



## Full length article

# Who do you troll and Why: An investigation into the relationship between the Dark Triad Personalities and online trolling behaviours towards popular and less popular Facebook profiles

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## ABSTRACT

This experiment examined the influence of Dark Personalities in trolling behaviour towards popular and less popular Facebook profiles. One-hundred and thirty-five participants were recruited to view two fake Facebook profiles and rate how much they would agree with some trolling comments to each profile, as well as how they perceived themselves in comparison to each profile in terms of social acceptance and rank. In addition, participants completed the Short Dark Personality Questionnaire. Results suggested Psychopathy was positively associated with trolling behaviours while Narcissism was associated with a tendency to see oneself superior to others. Moreover, the higher the Psychopathy score the more likely the participants would troll the popular profile. On the other hand, the higher the Narcissism score the more likely participants were to perceive themselves as superior to the popular profile. These analyses revealed the different influence Dark Personality traits play on different behavioural tendencies. Dynamics among the Dark Personalities in relationship with online behaviours and the implications of the study are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

An increasingly popular strand of research has examined how the Dark Personality Triad influences online behaviour such as trolling that is defined as “the practice of behaving in a deceptive, destructive, or disruptive manner in a social setting on the internet with no apparent instrumental purpose” (Buckels, Trapnell & Paulhus, 2014, p. 97). Researchers tried to examine the relationship between Dark Personality Triad traits and trolling in an attempt to predict and prevent trolling behaviour (Buckels et al., 2014). The Dark Personality Triad is characterised by socially offensive but not pathological traits, with Psychopathy being the most malicious of the three, showing callousness, impulsiveness, thrill-seeking and remorseless behaviour (Jones & Paulhus, 2011). Machiavellians are also manipulators but less malicious than Psychopaths (Jones & Paulhus, 2014). Narcissists on the other hand, tend to show ideas of grandiosity and preoccupation with their own

self-advancement and with gaining the admiration and attention from others (Campbell & Miller, 2012).

### 1.1. The dark personalities' differences in motivation and associated behaviours

Interestingly, recent research by Buckels et al. (2014) has shown that although Psychopathy, Machiavellism and Narcissism are overlapping constructs that share commonalities (Paulhus, 2014) such as lack of empathy and callousness, these Dark Triad Personalities also display different behaviours online. It seems that Psychopaths and Machiavellians have a tendency to display anti-social behaviour including trolling and acting against the law (e.g., engaging in internet hacking; Buckels, Jones & Paulhus, 2013). However, this was not found to be the case amongst the Narcissistic sample (Buckels et al., 2014): Narcissism was found to be negatively related to trolling (Buckels et al., 2014). Overall, research thus seems to suggest that the three Dark Triad Personalities have different motivations and beliefs that may have an impact on the behaviour they display.

Under a cognitive-behavioural framework, beliefs and associated cognitions are part of self and other schemas that act as

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“lenses” through which information is perceived and appraised thus determining behaviour, which in turn will help to maintain the beliefs (Ellis, 1985).

On one hand, Psychopathy is characterised by the inherent belief that it is acceptable for others to be manipulated and hurt for the individual's own benefit and by an underlying sadistic motivation to cause harm to others (both psychological and physical) that ultimately will give pleasure to the Psychopath. This sadistic streak motivates Psychopaths to bully and prey on people that catch their attention with the intention to use them for their own benefit and self-advancement (e.g., bullying and blackmailing popular individuals for social connections and social gains).

The behaviour of bullying will therefore maintain the Psychopaths' sadistic beliefs and motivation by providing them with feelings of pleasure derived from provoking harm to people that are important and socially salient and attractive (Holtzman & Strube, 2013). Moreover, although Psychopaths may be motivated to bully weaker and vulnerable victims (see Book, Costello, & Camilleri, 2013; Hare, 1999; Powell, 2008), they are also aware that they can obtain more from weaker and lower status victims by showing false sympathy and modesty, thus gaining their trust (Hare, 2006; Powell, 2008). This is because vulnerable victims usually have lower self-esteem and self-confidence, are more gullible and are more willing to trust (which makes them easier to be manipulated) than mentally strong victims (Hodges & Perry, 1999; Powell, 2008). Therefore, bullying vulnerable and less popular individuals does not give as much sadistic pleasure to Psychopaths as bullying popular people does. This is simply because bullying vulnerable low status individuals does not pose necessarily a challenge to Psychopaths; it is too easy to do so and does not necessarily bring any benefit or pleasure to Psychopaths.

In contrast to Psychopaths, Narcissists display a self-serving schema composed of strong beliefs about their own distorted sense of self-importance and grandiosity. Hence, their underlying motivation is not necessarily to cause harm to others but to socially compare themselves favourably to other perceived important people. This will help them to maintain their inflated views of their own self, thus protecting their self-esteem (Campbell & Miller, 2012). Like Narcissists, Machiavellians have also been characterised by self-interest, such that they will manipulate, deceive and exploit others in order to achieve their goals (Jakobwitz & Egan, 2006). As can be seen in previous literature, positive inter-correlations between Machiavellianism and Narcissism have been detected (Jones & Paulhus, 2014) and Narcissists and Machiavellians are seen to be similar in regards to manipulating and exploiting others in order to promote their self-advancement and success. This suggests that Narcissists and Machiavellians may be only motivated to bully when this leads to personal gains and self-advancement, whereas Psychopaths seem to bully not only to self-advance but also simply because they get kicks out of harming other people just for the fun of it.

Further research on the Dark Personality Triad's behaviour online has examined how the Dark Personalities use social media. For example, research that has utilised social media websites has suggested that Narcissists are more frequent users of Facebook (Ljepava, Orr, Locke, & Ross, 2013). Carpenter (2012) conducted a study on students and identified a clear link between the number of Facebook friends and people who score highly on the Narcissistic Personality Inventory questionnaire. Findings also revealed that these individuals are more likely to accept friend requests from strangers, tag themselves more often, update their news-feeds more frequently, respond more aggressively to derogatory comments made about them and change their profile pictures more often. Furthermore, Marshall, Lefringhausen, and Ferenczi (2015) researched personality predictors of Facebook status update

topics. They found that extroverts update more frequently about their social activities and Narcissists update more frequently about their achievements, diet and exercise.

A recent study by Kaya and Bicen (2016) supports previous literature on the relationship between Narcissism and Facebook use in students. They found in a large sample of 362 high school students from level 9 to 12 that students that update their Facebook status more often are more likely to be showing Narcissism. Kaya and Bicen (2016) also added new results to the current literature by showing that in spite of this, Facebook may be an useful tool for e-learning (as long psychological considerations such as Narcissism and self-esteem are considered), given that they found that students that have high Facebook engagement show more participation in school related activities. The authors also found that students are aware of issues of privacy in Facebook as well as what constitutes negative behaviour in Facebook (e.g., swearing). This seems to suggest that students are aware that trolling is a negative behaviour.

Further research on the Dark Triad and online behaviour by Nevin (2015) has found that internet users actually display higher levels of the Dark Triad trait Psychopathy online rather than offline, which was particularly prominent in males. The researcher had participants score on personality measures and then rate the acceptability and likelihood of engaging in both online and offline misconduct behaviours provided in the form of vignettes. The researcher suggested that the internet facilitates increased expression of Psychopathic personality traits and one explanation for this is that of the online disinhibition effect, the view that anonymity online may contribute to more deviant behaviour (Suler, 2004).

In conclusion, research seems to suggest that trolls are displaying Psychopathic tendencies whereas Narcissists use social media websites to promote themselves and that social status and social comparison may be important variables to examine when exploring trolling behaviour of the Dark Personality Triad.

## 1.2. The dark personalities behave differently towards people of different popularity

Previous research has emphasised the importance of striving for self-enhancement as a central characteristic of Narcissism (Campbell & Miller, 2012). Narcissism is linked with the materialistic pursuit of wealth and Narcissistic displays of self-enhancement have taken the form of many behaviours including the need to display a superior status (Rose, 2007) alongside promoting a certain public image that consists of expensive clothing (Vazire, Naumann, Rentfrow, & Gosling, 2008). Narcissists focus on enforcing traits such as dominance and competitiveness as a means to self-enhance (Wallace, 2011) and strive in domains that offer power and status (Rose & Campbell, 2004).

The current study manipulated the social status of two Facebook profiles in order to explore how Narcissists behave online towards people of different perceived popularity because there is literature to suggest that Narcissists seem to show a self-grandiose schema and consequently social status and comparison are important aspects to research as they help to maintain the Narcissists' self-enhancing beliefs (Rose & Campbell, 2004). Therefore, the current study devised two Facebook profiles based on the social-evolutionary definition of popularity as being the perceived higher social rank and status of an individual that is characterised by symbols of power, acceptance and availability of resources (e.g., wealth; Gilbert, 2001). On the other hand, less popular individuals are usually perceived as possessing lower social rank and acceptance, vulnerability, less socially attractive qualities (e.g., lower physical attractiveness and social weaknesses such as awkward

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