

Reputation and Reactions to the Successful Plagiarising Professor

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J. G. Phillips¹ , C. Erik Landhuis¹, and Jay Wood¹

Abstract

Social media now allow the evaluation and documentation of people's reputations online (e.g. upvotes and downvotes). The psychological mechanisms (Deservingness, Rivalry) associated with such evaluation were probed by considering reactions to vignettes outlining the success or failure of an honest or plagiarising professor. 109 participants completed the Tall Poppy scale, and provided their reactions to the vignettes on 5 point Likert scales, rating their Satisfaction, Amusement as well as attributions of Responsibility and Fairness, and willingness to support (Upvote or Donate). In a 2×2 Outcome (success/fail) by Context (original/plagiarised work) Multivariate Analysis of Variance there was significant disapproval of the successful plagiarist, and approval when the plagiarist failed. The strongest reactions elicited involved dissatisfaction and attributions of unfairness. Upvoting was less likely when plagiarism was reported. Strength of effects indicated that satisfaction and attributions of unfairness could be important components of people's reactions. Upvoting and willingness to donate in support were greater when the Professor was honest and outcomes were unfair. People were more concerned when a vignette suggested a breakdown of the social order.

¹Department of Psychology, Auckland University of Technology

Corresponding Author:

J. G. Phillips, Department of Psychology, Auckland University of Technology, Akoranga Campus, 90 Akoranga Drive, Northcote, Auckland 0627, New Zealand.

Email: jphillip@aut.ac.nz

Data Availability Statement included at the end of the article

Keywords

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The behaviour of public figures tends to be documented, and such documentation can have consequences. In 2002, David Robinson, the Vice-Chancellor of Monash University was found to have plagiarised content in several of his books (Rodan, 2004). Although Robinson initially resolved these allegations, he was encouraged to resign after further instances were discovered (Martin, 2008; Rodan, 2004). While incidents such as this were previously soon forgotten, the internet now tracks what public figures do (Guillory & Hancock, 2012), and the advent of Web2.0 adds an additional dimension.

The democratisation of the internet now allows everyone to register and document their opinions. Unfortunately, in the absence of interpersonal feedback within the online environment there can be a tendency towards toxic disinhibition (Suler, 2004). Regrettably on some websites, anonymous laypeople are significantly more likely to engage in uncivil comments (e.g. containing vulgar, profane, abusive, racist or hateful language) (Santana, 2014, 2019).

In addition, with the implementation of reputation technologies (Kollock, 1999), social media allow people to monitor the activity of the general populace, and keep score with “likes”, “followers”, upvotes and downvotes (Villanueva-Moya et al., 2022). This can reify and document the social support of the general community (Doliński, 2018). For example, when Chinese skater Zhu Yi fell and finished last during the winter Olympics, the hashtag “Zhu Yi has fallen” gained 200 million views in a couple of hours, and a comment that said Zhu Yi’s halting Mandarin was a disgrace attracted 11,000 upvotes (Qin & Buckley, 2022).

Given that the internet is now keeping score for us, and non-empathetic behaviours can be linked to serious online incidents (e.g. Phillips et al., 2019; Zhu et al., 2023) that may be illegal in specific jurisdictions (e.g. New Zealand Legislation, 2015; New Zealand Legislation, 2015; UK Parliament, 2023), the present study sought to develop a methodology to examine psychological mechanisms contributing to online support and reputation.

Reputation

Cooperation can be important to civilised conduct (Baumard et al., 2013; Wu et al., 2021), however games such as Prisoner’s Dilemma indicate that beyond face-to-face interactions, cooperation can be fragile (Bos et al., 2002; Jensen et al., 2000). Hence, reputation can be part of the glue that ensures orderly transactions (Manrique et al., 2021; Riegelsberger et al., 2005). In particular, reputation establishes a degree of precedence in transactions (Kollock, 1999). The individual with lower reputation is

expected to take the first step and trust that the person with the higher reputation will behave appropriately (Corritore et al., 2003) and this is reified in systems such as eBay (Kollock, 1999). Indeed, the link between reputation and behaviour is stronger for high profile individuals (Anderson & Shirako, 2008). An unknown can do as they will, but public figures are watched (Giardini et al., 2022; Manrique et al., 2021; Wu et al., 2016). As a consequence, there is greater censure when a high-profile individual behaves in contravention of accepted standards (Anderson & Shirako, 2008). The analysis of such censure can be subsumed within the study of the phenomenon of schadenfreude.

Schadenfreude

It seems people informally keep score of reputation and transactions (Manrique et al., 2021) and react to variations in these informal ledgers (Pietraszkiewicz, 2013; van de Ven, 2018). A preference for the failure of high-profile individuals has been called “Tall Poppy syndrome” and is measured by the Tall Poppy scale (Feather, 1989). Dislike for high achievers has been linked to lower self-esteem (Feather, 1989; Feather & McKee, 1993) and Dark Traits (Buckels et al., 2014; Greenier, 2021).

A non-empathetic emotion is schadenfreude (harm joy) (van de Ven, 2018). It is characterised by pleasure and self-satisfaction elicited in response to someone’s misfortune (Smith et al., 2009). A related emotion is gluckschmerz (luck pain) characterised by displeasure and dissatisfaction in response to someone’s good fortune (van de Ven, 2018). Such reactions may elicit online unpleasantness (Hornik et al., 2021, 2023), inhibit helping behaviour (Tscharaktschiew & Rudolph, 2016; Weisel & Böhm, 2015), or lead to cyber-bullying online (Villanueva-Moya et al., 2022).

Explanations of schadenfreude have focussed upon associated Emotions (e.g. Envy), Attributions (e.g. Deservingness) or Group Processes (e.g. Rivalry) (Smith et al., 2009; Wang et al., 2019). Each of these accounts tends to view schadenfreude as a positive emotion associated in some way with the restoration of balance (van de Ven, 2018): redressing injustice (Feather et al., 2011), the reduction of perceived advantage (Lange et al., 2016; Van Dijk et al., 2012) or the diminishment of an opponent’s status (Leach et al., 2015; Wei & Liu, 2020). As such they are associated with “levelling” behaviours (Cheng, 2020). A related construct occurring in response to imbalance is gluckschmerz (Smith & van Dijk, 2018). Gluckschmerz is a negative emotion associated with the creation of imbalance (van de Ven, 2018), but instead results from the furtherance of injustice (Feather & McKee, 2014), the increase of advantage (Hoogland et al., 2015), or the enhancement of a rival’s status (Cikara et al., 2014).

Gluckschmerz

Although more research has been devoted to schadenfreude, there has been growing interest in gluckschmerz – the non-empathetic reaction to another person’s success (Smith & van Dijk, 2018; van de Ven, 2018). A consideration of the relative strengths

of schadenfreude and gluckschmerz can potentially provide further insight into the mechanisms contributing to non-empathetic responses.

Reputation and Legal Consequences

Hitherto, accounts of schadenfreude have tended to focus upon a specific emotional response – namely a non-empathetic reaction to another person's misadventure (e.g. Feather et al., 2011). As such, this research falls short of understanding current technological and jurisdictional changes, specifically the reputation technologies that keep score of an individual's repute (Kollock, 1999). The internet now employs a variety of systems to monitor people's reputation. Academics have "h" indices. Influencers have "followers". Online commentators have "upvotes". In addition, many jurisdictions (e.g. UK, NZ, China) are now making specific forms of negative online communication illegal (e.g. Australian Government, 2021; European Union, 2022; New Zealand Legislation, 2015; UK Parliament, 2023), and the organisations hosting this content may now be liable if this content is not taken down promptly (e.g. Ong, 2015). For these reasons, the present study specifically examines factors influencing a willingness to support others.

The Present Study

The present study considered mechanisms associated with support (i.e. upvoting and donating) by eliciting reactions to wrong-doing: namely the plagiaristic behaviour of a professor in an academic institution. Explanations of schadenfreude and gluckschmerz (Smith et al., 2009; Wang et al., 2019) involve rivalry (Leach et al., 2003, 2015) and deservingness (Feather et al., 2011). It is therefore important to assess affective valence, attributions of deservingness, and indices of rivalry (Greenier, 2021). The present study considered emotional responses such as satisfaction and amusement (Crysel & Webster, 2018), levels of support (Cikara & Fiske, 2013; Havard & Theiss-Morse, 2023; Webster et al., 2024) and attributions of responsibility and fairness (Feather, 1989; Feather et al., 2013) as well as attitudes towards high profile individuals (Feather, 1989).

As online opprobrium directed towards specific individuals is illegal in some jurisdictions, the present paper examined responses to wrong-doing. Using the scenario of a dishonest professor, we examined emotions, attributions, and willingness to support. To assess non-empathetic reactions participants were asked to provide attributions associated with deservingness (fairness, responsibility), indicators of support or rivalry (willingness to upvote or donate), and ratings of emotions (satisfaction, amusement). When compared to the honest professor, for the dishonest failing professor schadenfreude was expected that would be characterised by emotions of amusement and satisfaction, attributions of fairness, and responsibility; and an unwillingness to upvote or donate in support. For the dishonest succeeding professor when compared to the honest professor,

gluckschmerz was expected, characterised by absences of amusement and satisfaction, reduced attributions of fairness and responsibility; and reduced willingness to upvote or donate in support. In addition, it was expected that a lack of support (as indicated by reduced willingness to upvote or donate), would be associated with negative attitudes towards high-profile individuals (as measured by the Tall Poppy scale), non-empathetic affect and attributions, and low self-esteem.

Method

Participants

There were 109 participants with a mean age of 29.84 (SE = 1.20) years. There were 53 (48.6%) male, 49 female (45.0%), 5 (4.6%) non-binary and 2 (1.8%) undisclosed participants. Participants had received 15.90 years of education (SE = 0.40). Participants were solicited from undergraduate psychology student noticeboards at our institution and an online noticeboard (Reddit) that is predominantly used by Westerners. The survey was presented in English, and as we used inferred consent, participants that did not complete appreciable amounts of the survey were excluded from analyses. There was no compensation for participation. The survey was available from 19th March to 10th September 2023.

Feather (1989) reported a significant effect of a “fall” upon respondent satisfaction of ($F(2,511) = 11.38, p < .001, \eta^2 = .04$) equating to a Cohen’s f of .20. There was also a significant effect of a “fall” upon ratings of ability of ($F(1,514) = 49.34, p < .001, \eta^2 = .09$) equating to a Cohen’s f of .31. According to Cohen (1988) a sample of 96 provides an 80% chance of detecting a Cohen’s f of .20 at the .05 level.

Materials

The questionnaire was hosted online using Qualtrics. Participants read a vignette describing a professor (‘Smith’). The vignette was presented online upon Qualtrics. The vignette manipulated outcome (success, failure) and context (original, plagiarised) by varying key phrases as follows:

“Smith” is a professor at a prestigious institution. “Smith” has (submitted an original grant application/plagiarised and submitted someone else’s grant application).

“Smith” (does/does not) get funded.

To evaluate the strength of emotional reactions, participants were asked how Amusing the outcome was, and how Satisfied they were with the outcome. To measure attributions of deservingness, participants were asked how Responsible “Smith” was for this outcome and how Fair they felt the outcome was. To evaluate support, participants were asked how willing they would be to Upvote and Donate to “Smith”

following the success or failure. Participants were asked to provide their responses on 5-point Likert scales (Very, Somewhat, Neutral, Not somewhat, Not very).

In addition, to document attitudes towards high achievers (Greenier, 2017), the questionnaire also included the Tall Poppy scale (Feather, 1989), and Decisional Self Esteem subscale of the Melbourne Decision Making Questionnaire (Mann et al., 1997). The Tall Poppy scale (Feather, 1989) is a 20 item questionnaire that assesses responses on a 7 point Likert scale. There are 10 questions in a Favour Reward scale that addresses a preference for high achievers to succeed, and 10 questions in a Favour Fall scale that indicate a preference for a high achiever to fail. Scores ranged from 10 to 70. For the present study, the Cronbach's alphas were .77 for the Favour Reward and .71 for the Favour Fall subscales. The Decisional Self-Esteem subscale of the Melbourne Decision-Making Questionnaire has 6 items scored on a 3 point scale. Scores range from 0 to 12. The scale had a Cronbach's alpha of .79 for the present sample. Data is available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Procedure. All procedures were conducted with approval from the institutional ethics committee. Participants completed an online survey hosted on Qualtrics. This experiment employed a Between Subjects design. Participants were randomly assigned to conditions. Participants were initially asked some demographic questions and then completed the Tall Poppy scale (Feather, 1989), followed by the vignette. Each participant saw just one version of the vignette. They read and then provided their reactions to the vignette in the order: Amusing; Satisfied; Responsible; Fair; Upvote; Donate. Finally, participants completed a Decisional Self Esteem subscale of the Melbourne Decision Making Questionnaire (Mann et al., 1997).

Results

A 2×2 Outcome (success/fail) by Context (original/plagiarised) Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) considered the ratings of Amusement, Satisfaction, Responsibility, Fairness, and willingness to Upvote and Donate and compared the relative strengths of reactions in terms of effect sizes. Schadenfreude was indicated within the Outcome by Context interaction.

There was a significant main effect of Outcome ($V = .215$, $F(6,101) = 4.616$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .22$). The combination of variables indicated that participants reacted differently to the professor's Success or Failure. Univariate analyses indicated that this was due to differences in Satisfaction ($F(1,106) = 7.889$, $p = .006$, $\eta^2 = .07$), Amusement ($F(1,106) = 4.074$, $p = .046$, $\eta^2 = .04$), and Fairness ($F(1,106) = 18.441$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .15$). Participants found the professor's failure more satisfying ($M = 2.93$, $SE = 0.16$), amusing ($M = 2.25$, $SE = 0.18$), and fair ($M = 3.41$, $SE = 0.16$), than his success (satisfying $M = 2.30$, $SE = 0.16$; amusing $M = 1.72$, $SE = 0.18$; fair $M = 2.45$, $SE = 0.16$).

There was also a significant main effect of Context ($V = .434$, $F(6,101) = 12.913$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .43$). Participants responded differently to a professor that plagiarised. Univariate analyses indicated that this was due to significant differences in

Amusement. ($F(1,106) = 7.966, p = .006, \eta^2 = .07$), and Fairness ($F(1,106) = 4.277, p = .041, \eta^2 = .04$) as well as changes in willingness to support. A plagiarising professor was considered more amusing ($M = 2.35, SE = 0.16$), but less fair ($M = 2.70, SE = 0.14$) than a professor submitting original work (amusing $M = 1.62, SE = 0.21$; fair $M = 3.16, SE = 0.18$). Participants were significantly less likely to upvote ($M = 1.52, SE = 0.15$) ($F(1,106) = 30.933, p < .001, \eta^2 = .23$), or donate ($M = 1.15, SE = 0.12$) ($F(1,106) = 12.364, p = .001, \eta^2 = .10$), to support a plagiarising professor than a professor submitting original work (upvote $M = 2.91, SE = 0.20$, donate $M = 1.83, SE = 0.16$).

Emotions

Schadenfreude manifest within the Outcome by Context interaction. The significant Outcome by Context ($V = .541, F(6,101) = 19.809, p < .001, \eta^2 = .54$) indicated that participants viewed the professor's failure differently when they plagiarised. There were significant univariate differences in Satisfaction ($F(1,106) = 95.751, p < .001, \eta^2 = .48$) and Amusement ($F(1,106) = 29.043, p < .001, \eta^2 = .22$) (see [Figure 1](#)) showing participants reacted emotionally to the outcome of the professor's transgressions.

Satisfaction. The significant interaction involving Satisfaction may be seen in [Figure 1](#). The simple main effect of Context indicated significant dissatisfaction and gluckschmerz when the plagiarising professor was successful ($F(1,106) = 51.429, p < .001, \eta^2 = .33$) (see [Table 1](#)). When the professor was unsuccessful, the simple main effect of Context also indicated significant satisfaction and schadenfreude ($F(1,106) = 44.449, p < .001, \eta^2 = .30$).

Amusement. Participants were amused with the plagiarising professor's failure. These interactions were decomposed by testing the simple main effect of Context at each level of Outcome. For Amusement, the simple main effect of Context for the original professor's success approached significance ($F(1,106) = 3.294, p = .072, \eta^2 = .03$). As may be seen in [Figure 1](#), it was not particularly amusing when the plagiarising professor succeeded. However, there was schadenfreude and significant amusement when the plagiarising professor failed.

($F(1,106) = 33.717, p < .001, \eta^2 = .24$).

Attributions

Plagiarism elicited attributions of injustice and deservingness. There were significant Outcome by Context interactions for Responsibility ($F(1,106) = 24.637, p < .001, \eta^2 = .19$) and Fairness ($F(1,106) = 96.085, p < .001, \eta^2 = .48$). As may be seen in [Figure 1](#), the plagiarising professor was deemed responsible for his failure, and it was considered unfair for the plagiarising professor to be successful (see [Figure 1](#)). To

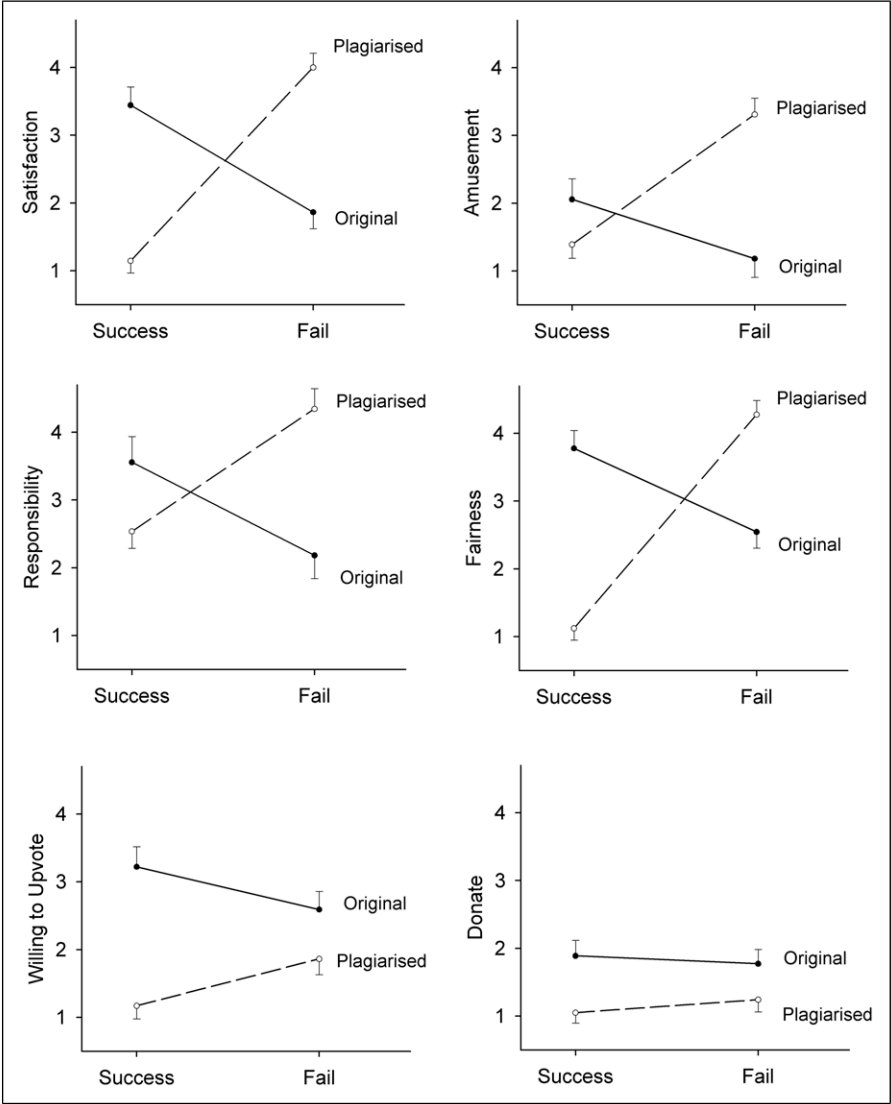


Figure 1. Reactions to a professor’s plagiarism varies as a function of his success and failure. Higher scores reflect greater Satisfaction, Amusement, Responsibility, Fairness, Willingness to Upvote or Donate. Error bars are one standard error.

Table 1. Size of Effects as η^2 Provided for Univariate Interactions, as Well as the Simple Effects of Plagiarism and Mean Differences for Each Level of Outcome: Failure = Schadenfreude; and Success = Gluckschmerz

Effect	Interaction	Failure schadenfreude	Mean difference	Success gluckschmerz	Mean difference
Multivariate	$F(6,101) = 19.809$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .541$				
Univariate					
Satisfaction	$F(1,106) = 95.751$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .48$	Simple main effect $F(1,106) = 44.449$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .30$	2.136 (0.32)	Simple main effect $F(1,106) = 51.429$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .33$	-2.298 (0.32)
Amusement	$F(1,106) = 29.043$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .22$	$F(1,106) = 33.717$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .24$	2.129 (0.367)	$F(1,106) = 3.294$, $p = .072$, $\eta^2 = .03$	-0.665 (0.367)
Responsibility	$F(1,106) = 24.637$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .19$	$F(1,106) = 22.770$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .18$	2.163 (0.453)	$F(1,106) = 5.053$, $p = .027$, $\eta^2 = .05$	-1.019 (0.453)
Fairness	$F(1,106) = 96.085$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .48$	$F(1,106) = 29.910$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .22$	1.730 (0.316)	$F(1,106) = 70.450$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .40$	-2.656 (0.316)
Upvote	$F(1,106) = 7.000$, $p = .009$, $\eta^2 = .06$	$F(1,106) = 4.252$, $p = .042$, $\eta^2 = .04$	-0.729 (0.353)	$F(1,106) = 33.680$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .24$	-2.151 (0.353)
Donation	$F(1,106) = 0.627$, $p = .43$, $\eta^2 = .01$	$F(1,106) = 3.712$, $p = .057$, $\eta^2 = .03$	-0.531 (0.276)	$F(1,106) = 9.279$, $p = .003$, $\eta^2 = .08$	-0.840 (0.276)

determine the locus of this interaction, tests of simple main effects of Context were conducted at each level of Outcome.

Responsibility. The significant interaction involving Responsibility may be seen in Figure 1. The simple main effect of Plagiarism indicated significant attributions of deservingness when the plagiarising professor failed ($F(1,106) = 22.770, p < .001, \eta^2 = .18$). Participants felt that the plagiarising professor was responsible for their own failure (see Figure 1). Likewise, participants deemed the professor not responsible for their plagiarised success. The simple main effect of context indicated people attributed significantly less responsibility when the plagiarising professor succeeded ($F(1,106) = 5.053, p = .027, \eta^2 = .05$) (see Table 1).

Fairness. Strong reactions of unfairness emerged in response to the professor's plagiarism. The significant interaction involving Fairness may be seen in Figure 1. The simple main effect of Plagiarism indicated significant attributions of unfairness when the plagiarised professor succeeded ($F(1,106) = 70.450, p < .001, \eta^2 = .40$). Participants found the plagiarised success undeserved. Participants also found it significantly fairer when the plagiarised professor failed ($F(1,106) = 29.910, p < .001, \eta^2 = .22$).

Support

It was thought that rivalry would be indicated by variations in the level of support within Outcome by Context interactions. There was a significant univariate interaction for willingness to Upvote ($F(1,106) = 7.000, p = .009, \eta^2 = .06$) (see Figure 1), but not for willingness to Donate ($F(1,106) = 0.627, p = .43, \eta^2 = .01$).

To decompose this interaction, simple main effects of the effect of Context at each level of Outcome were examined. Levels of support for the plagiarising professor were significantly less ($F(1,106) = 33.680, p < .001, \eta^2 = .24$) when they succeeded, indicating a degree of *gluckschmerz*. However, this effect was smaller when the plagiarising professor was unsuccessful ($F(1,106) = 4.252, p = .042, \eta^2 = .04$) (see Table 1).

Table 2 shows Pearson correlation coefficients between a willingness to upvote or donate and Tall Poppy scores. There were significant correlations between Favour Reward scores and a willingness to upvote ($r = .276, n = 109, p < .01$) or donate ($r = .441, n = 109, p < .001$) and support the professor. People that favoured the reward of high achievers were more likely to support the professor.

Two indicators of support for the professor were considered: willingness to upvote; and willingness to donate. Multiple regression was used to examine variables associated with support. The predictors in the regression equations were: (1) Favour Reward scores; (2) Favour Fall scores; (3) Decisional Self-Esteem; (4) Outcome (success or fail); (5) Plagiarism; (6) Amusement; (7) Satisfaction; (8) attributions of Responsibility; (9) attributions of Fairness. For these analyses SPSS performed a list-wise deletion of cases when there were missing variables (i.e. Tall Poppy or Decisional

Table 2. Relationships Between Affective Valence, Attributions, Support, and Tall Poppy Scores (Pearson Correlation Coefficients)

	Favour Reward	Favour Fall	DSE	Amusement	Satisfaction	Responsibility	Fairness	Willingness to Upvote	Willingness to Donate
Favour reward	1								
Favour fall	-.408**	1							
Decisional self- esteem	.247*	-.291**	1						
				.068	.157	-.052	.119	.276**	.441**
			-.291**	.140	-.030	.051	-.027	-.176	-.161
				-.029	.041	-.120	-.004	.150	.086

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

Table 3. Predictors of Upvote and Support

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p
Favour reward	.011	.008	.130	1.474	.144
Favour fall	.001	.009	.014	.159	.874
DSE	.008	.040	.017	.207	.837
Success/failure	-.098	.264	-.035	-.371	.712
Plagiarism	-1.624	.273	-.554	-5.953	<.001
Amusement	.001	.092	.001	.010	.992
Satisfaction	.718	.191	.814	3.759	<.001
Responsibility	-.034	.085	-.039	-.394	.695
Fairness	-.404	.203	-.468	-1.995	.049

Self Esteem scores). According to Gpower a multiple regression with 9 independent variables and a sample of $n = 95$, has an 80% chance of detecting a medium effect of f^2 of .18 at a .05 level of significance.

There was a reluctance to upvote ($M = 1.98$, $SE = 0.14$) overall to support the professor. Multiple regression was employed to determine which study variables predicted a willingness to upvote. Multiple regression explained a significant proportion of the variance in upvoting ($R^2 = 44\%$) ($F(9,85) = 9.267$, $p < .001$) (see Table 3). Predictors with non-zero slopes (see Table 2) were plagiarism ($t(85) = -5.953$, $p < .001$), satisfaction ($t(85) = 3.759$, $p < .001$), and fairness ($t(85) = -1.995$, $p = .049$). Upvoting was more likely when the professor had not plagiarised, people were satisfied with the outcome, or felt that it was unfair.

Nor were participants particularly willing overall to donate to support the professor ($M = 1.42$, $SE = 0.10$). Multiple regression explained a significant ($F(9,85) = 6.040$, $p < .001$) proportion of ($R^2 = 32.5\%$) of the variance in participants' willingness to donate. Significant predictors may be seen in Table 4. Participants were more willing to donate when they had higher Favour Reward scores, ($t(85) = 4.499$, $p < .001$), were

Table 4. Predictors of a Willingness to Donate and Support

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p
Favour reward	.026	.006	.435	4.499	<.001
Favour fall	.007	.007	.101	1.016	.313
DSE	-.015	.030	-.044	-.485	.629
Success/Failure	-.014	.202	-.007	-.067	.946
Plagiarism	-.797	.209	-.390	-3.817	<.001
Amusement	-.012	.071	-.019	-.175	.861
Satisfaction	.331	.146	.540	2.266	.026
Responsibility	.006	.065	.011	.097	.923
Fairness	-.227	.155	-.378	-1.465	.146

satisfied with the outcome ($t(85) = 2.266, p = .026$) and the professor had not plagiarised ($t(85) = -3.817, p < .001$).

Discussion

The present study sought to understand online evaluation, arguing that effect sizes would be greatest for those mechanisms most directly involved in driving participants' reactions. People approved of the professor's failure, they disapproved of the professor as a plagiarist and the strongest effects were those reactions of dissatisfaction and unfairness at the success of the plagiarising professor. As unfairness and dissatisfaction were strong responses, these findings indicate the salience of attributions and emotions as important facets of *schadenfreude*.

Emotions and attributions seemed to feature more strongly in *schadenfreude* than indications of support. The effect sizes for the relevant interactions involving emotion or attribution (satisfaction, fairness) were both large ($\eta^2 = .48$). Whereas the effect size for rivalry and upvoting was small ($\eta^2 = .06$). There was little willingness to upvote professors in any condition, indicating dislike (Greenier, 2021). As we asked participants whether they would "upvote" or "donate" to support an academic, and their average ratings were below the mid-range, this indicated that they were unwilling to upvote or donate. This is strong evidence for "Tall Poppy Syndrome".

For ethical reasons the present study measured a willingness to "upvote" and interpreted lower scores as downvotes. An alternative interpretation could be that a reduced willingness to upvote indicated apathy. The number of required ratings and their fixed order of presentation may have produced a response bias. In the online environment voting is optional. Not everyone posts or votes (Preece et al., 2004). However, as there are links between occupation and socio-economic status (Fujishiro et al., 2010), it is more likely that people may feel that professors do not require further support.

Explanations invoking Deservingness suggest that *schadenfreude* occurs because an inequity or an injustice has been resolved and the balance of transactions restored. Gluckschmerz (luck pain) is the negative emotion experienced when someone witnesses a high-profile individual succeeding (Smith & van Dijk, 2018; van de Ven, 2018). Gluckschmerz is considered to result from the creation of further imbalance, inequity or injustice (van de Ven, 2018).

However, as we argued to interpret findings in terms of effect sizes, it is important to note that there was appreciably more gluckschmerz and outrage in reaction to the successful plagiarist than there was *schadenfreude* and approval in response to the plagiarist getting his comeuppance and just desserts (Greenier, 2021) (see Table 1). If there is an informal balance of transactions that serves to maintain social order (Baumard et al., 2013), then it seems the more important response is the reaction to evidence that the social order has been violated (Pietraszkiewicz, 2013). Society relies upon principles such as reputation to establish precedence and maintain order. Indeed, there are indications that people monitor such transactions (Giardini et al., 2022; Manrique et al., 2021; Wu et al., 2016). And while people might find the restoration of balance satisfying and amusing with effect sizes ranging from .18 to .30, suggestions

that the system was flawed elicited greater responses with effect sizes ranging from .33 to .40. It seems that *schadenfreude* associated with proof that the system actually works may not be as important as *gluckschmerz* and concern that the system may sadly not be working.

Upvoting was of specific interest as it is potentially a behavioural measure reifying social support. The present study found lower upvoting rates (implying downvoting) were associated with dissatisfaction and perceived unfairness. Evidence of wrongdoing (i.e. plagiarism) contributed to downvoting and a reduced willingness to donate. Indeed a big-data study of downvoting and exclusion [Cheng et al. \(2014\)](#) found that a failure to conform to a group's identity led to the discussion board user being banned.

Interactions involving upvoting were not as strong, and argued that rivalry was not a strong contributor to *schadenfreude*. However, in actual cases of plagiarising professors (e.g. David Robinson) it seems that rivalry may also have contributed to the discovery and reporting of plagiarism ([Rodan, 2004](#)). This could be interpreted as people feeling professors do not require support, but elicit outrage when dishonest. However, it is likely that the activities of unpopular professors may be monitored more closely by the public and denounced in situations where inappropriate ([Greenier, 2015](#)). Although there was a noted unwillingness to upvote professors, the effect size suggested there could be a strong tendency to downvote a dishonest professor ($\eta^2 = .24$) implying that rivalry should not be dismissed as a contributing factor. Indeed, these effects are potentially likely to be greater when an audience has more involvement on an issue.

The multiple regression in the present study indicated that a preference for the reward of high achievers predicted a willingness to donate and support them. This implies that some individuals approve of a shared reputation system, appreciate "elitism" and have a vested interest in high achievement. Such an observation is in keeping with claims that organisations may support senior staff, and turn a blind eye to "irregularities" ([Eaton et al., 2024](#); [Martin, 2008](#)). Whereas higher status individuals that do not inspire, and are not trusted, are allowed to fall ([Eaton et al., 2024](#)). Such observations are also in keeping with observations that "disliking" can be a contributing factor in non-empathetic responses (e.g. [Feather & Mckee, 2014](#); [Greenier, 2021](#)).

While there are formal systems operating on the internet that monitor reputation ([Kollock, 1999](#)), higher status individuals are also subjected to informal surveillance ([Giardini et al., 2022](#); [Manrique et al., 2021](#); [Wu et al., 2016](#)). Instead of analysing *schadenfreude* and *gluckschmerz* as socially unacceptable emotions, the present paper has identified the functions of *schadenfreude* and *gluckschmerz* as reactions to a violation of a system monitoring social precedence ([Pietraszkiewicz, 2013](#)). High status individuals are expected to behave in a manner consistent with their status or risk censure ([Anderson & Shirako, 2008](#)). Otherwise, higher status individuals may not be supported by their followers ([Eaton et al., 2024](#)).

In the present milieu the activities of prominent figures may be a matter of public record. Indeed, with the Internet of Things developing apace ([Simmers & Anandarajan, 2018](#)), this may be the case for us all in the near future, however this lack of privacy is

already well developed for higher-profile individuals. As the internet documents (Joinson, 2008; Tong, 2013), and keeps score (Cheng et al., 2014) it is becoming more difficult to embellish details that are now recorded fact. Instead, people seeking to embellish their resumes need to focus upon and enhance less well documented aspects of their careers (Guillory & Hancock, 2012). Or in an era of misinformation tell their lies frequently and often in an effort to convince the internet as scoring referee (Lam et al., 2006). Unfortunately, this seems to be one unfortunate consequence of the democratisation of the internet.

Attitudes towards higher achievers varies across cultures (Feather, 1998; Feather & McKee 1993; Phillips et al., 2022, 2023). It seems that cultures with a more collectivist orientation (e.g. China, Japan, Korea) (Nisbett et al., 2001; Varnum et al., 2010) are less tolerant of high achievers than more independently orientated cultures such as the USA (Feather, 1998; Feather & McKee, 1993). This suggests that some online transgressions are more likely to be tolerated in countries such as the USA (Feather, 1998), and more likely to be censured in others such as China (Phillips et al., 2022). Given that the common humanity can now register their say online anonymously (Santana, 2014, 2019) this poses a greater risk for individuals that are vulnerable (Phillips et al., 2023) in specific jurisdictions. Regrettably, in some cases such online harassment has contributed to suicides (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010; Phillips et al., 2019).

Conclusion

Emotions and attributions seem to be key components of online outrage, but the stronger reaction of gluckschmerz occurred in response to successful wrong-doing. While rivalries did not appear to be a major factor contributing to schadenfreude, it may still play an important role in monitoring and reporting dishonesty. It seems reactions were greater to the transgression of accepted standards of behaviour than any perceived righting of wrongs.

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ORCID iD

J. G. Phillips  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3125-4009>

Ethical Considerations

The study was approved by the ethics committee of Auckland University of Technology (AUTEK 23/59). Participation was informed and completely anonymous, and consent was inferred from completion of the questionnaire.

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Data Availability Statement

Data is available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. Data associated with this manuscript is available from <https://osf.io/rq6wt/>

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Author Biographies

J. G. Phillips is currently an adjunct Associate Professor at Auckland University of Technology. He did his undergraduate training at Adelaide University (honours thesis with Dr. Doug Vickers) and completed his PhD at Flinders University (supervised by Dr. Denis Glencross). After doing some post-doctoral work with Professor George Stelmach on Parkinsons Disease and balance in the elderly he worked for a year at Bendigo College of Advanced Education. From 1990 to 2010 he worked at the Psychology Department at Monash University.

C. Erik Landhuis is currently a Senior Lecturer at Auckland University of Technology. He did his PhD at University of Auckland and post-doctoral work at University of Otago. His research has previously considered obesity, quality of life and the impact of media on social and cognitive development, but he is currently interested in mental health stigma, pseudoscience, strange beliefs, and conspiracy theories.

Jay Wood is a social psychologist. His research explores social influence and the cognitive processes underlying social behaviour. His research addresses theories of attitude change, and how and when attitudes shape our actions. He is also interested in how characteristics of persuasive messages and cognitive biases affect attitudinal processes. Recently, he has been involved in projects that apply basic social psychological principles to practical issues, such the effects that architecture and the built environment have on our behaviour. He is currently investigating the various factors that impact the social and cognitive bases of the beliefs that we hold.