



Dark Triad personality traits and adolescent cyber-aggression



Sara Pabian, Charlotte J.S. De Backer*, Heidi Vandebosch

Department of Communication Studies, University of Antwerp, Sint-Jacobstraat 2, 2000 Antwerp, Belgium

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ABSTRACT

The current study empirically investigates the relationships between the Dark Triad personality traits and cyber-aggression among adolescents (14–18 year old). The sample consisted of 324 participants aged 14–18 ($M = 16.05$, $SD = 1.31$). Participants completed the Short Dark Triad (SD3) as a measure of the Dark Triad personality traits, the Facebook Intensity Scale and a scale to measure cyber-aggression. Structural equation modelling was applied to investigate the relationships. Results show that only Facebook intensity and psychopathy significantly predict cyber-aggression, when controlling for age and gender. Findings are discussed regarding the potential importance to further study Dark Triad traits, and psychopathy in particular, in the context of adolescent cyber-aggression.

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1. Introduction

Much is known about the short-term and long-term effects of cyber-aggression for victims (e.g., Slonje, Smith, & Frisé, 2013). More remains uncovered about the motives and personality profiles of online aggressors. Gammon, Converse, Lee, and Griffith (2011) have put forward a theoretical personality model to study motivations underlying cyber-aggression, emphasizing the importance of Dark Triad characteristics (Machiavellianism, and particularly narcissism and psychopathy). This assumed association between Dark Triad characteristics and cyber-aggression was recently studied among a sample of college students (Gibb & Devereux, 2014). The study here presented is the first to study the association between Dark Triad traits and cyber-aggression among an adolescent population (14–18 years old).

The work here presented focuses on cyber-aggression in general. According to Grigg (2010, p. 152) cyber-aggression can be defined as “intentional harm delivered by the use of electronic means to a person or a group of people irrespective of their age, who perceive(s) such acts as offensive, derogatory, harmful or unwanted.” Cyber-aggression encompasses both cyber harassment and cyberbullying, along with other forms of online aggression (Grigg, 2010; Pyżalski, 2012). Throughout this text, the overarching term cyber-aggression will be used to refer to any act of violence that falls under this general definition.

1.1. Cyber-aggression among school-aged children

Although the prevalence rates vary (depending on factors such as the type of measurement, the type of survey, and the specific age categories used), cyber-aggression, appears to be a considerable problem among adolescents (for overviews of prevalence rates, see for instance, Kowalski, Giumetti, Schroeder, & Lattanner, 2014). Research on adolescent perpetrators of cyber-aggression have mostly focused on profiling perpetrators in terms of sociodemographic characteristics (e.g., gender: Sevcikova & Smahel, 2009; Wade & Beran, 2011), social-cognitive factors (e.g., empathy: Kaukiainen et al., 1999; Steffgen, König, Pfetsch, & Melzer, 2011), and several personality traits (e.g., self-control, self-confidence, and social competence: Pornari & Wood, 2010; Vandebosch & Van Cleemput, 2009). This study focuses on three socially aversive personality traits – Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy – known as the Dark Triad (Jones & Paulhus, 2014; Paulhus & Williams, 2002) that have been theoretically linked to cyber-aggression (Gammon et al., 2011), but not yet empirically among adolescent populations.

1.2. Cyber-aggression and Dark Triad personality traits

Out of the three Dark Triad traits, Machiavellianism refers to manipulative strategies of social conduct that are not correlated with general intelligence, and that do not necessarily lead to success (Wilson, Near, & Miller, 1996). Narcissism and psychopathy both originated in clinical literature and practice (see Furnham & Crump, 2005), but are treated as sub-clinical traits in the Dark Triad composite (Furnham, Richards, & Paulhus, 2013; Paulhus &

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +32 32655680, mobile: +32 494724049; fax: +32 32655798.

E-mail address: charlotte.debacker@ua.ac.be (C.J.S. De Backer).

Williams, 2002). A subclinical narcissistic personality includes a sense of importance and uniqueness, fantasies of unlimited success, requesting constant attention, expecting special favors, and being interpersonally exploitative (Emmons, 1987). With regards to psychopathy, most researchers acknowledge the inclusion of three important elements: an impulsive behavioral style, an arrogant, deceitful interpersonal style and a deficient affective experience (callousness, see Cooke & Michie, 2001; Cooke, Michie, Hart, & Clark, 2004). It has also been argued to add antisocial behavior to this list (Hare, 2003), although it is advised to exclude this dimension in the definition of child and adolescent psychopathy (Farrington, 2005).

Among non-referred samples, the three components of the Dark Triad have been associated with both offline aggression and cyber-aggression, mostly in studies only looking at one of the three traits. To start, self-report measures of Machiavellianism have been associated with offline aggression among primary school children (Andreou, 2004; Sutton & Keogh, 2000), as well as among adolescents (Peeters, Cillessen, & Scholte, 2010). Second, narcissism (specifically exploitativeness) has been linked to offline aggression among primary school children and middle school adolescents (Ang, Ong, Lim, & Lim, 2010; Fanti & Henrich, 2014). With regards to cyber-aggression, narcissists are expected to function well in online environments, because of the shallowness of online relations and the controllability of online self-presentation (Buffardi & Campbell, 2008). Narcissism is associated with more intense use of social network sites and larger online networks (Ang, Tan, & Mansor, 2011; Buffardi & Campbell, 2008; Carpenter, 2012). Further evidence supports an association between narcissistic exploitativeness, a sub construct of narcissism, and cyber-aggression among adolescents (Ang et al., 2011). While others (Eksi, 2012) found that narcissism in general is indirectly associated with cyber-aggression, when controlling for mediation by Internet addiction.

Third, psychopathic traits have been associated with offline aggressive behavior (Chabrol, van Leeuwen, Rodgers, & Gibbs, 2011; Gumpel, 2014; Marsee, Silverthorn, & Frick, 2005) and cyber-aggression (Ciucci, Baroncelli, Franchi, Golmaryami, & Frick, 2014) among adolescents. In their longitudinal study of cyber-aggression Fanti, Demetriou, and Hawa (2012) found that callous unemotional traits, a subset of psychopathic traits, were positively related to changes – between time 1 and 2 with a one year interval – in cyber-aggression above and beyond gender, offline- and online bullying.

Looking at combinations of the above-discussed traits, Fanti and Kimonis (2012) investigated the relation between both narcissism and psychopathic traits and aggressive behavior. They found that aggression was highest among those who scored high on narcissism, and especially among those who also show psychopathic callous-unemotional traits. As a combined Dark Triad cluster, Machiavellianism, narcissism and psychopathy have together been linked to children's offline aggression (Chabrol, Van Leeuwen, Rodgers, & Séjourné, 2009; Kerig & Stellwagen, 2010), children's theory of mind abilities (Stellwagen & Kerig, 2013), adults' offline aggression (Baughman, Dearing, Giammarco, & Vernon, 2012; Pailing, Boon, & Egan, 2014), and adults' cyber-aggression (Gibb & Devereux, 2014). To our knowledge the Dark Triad cluster has not yet been examined with adolescents' cyber-aggression.

1.3. The present study

This study investigates how all Dark Triad traits correspond to cyber-aggression among adolescents (aged 14–18) using Facebook. Although the Dark Triad traits are clearly clustered, the correlations among the traits are fairly modest, so that each component may still be viewed as a distinct aspect of socially aversive

behavior (Baughman et al., 2012). Because of the close connection between narcissism and online behavior we described above, a control measure for Facebook intensity will be added to the design.

2. Method

2.1. Sample

The sample consisted of 324 adolescents (63.0% girls) aged between 14 and 18 ($M = 16.05$, $SD = 1.31$). The sample was a convenience sample recruited via a researcher in charge of the data collection who made personal announcements and handed out flyers with the web link to the survey at schools, scouting organizations and sports clubs.

2.2. Procedure

This study followed APA Ethical Guidelines for research with human subjects; all participants were fully informed about the general scope of the study, informed consent was collected from the participant and an adult supervisor, and no compensations were given for participation. Participants were given a link that opened the online consent form describing their rights as research participants. Only if they indicated that they and a parent or guardian agreed for participation, the online survey appeared. For those who disagreed to participate, had doubts, or had no permission from a parent or guardian, the survey ended. For all others, the survey began with the questions regarding sociodemographics, followed by the three personality traits of the Dark Triad. In a final part, respondents were asked about their cyber-aggression activities on Facebook and their intensity of Facebook use. Participants without a Facebook profile ($N = 5$) were referred to the end of the survey and excluded from this study.

2.3. Instruments

All instruments were translated from English to Dutch, and back-translated to English by a second translator, not familiar with the instrument (as suggested by Brislin (1986)). Before administering the survey, a pilot study was carried out among a convenience sample of five boys and five girls ($M = 15.40$, $SD = 1.58$) to test in particular whether all the words were understood. No major issues appeared.

2.4. The Short Dark Triad (Jones & Paulhus, 2014)

Using a five-point scale from *totally disagree* (1) to *totally agree* (5), participants indicated their agreement with 27 items, 9 items for each personality trait. A measurement model was calculated to test whether the observed items reliably reflect the hypothesized latent variables Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy, using Mplus 6 (Muthén & Muthén, 2010). Confirmatory factor analysis was used with robust maximum likelihood estimation (MLR) in order to adjust for deviations due to non-normal variables. The three factors were allowed to co-vary. One item that measured narcissism, two items of Machiavellianism, and two items of psychopathy had factor loadings lower than 0.30 on their corresponding factor. These items were not included in further analyses. The (final) measurement model is presented in Table 1. The results indicated a good fit for the measurement model, except for the Chi-square (due to its sensitivity to sample size): $CFI = 0.902$; $RMSEA = .045$ (C.I. 90%: 0.036–0.054); $\chi^2(201) = 332.812$, $p < .001$. The internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha) was .74 for Machiavellianism, .61 for narcissism, and .77 for psychopathy (without the low loading items). Jones and Paulhus (2014) reported alphas between .71 and .76 for

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