

Cause of Death: Vending Machine

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Hunger pains. You have been working for six hours straight. The only thing on your mind are those Cheetos in the vending machine you walked by this morning. You are now on a mission to satisfy your hunger. A dilapidated dollar bill—washed a few times and sat on for a few days—clings to your back pocket. A quick smoothing of the rough green note and you are off. You stick it in the vending machine, press the magical B6 button for the Cheetos, the wire spins and... nothing. The Cheetos are stuck. Immoveable. Mission not accomplished.

It is this exact moment where some people make a rash life or death decision. While most people walk away from this moment, frustrated and disappointed, but living, some make the decision to tempt the stuck object and their fate by shaking the vending machine. According to the United States Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC), there were 37 deaths and 113 injuries from 1975 to 1995 in the United States alone. Although vending machine deaths are extremely rare, they illustrate a completely irrational side to human behavior. The vending machine shakers who found death instead of a candy bar may have been commemorated with the honor of a Darwin Award, a website that shares the glory of natural selection through stories of, for lack of a better term, stupid deaths. The innocent-looking vending machine gives a surprising insight into the cultural reaction around sudden and foolish deaths.

Stupid is as stupid does

Before delving into the rather bewildering topic of death, let's discuss how and why the decision to dangerously shake a vending machine comes to fruition. The answer is a mix of social and psychological influence. Rational decision making can be clouded by emotion, like feelings of anger or frustration. Research performed by Harvard Psychologist Jennifer Langer addresses this. She observed anger in subjects caused them to be "more likely to take risks and to minimize how dangerous those risks will be" (qtd. in Khazan). Think back to those aforementioned hanging Cheetos. The pollen-like, ungodly powdered cheese was moments away from deliciously sticking to your fingertips. Now they are just a finger-length

away, behind a thin layer of glass, stuck on a tantalizing ledge. How could one not feel at least a little bit angry? The anger could override the warning labels of the vending machine and in turn make the vending-machine-shaking less dangerous in one's annoyed and hungry mind. The vending machine's impersonal automation is largely responsible for the frustration.

The vending machine is, of course, not staffed by anyone. There is no one waiting to push buttons for the next customer or help unleash a stuck item. According to Dong H. Lee, who studies consumer behavior, vending machines can leave consumers feeling helpless. Lee determined that the impersonal interactions present problems and could "potentially alienate consumers." This is what makes vending machines as frustrating as they are convenient. In addition, when our expectations are not met and anger sets in, we will go to extra lengths to get what we desire.

It is a basic human instinct to impulsively go after what we want, even if that means overlooking rationality. Langer explains, "This trigger-happy impulse is evolutionarily adaptive. We evolved in hunter-gatherer times. If someone steals your meat, you don't think 'Should I go after him?' No! You strike back quickly" (qtd. in Khazan). There is even something a bit primal about shaking a vending machine, like shaking a coconut down from a tree. Except that the coconut is a Sprite and the tree is a chunk of metal that can fall on you.

Other factors also influence risky behavior around vending machines. Warning labels on vending machines display a signal word warning or depict an unfortunate stick person pictograph about to be crushed by the machine with a frightening red X over it. Marc Green, an expert in Human Factors Engineering, studies decision-making procedures in the presence of a warning labels. According to Green, there are a few procedures that happen in the brain that determine decisions. One is the "perception of danger level" that is often predetermined by the physical look of the dangerous object and how often its danger is publicized (Green).

Vending machines present no obvious outward risks. The colorful candy and soda could even be considered a welcome sight. There are no sharp, protruding characteristics and no alarms that could go off if the machine is shaken. However, this makes them no less capable of crushing a user who could overlook the warning label based on their perception of the machine's danger. People are not necessarily as scared of risks when

they observe no obvious danger. So, the perception that a vending machine is only capable of dispensing snacks and not killing its user influences more risky behavior around it.

Green's other component in evaluating risk and decision-making is "personal and social and cultural decision-making factors" which surround any death or injury. In the case of the vending machines, there are a few key social indicators that may contribute to death and injury: age, gender, and involvement in military. Michael Q. Cosio and Gregg W. Tyler analyzed 64 injuries from vending machines, 15 of which were fatal. Of those 64, only one was female and the average age was 19.8 (Cosio and Tyler 186). Given the number of unintended injuries and deaths sustained by males, it is worth exploring how and why this happens.

Natural selection is not random

Why are one setting, one age group, and one gender overwhelmingly represented in injury and death statistics? Let us start with deciphering the most overwhelming characteristic in Cosio and Tyler's study: gender. Given that 63 of 64 injuries were male, there is obviously something different in male social groups and individual male behavior than in females. Christine R. Harris, Michael Jenkins, and Dale Glaser, researchers at University of California, San Diego, interviewed a large pool of undergraduate psychology students with roughly equal numbers of males and females. The students self-reported how likely it is for them to engage in risky behavior, such as gambling, or social risk-taking, such as asking someone out or calling someone out. They found that males overwhelmingly took more risks in most categories and reported more enjoyment when taking risks than their female peers (Harris et al. 48-49). The findings directly correlate with the risk of shaking a vending machine that resulted in injuries and death. To get at the direct reasons why this is, we will look at theories from our friend Charles Darwin.

The evolutionary perspective gives an interesting insight into why males and females perceive risks so differently. Some theorize that females can better perceive risks because they are equipped to successfully raise offspring, whereas males take more risks because, physiologically, they can spread their offspring much faster to multiple people while females have to wait nine months to further their DNA (Harris et al. 60). In other words, the evolutionary perspective reveals that males do not have to stick around as long to reproduce, so they take more risks. Ironically, a popular website

honors Darwin and foolish deaths by giving out Darwin Awards to the most idiotic deaths. The idiocy involved supposedly confirms Darwin's theory of the "survival of the fittest." Upon further analysis, the website also shows that the awards overwhelmingly go to males.

Darwin Award candidates must show an "astounding misapplication of common sense" and be the "cause of their own demise" (Lendrem et al.). A data analysis of the candidates from 1995 to 2014 reveals that 87% of recipients were male (Ledrem et al.). This statistic confirms that males disproportionately participate in stupid behavior. To add to the discussion regarding differences in male and female decision-making, Darwin's theory is now backed up with modern scientific data about the brain.

Pivotal research done by Kristina Caudle, a neuroscientist at the Weill Cornell Medical College in New York City, shows that male adolescents have to think much harder to restrain themselves (qtd. in Underwood). The adolescents in the study were shown photos of intimidating faces and the choice of "go/no go": to risk fighting or stay in safety. "Those adolescents who did manage to restrain themselves showed significantly higher activity in a brain region called the ventromedial prefrontal cortex (vmPFC), which is involved in top-down control of behavior" (Underwood). This study also corresponds to the average age of victims of vending machines, which is relatively young at 19.8 years old. Adolescents made 15% more errors (risks) than children and adults (Underwood).

Another factor important in Cosio and Tyler's study is the environment of the injuries and deaths. Not only do age and gender play a role in decision making, but the setting does, too. For example, many deaths occur on military bases, which are notoriously male-dominated and have strict social and cultural discipline. The male-dominated community facilitates shows of strength, such as physical testing. This relates back to risk because men want to prove themselves in everything they do (remember back to the evolutionary perspective—they want their meat!). Getting a soda from the vending machine is no exception, even if it means a destructive shake or two.

Now that we better understand how and why stupid deaths occur, it is now time to grapple with the aftermath of the many fatal, irrational decisions. It can be easy to brush away vending machine deaths as rare,

and you would be correct. They are. But foolish deaths happen almost every day; could stupid deaths guide us through our fear of our own impending deaths?

“I’m not laughing *at* death, I’m laughing *with* death!”

Death is, of course, inevitable. It happens almost everywhere, every second, every day. But as inevitable and frequent as death is, it is often not confronted or talked about. Grief is met with whispers and prepared lasagna from the neighbors, but not with dialogue. The rare and rash decision to shake a vending machine, and the possible death resulting, provide us with some clues as to how to deal with death. How? The case of Kevin Mackle, a teenager crushed by a vending machine, shows us that humor can be a jumping block to start conceptualizing death.

Kevin Mackle was a first-year student at Bishop’s University outside of Montreal, Canada. As his parents anxiously awaited his return home for the winter holiday, Kevin died intoxicated and alone, crushed underneath a 1000-pound Coca-Cola vending machine the night before his train home (“Student Dies of Thirst”). He died after presumably trying to coax a soda out of the machine by shaking it. How is a parent or friend supposed to rationalize his sudden death? Any son or daughter could make a foolish decision, so exploring the Mackle family’s reaction could be beneficial to the difficult conversation surrounding death and grief. However, the Mackle family gave no official interviews, and it is difficult to measure the emotional aspect of a death. What we can evaluate is how the public perceives death and the constraints this presents to the family and friends involved.

Research done by psychotherapists Marcia Lattanzi-Licht, Kenneth Doka, and Kenneth J. Doka, indicates that social values attached with the victim and “degree of intentionality” influence the extent of grief allowed by the family. Youth gives a positive social value to death, meaning the grief is more validated (Lattanzi-Licht et al. 7). If a death is preventable or deemed intentional (done consciously at the person’s own expense), then the death loses value and the victim is more apt to “be held responsible and face collective wrath” (Lattanzi-Licht et al. 9). Given Kevin Mackle’s young age and poor decision to shake the vending machine, the parents are presumably left conflicted on how publicly they should grieve and how they should respond. While their grief was private, they did file a lawsuit against the Vendo Company who owned the unsecured vending machine.

The lawsuit brought up many questions. What is the economic value of a life? The Mackles decided that \$665,000 was enough to make up for funeral and emotional costs that ensued after their son's death ("Family Sues Over Vend Machine Death"). On chat forums and websites, many questioned the family's decision to sue.

While people typically look at death with sympathy, in some circumstances, particularly when alcohol is involved, they can also view death with hostility. This showed in comments regarding the lawsuit filed by Kevin Mackle's family. On the website called EnterStageRight.com, a self-proclaimed e-Journal of Modern Conservatism that allows blog post submissions, a contributor named Shelly McKinney gave her bitter review of the family's lawsuit, poetically titled, "Overdosing on Coke: Soda Machine Falls on Drunken Idiot." The finale of her rant reads: "I'd love to read that the judge to whom this case is presented would look at the Mackles and bark, 'Whatever happened to personal responsibility? Whatever happened to personal dignity? Get your idiotic Jerry Springer lawsuit out of my courtroom. I find it both sickening and immoral.'" You can feel her anger and disbelief that the family is willing to go through a long and arduous trial, just because of their son's decision, made more complex when the coroner reported Mackle had been intoxicated at the time. Although death can bring much hardship to a family, a result of stupid decisions or not, it is not uncommon for people to joke about the death.

The aforementioned Darwin Award was given to Kevin Mackle in 2001 ("Coke it is!"). The website is not only useful for showing that men take more risks that result in irrational deaths, but it also reveals our tendency to balance hard subjects with humor, or anything just to take the edge off. Even though it's tacky, humor is used as a natural coping mechanism in the grieving process or when confronted with the topic of death. Brian D. Vivona conducted interviews with crime scene investigators (CSIs) who deal with death every day. They frequently see morbid crime scenes and are confronted with the difficult task of consoling grieving family members. If your life's work was to deal with death's work, how would you cope? The CSIs use humor. According to Vivona, they retell humorous stories to their colleagues often, on the job or not. The ensuing laughter can defuse the stressful work environment through what is called "tension relief theory" (Vivona). The theory suggests that the energy exerted through laughter physically releases stress from the face. The

theory is grounded in Freud's idea that "laughter served to release nervous energy that was no longer needed" (Vivona). Relatedly, many websites like the Darwin Awards have been created to portray the humorous side of death.

The Darwin Awards site is full of outrageous titles and cheesy Clip Art graphics. Kevin Mackle's death, for instance, was titled "Coke it is!" People can argue that the website is doing injustice to the families of the victims by labeling their dead relative as someone who ought to die for the best of mankind. However, behind its perceived mocking front, the hashtag #YourDeathMatters under the logo stands out. With this hashtag, The Darwin Awards are communicating that all deaths, even the most mind-boggling, stupid, and senseless deaths, deserve some kind of acknowledgement. The Darwin Awards strive to do so by delivering humor alongside their lesson of morality.

All jokes aside, why does such a gruesome website exist? Are humans so low that we get amusement from reading about or seeing others' misfortune? The answer is a complicated "yes." According to Leah Sottile, contributor to *The Atlantic*, stories about death are fascinating because they are not happening to *us*. Scott Bunn, a professor of criminology and sociology at Drew University featured in the article, nicely sums up this idea: "[Looking at causes of death] is a form of escapism. There's an inherent need to get close to the edge of the abyss and look in without falling in" (qtd. in Sottile). Humans naturally fear death, so to read about it on the screen or a book gives us a nice barrier while we safely confront the subject. So, we have one side to evaluating death that is made out of pure curiosity, but the Darwin Awards also reveal that humor is a natural reaction to death. So, if laughter can diffuse tough situations, it can get people that much closer to discussing death. But why do we feel better about laughing at idiotic deaths, like being crushed under a vending machine, more than natural, common deaths?

It turns out we humans can be pretty awful from a moral standpoint. As much as we do not want to admit it, we secretly *enjoy* witnessing negative outcomes for people, especially if by our own judgement they deserve the consequences. This is why it is far easier and socially acceptable to laugh at articles, like Kevin Mackle's, featured on the Darwin Awards than say, someone who died from natural causes after living a morally good life. One stupid, irrational action, especially when

alcohol is involved, can change the perception of the deceased. Further, because no one wants to declare that anyone deserves to die, when someone brings death upon themselves through poor reasoning, it complicates the statement and, thus, humor swoops in to defuse the situation. There is a German term, *schadenfreude*, that sums up this common conflicted reaction to death. It roughly translates to “malicious joy” in English. If you have ever secretly been happy at someone else’s pain, be it the most popular girl in school “accidentally” tripping or watching someone get hit in the head with a ball on Youtube, you have experienced *schadenfreude*.

Schadenfreude gives us a feeling that justice has been served to the deserving and a pleasant sigh of relief that we have lived another day without succumbing to irrationality, unlike the guy featured in a Darwin Award. So yes, humans can appear malicious for smiling at others’ rash decisions and subsequent fatalities, but perhaps the humor we allow ourselves at the expense of our foes or Darwin Award recipients’ pain can help us confront the reality of impending death without fearing it.

In Conclusion: Do. Not. Shake. The. Vending. Machine.

Luckily, engineering advancements have made vending machines heavier and most are now anchored to walls. Vending machine deaths are incredibly rare, however, risks can be taken anywhere and with anything; the vending machine deaths are just one perfectly irrational example of how stupid we can be. But stupidity allows an entry point to discuss death and breathe a sigh of relief (secretly) and proclaim, “thank God that wasn’t me under that vending machine!”

The vending machine crush is not a subtle death. To be killed from the innocent action of quenching a junk-food craving must leave the family and loved ones of the deceased reeling from the immense senselessness of it all. Fortunately, our human impulses and behaviors, hard-wired in over the millennium, also includes humor and empathy, and hopefully an ability to learn from others. So, the next time your Cheetos get caught in the corkscrew vending mechanisms, remember you are only a buck away from Fritos, B8, the safer option. Otherwise Darwin’s Law of Natural Selection will have the last laugh.

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