

The Attractiveness of Women with “Dark” Personality: A Brief Report

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Abstract. As we discuss in this paper, physical attractiveness is not the only way to define a person’s appeal. We suggest that personality traits also have an impact on the perceived attractiveness of a person. The main objective of this paper is to assess men’s perspective on the attraction of women with characteristics of the Dark Triad traits (Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy). This study was based on a quasi-experimental design in which 94 men participated. The participants were randomly presented with one of two scenarios about the day of woman X, where the expression of the Dark Triad personality traits (low versus high) was manipulated. Our research results revealed that women with a high level of the Dark Triad traits are perceived by men to be less attractive ($n = 52$) than women with a low level of the Dark Triad traits ($n = 42$). Our results partially support the idea that women are perceived as more attractive if they meet certain gender norms such as being friendly, community-oriented, being less aggressive, and non-manipulative.

Keywords: Dark Triad, attractiveness, quasi-experiment, gender norms.

Motery, pasižyminčių „tamsiąja“ asmenybe, patrauklumo vertinimas: trumpas pranešimas

Santrauka. Šiame straipsnyje aptariama, kad fizinis patrauklumas nėra vienintelis patrauklumo vertinimo elementas. Straipsnyje teigiama, kad asmenybės bruožai taip pat turi įtakos žmogaus patrauklumo vertinimui. Pagrindinis šio straipsnio tikslas buvo įvertinti vyrų požiūrį į moterų, pasižyminčių tamsiosios triados (makiavelizmo, narcisizmo ir psichopatiškumo) bruožais, patrauklumą. Tyrime, kuriame dalyvavo 94 vyrai, naudotas kvaziekperimento tyrimo dizainas. Dalyviams atsitiktiniu būdu buvo pateiktas vienas iš dviejų scenarijų apie moters X dieną, kuriame buvo

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manipuliuojama tamsiosios triados asmenybės bruožų išreikštumu (žemas ir aukštas). Tyrimo rezultatai parodė, kad moterys, pasižyminčios aukštu tamsiosios triados bruožų lygiu, buvo vertinamos kaip mažiau patrauklios vyrams ($n = 52$) nei moterys, pasižyminčios žemu tamsiosios triados bruožų lygiu ($n = 42$). Rezultatai iš dalies patvirtina idėją, kad moterys yra laikomos patrauklesnėmis, jei atitinka tam tikras lyties normas, pavyzdžiui, yra draugiškos, orientuotos į bendruomenę, mažiau agresyvios ir nemanipuliatyvios.

Pagrindiniai žodžiai: tamsioji triada, patrauklumas, kvaziekperimentas, lyčių normos.

Introduction

It is known that attractive people are treated differently from people who are perceived as unattractive. This fact is mostly related to the *Halo effect* – a cognitive bias when physical appearance (or any other trait) affects the overall impression of a person. Usually, an attractive person is perceived as more competent, confident, socially skilled, reliable, etc., compared to an unattractive person (e.g., Standing, 2004). Physical attraction is the first (and sometimes the only) aspect to be taken into account when meeting someone for the first time, and it shapes a first impression on a person (e.g., Fultz et al., 2024). However, it is important to look at attractiveness as a multi-component construct, not focusing merely on physical appearance (e.g., Gignac et al., 2018; McCroskey & McCain, 1974). We consider that personality traits (and related behaviours) can make a considerable contribution to the perceived attractiveness of a person. Specifically, we are interested in the influence of the dark personality traits on the perceived attraction of women. Role theory suggests that both men and women act depending on social norms and expectations of their gender, i.e., men are supposed to be more dominant, while women are expected to be more modest. Meanwhile, people judge other men or women based on the alignment of their behaviour with gender norms. Questions arise as to how men assess women with high Dark Triad traits as this personality profile does not match female gender norms; and how attractive to men these women are.

The Dark Triad model (Paulhus & Williams, 2002) consists of three personality traits: Machiavellianism (exploiting others and manipulation to get personal gains (Amiri & Behnezhad, 2017; Forsyth et al., 2012)), subclinical narcissism (the grandiose self-view and desire to achieve recognition and admiration (Lee et al., 2013)), and subclinical psychopathy (impulsivity and lack of remorse (Amiri & Behnezhad, 2017; Lee et al., 2013)). All Dark Triad traits are associated with a lower level of empathy, honesty-humility, agreeableness, higher tendency to involve in short-term mating behaviour (Jonason & Webster, 2010; Lee et al., 2013; Shukla & Upadhyay, 2025) and more.

A substantial proportion of studies examining the relationship between the Dark Triad and attractiveness have focused either more or solely on (1) women’s preferences for male partners with Dark Triad traits (e.g., Carter et al., 2014), or (2) attractiveness exclusively within mating contexts (e.g., Dragostinov & Booth, 2025). Considering the existing gender differences in many fields (driving psychology, leadership psychology, health psychology, etc.) and theoretical perspective, we argue that findings regarding women’s preferences toward men cannot be generalized to explain men’s preferences regarding women. Con-

sequently, two important questions remain largely unanswered: first, whether *women* who possess Dark Triad traits are perceived as attractive; and second, how Dark Triad traits in women relate to other forms of attractiveness beyond mating.

This study contributes to research on social perception and gender roles in at least three ways. First, by taking attractiveness as a multi-component construct, and not only physical attractiveness, we expand the field of research on attractiveness studies. Second, we fill the gap in the literature by answering the question of how Dark Triad personality traits affect the perceived attractiveness of a woman as studies still tend to focus more on the attractiveness of man. Finally, we present a quasi-experimental research design as an effective method in attractiveness and Dark Triad research.

Method

Participants

An online quasi-experiment research design was applied. The sample of a pilot study consisted of 94 male participants from Lithuania who were gathered by using a convenient sampling method. *Google Forms* application was used for data collection. The participants were recruited by using *Facebook* and *LinkedIn* social media platforms. All participants were men ($M = 25.24$; age range: 18 to 44 years). Most participants (45.7%) had a higher university education. A total of 44.7% of the participants had a romantic partner, 38.4% were single, 14.9% were married, and 2% were divorced.

Measures

Interpersonal Attractiveness scale. The attractiveness of a woman described in the scenarios was measured with the Interpersonal Attractiveness Scale (McCroskey & McCain, 1974). It is a 15-item inventory measuring general attractiveness ($\omega = .85$) and three subscales: task attractiveness ($\omega = .74$), social attractiveness ($\omega = .82$), and physical attractiveness ($\omega = .73$). The participants responded on a '7'-point Likert scale ranging from '1' (strongly disagree) to '7' (strongly agree).

The Short Dark Triad (SD3) scale. Dark Triad personality traits of the assessors were measured by using SD3 (Jones & Paulhus, 2014). Due to the low reliability of the subscales ($\omega = .66$ for Machiavellianism; $\omega = .49$ for narcissism; $\omega = .72$ for psychopathy) only the general score was used ($\omega = .72$). Also, Persson et al. (2017) recommended using a total score of SD3, because SD3 subscales contain small amounts of variance. Items were scored on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from '1' (strongly disagree) to '5' (strongly agree).

Procedure

This pilot study employed a quasi-experimental design in which randomization was not implemented. In this study, scenarios were used as independent variables that manipulate the expression of the Dark Triad personality traits (low versus high). Scenarios are

believed to be an effective way to manipulate the ‘personality’, and they are an effective way to measure the effect of personality (e.g., Steiner et al., 2016).

Two scenarios were created by using the results of the factorial analysis results of Jonason and Webster (2010). 12 characteristics (four for each trait), as identified by Jonason and Webster (2010), that describe specific behaviour (e.g., manipulation, seeking for attention, lack of remorse) were represented in the scenarios. Creating the scenarios with low and high Dark Triad expressions, we kept all scenes the same, but the behaviour of the described woman was different. Both scenarios described the moments of Woman X’s everyday situations (if interested, please contact the corresponding author for the scenarios). No information about the woman’s physical appearance was provided.

The participants had to answer demographic questions and fill in the SD3 scale. Later, the participants had to blindly choose one of two scenarios given (with high or low Dark Triad expression so that to control selection bias). After blindly choosing a scenario, the participants were asked to read that scenario and fill out the Interpersonal Attractiveness Scale to assess the woman described in the scenario.

Manipulation check

To test the suitability and validity of the created scenarios, a manipulation check has been conducted. 14 lecturers and doctoral students from the Department of Psychology at Vytautas Magnus University were asked to assess the differences between Dark Triad traits expression in given scenarios. The participants had to read both scenarios created by the authors and fill in the SD3 scale to assess the women described in the scenarios. The results revealed statistically significant differences in the Dark Triad trait mean rank between the two scenarios (Mann-Whitney $U = 39.5; p < .05$), while the inter-raters agreement index was high ($a_{wg} .76 - .92$), which means that the created scenarios are denoted by high construct validity and were suitable to use in further research.

Statistical procedures

Statistical analysis revealed that the data are skewed. No data transformation method (e.g., log or square-root transformations) was applied. Thus, a non-parametric Mann-Whitney U test was used.

Results

The woman with a higher level of the Dark Triad traits described in the scenario was assessed as less generally, task-, socially, and physically attractive than the woman described in the scenario with a lower level of the Dark Triad traits (see Table 1).

Table 1

Differences of attractiveness between scenarios with a higher level and a lower level of the Dark Triad traits

Dependent variable	Women with a higher level of Dark Triad traits ($n = 52$)	Women with a lower level of Dark Triad traits ($n = 42$)	Mann-Whitney U	Z	r
	<i>Mean rank</i>	<i>Mean rank</i>			
General attractiveness	35.39	62.49	462.5*	-4.79	.25
Task attractiveness	35.43	62.44	464.50*	-4.78	.25
Social attractiveness	37.77	59.55	586.00*	-3.85	.16
Physical attractiveness	41.93	54.39	802.50*	-2.21	.05

Note. * $p < .05$; r represents the effect size

The sample was divided into two groups base on the sample median score. Men with a lower level of the Dark Triad traits compared to the median ($n = 45$) assess this woman as more socially attractive compared to women with a higher level of the Dark Triad traits; whereas, men with a higher level of the Dark Triad traits compared to the median ($n = 49$) assess the woman with a lower level of the Dark Triad traits as more physically attractive compared to the woman with a higher level of the Dark Triad traits (see Table 2).

Discussion

The goal of our pilot study was twofold: (a) to examine differences in women's attractiveness with a higher or lower levels of the Dark Triad traits, and (b) to test what effect an assessor's Dark Triad traits have on the perceived attractiveness of a woman with the same level of the Dark Triad traits as the assessor possesses.

Women described in the scenario with a higher level of the Dark Triad traits were assessed as less attractive compared to women described in the scenario with a lower level of the Dark Triad traits. Our results at least partially confirm the gender roles theory claiming that women and men perform different social roles, and their behaviour is evaluated differently based on social norms (Rudman et al., 2012). Different gender norms and differences in how men and women are evaluated by others may be manifested because women are seen as more communal and use aggression far less frequently (Björkqvist, 1994). Also, according to Grijalva et al. (2015), women who manifest anti-social behaviour (cheating, manipulation, aggression, emotional insensitivity, etc.) are rated more harshly and are more likely to be sanctioned and judged than men who demonstrate the same behaviour. The results of this study indirectly suggest (given the lack of a definitive cause-and-effect relationship) that women who do not act in accordance with the gender norms (e.g., by being manipulative or showing a lack of remorse or empathy) are perceived as less attractive.

Despite the absence of visual stimuli, a woman with a lower level of the Dark Triad traits was assessed as more physically attractive than a woman with a high level of the Dark Triad traits. This aligns with the Halo effect, a cognitive bias where a single positive attribute (in this case, a pro-social personality) leads to an overall favourable evaluation of women, including their physical appearance (Bak, 2010).

Based on the similarity-attraction hypothesis (Byrne, 1971) (as cited in Barbuto & Gifford, 2012), we expected that men with a higher level of the Dark Triad traits would assess women with the same traits as more attractive than women without these traits. However, the results revealed that women with a lower level of the Dark Triad traits were seen as more attractive by men despite their levels of the Dark Triad traits. This discrepancy in the results could be explained by the influence of the cultural norms related to gender roles. It is still more acceptable and appreciated in society for women to be calmer, more sensitive to others, more likely to develop friendly and supportive relationships, and be shy (Mahalik et al., 2005). As Eastwick et al. (2006) noted, individuals following traditional gender ideologies tend to choose partners who fit these stereotypes.

The main limitation of the current study is the small sample size. Consequently, the findings of this paper must be further analysed with caution. Future research should replicate the study with more participants so that to achieve more detailed results. The participants were only men. Future research should include female participants to investigate the internalization of societal norms across genders. Assessment of the conformity to the masculine/femininity norms of the participants (e.g., by using Mahalik et al.'s (2005) inventory) might be also a valuable improvement of the study in this field. Also, it should be considered that the scenarios given to the participants described fictional characters and described only specific situations of the target's life. A broader depiction of the daily life situation(s) of the person with the Dark Triad could ensure the ecological validity of the research. Additionally, future studies could include questions about the participants' relationship status or sexual orientation in order to explore potential correlations with the perceived attractiveness or differences between groups. Future research could also benefit from creating separate scenarios for all three personality traits. This would allow for the measurement of the relationship between individual Dark Triad personality traits and attractiveness. Finally, different experimental stimuli could be applied in the research, e.g., by using recorded video, or by using an actor who would play 'dark' women.

Author contributions

Tadas Vadvilavičius: conceptualization, methodology, formal analysis, investigation, writing – original draft, writing – review and editing, visualization.

Jovita Janavičiūtė-Pužauskė: conceptualization, methodology, data curation, investigation, writing – original draft.

Kristina Žardeckaitė-Matulaitienė: supervision, conceptualization, methodology, writing – review and editing.

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