



# The Dark Triad and trait self-objectification as predictors of men's use and self-presentation behaviors on social networking sites



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## ABSTRACT

An online survey of a nationally representative sample of U.S. men aged 18–40 assessed trait predictors of social networking site use as well as two forms of visual self-presentation: editing one's image in photographs posted on social networking sites (SNSs) and posting “selfies,” or pictures users take of themselves. We examined the Dark Triad (i.e., narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy) and trait self-objectification as predictors. Self-objectification and narcissism predicted time spent on SNSs. Narcissism and psychopathy predicted the number of selfies posted, whereas narcissism and self-objectification predicted editing photographs of oneself posted on SNSs. We discuss selective self-presentation processes on social media and how these traits may influence interpersonal relationship development in computer-mediated communication.

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## 1. Introduction

Social networking websites (SNSs) have become an integral channel for communication and self-expression in the lives of many. The SNS Facebook has become ubiquitous with over 1 billion users worldwide, 700 million of which access the site daily (Facebook, 2014). Instagram, owned by Facebook, hosts over 1 billion photographs posted by their 200 million users, one-third of whom use the site multiple times a day (Instagram, 2014; Pew Internet, 2013). Twitter hosts over 250 million active users; nearly half access the site daily, and nearly a quarter visit multiple times a day (Pew Internet, 2013; Twitter, 2014).

Although several studies have delved into trait predictors of SNS use, there are consistent shortcomings. First, most use college samples (e.g., Amichai-Hamburger & Vinitzky, 2010; Ross et al., 2009; Seidman, 2013) or nonrepresentative samples collected via online posts, often from college snowball samples (e.g., Carpenter, 2012; Hughes, Rowe, Batey, & Lee, 2012; Ryan & Xenos, 2011), limiting the generalizability of these findings. Second, existing research has largely investigated the Big 5 traits (Amichai-Hamburger & Vinitzky, 2010; Hughes et al., 2012; Ross et al., 2009; Seidman, 2013), narcissism (Carpenter, 2012; Panek, Nardis, & Konrath,

2013; Ryan & Xenos, 2011), and shyness and loneliness (Baker & Oswald, 2010; Ryan & Xenos, 2011). Other traits relevant to social interaction on SNSs remain unexamined. Finally, although considerable research has examined text posts and traditional photographs on SNSs, technological practices continuously evolve. At this time, limited research has parsed apart the use of photo editing software to manipulate one's self-presentation or the relatively new phenomenon of “selfies” (i.e., pictures of oneself taken by oneself). Given that those high on Dark Triad traits manipulate their physical appearance to achieve social gains (Holtzman & Strube, 2013; Jonason, Lyons, Baughman, & Vernon, 2014) and that pictures are considered a key channel for communicating social information on SNSs (Kapadzic, 2013), investigating the trait predictors of these behaviors is the first step in examining their role in the social media environment.

## 2. The Dark Triad

The Dark Triad of personalities includes subclinical (i.e., within a normal range of functioning) Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Machiavellians (Machs) are strategic and cynical. They seek to satisfy their own needs with little regard for morals, often by manipulating others (Christie & Geis, 1970). Narcissists are egocentric individuals with a sense of grandiosity, dominance, and entitlement who perceive themselves as smarter, more attractive, and better than others, but are still

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marked by insecurity (Gabriel, Critelli, & Ee, 1994; Raskin & Terry, 1988). Finally, psychopaths lack empathy and often engage in impulsive and thrill-seeking behaviors regardless of the cost to others (Jonason & Krause, 2013). The three traits share common threads of deceitfulness, self-promotion, coldness, disagreeableness, exploitation, and aggression (Furnham, Richards, & Paulhus, 2013; Jonason & Webster, 2010).

From an evolutionary perspective, many have questioned why antisocial personality traits would emerge and proliferate among social beings. According to life history theory, such trait variance (i.e., individual differences) may be one way to help maximize the likelihood that offspring will survive and reproduce (Figueredo et al., 2005). One possible explanation for Dark Triad traits is that each has a function that makes it evolutionarily advantageous. These traits are associated with the development of different strategies that help individuals achieve their social goals such as obtaining mates (Buss, 2009). Indeed, recent research has determined that individuals high on Dark Triad traits employ different types of “cheater strategies,” as these methods help them achieve interpersonal and social goals despite their antisocial personalities (Jonason & Webster, 2012). For example, they may try to charm others into doing what they want, or they may try coercive tactics (Jonason & Webster, 2012).

Existing research on SNSs indicate there may be cheater strategies specific to this mediated context that help those high on Dark Triad traits attract mates or express social dominance. Narcissists use SNSs for self-promotion purposes, including projecting a positive self-image and acquiring a lot of “friends” (Bergman, Fearington, Davenport, & Bergman, 2011; Buffardi & Campbell, 2008; Carpenter, 2012). Machiavellianism predicts self-oriented goal pursuit on Facebook (Rosenberg & Egbert, 2011) and also predicts more self-monitoring and self-promoting Facebook behavior in men (Abell & Brewer, 2014). Machs have also been shown to be more likely to use the site to manipulate their romantic partners (Fox, Peterson, & Warber, 2013).

SNSs are often used to convey one’s attractiveness or sexual availability to the network (Fox & Warber, 2013; Fox, Warber, & Makstaller, 2013; Kapidzic, 2013); as such, manipulating one’s self-presentation on SNSs, or merely spending time on SNSs, may qualify as cheater strategies. Given the findings that those high on the Dark Triad employ strategies that enable them to manipulate both their self-image as well as their interactions with others via SNSs, we expect that narcissism (H1), Machiavellianism (H2), and psychopathy (H3) will be associated with (a) greater social networking site use, (b) more frequent posting of selfies, and (c) more frequent photo editing.

### 3. Self-objectification

Another trait that may predict these SNS behaviors is self-objectification. According to objectification theory, sociocultural forces promote the sexual objectification of people such that they are depersonalized and judged as objects with solely sexual worth. As people are socialized in a sexual objectifying culture, they gradually internalize this perspective and learn to see and value themselves based on their appearance (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997).

On SNSs, where attention is often focused self-presentation and appearance, self-objectifying individuals may be driven to promote their appearance through these sites. Indeed, the drive to satisfy others’ expectations or desires parallels the use of cheater strategies, as self-objectifying individuals may be masking this trait by strategically presenting themselves in a way that would achieve social goals such as attracting a mate.

Although some research on SNSs and other interactive media has shown a relationship between use and self-objectification among females (e.g., Fox, Bailenson, & Tricase, 2013; Fox, Ralston,

Cooper, & Jones, in press; De Vries & Peter, 2013; Meier & Gray, 2013; Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2012), at this time little is known about men. Given previous findings with females, we anticipate that trait self-objectification will be associated with greater social networking site use (H4a), more frequently posting selfies (H4b), and more frequent photo editing (H4c) by men.

## 4. Method

A nationally representative sample of 1000 men aged 18–40 obtained through Qualtrics completed an online survey in March 2014. These data were part of a larger data gathering initiative instigated by a national magazine. Fidelity checks were incorporated in the survey; if participants did not pass these checks, their data were removed and sampling continued until quotas were reached. Because of a technical difficulty with the trait self-objectification measure (i.e., a lack of compatibility with some mobile devices), these data were not available for some participants and thus they were removed from the sample.<sup>1</sup> The final sample included 800 men ( $M_{age} = 29.29$ ,  $SD = 6.52$ ) who identified as 73.1% Caucasian/European-American/White; 13.3% Black/African/African-American; 7.6% Latino/Latina/Hispanic; 6.1% Asian/Asian-American; 1.3% American Indian/Native American; 2.3% multiracial; and 2% other.

### 4.1. Measures

#### 4.1.1. Trait self-objectification

The Self-Objectification Questionnaire (SOQ) assesses trait-level self-objectification by asking participants to rank various body traits from most to least important (Noll & Fredrickson, 1998). The traits vary on whether they are appearance-based (e.g., sex appeal, physical attractiveness) or competence-based (e.g., energy level, health). Competence scores are summed and subtracted from the summed appearance scores. Scores can range from –25 to 25; higher scores indicate higher self-objectification ( $M = -5.22$ ,  $SD = 12.07$ ).

#### 4.1.2. Dark Triad

The Dirty Dozen (Jonason & Webster, 2010) includes twelve items measuring the Dark Triad. Four items derived from the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (Raskin & Terry, 1988) measured narcissism (e.g., “I tend to want others to pay attention to me”;  $M = 2.96$ ,  $SD = 0.96$ ;  $\alpha = 0.85$ ). Four items derived from the Psychopathy Scale (Paulhus, Neumann, & Hare, 2010) assessed subclinical psychopathy (e.g., “I tend to not be too concerned with morality or the morality of my actions”;  $M = 2.54$ ,  $SD = 1.00$ ;  $\alpha = 0.83$ ). Four items derived from the Mach IV scale (Christie & Geis, 1970) measured Machiavellianism (e.g., “I tend to manipulate others to get my way”;  $M = 2.42$ ,  $SD = 1.08$ ;  $\alpha = 0.90$ ). Participants answered all items on a 5-point fully labeled Likert scale (1 = *Strongly disagree*; 5 = *Strongly agree*) and responses were averaged within the subscales for analysis.

#### 4.1.3. Time spent on social networking sites

Participants estimated how much time they spent each day on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Tumblr, and Pinterest, five of the most popular SNSs (Pew Internet, 2013). An open-ended item allowed participants to list other SNSs and the time spent on each. The total time spent each day was summed ( $M = 78.73$ ,  $SD = 106.18$ ). Because a handful of participants indicated very high

<sup>1</sup> Chi squares and independent *t*-tests were conducted on the available demographic variables to compare included and excluded respondents to ensure there was no bias in the selected group. No significant differences between the groups were observed. Further, the remaining identified predictor variables are significant with both the full sample as well as the reduced sample.

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