FROM HERO TO OUTCAST: THE RHETORIC OF SCHADENFREUDE

AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my incredible family. First, this is for my wonderful husband, Rob. Thank you for supporting me every single day, in both big ways and small. Also, this is for my three fantastic kids: Cale, Gillian, and Conlan. You patiently waited while I was at school or was absentmindedly thinking of other things. I love you from here to the moon and back. This is also for my parents because they always pushed me towards the complicated and messy, but ultimately more satisfying, answers. Finally, this is for Kay, who embodies the term “unconditional love.”
ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

From Hero to Outcast: The Rhetoric of Schadenfreude and its Implications

by
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Media outlets across the United States have long relied upon stories covering disgraced celebrities. The prevalence and popularity of these types of stories is difficult to deny, though very little rhetorical analysis has been dedicated to their structure, significance, or effect upon audiences. Through the lens of generic criticism, this thesis analyzes the media’s portrayal and audience reaction to the fallen celebrity. Close examination provides evidence that the fallen celebrity narrative can be best understood through a genre of schadenfreude. The German concept of Schadenfreude provides a suitable frame for identifying and understanding coverage relating to disgraced media stars in that it explains the prevalence of rhetoric evoking envy, justice, and vilification.

Analysis of editorial coverage, published on the Internet and in widely read news papers, of the Lance Armstrong scandal provide evidence of similar characteristics, arguments, and judgments. This thesis proposes that the genre of schadenfreude thrives in modern capitalistic societies because of the audience’s ambivalence regarding its promise of equal opportunity for all. Celebrities both personify the promise of capitalism and provoke more uncomfortable emotions, such as envy, in the audience. The genre of schadenfreude functions as a balm, offering relief from the discomfort roused by negative comparisons between celebrity and audience. A more harmful byproduct of the genre of schadenfreude is its power to mask underlying social problems by encouraging the scapegoating process.
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CHAPTER 1
FROM HERO TO OUTCAST: THE RHETORIC OF
SCHADENFREUDE AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

*The man who is delighted by others misfortunes is identical to the man who envies others’ prosperity. For anyone who is pained by the occurrence or existence of a given thing must be pleased by that thing’s non-existence or destruction.*

--Aristotle
*The Art of Rhetoric*

A visit to any grocery store’s checkout aisle confirms the ever-increasing prevalence of textual media designed to arouse audience delight in celebrity downfall. In fact, the mass production and consumption of rhetoric featuring disgraced celebrities can be viewed as its own category of entertainment. In venues from reality television shows featuring celebrities in rehabilitation centers to tabloid exposure of various indiscretions, celebrities have long provided material for these types of stories. The trajectory from national hero to villain is a familiar staple, regularly consumed by the public. Its consideration offers the opportunity to glean insights into the anxieties and desires of contemporary society’s significance of celebrities as texts has already exposed the intersection between celebrity figures and their reflection of society at large. In *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture*, David Marshall has revealed the elevated space celebrities occupy within the culture’s psyche. They dominate a sphere of influence within society, representing distinct preferences and desires. “The celebrity is the independent individual par excellence: he or she represents the meaning of freedom and accessibility in a culture…. Celebrities reinforce the conception that there are no barriers in contemporary culture that the individual cannot overcome” (247).

In a capitalistic society, celebrities personify and reinforce the promise of the “American Dream.” Considering the importance of celebrities within our culture, what is the rhetorical significance of media intended to evoke antipathy for celebrities who badly stumble over “barriers?” This study extends analysis of celebrity as text by rhetorically examining the fallen celebrity as sign within the context of its meaning to society. A generic analysis of media attention concerning celebrated cyclist Lance Armstrong’s steroid use
confession offers an opportunity to extend the insights culled from the analysis of celebrity as sign.

Lance Armstrong’s confession garnered continuous negative media attention, transforming his image from hero to villain. Though unsurprising in their narrative scope or trajectory, these portrayals revealed a fascinating hunger for a genre of rhetoric that functioned to denigrate and denounce the offender. The media’s portrayal of Lance Armstrong stoked *schadenfreude*, or a shameful pleasure in the audience caused by accounts of his suffering.

The commonalities among editorials relating to Armstrong’s confession allow us to consider the following questions: Can this type of rhetoric be classified as a genre? What is the exigence for this type of rhetoric and what need is it fulfilling within the audience? What are the social consequences to this type of rhetoric? Celebrities enjoy power, status, and wealth, often arousing envy in the consuming public. A paradox emerges; the celebrity is glorified and degraded, loved and hated. The media satisfies audience demand by elevating celebrities to their high status. Inversely, media are often eager to savor celebrity downfall. This inverted narrative also gratifies the audience’s expectations and appetite in that it provides evidence of an egalitarian and just society. Underscoring the humbled celebrity’s transgressions and punishment solidifies observers’ belief in the system of rewards and punishments. In fact, negative celebrity coverage has become conventional enough to spawn its own arm of research. One such study has shown that as the status of a celebrity increased, so too did the likelihood the story would involve the celebrity's misfortune (Smith “The Joy of Pain”, 116). The purpose of this study is to rhetorically analyze editorial coverage of Lance Armstrong’s downfall through the lens of generic criticism in an attempt to better understand the exigence for this type of rhetoric and its structure in relationship to the audience. The concept of *schadenfreude* is discussed as a means for understanding the underpinnings of Armstrong’s coverage. Finally, conclusions about this type of rhetoric will be discussed.

**METHOD OF ANALYSIS**

Generic criticism is useful in this type of pursuit because it offers an avenue for arriving at a rhetorical understanding of social action, and its social consequences,
limitations, and underpinnings. As Carolyn Miller has explained, genre is a practical tool that allows for “a point of connection between intention and effect, an aspect of social action” (153). In other words, genre analysis permits critics to see beyond the text’s form and ostensible purpose to its underlying motivations and consequences.

More recently, Joshua Gunn has argued that generic criticism should not be overlooked as a worthwhile method for understanding the rhetorical work of a set of texts. As he explains, generic criticism remains compelling, relevant, and significant because it is capable of capturing society’s “psychological status.” Genres expose the “collective, mental space of a community or audience.” The essence of what typically resides within the audience’s collective mental life is brought forth through the analysis of common elements that join what is “rhetorically possible” in particular situations. By identifying the rhetorical similarities and functions of a set of texts, the critic is able to access and assess socially constructed beliefs, patterns, and forms (4). Miller reminds genre critics that this type of analysis is a useful principle of classification for discourse, but should also have some grounding in the conventions of rhetorical practice, including the ways actual rhetors and audiences have of comprehending the discourse they use and its “implications” (152). Miller concludes that genre analysis must comprise:

A large-scale type of rhetorical action that acquires meaning from situation and social context in which the situation arose. It’s interpretable by means of rules. It is different from form because it fuses many lower-level forms and characteristic substance. Genres help constitute the substance of our cultural life.

A genre is a rhetorical means for mediating private intentions and social exigence; it motivates by connecting the private with the public, the singular with the recurrent. (163)

In essence, both Miller and Gunn encourage critics to leave a restrictive view of genre that limits criticism to examining forms and rules. Instead, they urge using these elements as signposts, devices for exploring larger purposes and roles that genres play in formulating social cohesion and understanding. Forms and rules are not interesting or relevant when isolated, but when analyzed in tandem with context, they provide a dependable map with which to explore the collective psyche. In order to identify generic commonalities and shared features and functions of a genre, this paper will examine Lance Armstrong’s rhetorical treatment in online editorials published in national outlets. As already discussed, Armstrong’s media coverage provides a worthwhile avenue of investigation, not because it is
unusual, but rather because it typifies (in an extreme sense) a trope that has become a staple within the media. Armstrong’s media coverage raises a number of interesting rhetorical issues. What is the exigence for this type of rhetoric and how does it fulfill the needs of its audience? What are the shared features and elements organizing this type of rhetoric? What motivates rhetors and audiences to rewrite, renew, and reestablish these types of tropes?

In the following sections, I suggest that the German concept of schadenfreude proves useful in identifying and understanding the production and consumption of rhetoric related to disgraced media stars. The pleasure the audience takes from the celebrity’s humiliation alleviates some of the discomfort that comes from envy and dissatisfaction with economic inequalities within our society. Celebrities fulfill the role of hero that deities, royalty, and saints formerly occupied. They personify the aspirations of capitalism’s greatest promise. Though we envy celebrities and the power they enjoy, we also look to them as symbols of the “American Dream.” Though celebrity serves an important function, the individual celebrity is disposable. In times of tension and crisis, an individual celebrity will be expelled from society, so that it may continue to believe in the narrative of the “American Dream.”

**LANCE ARMSTRONG**

So it's official – @lancearmstrong is the worst lying, doping cheat in the history of the sport.

--TV host Piers Morgan, via Twitter

This tweet and cartoon (Figure 1) epitomize the media’s reaction to Lance Armstrong’s sensational Oprah Winfrey television confession. By 2013, Lance Armstrong had risen to the highest level of fame as the first seven-time winner of the grueling Tour de France (“Lance Armstrong” Bio.com). His story was astonishing because of two phenomenal triumphs. He first beat cancer and then became the world’s most celebrated and recognizable cyclist. In 1996, after only a handful of professional victories, Armstrong was diagnosed with testicular cancer that spread to his brain and lungs. Though cancer is often terminal, Armstrong dramatically trounced the disease. In 1997, after aggressive treatment, his doctors declared Armstrong cancer-free. Shortly after this astounding reversal, Armstrong created a foundation in his own name. Its mission was to raise money and awareness for cancer survivors and inspire hope in the millions of people affected by cancer each year. The popularity and prevalence of celebrities and non-celebrities wearing his foundation’s yellow
wristbands stamped with the LIVESTRONG logo offered convincing evidence that the public identified with Armstrong’s battle and vision.

His second incredible triumph came after his reversal of health. Armstrong returned to cycling in 1998, securing major sponsors and won enough races to officially dominate the sport of cycling. A media darling, Armstrong’s widely recognized face was seemingly everywhere: supporting his LIVESTRONG foundation and promoting numerous products through endorsement deals. He regularly appeared in popular media stories concerning his divorce, relationship with Sheryl Crow, and denying accusations made by his teammates on the U.S. Postal Service Pro Cycling Team. He reached the highest level of fame a professional athlete can, joining the ranks of Muhammad Ali, Babe Ruth, Mike Tyson, Michael Jordan, and Tiger Woods. He permanently retired in 2011, amid rampant allegations of illicit performance-enhancing drug use. The United States Anti-Doping Agency (USADA) announced that Armstrong faced a lifetime ban from competition. He was also stripped him every title he had won since 1998. Throughout it all, Armstrong vehemently denied using steroids and routinely sued anyone who accused him of using banned substances in order to enhance his performance.
In January of 2013, Armstrong confessed to Oprah Winfrey and millions of viewers what critics had long suspected: he had used forbidden performance enhancing drugs in order to gain an edge during his now infamous Tour de France wins. Though Armstrong apologized and labeled himself “as deeply flawed” and “a bully,” editorials, tweets, and cartoons following the January 2013 admission scrutinized and criticized every aspect of his confession and apology. Though disgust and denunciation characterized the social consciousness, the appetite for articles rehashing his lapses appeared insatiable. A symbiotic relationship of production and consumption of Lance Armstrong lasted for several weeks. The vast majority of editorials crowding every media outlet condemned, admonished, and rehashed the details of Armstrong’s misdeeds in the world of cycling. While Armstrong’s behavior shocked society, many aspects of his story were familiar: an iconic and extraordinary sport’s hero broke the rules, lying about his transgressions and exposing himself as a fraud. Though Armstrong’s transformation from hero to villain was exceptionally conspicuous, his was a narrative that had played itself out within the media countless times.

**SCHADENFREUDE**

The German word *schadenfreude* describes the complex, and frankly shameful, feeling of joy experienced because of someone else's misfortune. Nietzsche, one of the first in the modern period to address the peculiarities of *schadenfreude*, categorized the emotion as “a passive, indirect, and opportunistic way to gain pleasure from others’ suffering” (qtd. in Spears and Leach 338). *Schadenfreude* differs from a malicious desire to create suffering in another person. There is no active involvement in creating the person’s pain. Rather, the emotion of envy, suspicions of hypocrisy, and concerns of justice fuel *schadenfreude*. The discourse following a scandalized celebrity reflects these motivations and can be understood

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1 A survey of the editorials regarding Armstrong provided rare examples of alternative approaches to the rhetoric defining Armstrong. For instance, Jonathan Mahler’s editorial “Lance Armstrong’s Confession is Just the Start” urges the audience to “move beyond the sanctimony and outrage and proceed with a more sensible conversation about drugs and sports.” Rather than chronicling Armstrong’s transgressions, Mahler chides the industry for failing to recognize the industry’s obvious and widespread culture of drug abuse, while tracing cycling’s history of drug use, grueling nature, and the unrealistic demands of the audience.
as a genre of *schadenfreude*. Though the emotion of *schadenfreude* is not socially desirable, or even acknowledged, it offers a structure in which to understand the widespread interest, coverage, and tone of the rhetoric following Armstrong’s fall and other examples of this type of event. This study will present research findings regarding the causes and characteristics of the *schadenfreude*, illustrate connections between the research findings and editorials castigating Armstrong, and utilize a rhetorical approach to genre in order to consider the ramifications of media coverage of Lance Armstrong published immediately after his infamous confession. Finally, the implications of the rhetoric of *schadenfreude* will be explored.

Russell Spears and Colin Leach, social psychologists and the principal current researchers of *schadenfreude*, found evidence to support Nietzsche’s theory of *ressentiment*, an unhealthy emotional state created from the bitter feeling produced by envy. Their research revealed that an individual is necessarily un-aware of any desire, or intentional involvement, in the objects suffering. Those who experience *schadenfreude* have not taken an active role, but rather act as pleasure seeking bystanders: “We do not work to obtain it: it simply falls into our hands, as a fruit of passivity” (Spears and Leach 337). Empirical research, conducted by social scientists, reveals that *schadenfreude* flourishes under certain conditions. Recent findings clearly support earlier scholarly claims about the emotion and its root causes: envy, hypocrisy, and deservingness (Smith *et al.* “Envy and Schadenfreude”; Van Dijk *et al.* “Impact of Responsibility”; Spears & Leach “Intergroup Schadenfreude”; Smith *et al.* “Exploring the When”).

Envy nourishes negative feelings regarding self-worth, creating unpleasant feelings about status within a group. *Schadenfreude* can act as an anecdote to these painful feelings of inferiority, providing relief from the distressing emotion. Key aspects of our emotional lives are determined by comparisons to others, and findings suggest that a misfortune befalling an envied individual is likely to fuel *schadenfreude*, rather than pity or sympathy. Envy is comprised of several feelings, such as dislike and resentment. These emotions can work independently or overlap to produce a feeling of *schadenfreude* (Smith *et al.* “Exploring the

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2 For a more detailed analysis of the philosophical implications of *schadenfreude*, see John Portman’s work, *When Bad Things Happen to Other People*.
Envy is a common emotion, though we often deny experiencing it. Admitting to envy is to admit that we feel inadequate in comparison to others. A misfortune befalling the source of an individual’s envy provides relief by reversing the offending comparison (Smith et al. 1996, 159). It is for this reason that the feeling of schadenfreude increases when an unpleasant self-assessment generates a sense of inferiority. While celebrities are worshipped as icons of success, they are also scrutinized for evidence that they are unworthy of their success. The rhetoric of schadenfreude transforms the negative comparison into a feeling of superiority, while also providing an opportunity for the audience to vent its ambivalence towards a system that mythologizes and rewards the relatively few.

Capitalism promises a system that rewards the most deserving members of society. In actuality, social biases regarding race, gender, and economic status complicate many individuals’ chances to fulfill the “American Dream.” Celebrity lore perpetuates the myth that through sheer grit, good looks, talent, determination, or even luck, an individual can succeed to the highest levels of achievement in society. That celebrities are often admired, or even deified, by the public is a manifestation of this dream. Yet, this type of attention often leads to unpleasant comparisons between the audience and celebrity, resulting in feelings of low self-regard. In some sense, celebrities provide concrete illustrations of capitalism’s incentives and consequences, acting as both the carrot and stick. While they offer exciting windows into lives of privilege and power, their images come at a cost, leading to upward and unfavorable comparisons that result in uncomfortable feeling such as envy. Thus, when a celebrity is universally judged unworthy of society’s esteem, the emotion of schadenfreude offers much needed release from the painful, though often unrecognized, negative feelings produced by the social inequities.

A second important element of schadenfreude is the belief in the individual’s deservingness. The idea of deservingness assists the group in reconciling the powerful and shameful emotion of schadenfreude by providing a feeling of personal justification. This idea is important because it allows the subject to believe the emotion of schadenfreude is unrelated to self-interest. Rather, the subject is free to believe that the suffering adheres to the standard of justice and equality (Smith et al. “Exploring the When”, 536). Research has also shown that the more a group believes the object’s suffering is appropriate, the greater the strength of the emotion of schadenfreude. Just as the justice system operates with a
framework of harsher punishments for greater offenses, social group’s crave severe
punishment when an individual’s transgression appear acute. *Schadenfreude* is not an
emotion acknowledged within the justice system, but operates upon the same belief that the
guilty should be punished. When an individual is socially punished, the group often
experiences greater levels of *schadenfreude*, as the pain experienced by the individual is
evaluated as an appropriate consequence.

Third, *schadenfreude* thrives when the group views the sufferer is a hypocrite (Smith
et al. “Exploring the When”, 536). Hypocrisy often inspires *schadenfreude* because the
hypocrite’s suffering is viewed as deserved. Hypocrites criticize others for the same type of
behavior that they engage in. The incongruence between hypocrites’ condemnation of others
and their private behavior is believed to be a serious transgression. Thus, when individuals
reveal their hypocrisy, the social stigma and condemnation of the group is widely believed
appropriate and directly related to their behavior. This certainly helps to explain why
examples of hypocrisy-inspired *schadenfreude* are common in the popular press.

Individual’s whose statements and behavior are public, and therefore given more attention,
are held to even higher levels of scrutiny than the average individual. They speak from a
higher pulpit, but then fall from greater heights because their behavior is judged immoral by
a greater number of people.

Finally, the group must have psychological distance from the target. Spears and
Leach explain, “*Schadenfreude* implies psychological distance and emotional divergence”
(338). A feeling of separateness is a necessary beginning point; individuals cannot
experience *schadenfreude* in relation to themselves. Disliked celebrities may offer the
perfect vessel for *schadenfreude* because unflattering comparisons often cultivate envy and
fears of inferiority. Social scientists have examined objective evidence regarding groups’
feelings towards their perceived superiors. Analysis concludes that a group’s comparison is
“an important determinant of one’s psychological experience” (Spears and Leach 338),
posing a threat to individual’s feelings of self-worth by producing painful emotions such as
shame and frustration. It can also lead groups to criticize, devalue, or compete against those
in superior positions in an attempt “to reverse their fortunes.”

Celebrities are often regarded as objectively superior to other members in society,
because of the resources available to them. When a celebrity experiences a reversal of
fortune because of a perceived misdeed, the audience’s inclination is to seize the moment as an opportunity to alleviate the unpleasant emotions associated with comparing oneself unfavorably to celebrities. Thus, unpleasant feelings regarding the self lead to a pleasant feeling regarding the misfortune of another party. Even though *schadenfreude* is a feeling about another party’s failure, it is best explained by the self-focused feeling of pain about the self’s inferiority (Spears and Leach 339). The pain of inferiority, and the accompanying anger, explains how *schadenfreude* assists groups in negotiating their social relationships.
CHAPTER 2

DEFINING SCHAĐENFREUDE AS GENRE

_Schadenfreude_ offers a category of rhetorical understanding of the media’s coverage of Lance Armstrong, as it is organized around a central idea and repeatedly uses common structural arrangements and arguments. _Schadenfreude_ offers a framework of explanation of this genre of rhetoric because research found ample evidence of audience envy, shared beliefs regarding Armstrong’s intrinsic hypocrisy and deservingness of justice, and a rhetorical distance between the audience and Armstrong. Editorials covering Armstrong’s confession consistently drew upon these devices to offer an understanding of Armstrong’s behavior.³

Research examining the familiar ascent and descent of celebrities like Armstrong who find themselves caught in scandal shows that celebrities and the public share a symbiotic relationship (Gies 348). While celebrities enjoy greater access to coveted resources and status, a celebrity’s status is powered by the public’s approval. Therefore, a tension exists between the power given a celebrity and the resulting envy caused by the celebrity’s power:

> Tolerance for celebrities’ excesses is not without boundaries. Celebrities have to renew their popularity on an almost daily basis. Public acknowledgment of their worth is not static….As a result, downfall and disgrace are the mainstay of the celebrity narrative: the celebrity who succumbs to drink, drugs and abusive relationships, who is afflicted by illness, aging and a loss of physical beauty, and so on, is what drives the media vortex of publicity and gossip. (353)

³ The editorials surveyed were widely distributed and found on the web. Thus, they are nationally and internationally available, reflecting a desire to appeal to a broad audience. A survey of the readership from different outlets, such as USA Today, the Los Angeles Times, and the New Yorker shows that the average reader is 50 years old, enjoys a household income above $70,000 (The New Yorker’s readers averaged $109,877 in 2009), and has attended some college. Whether these editorials were first published in large newspapers, financial magazines, sports magazines, or directly to the web, the format, content, tone, and message were commonly uniform. The editorials consistently criticized Armstrong’s behavior, singling him out as independently responsible for his behavior. Very rarely, editorials provided an investigation into larger social or cultural issues surrounding athletes’ use of performance enhancing drugs.
Celebrity status offers an individual broad and legitimate power. According to David Marshall, “Celebrity status confers on the person a certain discursive power: within society, the celebrity is a voice above all others, a voice that is channeled into the media systems as being legitimately significant” (48-49). The legitimacy of the individual rests in the hands of the audience. Without the public’s support, the power evaporates. A tension exists between the public and celebrities; celebrities earn their status, wealth, and power from the adoration of the public. Though the public admires celebrities, envy often promotes skepticism concerning the celebrity’s worth. Consequently, celebrities are always at risk of schadenfreude. This uneasiness and envy caused by the greater power and resources celebrities enjoy explains why the public hungers for examples in which the heroes suffer the loss of status and humiliation in the media. Because the star is “meant to epitomize the potential of everyone in American society, we are psychically drawn to identify with stars as ourselves,”(x) wedding consumer culture with democratic aspirations.

Marshall argues, “This (potential) is only appearance. The dialectical reality is that the star is part of a system of false promise in the system of capital, which offers the reward of stardom to a random few in order to perpetuate the myth of potential universal success. The masses are by their very nature psychologically immature and thus are drawn to the magic of these larger-than-life personalities” (x). This unacknowledged, but very real tension between celebrities and the public promotes a hunger for rhetoric that emphasizes and exercises the audience’s power upon a celebrity. When a celebrity reaches the astronomical levels of fame of Armstrong and then badly stumbles, the resulting rhetoric promotes schadenfreude in the audience.

In order to feel schadenfreude, the public must first gain in some way from Armstrong’s misfortune. The gain comes in the form of relief from the painful experience of envy. This circumstance highlights the long-standing scholarly tradition linking envy with schadenfreude. Envy, because it can entail feelings of inferiority, hostility, and resentment, primes the envying person for pleasure when the envied person suffers. Secondly, the rhetoric must emphasize a strong link between the justice in Armstrong’s misfortune. This is often accomplished by illustrating the justice of his situation and his hypocrisy. Finally, the rhetoric of schadenfreude will vilify the object of the emotion in order to create distance between Armstrong and the audience.
Envy

Envy, deservingness, hypocrisy, and vilification are prime motivators and indicators of schadenfreude. Considering the uneasy relationship between celebrities and the public allows us to recognize and understand the need to address the inequity in the media. Frustrated desire can lead to hostility and envy. Analysis of editorials regarding Lance Armstrong’s confession found consistent use of rhetoric that arouses the emotions that feed schadenfreude, which in turn brings welcome relief from the negative comparisons. Though only an illusion, schadenfreude provides the audience with a belief that in some way they have been elevated. This provides exigence for this type of rhetoric. Editorialists often outlined the inequities between Armstrong and the public. Indeed, the Denver Post Editorial Board fueled the public’s envy in a scathing editorial, reminding readers, “His net worth has been estimated at upward of $100 million…[he’s had] victories, lucrative sponsorships and [lived] the jet set life of a celebrity” (“Lance Armstrong, World”). The Post and Courier emphasized the distance between Armstrong’s celebrity status with that of the audience: Armstrong “stood on the pedestal with the pretty women and accepted the top prize at the tour year in and year out” (“Lance Armstrong, Disgraced”). Likewise, the Sun Journal’s editorial stated, “Armstrong was an American elite who clawed his way out of Texas to the pinnacle of his sport, then successfully crossed the Rubicon into the celebrity world of personal jets and $10 million estates… The wealthiest cheaters can hire the best doctors and chemists. Armstrong was able to use his private jet to transport drugs and hire his gardener to deliver them posing as a motorcyclist and fan” (“Lance Joins”).

Proclaiming Armstrong’s mediocrity was another rhetorical strategy used to diminish uncomfortable feelings caused by unfavorable comparisons. Rather than fueling envy, this approach reduced Armstrong’s standing in comparison to the audience. Sports Illustrated wrote “Without doping, Armstrong would just be another guy running a bike shop in Austin, Texas, trying to promote the place with special discounts for his 200 Twitter followers. Without doping, he would work his butt off to pay the mortgage every month and hope he had a little extra to give to the American Cancer Society” (Rosenberg “Here’s the Truth”). Passages such as these dilute the audience’s envy by underscoring many reasons he deserved to suffer. One strategy illustrated the fantastic returns on his celebrity while the other
effectively consigned Armstrong’s image to mediocrity. Both used the audience’s envious feelings to fuel *schadenfreude*.

**DESERVINGNESS**

Again and again, editorialists provided evidence to support the belief that Lance Armstrong’s suffering was just. This was done in two ways. First, editorialists gave a tailored account of his misdeeds, framing Armstrong’s transgressions in multiple ways, creating an appetite for justice, just as a prosecuting attorney sets the stage with his opening arguments. Additionally, editorialists interwove details about Armstrong’s misbehavior within racing with accusations regarding interpersonal behavior. The *Denver Post* editorial board summed up his crimes. “For years, he didn’t just deny using drugs such as EPO and testosterone, or blood transfusions. No, he used his vast resources…to attempt to ruin anyone who threatened to break the silence” (“Lance Armstrong, *World*”). Kathleen Parker (*Lance Armstrong's Confession*) agreed that “Of all his sins, Armstrong’s persistent bullying toward any who questioned his drug use — often suing them, successfully — seems to be the most unforgivable.”

A second characteristic of this type of rhetoric provides evidence that the subject deserves further suffering because he is not actually suffering or sufficiently regretful.

Visual clues were also used as evidence that Armstrong had not yet suffered enough. The *Denver Post* Editorial Board declared, “One of the most jaw-dropping elements of the Armstrong confession was the glib ease with which he pivoted from the vitriolic denials of the past days” (“Lance Armstrong, *World*”). Arguing that the object of *schadenfreude* deserves suffering, but has not yet suffered enough is an aspect of this type of rhetoric. Dan Wetzel (“Lance Armstrong's Doping Admission”) wrote, “then he smirked” in order to suggest that Armstrong has not yet been humbled adequately. Allesandra Stanley asserted, He may have been nervous, but he didn’t look uncomfortable. Armstrong appeared as reasoned and dispassionate telling the truth as he did all those years that he so fluently and convincingly spun a lie. He gave his interview with a “rueful smile”.

Besides analysis of body language, critics demonstrated Armstrong’s deservingness of *schadenfreude* by making claims about his impenitent character, as John Baldoni believed. “It’s one thing to say you are sorry. It’s another thing to make amends…. People who get
into hot water may be quick to say they are sorry but the real question is what are you going to do about it.” Emphasis is placed on the inadequacy of Armstrong’s apology. He goads Armstrong to “do” something, though what that might be is unclear. William Fotheringham wrote, “The use of the f-word (flawed) was a tactical masterstroke, the subtext being that all the bad stuff was the outcome of how Armstrong was made. He repeatedly accepted responsibility while keeping the subtext running strongly, simultaneously giving the impression that yes, he had done wrong but, well, it was the result of forces beyond his control.” He accuses Armstrong of apologizing while not accepting the responsibility that comes with true regret. Like the Denver Post, Fotheringham implies that Armstrong’s lack of regret gives permission to enjoy his suffering and clamor for additional punishment. “Lance Armstrong, Arrogant and Unaware” echoed the sentiment: “This is not sounding much like contrition because, well, it isn’t. This sounds an awful lot like ‘I’m sorry if your feelings were hurt,’ instead of ‘I’m sorry I hurt you…. Armstrong isn’t sorry for what he did; he seems sorry he got caught.” (Wetzel)

Juliet Macur and Ian Austen’s article combines both tactics, asserting that Armstrong demonstrates deservingness because he was not yet adequately sorry. “In an extensive interview with Oprah Winfrey that was shown over two nights, Lance Armstrong admitted publicly for the first time that he doped throughout his cycling career. He revealed that all seven of his Tour de France victories were fueled by doping, that he never felt bad about cheating, and that he had covered up a positive drug test at the 1999 Tour with a backdated doctor’s prescription for banned cortisone.” By characterizing his confession in this way, Macur and Austen encourage schadenfreude by sanctioning and magnifying the feelings that evoke it. Contexts that might mitigate hostility and mistrust for Armstrong remain unvoiced.

Finally and most remarkably, editorialist Dan Wetzel from Yahoo! Sports linked Armstrong’s drug use to his battle with cancer, bringing a sense of justice to pain suffered through his disease: “Did you take performance-enhancing drugs prior to your diagnosis of testicular cancer, as Betsy Andreu, who I now have every reason to believe, says you admitted to doing? Do you think it played a role in your diagnosis?” (“Questions”). In the Los Angeles Times “Lance Armstrong’s Legacy,” the authors argue that Armstrong’s punishment is necessary for the public good:
First, because doping creates an uneven playing field in which cheaters have the distinct advantage. Allowing it would merely encourage everyone else to do it as well. Second, because sports are supposed to test the limits of human strength, agility and skill, not the talents of one's chemist or trainer. Third, and most important, because young people fall into the trap of thinking they need performance-enhancing drugs to succeed, turning kids into chemical abusers, with all the risks that entails. (“Lance Armstrong, Arrogant”)

**HYPOCRISY**

In addition to rhetoric evoking envy and a sense of justice, many texts provided examples of Armstrong’s hypocrisy. Examples that evoked this prime motivator of Schadenfreude were found throughout these texts. He was often judged to be in moral contradiction to his own stated beliefs, encouraging Schadenfreude within the audience. The inconsistency between Armstrong’s statements and behavior provided the material needed to claim that Armstrong was dishonest and hypocritical about his drug use. Frequently, claims regarding Armstrong’s denials were coupled with references to his verbal attacks on his rivals, underscoring Armstrong’s contrary behavior. The Denver Post explained, “For years, he didn’t just deny using drugs such as EPO and testosterone, or blood transfusions. No, he used his vast resources…to attempt to ruin anyone who threatened to break the silence that allowed him to continue racking up victories, lucrative sponsorships and living a jet-set life of celebrity” (“Lance Armstrong, World Class”). On January 18, 2013, Yahoo Sports emphasized Armstrong’s vehement denials and the public’s regrettable faith in him. “The same one that while we celebrated his victory was, behind the scenes, leaving a path of personal destruction in its wake…. [He would] go on the attack, often trying to ruin his accusers professionally and, perhaps, personally, maybe legally and certainly financially” (“Lance Armstrong, Arrogant”). Similarly, Kathleen Parker framed Armstrong’s hypocrisy in the same manner, if more succinctly: “Did he dope? Yes. Did he boost his blood with EPO? Yes. Did he lie, betray and bully? Yes, all that.” The Dallas Morning News claimed Armstrong was especially adept at insincerity, likening him to a superhero of hypocrisy. “According to the reams of testimony, he took it to a whole new level, bullying accusers into silence as he held himself up as a paragon of cycling virtue. In comic book terms, it’s like Captain America sneaking around robbing banks on the way to his acts of heroism” (“Charade”).
In a second *Yahoo Sports* article, the rhetoric emphasized this precursor to *schadenfreude* in a rather novel, but equally contemptuous manner. Rather than stressing Armstrong’s drug use, the writer explicitly criticizes his abuse of power to undermine his competitors’ integrity: “Armstrong isn’t necessarily a bad guy for doping. He is a bad guy for the way he used his immense power, fame and fortune to attempt to ruin anyone who dared to speak the truth to his avalanche of lies” (“Lance Armstrong, Arrogant and Unaware”). Greg Couch used the same approach, “Many of his accusers talked about Armstrong’s threats and strong-arming. He threatened to kick them off the team, expose them, and attack their names, their finances, their futures.” Tracy Connor’s editorial traveled onestep further and questioned Armstrong’s handling of the accusations, claiming his “unequivocal denials and threats of legal action” were coupled with “playing the cancer card” in order to deceive the public and authorities. Editorialists who personally knew Armstrong were often the most adamant in their charges of hypocrisy, revealing feelings of personal betrayal. Rick Reilly’s editorial was typical of sports writers who had publically supported Armstrong. His wrote: “Two words? That’s it? Staked my reputation on it.... And the whole time he was lying. Right in my earpiece.” Similarly, Lynn Zinser echoes assertions that Armstrong failed to prove penitent enough for forgiveness.

He ruined some lives he considered collateral damage to building his myth and he sort of said he was sorry about that, but he did a horrendous sales job on the remorse part. He started the night as an arrogant jerk buried in public scorn, legal woes and a bank account with its rubber stopper about to be pulled, and ended it as perhaps an even bigger jerk who made no headway on the other three. (“Next on Oprah”)

**VILIFICATION**

A final crucial component to *schadenfreude* is emotional divergence between the audience and target. Within the genre of rhetorical *schadenfreude*, the text’s underlying message repeatedly propels the audience away from the target. Though all of the previously mentioned strategies enhance distance between the audience and Armstrong, the explicit strategy of vilification throughout these texts deserves its own category, as it addresses a prerequisite all its own. Rather than simply focusing upon Armstrong’s hypocrisy or deservingness, this category of rhetoric functions to separate Armstrong from society through a unique process. Here, it is suggested that Armstrong should suffer because of misdeeds,
separate from the main allegations concerning steroid use and dishonesty regarding this problem. Surveyed editorials vilified Armstrong through the use of labeling or attention to misdeeds outside the scope of the doping scandal. A *New York Times* editorial, Gail Collins brought attention to deeds completely outside the scope of the scandal:

> He was once cited for using 330,000 gallons of water at his Texas home in a month when his neighbors were being asked to conserve by cutting back on their car washing. He left his wife, got engaged to the singer Sheryl Crow. He said he broke up with Sheryl Crow because of her ‘biological clock.’ The *New York Post* had him dating one of the Olsen twins. (“The Point of Lance.”)

Lance Armstrong was categorized as a “contemptible liar, cheat and bully” (“Lance Armstrong Peddles”), a man who “recognized the humanity of nobody…. His ethical hollowness, bad enough in itself, was filled with cruelty” (Zinzer). Other editorials characterized Armstrong as a “sociopathic spectacle…. Defiant, distant, difficult, arrogant, unaware, flippant” (“Lance Armstrong, Arrogant”), “Disgraced” (Collins), “a bully, a coercer, a man who threatened people who once worked for and with him” (Reilly), “an immoral, manipulative liar who doesn’t deserve a second more of anybody’s time” and “unimportant and worthless” (Connor).

Greg Couch, of *Fox Sports*, followed a familiar road to vilification, accusing Armstrong of using the sick and weak to cover up his misdeeds. Again pointing to Armstrong’s cancer, he insists that even that portion of his past was a ruse used to cover his transgressions:

> Armstrong nestled comfortably in public opinion over his charity and his personal story of overcoming cancer. The way he used that charity, and all the cancer-stricken people it was designed to help, was beyond mean-spirited…. Is it even possible he seeks forgiveness for his conscience? Nah. His calculations haven’t included one of those. (“Admission”)

In another editorial, Armstrong is framed as cold-hearted villain because “At one point during the interview, he couldn’t recall how many people he’d sued. Really. He not only didn’t know the number, he couldn’t even be sure when asked about specific individuals that his mighty, powerful legal team relentlessly tried to bury” (“Lance Armstrong, Arrogant”). Reilly highlighted Armstrong’s immorality with charges of malice. “Look, I’ve been fooled before…. But those people never looked me in the eye and spit.” Readers are further encouraged to disregard Armstrong as part of the community with opinions such as “If you never met this jerk, well, count your blessings” (“Lance Armstrong, Arrogant” and
“There’s not much point to Lance Armstrong, Famous Person. He has no other talents” (Collins). Baldoni advises the audience to “Let him simply drift unnoticed into obscurity,” while Tracy Connor instructs readers to stop “feed(ing) his insufferable ego. Don’t give him the satisfaction.”

In “Lance Armstrong, disgraced bully,” the rhetoric warns that Armstrong cannot be trusted to be part of the community. The rhetoric separates Armstrong from the audience by treating him as a loutish outsider, unable to comprehend and abide by even the simplest social norms:

Three familiar morals from this troubling story: Just because other people cheat doesn't mean you should. Just because you do some good things doesn't excuse you for doing a lot of bad things. And pick on someone your own size.

This type of rhetoric casts Armstrong as a villain who defies civilized society. By contrasting Armstrong’s behavior with simple admonishments taught in Kindergarten, the language underscores the antithesis between Armstrong’s behavior and the audience’s expectations regarding its heroes. Because Armstrong was unable to live by these simple rules, the audience is justified in dehumanizing him. This type of commentary rests upon emotional appeals and simple binaries that function to draw a stark line between Armstrong and the audience.
CHAPTER 3

CONSEQUENCES OF THE RHETORIC OF ‘SCHADENFREUDE’

The genre of *schadenfreude* addresses a problem confronting society. One might conclude that it is an important first step in facing important social problems and their consequences. Didn’t Armstrong’s confession release a well-spring of articles, editorials, and other media concerning unethical behavior in professional sports? Didn’t the national attention collectively shift towards the controversy concerning banned substance use in sports and its consequences? It seems clear that Armstrong’s confession ushered these issues into public consciousness, but the rhetorical perspective of *schadenfreude* failed to facilitate a national conversation beyond Lance Armstrong. Rather than an open debate of the accompanying social issues, the rhetoric provided a tidy ending to the discussion. The audience’s envy of celebrities created an environment that fostered suspicion about the worthiness of the individual celebrity. When a celebrity such as Lance Armstrong is judged unworthy, the opportunity to use him as a scapegoat is revealed.

Rene Girard’s ideas regarding the modern process of scapegoating further enrich an understanding of the nature of *schadenfreude* within Armstrong’s media coverage. Girard explained that a conflict’s origins are our mimetic desires. Our desires are adopted from each other, leading to rivalry within groups competing for the same advantages. When these tensions accumulate violence can endanger the community. The scapegoating process alleviates these tensions by allowing a dose of violence to be projected upon the scapegoat. In our modern, secular world, strict prohibitions on violence, anger, and resentments disguise our violence. Girard explained that as resentments escalate, the pool of potential scapegoats also grows:

The real source of victim substitutions is the appetite for violence that awakens in people when anger seizes them and when the true object of their anger is untouchable. The range of objects capable of satisfying the appetite for violence enlarges proportionally to the intensity of anger. (*I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, 156)
Several aspects of Armstrong’s media coverage converge with Girard’s theory of scapegoating. Girard insisted that society lacks any awareness that an individual is being scapegoated. Likewise, the vilification of Armstrong provides justification to the audience and media to project all wrongdoing upon him. Girard insists that this is an essential component of the process because without complete ignorance of the process it cannot proceed:

The accusing group, however, views the victim as guilty, by virtue of a contagion similar to what we find in scapegoat rituals. The members of this group accuse their ‘scapegoat’ with great fervor and sincerity. More often than not some incident, whether fantastic or trivial, has triggered a wave of opinion against this victim, a mild version of mimetic snowballing and the victim mechanism. (*I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, 157)

Girard recognized that in secular, modern scapegoating, in order for grudges and hatreds to be tolerated they must appear completely legitimate and justified. The victim must never be recognized as a scapegoat. Girard believed that scapegoats are first identified as heroes within society.

Armstrong was mythologized as hero before his transgressions became significant in relationship to the myth that had functioned as his identity. “Yesterday’s idol becomes today’s scapegoat,” (“Generative Scapegoating”, 82). As an emblem of success and heroism, Armstrong was idolized for his stamina, dedication, lifestyle, fame, and wealth. As one of the most recognizable and admired athletes of all time, Armstrong represented all that could be accomplished through hard work and desire. Media coverage concerning the scandal confronting Armstrong fully reversed his heroic status. Very quickly, Armstrong was transformed from a media favorite into lightening rod for collective anger and discontent. Scapegoats alleviate uneasiness by shifting unpleasant feelings from the difficult, internal, and often, intractable conflicts within a group to a more easily banished target. Within a capitalistic society, wealth, elitism, and privilege form the vortex of the “American Dream”; celebrities provide very tangible and compelling images that facilitate the personification of that myth. Belief in the “American Dream” requires belief in the individual celebrity’s value, worthiness of the advantages they enjoy. Audiences hunger for these images as proof of fulfillment of the “American dream,” while concurrently battling conflicting emotions such as envy and disillusionment. Suspicions that individuality may be a mythical recipe for success also create tensions within the audience. Capitalism often leads to a keen desire for
more than we can reasonably attain. We look to those that have attained more than ourselves. These comparisons cause pain that can be alleviated when a scapegoat acts as a vessel for the frustration and disappointment. The relief generated from the rhetoric of schadenfreude and the attendant scapegoating process allow for a complete and satisfactory, if temporary, conclusion. The hero is proven an unworthy fraud, wholly responsible for his transgressions. After the scapegoat has been cast out, vilified, and finally completely discounted, the audience is free to move forward and away from the disquieting emotions that accompany hero worship. Unrestricted, the audience, once again, casts about for a new hero to replace the old. The hope is that this new hero will prove worthy of all the bitter feelings that are byproducts of the “American dream.”

Equally important to the audience’s emotional state is the feeling of unity, a byproduct of the scapegoating process. The rhetoric of schadenfreude unites the group through outrage and condemnation. Once an insider, the hero is ejected, leaving the remaining insiders united as never before. As Girard so eloquently noted, “The alien threat displaces everything else; internal quarrels are forgotten. A new unity and camaraderie prevails among those who feel attacked as a group” (“Generative Scapegoating”, 90). This newfound unity allows members to momentarily forget other perceived dangers or problems, turning eyes and attentions outward. Though momentary, this newfound common ground soothes the group by promoting the illusion that the poisons within the group have been proscribed.

The final and most significant consequence of the rhetoric of schadenfreude involves its tendency to shift attention from significant social problems to the individual. Scholars have noted this process. Brian Ott and Eric Aoki’s frame analysis of Matthew Shepard’s illustrated how significant social problems could be ignored when negative feelings were channeled into a repository for ambivalent feelings. Though Armstrong’s case was not precipitated by a tragedy, Ott and Aoki’s analysis of the Matthew Shepard story parallels Lance Armstrong’s case in an important way. In both cases, the media’s framing personalized the event by making one man “the center of the story,” rather than integrating it within its historical and cultural context. Ott and Aoki argue that the media’s choice to present one man as the villain alleviates audience responsibility and focuses attention upon the agent, freeing the audience to consider these types of news stories as an example of
individual deviance: “One consequence of personalized news gives preference to the individual actors and human-interest angles in events while downplaying institutional and political considerations that establish the social context for those events.” (491)

Shifting away from larger contextual analysis of the problems and their social implications allows for closure and restored order, rather than opening up the dialogue, leading to less easily resolved questions.

In this sense, Armstrong becomes unique in his transgressions, transformed into a symbol. This process shifts attention from the larger foundational social ills and creates fertile territory for the scapegoating process to begin. Burke argued that when an individual is deemed a criminal, he serves as curative scapegoat for society. A scapegoat allows society to be purified through “moral indignation and condemnation” (qtd. in Ott and Aoki 485). Society’s ills are often complicated and disheartening, with no easy solutions, but the scapegoat offers the illusion of a solution. The rhetoric of schadenfreude provides a fictional shortcut past these painful realities. When a celebrity such as Lance Armstrong satisfies certain conditions, he is transformed into a scapegoat, bypassing disturbing questions regarding the cultural significance of the action. The scapegoat mechanism is an avenue for society to “ritualistically cleanse” itself of guilt. Schadenfreude can provide important seeds of justification for transferring negative feelings to a target.

Before Armstrong’ confession, evidence of Americans’ strong identification with him was obvious. The popularity of cycling and the Tour de France swelled to new levels after he re-entered the sport. His many endorsement deals ensured that his image was familiar and revered in many segments of society. As the public face of businesses as disparate as Anheuser-Busch, Nike, RadioShack, and the U.S. Postal Service, Armstrong’s image was ubiquitous. Millions of Americans bought and wore his foundation’s yellow wristbands as way to be connected with him. Cancer survivors insisted he was a hero for surviving the disease and then conquering the world’s hardest bicycling race.

Armstrong represented something larger than himself, personifying the aspirations of the audience. His irrepressible will (ostensibly strong enough to defeat cancer, allegations of misconduct, grueling races, and all other competitors) fed the myth of Armstrong as hero. Another cause of American identification with Armstrong was his role as “underdog.” Much of the media celebrated and elevated Lance Armstrong’s status as underdog, with frequent
references to his battle against cancer and enormous talent within the world of cycling. Armstrong’s image provided a receptacle for the audience’s belief in a system that nurtures the individual and provides limitless opportunities for all. As a vessel, Armstrong became more symbolic than real in the American awareness. He became the perfect hero in a community searching for evidence that desire, motivation, and fortitude alone provide the foundation of success in our capitalistic society, embodying the hopes, dreams, and sentiments of the audience.

Society’s strong identification with Armstrong allowed greater catharsis when he was ritualistically alienated, the second step in transforming hero to scapegoat. The rhetoric of *schadenfreude* offers an effective and straightforward means to this end. After Armstrong’s confession, the audiences’ identification with his image was predictably and routinely severed through the media’s depiction of his intentions, transgressions, and character.

A close look at the editorials’ headlines offers concrete examples of how the rhetoric of *schadenfreude* widened the distance, alienating all the shared elements between audience and scapegoat. Headlines such as "Disgraced cheater also a bully" and “Lance Armstrong joins parade of cheaters” place Armstrong in binary opposition to society through the use of vilification. Headlines began the process that encouraged transformation of Armstrong’s image from hero to criminal; his image is repositioned from familiar, quintessential American to a symbol of corruption, ruthlessness, and hubris. Likewise, another category of headline stimulated division by classifying Armstrong as a liar. Statements such as “Lance Armstrong, world class liar” and “Lance Armstrong and the art of lying” cue the audience to identify him as *liar*, fundamentally framing him within this one dimension. Other headlines encourage the audience to discount Armstrong’s confession, asserting that it was wholly insincere. “Lance Armstrong, arrogant and unaware...,” “Admission just another Lance ploy,” “Lance Armstrong peddles a dopey confession,” and “Lance Armstrong confession without contrition,” “Amid tears, Armstrong leaves unanswered questions” and “At the end of the day, Armstrong only sorry he got caught” provide examples of headlines that serve two purposes in the rhetoric of *schadenfreude*. First, they extinguish any anxiety or ambivalence the audience might harbor over the complexities Armstrong’s confession conjures. Secondly, these headlines offer the audience relief from any sense of guilt.
stemming from *schadenfreude* in that they show Armstrong as undeserving of forgiveness or sympathy, assisting in the scapegoating process.

Finally the rhetoric of *schadenfreude* promotes scapegoating by symbolically banishing the scapegoat. Defining the audience in “dialectical opposition to the sacrificial offering,” (Ott and Aoki 485) renews the strength of the group. This concept, originating from Burke’s symbolic resolution of an issue, creates a cathartic momentary release for the audience when Armstrong is punished, signaling a resolution of the issue and reaffirming the social and moral order. Some argued that his banishment is necessary to continue the good works done through his foundation:

> Perhaps the resignation will protect the worthy charity from further negative fallout. Live-strong and the millions of people the foundation has helped certainly want that to be the case. But until Armstrong comes to grips with his failings, donors may find it hard to separate the cheater from the philanthropist. And that would be Armstrong’s biggest betrayal. (“Time for Lance”)

In the “Lance Armstrong and the art of lying,” the rhetoric suggests that Armstrong needs to be cast out long enough for wounds to heal:

> I guess I should thank him for finally admitting his whole magnificent castle was built on sand and syringes and suckers like me. But I’m not quite ready. Give me 14 years, maybe. (Keane)

Kathleen Parker’s argues that that Armstrong’s expulsion from society is a good unto itself:

> Stripped of his seven Tour de France titles and his Olympic medal, ousted by the foundation he created and facing lawsuits, Armstrong has fallen just about as far as one can. It seems enough. (“Lance Armstrong’s Confession”)

Likewise, “Lance Armstrong, disgraced bully” delights in imagining Armstrong’s reflection upon his failure.

> And I want [Armstrong] to think about Lance Armstrong…. The Armstrong who is disgraced and will surely be stripped of most of his fortune by the people, businesses and governments who will now sue or send him to jail. If that happens, Lance Armstrong's journey up and down the ladder of fickle fame will have been worthwhile. And that thought makes me happy. (“Lance Armstrong’s Confession”)

Clearly, the recounting of various details of Lance Armstrong’s humiliation, punishment, and disgrace function in several important ways. Fulfilling a need, the media satisfies the audience’s appetite for a democratic leveler; media elevates the audience by degrading the celebrity. Prompted by envy, the audience uses the circumstance of a disgraced celebrity to provide relief from uncomfortable comparisons and dissatisfaction with societal
structure, as well as an illusory simulation of closure. The larger and more complicated debate concerning the role of performance enhancing drugs within professional sports remain, but Armstrong’s transgressions provide a deflective surface upon which to ignore the issue.

It is possible to imagine alternatives to the rhetoric of schadenfreude. The Lance Armstrong scandal might have been viewed as an opportunity to address the larger cultural concerns, such as fairness within our system, the role of greed within our society, and our limitless appetite for additional wealth. Editorialists might also have used the Lance Armstrong scandal as an opportunity to shine a light on the underlying issues of inequality within society. The promise of democracy and capitalism is one of individualism, talent, and hard work affording a method for a culturally constructed sense of success. Lance Armstrong’s doping could have been offered as a metaphor for capitalism’s failure to deliver on its promise of equal chance of success for all. While we hope for fair play, there often are large forces working behind the scenes that limit real opportunity or agency. Instead of choosing any of these routes, the media almost universally interpreted the scandal through the lens of schadenfreude, transforming Armstrong into vessel in which to focus our anxieties regarding the much larger and deeply rooted problem of economic inequalities.

In this paper, the significance of schadenfreude as genre has been explored. Rather than eliciting productive emotions, media coverage of the Lance Armstrong scandal in order to provide resolution, without change, to a complicated problem. The genre of schadenfreude provides a lens in which to understand the motivations and strategies in public discussion of a fallen celebrity. When an individual is cast as a scapegoat, the public can avoid difficult and complex problems. Innate envy of Armstrong fueled an appetite for rhetoric providing satisfying justification for schadenfreude. Rather than look at systemic issues or the complexity and corruption within the wider world or sports, the audience is urged to accept a simplified cause as individual behavior.

It’s important to be mindful that the rhetoric of schadenfreude damages society as well as the scapegoat. By focusing attention on the “other,” the rhetoric closes the gate to important social, political, and economic debates, stifling real transformation. By providing a temporary balm to the symptom, rather than addressing the disease, the rhetoric of schadenfreude promotes a static response to social problems. In the months following
Armstrong’s confession, Major League Baseball announced plans to suspend 20 players suspected of using performance-enhancing drugs. Again, hands are thrown up, writers decry the corruption and greed of the players and nothing significant is changed. While the exposure of Armstrong’s misdeeds might open a larger dialogue into the cultural issues that foster this type of behavior, the destructive rhetoric of *schadenfreude* promises simple closure and an instrument for venting unpleasant feelings about social inequality.

Through the examination of one media story, a new genre of rhetoric has been explored. Though it is not possible to definitively extend the conclusions brought forth in this study, further research regarding the media’s portrayal concerning disgraced celebrities offers the possibility of a more comprehensive analysis of the genre. By examining additional examples, studies may provide additional evidence and knowledge regarding the rhetoric of *schadenfreude* as a genre. Further research might also offer additional conclusions about the fundamental features and structures arising from this type of rhetoric.
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