

Research Paper

Dark Desires: The Link Between Dark Triad and Attitude Towards Revenge in Young Adults

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how Psychopathy, Narcissism and Machiavellianism, also known as The Dark Triad, are linked to attitudes toward revenge-seeking behavior and to explore the moderating influence of gender in the relationship between the Dark Triad traits and revenge tendency among young adults. A total of 237 participants completed the Short Dark Triad (SD3) scale and The Vengeance Scale. Using quantitative correlational research design and moderation analyses, the findings demonstrated that the Dark Triad were found to be significant predictors of vengeful tendencies and gender did significantly moderate the relationships between narcissism and revenge. However, gender did not moderate the relationship between Machiavellianism and revenge, nor between psychopathy and revenge. This study demonstrates how socially malevolent dispositions can influence vicious interpersonal relationships and vice versa.

Keywords: *Psychopathy, Narcissism, Machiavellianism, Dark Triad, Revenge, Gender*

Revenge is an act of motivated retaliation in response to perceived harm to an individual's well-being. It is widespread in almost all cultures, as seen through its prominence in the themes of many well-known captivating stories (Jackson et al., 2019). Psychologically, this tendency appears to emerge due to norm-breaking behaviors offensive to one's core values for ego-syntonic and ego-dystonic feelings (Grobbink et al., 2015) and is influenced by factors like intentionality, righteous anger, shame, anticipation of pleasurable rewards, and power dynamics (Jackson et al. 2019). A complex interplay of moral appraisals, emotions, personality traits, anticipated rewards, and social considerations shapes revenge.

The Dark Triad - Narcissism, Machiavellianism, and Psychopathy are three distinct but interrelated personality traits that predict socially aversive outcomes like manipulation and exploitation (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Wissing and Reinhard (2019) found that

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individuals high on these traits excel at producing deception but not detecting it, highlighting their role in self-perception biases. Syed, Naseer, and Shamim (2022) demonstrated that these traits amplify revenge responses to destructive leadership while fostering emotional detachment and happiness. Furnham, Richards, and Paulhus (2013) reviewed a decade of research, emphasizing a shared core of manipulative tendencies in these traits, manifesting across workplace behaviors, relationships, and mating strategies. Jonason and Middleton (2015) highlighted the short-term benefits of these traits, such as social charm and mating success, and their long-term costs, including poor relationships and resource mismanagement. The Dark Triad has both adaptive and maladaptive dimensions. The Dark Triad has been linked with an increased likelihood of revenge (Veselka, Giammarco, & Vernon, 2014). Narcissism has been linked with vengeful responses (Rasmussen, 2016). Individuals with high psychopathy engage in more vengeful behaviors due to higher risk-taking and impulsivity (Crysel et al., 2013). Furthermore, Machiavellianism is linked with emotional vengeance rather than direct retaliation (Giammarco & Vernon, 2014). Within romantic relationships, the Dark Triad predicts romantic revenge after infidelity (Brewer et al., 2015; Clemente & Espinosa, 2021). These studies suggest that the Dark Triad personality traits may be linked with revenge taking.

Theoretical Framework

The General Aggression Model (Anderson & Bushman, 2002) suggests that aggression is an emergent product of the dynamic interplay between dispositional characteristics, situational forces, and information processing. For GAM, person differences, for example, personality traits, play the role of inputs that make a difference as to how a person construes and reacts to perceived provocation. The Dark Triad tendencies—narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy, can serve as personality variables that enhance the probability of retaliatory behavior. Narcissism can enhance ego-threatening sensitivity, which can result in attack modes of retaliatory behavior when self-esteem is threatened.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study followed a correlational research design.

Objectives

- To examine the relationship between Dark Triad traits and revenge tendencies.
- To investigate whether gender moderates the relationship between Machiavellianism and revenge tendencies.
- To assess whether gender moderates the relationship between narcissism and revenge tendencies.
- To evaluate whether gender moderates the relationship between psychopathy and revenge tendencies.

Hypotheses

- **H₁** - There will be a positive correlation between Dark Triad personality traits (Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy) and the tendency towards revenge.
- **H₂** - Gender will significantly moderate the relationship between Machiavellianism and revenge tendencies.
- **H₃** - Gender will significantly moderate the relationship between narcissism and revenge tendencies.
- **H₄** - Gender will significantly moderate the relationship between psychopathy and revenge tendencies.

Participants

The sample for the study consisted of 237 participants aged 18 to 35 years from the Indian population chosen using convenience sampling. This age range is chosen to focus on individuals in early adulthood, a critical developmental stage characterized by significant life transitions and identity exploration. The specific inclusion criteria aim to ensure homogeneity within the sample while targeting a population of interest for understanding personality traits and behavioural tendencies.

Instruments

- 1. Short Dark Triad (SD3).** The Short Dark Triad (SD3) is a 27-item self-report questionnaire measuring Machiavellianism, narcissism and psychopathy. Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree) (Jones & Paulhus, 2014). The three subscales show acceptable reliability: Machiavellianism ($\alpha = .71$), narcissism ($\alpha = .74$), and psychopathy ($\alpha = .77$). The SD3 demonstrates strong construct, concurrent, and predictive validity.
- 2. The Vengeance Scale.** The Vengeance Scale (Stuckless & Goranson, 1992) is a 20-item self-report questionnaire measuring an individual's tendency to seek revenge in response to perceived harm. Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale (e.g., 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). The scale demonstrates high internal consistency ($\alpha = .92$), strong test-retest reliability ($r = .90, p < .001$), and convergent validity with empathy ($r = -.33, p < .001$) and anger ($r = .42, p < .001$).

Procedure

Participants were invited to complete an online questionnaire containing all aspects of the study. The first page of the form included a detailed description of the study's objectives, variables and consent form, where participants consented, after which they responded to the doctrine scale followed by Attitude Towards Revenge Scale.

Once participants answered all the questions, a debriefing page with additional study information and researcher contact details was shared. Data collection was conducted over a two-month period, then collected data was exported to Jamovi for analysis. Prior to analysis, the data was screened for normality and cleaned to ensure accuracy and reliability.

Scoring

The data was analyzed using Jamovi. Descriptive statistics were generated including the frequencies, mean, frequencies, and standard deviations for the demographics and the results of the instruments. Pearson correlation was used to examine the relationship between the variables, and moderation analysis was conducted using the Medmod module in Jamovi.

Variables

- Dark Triad personality traits
 - Machiavellianism
 - Narcissism
 - Psychopathy
- Revenge Tendency

RESULTS

The study sample comprised 237 participants, with (67.93%, $n = 161$) being female and (32.07%, $n = 76$) being male. Most participants fell within the 21-25 age range (73.84%, $n = 175$), followed by the 18-20 age group (23.21%, $n = 55$), and a smaller proportion in the 26-

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30 age range (2.95%, $n = 7$). The geographical location, (68.34%, $n = 162$) of participants were from urban areas, (27.43%, $n = 65$) from semi-urban areas, and (4.22%, $n = 10$) from rural areas. The educational attainment of participants was predominantly postgraduate degrees (48.95%, $n = 116$), followed by those with undergraduate degrees (41.35%, $n = 98$). A smaller segment possessed a high school education (9.70%, $n = 23$). In terms of socio-economic status, most participants identified as middle class (89.87%, $n = 213$), with smaller segments identifying as upper class (8.86%, $n = 21$) and lower class (1.27%, $n = 3$). These demographics suggest that the sample consisted mainly of young, well-educated, urban, middle-class inhabitants, with minimal variation in gender, socio-economic status, and geographical location.

Relationship between the Dark Triad traits and Attitude towards Revenge

Table No. 1: Pearson Correlation Coefficients Between the Dark Triad personality traits (Machiavellianism, Narcissism, and Psychopathy), and Vengefulness

		1*	2**	3***	4****
1	Pearson's r	—			
	df	—			
	p-value	—			
2	Pearson's r	0.333	—		
	df	235	—		
	p-value	< .001	—		
3	Pearson's r	0.549	0.351	—	
	df	235	235	—	
	p-value	< .001	< .001	—	
4	Pearson's r	0.314	0.188	0.471	—
	df	235	235	235	—
	p-value	< .001	0.004	< .001	—

Note: *=Machiavellianism, **=Narcissism, ***=Psychopathy, ****=Vengefulness

A Pearson's correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between the Dark Triad traits (Machiavellianism, Psychopathy, and Narcissism) and attitudes towards revenge. The results of Pearson's correlation analysis (see Table 1) support the first hypothesis, which posited a positive correlation between Dark Triad traits and the tendency towards revenge. A significant positive correlation was found between each Dark Triad trait and revenge tendencies. Machiavellianism showed a moderate positive, and statistically significant correlation with revenge ($r = 0.314$, $p < .001$). Narcissism also demonstrated a weak positive, statistically significant correlation with revenge ($r = 0.188$, $p = 0.004$). Psychopathy exhibited a moderate positive correlation with revenge ($r = 0.471$, $p < .001$).

Significant positive correlations were also observed among the Dark Triad traits themselves. Machiavellianism had a moderate positive correlation with narcissism ($r = 0.333$, $p < .001$), and a strong positive correlation with psychopathy ($r = 0.549$, $p < .001$). Narcissism also showed a moderate positive correlation with psychopathy ($r = 0.351$, $p < .001$), indicating that individuals who score higher on one Dark Triad trait tend to score higher on the others. These findings provide strong support for the hypothesized relationships, with positive correlations between the Dark Triad traits and revenge tendencies ranging from moderate to strong.

Moderation by Gender

Moderation of Gender between Machiavellianism and Revenge Tendencies. A moderation analysis was conducted in Jamovi to assess whether gender moderates the relationship between Machiavellianism and revenge tendencies. As shown in Table 2, Machiavellianism significantly predicted vengeance ($\beta=0.43$, $SE=0.09$, $p<.001$), with a confidence interval [0.25, 0.63], indicating a strong positive association. Gender, however, showed no significant main effect on vengeance ($\beta=0.09$, $SE=0.12$, $p=.418$), and the interaction term was also non-significant ($\beta=-0.07$, $SE=0.15$, $p=.656$), with the confidence interval [-0.31, 0.28] crossing zero. These results suggest that while Machiavellianism strongly predicts revenge tendencies, gender does not significantly alter this relationship. Therefore, Hypothesis 2 is not supported.

Table No. 2: Moderation Analysis of Machiavellianism and Revenge Tendencies by Gender

	Estimate	SE	95% Confidence Interval		Z	p
			Lower	Upper		
Machiavellianism subscale	0.4317	0.0943	0.262	0.627	4.580	<.001
Gender	0.0738	0.1208	-0.163	0.300	0.611	0.541
Machiavellianism subscale * Gender	-0.0252	0.1634	-0.301	0.338	-0.154	0.877

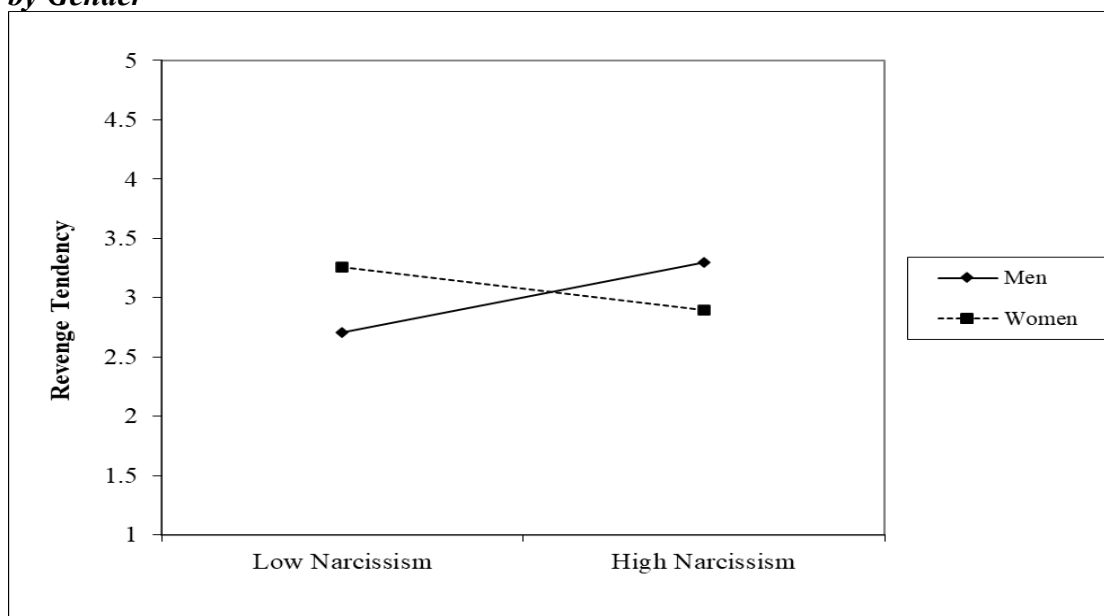
Moderation by Gender between Narcissism and Revenge Tendencies

The results (see Table 3) indicate that narcissism significantly predicted revenge tendencies ($\beta=0.30$, $SE=0.12$, $p=.011$), with higher narcissism scores associated with stronger vengeful tendencies. Gender alone was not a significant predictor ($\beta=0.08$, $SE=0.12$, $p=.529$). However, the interaction between narcissism and gender was significant ($\beta=-0.47$, $SE=0.21$, $p=.023$), indicating that gender moderates this relationship. Specifically, simple slope analysis (see Figure 1) showed that narcissism predicted revenge significantly among females ($\beta=0.54$, $p<.001$) but not among males ($\beta=0.05$, $p=.742$). The interaction plot further illustrated a strong positive slope for females and a flat slope for males. These findings suggest that narcissistic traits are more strongly associated with revenge tendencies in females than in males, supporting Hypothesis 3.

Table No. 3: Moderation Analysis of Narcissism and Revenge Tendencies by Gender

	Estimate	SE	95% Confidence Interval		Z	p
			Lower	Upper		
Narcissism Score	0.2959	0.117	0.0749	0.5435	2.532	0.011
Gender	0.0769	0.122	-0.1510	0.3467	0.630	0.529
Narcissism Score * Gender	-0.4748	0.209	-0.7950	0.0265	-2.267	0.023

Figure No. 1: Simple Slope Plot of the moderation of Narcissism and Revenge Tendencies by Gender



Moderation by Gender between Psychopathy and Revenge Tendencies

Psychopathy significantly predicted revenge tendencies (see Table 4) ($\beta=0.83$, $SE=0.12$, $p<.001$), with higher psychopathy scores linked to stronger vengeful tendencies. Gender was not a significant predictor ($\beta=-0.03$, $SE=0.12$, $p=.791$), and the interaction term was also non-significant ($\beta=0.05$, $SE=0.26$, $p=.832$). These findings indicate that gender does not moderate the relationship between psychopathy and revenge tendencies. Therefore, Hypothesis 4 is not supported.

Table No. 4: Moderation Analysis of Psychopathy and Revenge Tendencies by Gender

	95% Confidence Interval					
	Estimate	SE	Lower	Upper	Z	p
Psychopathy Score	0.8308	0.122	0.615	1.071	6.828	<.001
Gender	-	0.120	-0.270	0.208	-	0.791
	0.0319				0.265	
Psychopathy Score * Gender	0.0543	0.256	-0.412	0.605	0.212	0.832

DISCUSSION

The primary objective of this study was to examine the relationship between the Dark Triad personality traits —Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy—and the tendency to engage in revenge, along with exploring whether gender moderates these relationships. The findings supported the first hypothesis indicating a positive correlation between the dark triad personality traits and the tendency towards revenge, aligning with past studies by Jones and Paulhus (2014), Paulhus and Williams (2002), Krizan & Johar (2015). The findings of the study did not support the second hypothesis, suggesting that gender does not moderate the relationship between Machiavellianism and vengeance. However, the third hypothesis of the study was accepted indicating that gender significantly moderates the relationship between narcissism and revenge tendency, thus aligning with the findings conducted by Grijalva et al. (2015). The fourth hypothesis of the study was also rejected, thereby suggesting that gender does not significantly moderate the relationship between psychopathy

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and revenge tendencies. The rejection of the second and fourth hypothesis contradicts with the findings of Gerlsma and Lugtmeyer (2018), Goldner et al. (2019), Jäggi and Kliever (2016), Zhuang and Qiao (2018), Wilkowski et al. (2012) and Jonason and Davis (2018) that suggested that men are more likely to take revenge than women, with a strong association of masculinity with the dark triads.

Implications

The findings of this study offer valuable insights into identifying individuals at risk of maladaptive aggression and developing gender-sensitive interventions to enhance emotional regulation and empathy among young adults, reinforcing the importance of personality-based models like the General Aggression Model. The research also has practical implications for conflict management in educational and workplace settings, where individuals high in Machiavellianism may benefit from assertiveness and communication training. A notable finding is that gender moderates the link between narcissism and revenge, pointing to the need for gender-sensitive approaches in therapy and prevention programs.

Limitations

The study's limitations include a limited sample specific to a geographical region and reliance on self-report measures that may have resulted in social desirability biases. Additionally, other variables such as the participant's age, previous experience with revenge, and moral values may have influenced the outcomes of this study and hence requires to be evaluated separately.

CONCLUSION

This study's findings provide strong support of the hypothesis that each of the Dark Triad traits positively correlates with revenge, especially psychopathy. Gender moderated the relationship between narcissism and revenge tendency, with narcissistic females more prone to revenge than their male counterparts. This research contributes a culturally informed understanding of dark personality traits and aggression by examining these traits in a non-Western, young adult population.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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