



## Relationships between age of females and attraction to the Dark Triad personality



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### ABSTRACT

The current study extended previous literature that had investigated the attractiveness of the Dark Triad (DT) personality to youthful women (Carter, Campbell, & Muncer, 2014), by comparing responses between two age groups. Participants ( $N = 1001$  females) consisted of undergraduate students and women sampled from various North American communities. Participants read descriptions of male personalities and rated their attractiveness. Descriptions of male characters were designed to portray a combination of high scores on the Dark Triad traits (Machiavellianism, narcissism, and sub-clinical psychopathy), and results were compared to ratings on a low-scoring DT personality. Results were generally supportive of the hypotheses, such that younger women were more attracted to the Dark Triad traits than were older women; older women also rated the low-scoring DT personality as significantly more attractive than did younger women. However, inconsistent with previous literature, younger women rated the low-scoring DT personality as significantly more favorable than the high-scoring DT personality. Further, the participants' level of fertility did not significantly influence attractiveness ratings. The current study's findings may deepen understanding of the ways in which mating strategies change with age, as well as the qualities that women desire in a mate, in order to improve mating success.

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### 1. Introduction

Previous literature has investigated the attractiveness of a male Dark Triad personality to younger females (Carter, Campbell, & Muncer, 2014a; Carter, Campbell, & Muncer, 2014b), however minimal research has examined the changes which occur in women's preferences for men while they are both pre- and post-menopausal. The goal of this study is to explore the hypothesis that women 50 years of age and older—the average onset age for menopause (Frommer, 1965)—will rate high-scoring male Dark Triad personalities as less attractive, compared to the ratings of younger, pre-menopausal women. That is, younger females should indicate higher overall attraction levels to character depictions that are highly indicative of the Dark Triad personality traits when compared to older women, who are typically more mature, less fertile, and may also possibly be lower in the Dark Triad themselves. Previous research has indicated that individuals may associate certain physical appearances, such as facial features, with distinct personality traits (Paunonen, Ewan, Earthy, Lefave, & Goldberg, 1999; Albright, Kenny, & Malloy, 1988), which may lead to biased or inaccurate judgments. Consequently, this study evaluated women's attraction to the Dark Triad personality traits, independent of physical appearance, in order to minimize bias in attractiveness ratings.

The Dark Triad (DT) refers to a constellation of traits which include psychopathy, Machiavellianism, and narcissism. Psychopathy is characterized by antisocial behavior, impulsivity, and a lack of empathy, and is associated with deceitfulness and feigned charm (Hare, 2003). Machiavellianism is typified by extraversion, insincerity, and manipulation, and a tendency towards promiscuity (McHoskey, 2001). Narcissism refers to a grandiose view of the self and a sense of entitlement and dominance (Raskin & Terry, 1988), and is associated with intra-sexual competitive behavior, as well as short-term mating strategies (Carter et al., 2014a, 2014b).

Jonason et al. (2012) found that the Dark Triad traits were positively correlated with a preference for short-term mating strategies, and negatively correlated with tendencies towards more seriously defined romantic relationships. Here, the phrase “short-term mating” will refer to non-committed relationships which are primarily sexual in nature, as well as casual sexual interactions (e.g., ‘one night stands’; Gott & Hinchliff, 2003; Jonason, Luevano, & Adams, 2012).

Extensive research has investigated the changes that occur in the attributes which women find attractive throughout their menstrual cycle. Such changes include a preference for typically masculine facial features and intra-sexual competitive behavior at the peak of fertility, and an absence of these preferences in less fertile phases of the menstrual cycle (Cantu et al., 2014; Gangestad, Thornhill, & Garver-Apgar, 2005; Gangestad, Simpson, Cousins, Garver-Apgar, & Christensen, 2004; Gangestad & Thornhill, 1998). It is suggested that heterosexual women in the peak of their fertility are attracted to masculinity, which

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is positively correlated with high levels of testosterone (Pound, Penton-Voak, & Surridge, 2009). Testosterone is, in turn, associated with risk-taking, anti-social behavior, and a type of dominance that acts to gain status (Guo, Booth, Granger, Mazur, & Kivlighan, 2006)—behaviors associated with the DT personality (Carter et al., 2014a).

Therefore, it is contended that women who are in the peak of their life's fertility, in their youth, are more likely to be attracted to the qualities of an enhanced DT personality than are less fertile women. However, these preferences for aspects of masculinity have been found not to be significant in contraceptive pill-using women (Gangestad & Thornhill, 1998). Furthermore, the preferences of women—who did not use contraceptive pills that function by altering hormone levels—were correlated with probability of their conception (Gangestad & Thornhill, 1998).

The difference between younger and older women's libido is another potential factor affecting how attractive women tend to rate men. A study conducted by Graziottin (2000), for example, suggested that there is a post-menopausal decline in sexual desire, and casual, short-term mating has also been linked with the DT traits (Jonason et al., 2009; Jonason & Webster, 2010); therefore, it has been proposed that older women are less likely to be attracted to the qualities of a DT personality because, in part, they are unlikely to be interested in casual sex (Gott & Hinchliff, 2003).

Short-term mating has been linked with the DT personality (Jonason et al., 2009; Jonason & Webster, 2010), however our hypothesis is not that younger women desire more short-term, sexual relationships and older women prefer more long-term, committed relationships; rather, we propose that younger women are more likely to be attracted to the Dark Triad, and older women less likely to be attracted to the DT personality.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

Participants ( $N = 1150$ ) consisted of female University undergraduates and other North American citizens who were recruited through Western University, Canada, CrowdFlower, flyers posted on community bulletin boards, and newspaper advertisements. Participants enrolled in an introductory psychology course received course credit for their participation. Participants who did not complete the study for course credit were entered into a draw to win one of ten 50-dollar prizes as compensation, or were compensated 50 cents via CrowdFlower. Participants were eligible to participate if they were heterosexual females who were at least 18 years of age and fluent in English. Previous similar studies that our lab has conducted have found no important effects related to the different methods of recruitment.

Data collection took place online. As participants accessed the survey through a link, they were directed to one of two conditions on Fluid Survey—a character description of a male persona that was either representative of a high-scoring or a low-scoring DT personality (see Table 1).

### 2.2. Materials

A 6-point Likert scale was generated to assess female attraction levels to the male DT characters. Participant agreement to the statement, "I find this individual very attractive", was measured from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 6 (*Strongly Agree*). These character descriptions were developed by the first author and were modeled after Carter et al. (2014a), who used both descriptions and photographs. In order to avoid potential bias, the descriptions used in the current study did not include a photograph or indication of physical appearance.

Additional scales assessed the willingness of women to engage in hypothetical interactions (a short-term, sexual affair vs. a long-term, committed relationship) with the character with which they were

**Table 1**

Character descriptions of males scoring high or low on the Dark Triad.

#### High-scoring DT personality

I definitely enjoy getting acquainted with various women within my community; they hold this alluring vulnerability that piques my interest. I like when people ask me about my accomplishments and myself; it's always nice when people value and admire you and what you do. In a relationship, I tend to take the role of the decision-maker, especially when deciding where to take a lady on an extravagant date (I like to be impulsive when it comes to my relationships). When I am asked for my opinion, I don't think there's anything wrong with bending the truth a little bit in certain situations if the end justifies it; it's not something I tend to feel guilty about; besides, everyone lies. I don't think anyone would be hurt or upset in the long run. I don't see it as an especially moral issue — it's just a case of getting the best possible result out of all situations. Maybe one of the reasons I've been successful with women and in the majority of other areas of my life, is that I seem to be good at persuading others round to my way of thinking, and that I seek to praise them, and their abilities. Sometimes I feel like I can twirl the world around my finger.

#### Low-scoring DT personality

I definitely enjoy getting acquainted with various women within my community; they carry this alluring fortitude that piques my interest. I like asking people about their accomplishments and themselves; it's always nice admiring what others are capable of. In a relationship, I tend to let the lady take the role of the decision-maker, especially when deciding what to do on a low-key date (I like the stability and comfort that seems to go hand in hand with my relationships). When I am asked for my opinion, I give my honest answer, even knowing that maybe they were looking for a different one, because it would be morally wrong not to. I would feel guilty knowing I had not been honest with them, even if it means they are angry with me for a while (but I deserve that). Maybe one of the reasons I've steered clear of any type of leadership position in my career or taken a chance at women that might be out of my league, is that I don't seem to be good at persuading others round to my way of thinking, and I find it a little cringe-worthy to indulge in excessive flattery; I usually only give compliments if I think a co-worker or a woman truly earned them. The world may not be wrapped around my finger, but I am an honest and caring man.

presented. Participants responded on a 6-point Likert scale which ranged from 1 (*Not at all*) to 6 (*Very much so*).

A final 6-point scale was used as a manipulation check after the study, where participants were asked to rate the characters on each of the Big 5 and DT traits. Participants lastly indicated their position in their menstrual cycle and fertility status.

### 2.3. Procedure

Participants were presented with a link to the study via e-mail or alternatively accessed the link through the university's participation pool. The link was randomly redirected to one of the two conditions, where participants read a description of a male who was high or low in the DT traits. Before reading the description participants were presented with a letter of information and informed consent was obtained.

Subsequent to reading the character description, participants were asked to rate the character on the attractiveness rating scale, and completed the other scales mentioned previously. Finally, they were presented with a debriefing form. The entire study took approximately 30 min to complete.

## 3. Results

Of the 1150 participants that initially took part in the survey, 149 were deleted from the analyses due to incomplete data. The sample sizes within the two conditions varied depending on the items that were responded to, because a number of participants answered some of the survey questions, while leaving others blank.

Independent samples *t*-tests revealed that the high-scoring DT character was rated as significantly higher than the low-scoring DT character in Machiavellianism ( $t_{939} = 26.89, p < .001, \eta^2 = .44$ ), narcissism ( $t_{973} = 20.34, p < .001, \eta^2 = .30$ ), and psychopathy ( $t_{981} = 8.94, p < .001, \eta^2 = .08$ ), as well as higher in extraversion ( $t_{969} = 4.30, p < .001, \eta^2 = .02$ ). Consistent with previous

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