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Judgments of the Dark Triad based on Facebook profiles

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates observer accuracy for the Dark Triad (DT) traits – narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism – based on Facebook profiles. In a round-robin design, 145 individuals in 34 groups provided DT self-ratings and rated their group members on these traits based on Facebook profiles. Social Relations Model analyses revealed significant observer accuracy for narcissism, but not for psychopathy or Machiavellianism. Variance component estimates suggested that unique perceiver-target relationships account for a majority of variance in ratings of the DT. Finally, Brunswik lens model analyses suggested that, for narcissism and psychopathy, there is a moderate association between the cues observers utilize in making judgments of the DT traits and the cues that correspond to targets' personality.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Overview of research

Social Networking Sites (SNSs) have seen extraordinary growth over the last 10 years. According to the [Pew Research Center \(2015\)](#), nearly 65% of American adults use SNSs, a near ten-fold increase from just 7% in 2005. Facebook, among the most popular SNSs, reports an average of over 1 billion daily active users ([Facebook, 2017](#)). SNSs like Facebook give users the opportunity to build a public or semi-public profile, establish a network of other users with shared connections, and view other people's social networks ([Boyd & Ellison, 2007](#)). These functions, in turn, provide SNS users with information that can be used to find and assess potential friends, romantic partners, or even job applicants.

Consistent with this idea, several recent studies indicate that personality traits are communicated through the information available in SNS profiles ([Back, Schmukle, & Egloff, 2010](#); [Vazire & Gosling, 2004](#)). Other studies affirm the utility of making inferences about personality based on SNSs, revealing that somewhat accurate judgments about people's standing on the Big Five personality traits can be made through these sites ([Back et al., 2010](#); [Tskhay & Rule, 2014](#)). However, such findings plausibly may not extend to traits that have manipulation and deceit as central

aspects. Rather, SNS users higher on such traits may instead actively try to deceive others for personal gain – thereby limiting observers' ability to make accurate judgments about them. Accordingly, here, we focus on SNS judgments about “darker” traits: the Dark Triad (DT), consisting of narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism.

From a practical perspective, focusing on these attributes would seem beneficial because accurate judgments about others' standing on these particular traits can help individuals and organizations avoid potentially predatory or destructive acts and behaviors ([Kiazad, Restubog, Zagenczyk, Kiewitz, & Tang, 2010](#); [Kish-Gephart, Harrison, & Treviño, 2010](#)). For instance, such findings potentially could inform efforts to reduce acts of cyberstalking and harassment ([Buckels, Trapnell, & Paulhus, 2014](#)) or, in the extreme, help prevent cases like the, “The Facebook Serial Killer” ([Duthiers, 2012](#)). From a theoretical perspective, the duplicity that is central to the DT traits ([Jones & Paulhus, 2017](#)) implies that the accuracy achievable for the Big Five traits may not manifest for these darker characteristics – thereby potentially documenting a boundary condition for SNS-based accuracy in personality judgments.

Following from these recognitions, we designed the current study to achieve three primary purposes. First, we examine whether observer accuracy of the DT personality traits is possible through SNSs, and specifically, through Facebook. Second, we explore whether the relative variances associated with the (a) perceiver, (b) target, and (c) perceiver-target interaction effects of the

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DT are similar to those found for other traits and in other contexts. Finally, we assess which SNS (Facebook) profile cues observers use in assessing targets' standings on the DT and which cues are actually indicative of targets' actual (self-rated) DT personality. We address the first two questions using the Social Relations Model (SRM; Kenny, 1994) and the final question with the Brunswik lens model (1956).

1.2. Existing research on observer accuracy of personality (from Social Networking Sites)

We follow others in operationalizing observer accuracy as self-other agreement (e.g., Kenny & West, 2010). According to this conceptualization, accuracy represents the degree to which one person's or multiple persons' judgments agree with a target person's judgment of his or her own personality. Research generally demonstrates that observer accuracy of personality traits exists, but that the level of accuracy varies among personality traits (Funder, 1995, 2012; John & Robins, 1993). Here, we employ the Realistic Accuracy Model (RAM; Funder, 1995) as an overarching theoretical framework to discuss observer accuracy of the DT in an SNS context. The RAM identifies four stages that influence accuracy in personality judgments: relevance, availability, detection, and utilization. That is, for accurate judgments to occur, traits must be relevant to the situation, readily available (i.e., visible) for observation by those judging, and actually detected (i.e., correctly interpreted). Finally, the judge must utilize the observed information correctly in coming to an overall evaluation.

Mapping the RAM onto the SNS context, available evidence suggests that the relevance and availability stages should be achievable, as individuals generally share a large amount of information about themselves overtly in SNSs (Back et al., 2010). Such shared pieces of information (e.g., status updates, photos) represent observable cues that other SNS users can leverage in inferring personality (Gosling, Ko, Mannarelli, Morris, & Diener, 2002).

As for the detection stage of the RAM, intuition and evidence about online identities suggest somewhat competing ideas. On one hand, SNSs like Facebook afford individuals the ability to present themselves in any manner they choose. In particular, users can attempt to present their idealized self (as opposed to an accurate self) through an SNS profile, a concept which has been labeled the *idealized virtual-reality hypothesis* (Back et al., 2010). Insofar as people project a persona *inconsistent* with their actual trait standing, detection – and therefore accuracy – should suffer. On the other hand, individuals may instead display an accurate self, communicating their authentic personality – a notion termed the *extended real-life hypothesis* (Back et al., 2010). To the extent that people portray themselves as they *are* rather than how they *wish to be seen*, true levels of personality should be more easily detectable.

Regarding these two alternatives, research mostly supports the latter possibility, indicating that authentic personality typically manifests in SNSs (Vazire & Gosling, 2004). In one supporting study, Back et al. (2010) collected SNS users' self-ratings on the Big Five personality traits, along with informant ratings (i.e., observer ratings) of the SNS users from four well-acquainted friends. The researchers also measured perceptions of ideal-self and collected (unacquainted) observer ratings. The researchers produced a “pure” measure of self-idealization by removing the reality component from the idealized-self-ratings. Observer accuracy was found for all of the Big Five personality traits, except for neuroticism. But, no evidence was found for self-idealization, thereby lending support for the extended real-life hypothesis over of the idealized virtual-reality hypothesis.

Notably, despite these findings, self-enhancement can still occur in some cases. Indeed, studies have documented that SNS

users do sometimes engage in self-enhancement behaviors, such as controlling and managing their impressions expressed in SNS content (Back et al., 2010; Peluchette & Karl, 2009). However, given that many Facebook relationships begin through an offline relationship (Ross et al., 2009), research suggests that Facebook profile owners generally tend *not* to present themselves inaccurately for fear of being seen as dishonest (Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009). Consequently, a small degree of self-enhancement is not likely to impede detection of true personality levels (Back et al., 2010; Garcia & Sikström, 2014).

Finally, according to the last stage of the RAM, utilization, one must correctly use (e.g., evaluate and integrate) the available, observable cues in order to derive an accurate inference of personality. Researchers generally agree that trait judgments can be at least somewhat accurate based on even very brief observations, or “thin slices,” of behavior (see Ambady, Bernieri, & Richeson, 2000). In fact, from an evolutionary perspective, humans may have an innate mechanism for making accurate (personality) judgments, arising from a need to correctly identify potentially threatening individuals (cf. Haselton & Funder, 2006).

Research on SNS-based observer accuracy collectively reveals people's ability to utilize observable cues and make correct interpretations of personality, and that people generally do not overly enhance. If they do enhance greatly, others are able to decode it (cf. Gosling, Gaddis, & Vazire, 2007; Stopfer, Egloff, Nestler, & Back, 2014; Tskhay & Rule, 2014). For example, in a recent meta-analysis, Tskhay and Rule (2014) examined the accuracy at “zero-acquaintance” (i.e., complete strangers') judgments of others' Big Five personality traits made from viewing written text and text-based SNS content. Analyses revealed that extraversion, with an effect size of 0.42, yielded the highest degree of observer accuracy of the Big Five traits. Agreeableness, openness, and conscientiousness all demonstrated similar degrees of accuracy (0.21, 0.19, and 0.18, respectively), and neuroticism was the only Big Five personality trait that did not exhibit significant accuracy. Of note, these results mirror results for *in-person* zero-acquaintance ratings (e.g., Albright, Kenny, & Malloy, 1988; John & Robins, 1993; Rentfrow & Gosling, 2006).

Although these meta-analytic results are compelling, such findings may not hold for traits associated with deceit, manipulation, and self-enhancement. Below, we address this possibility, discussing how the DT traits – which are characterized by such tendencies (Furnham, Richards, & Paulhus, 2013) – may weaken others' ability to accurately gauge these traits based on SNSs.

1.3. The current research

The DT consists of three distinct, but interrelated socially aversive personality traits, namely, narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism.¹ These traits are distinct in that they possess different underlying processes (Jones & Paulhus, 2011; Rauthmann, 2012), but all three traits share a common core of callous-manipulation (Furnham et al., 2013). People with high standings on the DT possess characteristics that potentially threaten the well-being of others. Indeed, studies show that these individuals have an inclination to bully others (Baughman, Dearing, Giammarco, & Vernon, 2012), exhibit negative relationship maintenance behaviors (Jonason & Kavanagh, 2010; Smith et al., 2014), and demonstrate unethical and abusive leadership in the workplace (Kiazad et al., 2010; Kish-Gephart et al., 2010).

¹ Throughout the paper our usage of the terms *narcissist* and *psychopath* refer to individuals with high standings on the subclinical variations of these traits. Similarly, we also occasionally refer to these people as *darker individuals* and the DT traits as *dark traits*.

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