Restoration brings righteous pleasure upon righting the transgressor's wrongs, as though celebrating the other party's mistreatment. This is similar to the joy in *schadenfreude* when another person experiences a misfortune (Li et al., 2019). Research also found that this aligns with the concept of punishment, as the pleasure depends on the transgressor learning their lesson and being willing to make efforts to correct themselves (Dasborough & Harvey, 2017). Having deservingness being significant in determining justice, and the reward-inducing brain regions activated when observing others get deserved punishment, *schadenfreude* is justifiable as an appropriate emotion (de Quervain et al., 2004; Li et al., 2019; Singer et al., 2006). As Spurgin (2015) summarizes, the idea of justice and the pleasant feeling that follows when justice is served to the transgressor drives the experience of *schadenfreude*, since re-establishing equality and reinstating subjective justice are also key points in understanding *schadenfreude* (Berndsen et al., 2017).

Any ingroup members who behaved unacceptably, opposing the group and its norms, are more likely negatively judged by other ingroup members. Typically, this is perceived similarly among all ingroup members, prompting them to find means of justifying the immoral acts to protect the positive group image (Leach et al., 2007; van der Toom et al., 2015). Threats to the group increase the salience of ingroup identification, being more closely knit as a group. Those norm deviators are deemed as threats to the subjective validity of the ingroup, creating an outgroup bias (Çakal et al., 2016; Frings et al., 2012). However, harsher judgments resulted as a response to wrong acts of the outgroup transgressor due to ingroup bias that grows in significance when harm is targeted at the ingroup (Molenberghs et al., 2016; Valdesolo & DeSteno, 2007; van der Toom et al., 2015). Hostility may arise if a potential threat to the ingroup's safety is given by the outgroup, resulting in forming negative impressions or stereotypes of outgroup members as means of distinguishing the immoral others from the moral self (Brambilla et al., 2013; Hadarics, 2019; Sacchi et al., 2021). Such acts of the outgroup warrant the ingroup to feel morally responsible for the transgressor's actions, bearing a need to reprimand them and let them bear the consequences of their actions to further solidify their inferior status (Hopman & van Leeuwen, 2009; Zheng, 2015).

Therefore, this shapes the difference between "we" and "them" because "we" are keeping to the moral standards that "they" do not, hence suggesting that these "deviants" ought to be punished. In intergroup interactions, different types of moral criticisms appear as a basis for group members to respond to the outgroup's wrong acts, thereby terming it as appraisal-based responses. In the process of developing an emotional response for certain matters, based on one's interpretation of information given, our subsequent motivation for certain courses of action follows this guide. Punishment is a type of appraisal-based response that appears valuable and accurate for justice-seeking on behalf of the ingroup and society (Darley et al., 2000; Peters et al., 2004; Zheng, 2015).

Punishing Others to Seek Justice

Punishment is defined as an imposition of a penalty for wrong acts. It functions to prevent similar wrongful acts from repeating itself in the future. Through punishment, moral norms are reinforced to prevent the disruption of harmony in society (Hofmann et al., 2018; Wenzel & Okimoto, 2016). Punishment as a response satisfies the victims' need for retributive justice by indicating the level of severity of the wrongdoing and then balances out the moral significance of wrong acts by giving proper punishment to the transgressor (Carlsmith & Darley, 2008; Lenta, 2019). Therefore, the perceived value for suitably punishing someone is that punishment should be given to any individual or group that has done a wrong act against

a certain law or norm, thereby indicating that punishment is a component in explaining retributive justice (Wenzel & Okimoto, 2016). Having the intention to protect group members who are victims from the perpetrator is important as it slowly leads to achieving a form of peace by holding them accountable and restoring the victim's dignity (Li et al., 2018). Additionally, it also serves as a psychological relief for those who perceive themselves as part of the moral community who were offended or outraged by the wrongdoing (Deutsch, 2011).

Retribution bears similarities with social vigilantism, in that individuals have the need to share their beliefs with others, considering how they are "morally superior" (Saucier et al., 2014). Upon leaning towards this belief of superiority compared to the average person, individuals are more likely to impose similar beliefs onto others, regardless of their accuracy (Saucier et al., 2021). Hence, in seeking retribution based on one's moral views, the perceived value placed on punishment is defined as the perception of the need for behaviour control of a transgressor by imposing a penalty for their past wrong acts (Orth, 2003). This arouses a moral emotion, motivated by those who value retribution. Experiencing these emotions on behalf of the victim urges others to be equally concerned in correcting the transgressor. Any social concern would result in the urge for punishment for retribution and holding to the hope that there will be a good outcome after punishment (Walsh & Hatch, 2018).

This also explains why moral outrage is evoked, even if the immoral behaviours were not directed at them, thus showing its association with the need for justice (Roh, 2017). This forms the motivation to invalidate the transgressor's disrespectful behaviour towards ingroup victims, prompting further punishment as a response and eventually developing the status of morally superior "us" versus morally inferior "them" (Vidmar, 2000). Individual ingroup members would seek to respond to those who "break the rules" with such justice-seeking behaviour, fulfilling the urge for punishing the transgressor and reducing the number of unreasonable violators of moral norms, ultimately holding these transgressors responsible (Deutsch, 2011; Henrich et al., 2006).

Focus of The Present Study

The concept of feeling joy in other people suffering or being mistreated acts as a justifiable mode to seek retribution to intentionally decrease unwanted negative feelings about the injustice (Li et al., 2019). Knowing that one's social identity affects their emotional state, attaining a positive social identity to differentiate between a superior "us" versus an inferior "them" was found to evoke schadenfreude in its process (Smith & van Dijk, 2018). However, little understanding was made about how such moral perceptions impact one's moral emotions (i.e., schadenfreude), and how that subsequently impacts the perceived value placed on punishments for retribution. Research typically suggested how schadenfreude relates with each variable independently, and it can be seen that schadenfreude's role overlaps between both variables in establishing a deeper perceived moral superiority-punishment relationship. Despite that, little research looks into the role that emotions play in this relationship and could firmly link these variables together. Hence, this study proposes that it may be possible to study schadenfreude as a mediator in this relationship.

Hence, the aim of this study is to investigate the mediating role of schadenfreude on the relationship between perceived moral superiority and the perceived value placed on punishment for retributive justice. It aims to answer the question of whether schadenfreude can mediate this relationship. Three hypotheses are generated for this study, i.e.

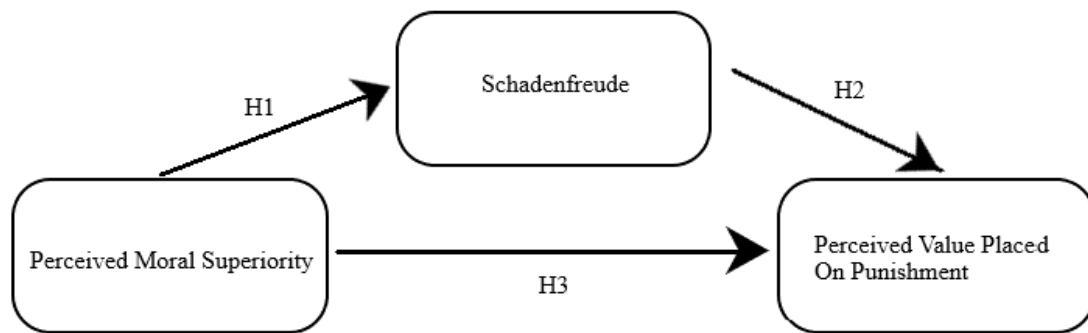
H1: There will be a relationship between perceived moral superiority and schadenfreude.

H2: There will be a relationship between schadenfreude and the perceived value placed on punishment for retributive justice while controlling for perceived moral superiority.

H3: Schadenfreude mediates the relationship between perceived moral superiority and the perceived value placed on punishment for retributive justice.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework of the Study



METHOD

This study used a non-experimental, correlational design with a mediational model. The predictor variable is perceived moral superiority, which is operationally defined as the total score on the 10-item 7-point Self-Perceived Moral Superiority (SPMS) scale. A higher total score indicates greater perceived moral superiority after accounting for reversed scoring (Tappin & McKay, 2017, 2018). The outcome variable is the perceived value placed on punishment for retributive justice, which is operationally defined as the total score on the 18-item 6-point Punishment Goals Scale. A higher total score indicates a greater need to punish (Orth, 2003). The mediator variable is schadenfreude, which is operationally defined as the total score on the 5-item 7-point Schadenfreude scale. A higher total score indicates higher levels of Schadenfreude (Van Dijk et al., 2008).

Sixty-eight undergraduate students from a private university in Malaysia participated in this study. This minimum sample size was determined through the G*Power calculator by using the conventional medium effect size of 0.15, a power value of 0.80 derived from past research and an alpha level of 0.05 (Faul et al., 2007; Lakens, 2013). However, only 66 responses were deemed valid for this study as two responses did not fulfil the criteria and were thus removed from the final dataset. The participants were generally aged between 19 to 29 years old ($M = 21.02$, $SD = 1.40$).

Materials

The alpha values of SPMS, Schadenfreude and Punishment Goals scale were taken from the original research papers to indicate its reliability for its use in this study.

Self-perceived Moral Superiority Scale

The full 30-item SPMS scale was initially developed to measure the extent of how participants perceived each trait to describe themselves, the average person and their social desirability. These traits were originally rated according to either of these dimensions (Tappin & McKay, 2017). Given that this study was more interested in moral traits, the morality dimension ($\alpha = .93$) was used for measuring participants' perceived moral superiority through

rating their perceptions of others. This would be similar to Tappin and McKay's (2018) study, where the intention was to measure how these 10 moral traits best describe the average person.

A statement prompting participants to think of a person from a different SES group to them was given as a basis to rate their perception of the outgroup. This was because past studies suggested that SES influenced individuals' sense of belongingness, based on their strong identification primarily towards a social ingroup or outgroup (Destin et al., 2017; Horwitz et al., 2014; Jury et al., 2019; Lam & Katona, 2018). Given that the difference in SES tends to create a social comparison, specifically a downward comparison, using different SES groups as a prompt when answering the questionnaire would indirectly and subconsciously create that sense of comparison needed to evoke the feeling of schadenfreude. The 10 items consisted of words that described both positive and negative moral traits.

Schadenfreude Scale

The 5-item Schadenfreude scale ($\alpha = .80$) was used to measure the extent to which participants felt joy in observing other people's sufferings (Van Dijk et al., 2008). The prompt regarding people of different SES was also applied.

Punishment Goals Scale

The 18-item Punishment Goals scale (retaliation $\alpha = .80$, recognition of victim status $\alpha = .64$, confirmation of societal values $\alpha = .82$, victim security $\alpha = .85$, societal security $\alpha = .74$) was used to measure participants' perceived value placed on punishment, which is the likelihood to impose a penalty on the transgressor for their wrongdoings, as means of seeking retribution (Orth, 2003). The statement used for the items' reference was "It was important to me that an outgroup member should be punished...", where the previous SES prompt was referred to as the outgroup member.

Procedure

All materials were compiled into a Google form that was shared with the students who volunteered their participation. Firstly, the participants indicated their consent to participate in the Informed Consent Form. They were then asked to fill up the demographic questionnaire for their age, gender, nationality, the presence of a clinical diagnosis of psychological disorders and whether they are undergraduate students. Then, they filled up three scales, namely the SPMS scale, the Schadenfreude scale and the Punishment Goals scale. Participants submitted their responses by clicking on the "Submit" button on the Google form. They completed the survey in less than 15 minutes.

RESULTS

The aim of this study was to investigate whether schadenfreude mediates the relationship between perceived moral superiority and the perceived value placed on punishment for retributive justice. Table 1 summarizes the socio-demographic characteristics of the participants. The age of the sample ranged from mostly 19 to 24 years ($M = 21.02$, $SD = 1.40$), with 1.5% being 29 years, and the majority 51.5% were 21 years. There were more female participants (77.9%) than male participants (22.1%), whereby 97.1% of them were from the private university where the study was conducted, and 2.9% were not.

The scores of each scale were totalled respectively. Reverse-scored items for the SPMS scale were also calculated accordingly. Table 2 shows the bivariate correlations indicating a significant relationship between schadenfreude and perceived value placed on punishment ($r = .49$, $p < .001$). However, the relationship between perceived moral superiority and

schadenfreude ($r = -.20$, $p = .105$), and the relationship between perceived moral superiority and perceived value placed on punishment ($r = -.21$, $p = .096$), are both non-significant.

Table 1

Socio-demographic characteristics of the sample ($n = 68$)

Variable	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	15	22.1
Female	53	77.9
Age		
Nineteen (19)	5	7.3
Twenty (20)	14	20.6
Twenty-One (21)	35	51.5
Twenty-Two (22)	8	11.8
Twenty-Three (23)	3	4.4
Twenty-Four (24)	2	2.9
Twenty-Nine (29)	1	1.5
Educational Institution		
From the Private University	66	97.1
Not from the Private University	2	2.9

Table 2

Bivariate Correlation and Scale Reliabilities

	M	SD	1	2	3
1. SPMS	45.63	9.31	(.93)		
2. Schadenfreude	16.16	6.31	-.20	(.80)	
3. Punishment	53.30	16.64	-.21	.49*	(.77)

Notes

$N = 64$

* $p < .001$

Assumptions Testing

Cook's Distance was used to run for potential outliers within the study. While the analysis showed a potential outlier based on the scatterplot graphs, the outlier's value was still lesser than the standard influential value, thereby not needing to remove it as it would not affect further analysis (Pardoe, 2018). That said, the extreme values in the dataset that did not seem to fit the general trend of the data points were removed.

In testing for normality, this assumption was not met based on the graph's slightly negatively skewed distribution. However, due to the robustness of the test for normality, further analyses can still proceed even if the assumption was violated. In testing for linearity, the assumption was met. The assumption for homoscedasticity was met. The assumption for having no multicollinearity was met, indicating that the variables are not too correlated to one another. The Harman's Single-Factor Test to account for common method bias in this study showed that the percentage of variance is 32.89%, thereby being not too large to skew the data and can proceed with further analysis.

Inferential Tests

To further analyse the data, the SPSS software was used to run a multiple regression analysis through PROCESS Model 4 to test the hypotheses, as PROCESS specifically runs for mediation models. Table 3 shows that perceived moral superiority as a model ($F(1, 62) = 1.79$, $R^2 = .04$, $p = .186$) did not significantly predict schadenfreude ($b = -0.14$, 95% $CI [-0.35, 0.07]$, $t(62) = -1.34$, $p = .186$). Thus, H1 is not supported.

That said, the overall model of perceived moral superiority and schadenfreude as seen in Table 4 significantly predicts the perceived value placed on punishment ($F(2, 61) = 7.72$, $R^2 = .25$, $p = .001$), explaining 25.1% of its variance. Specifically looking at schadenfreude, it was found to significantly predict the perceived value placed on punishment when controlling for perceived moral superiority ($b = 1.23$, 95% $CI [0.55, 1.90]$, $t(61) = 3.62$, $p = .001$), indicating that H2 is supported. However, perceived moral superiority does not significantly predict the perceived value placed on punishment when controlling for schadenfreude ($b = -0.21$, 95% $CI [-0.67, 0.27]$, $t(61) = -0.88$, $p = .384$).

Table 3

Perceived Moral Superiority and Schadenfreude Model

Outcome Variable: Schadenfreude

Model Summary

R-squared	F(HC3)	df1	df2	p-value
.042	1.791	1.000	62.000	.186

Model

	coefficient (b)	t	p-value	Lower bound CI	Upper bound CI
SPMS	-.138	-1.338	.186	-.345	.068

Table 4

Model Consisting of Perceived Moral Superiority, Schadenfreude and Perceived Value Placed on Punishment

Outcome Variable: Punishment

Model Summary

R-squared	F(HC3)	df1	df2	p-value
.251	7.72	2.000	61.000	.001

Model

	coefficient (b)	t	p-value	Lower bound CI	Upper bound CI
SPMS	-.205	-.877	.384	-.672	.262
Schadenfreude	1.226	3.619	.001	.549	1.904

Thus, the total effect of the whole relationship shown in Table 5 indicates that perceived moral superiority as a model ($F(1, 62) = 1.57, R^2 = .04, p = .215$) did not significantly predict the perceived value placed on punishment ($b = -0.38, 95\% CI [-0.97, 0.22], t(62) = -1.25, p = .215$). From Table 6, the indirect effect of perceived moral superiority on the perceived value placed on punishment through schadenfreude was not significant ($b = -0.17$), as the bias-corrected bootstrapped confidence interval contained a zero, $BCa CI [-0.43, 0.03]$. Mediation did not occur, showing that perceived moral superiority could not predict the perceived value placed on punishment upon controlling for schadenfreude ($b = -0.21, p = .384$), indicating that H3 is not supported.

Table 5

The Total Effect Model

Outcome Variable: Punishment

Model Summary

R-squared	F(HC3)	df1	df2	p-value
.044	1.573	1.000	62.000	.215

Model

	coefficient (b)	t	p-value	Lower bound CI	Upper bound CI
SPMS	-.375	-1.254	.215	-.972	.223

Table 6

The Direct Effect and Indirect Effect Model

Direct Effect of X on Y:

Effect	p-value	Bootstrapped Lower Bound CI	Bootstrapped Upper Bound CI
-.205	.384	-.672	.262

Indirect Effect(s) of X on Y:

	Effect	Bootstrapped Lower Bound CI	Bootstrapped Upper Bound CI
Schadenfreude	-.170	-.426	.030

DISCUSSION

Considering the valid responses gathered, the results showed that *schadenfreude* did not mediate the relationship between perceived moral superiority and the perceived value placed on punishment, as indicated by the non-significant indirect effect, thus not supporting H3. Additionally, there was no significant relationship between perceived moral superiority and *schadenfreude*. However, between *schadenfreude* and the perceived value placed on punishment, a significant relationship was shown after controlling for perceived moral superiority. It is also worth noting that these non-significant findings resulted from an averagely smaller sample size of 68 participants, within a limited population that consisted of mostly university students, as this study intended to look at the young adult age range and their response towards the potential components that explains the act of cancel culture seeing that this is more relevant to them (Strossen, 2020).

It is generally inconsistent with past studies given that little research observed *schadenfreude* as a potential third variable that explains relationships between variables. Berndsen and Tiggemann (2020) predicted that if an individual is caught behaving immorally, that individual is categorized as immoral, thus prompting condemning emotions similar to *schadenfreude* in lieu of a negative outcome. Punishment then follows as a typical response to the presence of a moral emotion due to certain demands and expectations of what “correct” moral behaviours ought to be in light of any immoral action (Van Assche et al., 2020; Walsh & Hatch, 2018; Zheng, 2015). However, from the non-significant finding, the immoral perception of others was shown to not evoke *schadenfreude*, resulting in the absence of moral emotion and the subsequent intention for punishment.

One study that lends insight into the possibilities for these non-significant findings is by Wang and colleagues (2019). They suggested that in the specific component of justice *schadenfreude*, the urge to seek justice is governed by what societal norms deem as “just”, or “fair”. It was thought to serve as a moral cognition in driving individuals to perceive woeful punishment on violators of group norms, showing that the key factor in inducing intergroup competitions is unfairness. Through this, ingroup loyalty and outgroup discrimination would be sufficient in evoking *schadenfreude*. However, this study may have had an absence in further fine-tuning what defines different SES groups for one to fully comprehend their urges in seeking justice, thus diminishing the importance of the competition component for intergroup *schadenfreude* to present itself. Each individual’s definition of “different SES” differs from one another in itself, resulting in a fair amount of vagueness and ambiguity in interpreting it (Rubin et al., 2014). A lack of clarity in the boundaries between different SES groups could be contributed to the fact different SES conditions do not really affect university students in any way, not even academic performance, suggesting further that these students do not view SES as a major factor in how they behave or act in a university setting (Rodriguez Hernandez et al., 2019). Thus, based on the different SES prompts given to the participants in this study, SES alone may not be a strong factor to create unfairness that induces a perception of economic competition between the participants and the person they thought of.

Additionally, upon having a strong identification with a social group and having witnessed an outgroup’s misfortune that falls under both parties’ area of interest, *schadenfreude* is naturally expressed because said immoral outgroup’s misfortune is perceived as “they deserved it” (Brambilla & Riva, 2017; Ouwerkerk et al., 2018). Recalling how SIT suggests that individuals that share similarities tend to stick together as one group and become more influential compared to those not as similar as us, ideally if “we” strongly identify as one common SES group, members who questionably violate our group norms or do not belong to this common SES group would endure mistreatment since they are deemed a threat to existing group norms (Hogg, 2016). Furthermore, IET explains that certain emotional reactions arise

due to the way individuals self-categorize based on how they group themselves as one social identity group. Ideally, it might have been possible that self-perceived different SES groups would indeed create a natural form of emotion towards each other (Mackie et al., 2008).

Yet, the contradiction between how these theories show the connections of all variables and the results of this study indicates certain parts that may not have been comprehensively observed mostly revolving around (i) the weak explanation for social groups' inferior or superior status and feeling morally responsible for each other's actions, (ii) the lack of misfortunes befalling the different SES outgroups, as well as (iii) the competition element to connect intergroup interaction and intergroup *schadenfreude* to the concept of social groups and moral emotions. Without the element of competition to create rivalry between ingroups and outgroups, "different SES groups", may be considered vague to induce a sense of being morally responsible to correct the previous "wrongdoing" by a supposed outgroup. Furthermore, the supposed "immoral" outgroup did not encounter any misfortune because of their "wrongdoing", thereby no elicitation of moral emotions and its subsequent response to the whole situation.

Seeing how this study intended to investigate *schadenfreude*'s mediating role in the relationship between the three components, an alternative interpretation of the results is due to *schadenfreude* being a weaker mediator than it might be as a predictor. Past research found that *schadenfreude* either predicted certain social behaviours such as intergroup competition, intergroup status, and developmental changes in equity-related decisions; or it was predicted by envy, collective narcissism, ingroup identification, and more (Feather & Sherman, 2002; Golec de Zavala et al., 2016; Ouwerkerk et al., 2018). Others found *schadenfreude*'s capability in mediating certain relationships, such as mediating positive or negative parasocial relationships and behavioural intentions or having episodic *schadenfreude* mediate affiliations to political parties and the intention to share (Crysel & Webster, 2018; Myrick & Chen, 2022). However, its mediating role is still considerably minimal in research. With the results of this study suggesting no mediating power of *schadenfreude* based on the non-significant mediating effect in H3, it instead potentially indicates that *schadenfreude* functions better as a predictor in how it correlates with perceived moral superiority and the perceived value placed on punishment respectively.

Additionally, it could also be the potential presence of vicarious *schadenfreude* that alternatively explains why the results were as such, which may explain in further detail this relationship between perceived moral superiority and the perceived value placed on punishment instead. According to Pagan (2020), vicarious *schadenfreude* is different from the common concept of what is deemed as "true" *schadenfreude*, given that *schadenfreude* commonly known is defined as a materialistic experience of misfortune resembling real life, whereas vicarious *schadenfreude* introduces the concept of imagined misfortune. This perception of misfortune formed in one's thoughts indicates the experience of *schadenfreude* through one's fantasy and imagination of learning about others' misfortunes.

While vicarious *schadenfreude* is considered new in its field of research, most would resort to the term "imagined misfortune" in trying to understand the possibility of vicarious *schadenfreude*. Seeing how it merely forms an imagination of harming others, it encourages one to be aware of such thoughts and thereby find joy in these thoughts (Gray, 2020). Even if a mutual dislike of the outgroup exists, hypothetical situations will still result in a lower intensity of *schadenfreude* due to a far psychological distance from the event itself. This further emphasizes the notion of how the mere thought of misfortunes happening and the joy that follows it results in a lower sense of group identification towards the ingroup, thereby creating a disparity in emotional responses between real life and imagined situations (Gonzalez-Gadea et al., 2018).

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

However, there are some limitations to this study, one of which is that research on cancel culture focuses on its occurrence through social media such as Twitter (Bouvier & Machin, 2021). However, this study did not introduce any social media disputes to create the immoral perception of an outgroup but instead relies on a perceived individual of different SES. To depend on participants to think of this individual may not be accurate in terms of various possible definitions of SES and what constitutes the status versus how this study defines it. Additionally, social media was thought to have a big influence on inducing emotions in general (Chang, 2018; Schoner-Schatz et al., 2021). It is possible that due to not studying the representation of cancel culture in its context, the associated emotion of *schadenfreude* may not be as prevalent, contributing more to the inability to generate an interaction effect in the relationship between variables.

Following the idea of vicarious *schadenfreude*, future research could develop a vicarious *schadenfreude* scale. Given that vicarious *schadenfreude* is a fairly new concept that newer research had only started looking into, there has yet to be a scale that encapsulates the notion of imagined misfortunes in a hypothetical situation accurately. This study's implementation of the *schadenfreude* scale sought to capture participants' expression of *schadenfreude* through the different SES prompts. However, the interpretation of the real-life extent of experiencing *schadenfreude* is limited as the prompts may have been insufficient to fully describe participants' actual urge to feel *schadenfreude*. This instead created an imaginary situation that has lesser effects to induce *schadenfreude* as opposed to participants witnessing a real-life scenario of the higher or lower SES individual experiencing a misfortune. Hence, it is suggested that future research could develop a newer method to account for measuring imagined misfortune instead of "real" *schadenfreude*.

Seeing that there might seemingly be a difference between vicarious and "true" *schadenfreude*, an experimental method should be encouraged for investigating *schadenfreude*'s role in depth to measure *schadenfreude* as close to real life as possible, since manual manipulations of participants feeling *schadenfreude* based on the moral discrepancy between a real ingroup versus an outgroup may be more relatable and personal to feel "true" *schadenfreude*. Future researchers could consider giving a few vignettes or scenarios to the participants to intentionally induce *schadenfreude* in the experimental group. Since this study was inspired by the cancel culture phenomenon, understanding *schadenfreude*'s role in why individuals see value in punishment when an outgroup does something wrong could shed some insight into why cancelling happens and by what means would they do so, potentially beyond the mere concepts of just deserts or revenge.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Nonetheless, the findings from the study still contribute to and open pathways for future studies to add insight into the SIT and IET theories as a whole. Seeing that social identity was previously mentioned as crucial in forming how one group would perceive another, it may be worthwhile for future studies to dig further into the competition component between groups to further understand why humans naturally form ingroups and outgroups based on those similar to us and those not similar to us respectively, and whether that element of competition may have strong correlations with misfortunes to an extent where anyone that is not similar to the ingroup would then be met with responses likewise to applying punishment on the outgroup as means of accounting for the best interest of the group rather than self-interest.

Furthermore, from this study's specific results of the correlation between *schadenfreude* and the perceived value placed on punishment, punishment is then seen as necessary to right someone's wrongs since they are suffering because of it. Righteousness comes into play as well where it helps keep people's behaviours in check. As such, it helps the

public become aware of why this may translate into the cancel culture that we know of today. The overall findings of this study are still applicable in slowly unfolding the components to cancel culture through a “seemingly sinister” emotion called schadenfreude to ensure people “pay for their actions”. This allows the public to understand why we humans have the tendency to seek justice whenever an individual or a group of people violate the integrity of our social norms.

Conclusion

This study was carried out with the intention to study the mediating effects of schadenfreude on perceived moral superiority and the perceived value placed on punishment. Despite the findings not indicating an interaction effect to suggest that schadenfreude can mediate this relationship, it still suggests that schadenfreude is related to the perceived value given to punishment. Due to this, future research can expand on this aspect to further contribute to this area of emotion and retributive behaviours as a whole, to slowly piece together the components that construct cancel culture and improve our understanding of why we fancy engaging in these cancelling actions.

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STATEMENT OF ETHICAL CLEARANCE

The study was cleared for data collection by the Ethics Review Board (ERB), Department of Psychology, HELP University. Ethical clearance was granted on 16 November 2021 (E202111/013)

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data is available upon request from the author.

DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

I declare that the current submission is my work and is not being considered for publication elsewhere. I certify that referenced work used in this submission has been properly acknowledged in-text and in the reference list.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author reports no conflicts of interest.

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The views and claims expressed in this article do not represent the Board of Editors and the Reviewers.

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