



# The longitudinal relationship between everyday sadism and the amount of violent video game play



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## ABSTRACT

Previous research found correlational evidence that the trait of everyday sadism is associated with the amount of violent video game play. Due to the correlational design, the direction of the association remained unclear. According to the selection hypothesis, everyday sadists should be attracted to violent video games, whereas the socialization hypothesis would propose that repeated exposure to violent video games makes the player more sadistic. However, these hypotheses are by no means mutually exclusive and the relation between everyday sadism and violent video game exposure could be bidirectional. To examine the causal mechanisms more closely, we carried out a longitudinal study ( $N = 743$ ) for which we collected data at two points in time, six months apart. Results showed that (a) everyday sadists are more likely than others to play violent video games and (b) repeated exposure to violent video games predicts everyday sadism over time. Overall, this bidirectional influence reflects a downward spiral of everyday sadistic tendencies and violent video gaming reinforcing each other.

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## 1. Introduction

Paulhus and Williams (2002) proposed that there are three distinct dimensions that characterize the dark side of human personality (labelled the Dark Triad): narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy. Narcissists seek admiration and attention and have a grandiose sense of self-importance and superiority. Machiavellians manipulate and exploit others. Psychopathy can be characterized as the tendencies of callousness, thrill seeking, and unemotionality. According to recent research (e.g., Chabrol, Van Leeuwen, Rodgers, & Séjourné, 2009; Paulhus, 2014), every sadism could be added as a fourth dimension. Generally, everyday sadists find pleasure in causing harm. They crave for cruelty and their aim is to humiliate others for personal enjoyment (Buckels, Jones, & Paulhus, 2013). These four dimensions (labelled the Dark Tetrad) are significantly correlated, but each trait also has its distinct profile (Chabrol, Melioli, Van Leeuwen, Rodgers, & Goutaudier, 2015). Importantly, these measures have been developed to target subclinical levels of these traits. That is, they are not intended to assess clinically relevant variations, but instead capture nuances of manifestations anywhere below the level of clinical disorders.

Violent video game play is characterized by causing serious harm to other game characters. Perhaps not surprisingly, there is a positive relationship between the Dark Tetrad and the amount of violent video game play (Greitemeyer, 2015). In particular, of the Dark Tetrad, everyday

sadism has the most robust association with amount of violent video game play (Greitemeyer, 2015). Yet, due to the correlational design, the nature of the association between violent video game exposure and everyday sadism could not be addressed. That is, everyday sadists may be attracted to violent video games, repeated exposure to violent video games may increase the player's sadistic tendencies, or both directions of influence may be at work. In the present research, we aimed for disentangling these alternative explanations by testing the interplay between everyday sadism and amount of violent video game play over time.

### 1.1. The association between violent video game play and dark personalities

A great number of studies have addressed the effects of exposure to violent video games on aggression and aggression-related variables. Although some studies fail to find that violent video games cause aggression (e.g., Adachi & Willoughby, 2011), it appears that individuals who frequently play violent video games do become more aggressive. Two recent meta-analyses (Anderson et al., 2010; Greitemeyer & Mügge, 2014) showed that playing violent video games significantly increases the accessibility of aggressive thoughts, hostile affect, and aggressive behavior. It thus appears that playing violent video games does have an impact on the player's aggression outside the virtual world.

Correlational studies suggest that there is also a relation between amount of violent video game exposure and malevolent personality dispositions. For example, habitual violent video game play is associated with higher trait aggression (e.g., Anderson et al., 2004) and trait hostility (Gentile, Lynch, Linder, & Walsh, 2004). Moreover, violent video

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**Table 1**  
Means, standard deviations, and bivariate correlations.

Variable	M	SD	$\alpha$	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. VVE T1	6.00	8.56	–										
2. Sadism T1	1.87	0.54	0.87	0.35***									
3. Trait aggression T1	2.00	0.73	0.88	0.17***	0.57***								
4. Extraversion T1	3.50	1.72	0.78	–0.02	0.05	–0.09*							
5. Agreeableness T1	5.36	1.27	0.57	–0.11**	–0.44***	–0.55***	0.04						
6. Conscientiousness T1	5.52	1.25	0.65	–0.07	–0.24***	–0.34***	0.20***	0.28***					
7. Neuroticism T1	3.17	1.55	0.79	–0.03	0.10*	0.47***	–0.21***	–0.35***	–0.38***				
8. Openness T1	5.12	1.26	0.56	0.08*	–0.01	–0.04	0.31***	0.17***	0.11**	–0.20***			
9. Narcissism T1	3.61	1.94	0.88	0.09*	0.35***	0.37***	0.15***	–0.24***	–0.17***	0.18***	0.00		
10. Machiavellianism T1	2.94	1.73	0.85	0.15***	0.56***	0.51***	0.04	–0.42***	–0.28***	0.21***	–0.02	0.54***	
11. Psychopathy T1	2.49	1.64	0.82	0.18***	0.57***	0.56***	–0.07	–0.62***	–0.29***	0.22***	–0.06	0.35***	0.65***
12. VVE T2	5.49	8.00	–	0.74***	0.38***	0.19***	–0.02	–0.15***	–0.09*	0.03	0.08*	0.07	0.18***
13. Sadism T2	1.86	0.53	0.87	0.36***	0.82***	0.47***	0.03	–0.42***	–0.18***	0.07	–0.01	0.30***	0.50***
14. Trait aggression T2	2.03	0.72	0.89	0.20***	0.54***	0.83***	–0.07	–0.53***	–0.29***	0.44***	–0.04	0.34***	0.46***
15. Extraversion T2	3.46	1.74	0.78	–0.06	0.01	–0.11**	0.89***	0.07	0.22***	–0.23***	0.27***	0.15***	0.02
16. Agreeableness T2	5.35	1.28	0.53	–0.10*	–0.39***	–0.51***	0.07	0.80***	0.26***	–0.29***	0.13**	–0.25***	–0.41***
17. Conscientiousness T2	5.47	1.26	0.58	–0.07	–0.21***	–0.32***	0.14***	0.30***	0.77***	–0.36***	0.08*	–0.16***	–0.23***
18. Neuroticism T2	3.20	1.54	0.78	–0.02	0.10**	0.42***	–0.18***	–0.29***	–0.34***	0.84***	–0.17***	0.15***	–0.20***
19. Openness T2	5.05	1.29	0.55	0.08*	–0.02	–0.05	0.29***	0.14***	0.06	–0.18***	0.78***	0.02	0.00
20. Narcissism T2	3.68	1.96	0.89	0.06	0.33***	0.32***	0.12**	–0.25***	–0.14***	0.13**	0.01	0.74***	0.46***
21. Machiavellianism T2	3.05	1.78	0.85	0.14***	0.51***	0.41***	0.02	–0.37***	–0.23***	0.17***	–0.03	0.41***	0.74***
22. Psychopathy T2	2.60	1.68	0.83	0.18***	0.50***	0.47***	–0.12**	–0.59***	–0.25***	0.20***	–0.10*	0.27***	0.54***

\*  $p < 0.05$ .  
\*\*  $p < 0.01$ .  
\*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

game exposure was shown to be associated with increased narcissism and decreased agreeableness (Anderson et al., 2004). A recent study (Greitemeyer, 2015) found that everyday sadism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy (in addition to trait aggression and agreeableness) were associated with amount of violent video game play. Importantly, of the Dark Tetrad, trait aggression, and agreeableness, everyday sadism was the best predictor of amount of violent video game play.

An important question is how precisely everyday sadism and exposure to video game violence are related. Behavioral research suggests that everyday sadists actively seek opportunities to indulge their appetite for cruelty (Buckels et al., 2013), so it appears a plausible explanation that particularly everyday sadists are attracted to violent video games, possibly due to the opportunity to cause virtual injury and death. This reasoning is in line with the selection hypothesis proposing that highly aggressive individuals are more likely to seek out violent media contents than do individuals who are less aggressive (Huesmann, Moise-Titus, Podolski, & Eron, 2003). The socialization hypothesis, on the other hand, proposes that exposure to violent content causes the user to become more aggressive over time (Anderson, Gentile, & Buckley, 2007). Therefore, the positive association between everyday sadism and amount of violent video game play could also be due to violent video game exposure increasing the player’s sadistic tendencies.

Importantly, the two directions are by no means mutually exclusive and it may well be that sadistic individuals are inclined to play violent video games in the first place, and that repeatedly playing violent video games then further increases their sadistic tendencies. Such a mutual reinforcement of personality variables and amount of violent media consumption was described by Slater and colleagues who termed it “downward spiral model” (Slater, Henry, Swaim, & Anderson, 2003). In the present research, we test the possible downward spiral model of everyday sadistic tendencies and exposure to video game violence in a longitudinal research design.

1.2. The present study

The present research examines the longitudinal association between everyday sadism and amount of violent video game exposure. Overall, it was predicted that everyday sadism would be positively associated with amount of violent video game exposure. Because trait aggression, the Big 5 (in particular, agreeableness), and the Dark Triad (narcissism,

Machiavellianism, and psychopathy) are typically associated with both everyday sadism and violent video game exposure (Anderson et al., 2004; Greitemeyer, 2015), we further examined whether the relation between everyday sadism and amount of violent video game exposure would remain significant when controlling for the impact of these constructs. Finally, making use of the longitudinal design, we examined the direction of the association between everyday sadism and amount of violent video game exposure.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants were citizens of the U.S. who took part on Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) in exchange for a modest payment. Data were collected 6 months apart. At Time 1, there were 1602 participants. Attentive participation was verified with an item attention check (cf. Oppenheimer, Meyvis, & Davidenko, 2009), which was placed among the dependent measures: “Please leave this item blank (don’t select an answer), so we know you are reading the questionnaire properly”. Forty-five individuals failed this check. At Time 2, all participants who passed the check were invited to fill out the second questionnaire. There were 743 individuals (410 females, 333 males; mean age = 35.7 years, SD = 12.0, age range: 18–79) who completed both questionnaires.

2.2. Measures

To measure amount of violent video game play, participants were asked to name their three favorite video games, to indicate how often they play each video game (on a scale from 1 = *sometimes* to 7 = *very often*), and to rate how violent the content of each video game was (on a scale from 1 = *not at all* to 7 = *very*). As in previous research (e.g., Anderson & Dill, 2000; Greitemeyer, 2014), for each video game, the frequency of game play was multiplied by violent content. These three violent video game exposure scores were then summed to provide a measure of the amount of violent video game play.

The expanded version of the Comprehensive Assessment of Sadistic Tendencies (Buckels & Paulhus, 2014) was used to assess everyday sadism, which contains 18 items. A sample item is: “I was purposely

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