



# The Impact of Dark Triad Traits on Women's Romantic Preferences

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## Abstract

**Background:** There has been growing interest in understanding why certain socially aversive personality traits known as the Dark Triad (Narcissism, Machiavellianism, and Psychopathy), seem to hold appeal in romantic contexts. While these traits are typically associated with manipulation, lack of empathy, and emotional detachment, these can be enticing in short term mating preference for women.

**Aim:** This paper aims to synthesize and critically evaluate psychological research examining how Dark Triad traits influence women's romantic preferences

**Method:** A comprehensive literature review was conducted, drawing from empirical studies and theoretical frameworks within personality psychology, evolutionary psychology, and social psychology.

**Result:** The review reveals that women may be drawn to individuals high in Dark Triad traits due to their superficial charm, self-assuredness, and dominant social presence. Traits such as narcissistic grandiosity, Machiavellian strategic thinking, and psychopathic thrill-seeking can create an impression of excitement and power, particularly in short-term or non-committed relational contexts. Factors like sensation-seeking tendencies, age, and cultural narratives (e.g., media glorification of "bad boys") further amplify this attraction. Ultimately, these traits are linked to preferences for fleeting, emotionally distant, and often exploitative relationships.

**Conclusion:** The paradoxical allure of toxic personality traits highlights the complex interplay between biological drives, psychological needs, and cultural messaging. By shedding light on the mechanisms through which the Dark Triad influences romantic decision-making, this review underscores the need for greater awareness of how these dynamics can shape—and sometimes undermine—women's relational well-being.

**Keywords:** *Dark Triad, Romanticization, Women's attraction, Psychopathy, Narcissism, Machiavellianism*

## Introduction

### *The Dark Triad: An Overview*

The Dark Triad is a psychological construct comprising three interrelated yet distinct personality traits: narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy. These traits are unified by a common thread of socially aversive behavior, including manipulation, callousness, and a disregard for others' well-being (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). While some researchers argue for clearer distinctions among the three traits, the Dark Triad remains a dominant framework for understanding toxic interpersonal behavior and antisocial tendencies (Akre, 2024).

Narcissism is characterized by grandiosity, a strong need for admiration, and hypersensitivity to criticism. Machiavellianism involves a manipulative interpersonal style, strategic exploitation of others, and a cynical worldview. Psychopathy is marked by impulsivity, superficial charm, and a lack of empathy or remorse (Jakobwitz & Egan, 2006; Hare, 1991).

Paulhus and Williams (2002) noted the significant overlap among these traits while emphasizing their unique characteristics. The presence of Dark Triad traits in an individual often correlates with exploitative behaviors in personal, romantic, and professional settings (Jonason et al., 2010; Carter et al., 2014).

The manifestation of these traits in romantic relationships has gained particular interest in recent years. Individuals high in Dark Triad traits tend to pursue short-term mating strategies, prioritize personal gain, and exhibit limited emotional depth in relationships (Jonason & Kavanagh, 2010). Carter et al. (2014) further emphasized that these individuals often employ charm, manipulation, and deceit to fulfil their needs, often to the detriment of their partners.

The romantic allure of individuals with Dark Triad traits has also been linked to sociocultural and media representations. Mayer et al. (2019) argued that popular culture often glamorizes such personalities, portraying them as dangerously charismatic or misunderstood, thus reinforcing their appeal. Majeed and Saeed (2022) found that individuals with Dark Triad tendencies were more likely to romanticize antisocial behaviors and form unstable, yet thrilling, relationships. Now, let's dive into each of these traits separately.

### *Narcissism*

Derived from the Greek myth of Narcissus, narcissism refers to excessive self-focus, vanity, and an inflated sense of superiority. Narcissistic individuals crave validation and admiration, often presenting themselves as confident while concealing deep-seated insecurity (Kohut, 1977; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001).

Freud (1914) conceptualized narcissism as a normal stage of development, distinguishing between primary (self-love) and secondary (self-love redirected from love objects) narcissism. Melanie Klein (1932) later expanded on this, suggesting that unresolved early attachment issues could lead to narcissistic defenses in adulthood. Modern perspectives, such as those offered by Segal and Bell (2018), regard narcissism as a spectrum ranging from adaptive self-assurance to pathological grandiosity.

In romantic contexts, narcissists often pursue relationships to enhance their self-image, using partners as extensions of their ego (Campbell & Foster, 2002). Their sensitivity to criticism and lack of empathy can lead to volatile, unbalanced dynamics, where emotional validation is extracted without reciprocation (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001).

### ***Machiavellianism***

Named after the political philosopher Niccolò Machiavelli, Machiavellianism reflects a manipulative and emotionally detached interpersonal style. Individuals high in this trait tend to engage in strategic deception and exploit relationships for instrumental gain (Christie & Geis, 1970; Jakobwitz & Egan, 2006).

Unlike narcissists, who seek admiration, Machiavellians prioritize control, power, and long-term strategic success. Their interactions are calculated, often devoid of emotional investment (Jonason & Kavanagh, 2010). Kaufman et al.

(2019) emphasized that Machiavellians maintain a utilitarian approach to relationships, valuing outcomes over emotional connection.

Ali and Chamorro-Premuzic (2010) found that high Machiavellian individuals often feign intimacy to foster trust, only to later exploit it for personal advantage. This emotional manipulation contributes to dysfunctional romantic patterns, where affection is instrumental rather than genuine.

### ***Psychopathy***

Psychopathy is the most overtly antisocial trait within the Dark Triad, defined by impulsivity, emotional detachment, and a profound lack of guilt or remorse (Hare, 1991). While commonly associated with criminal behavior, psychopathy also appears in subclinical forms among “successful psychopaths”—individuals who thrive in social or professional contexts without engaging in overt violence (Hall & Benning, 2006).

Psychopathic traits include superficial charm, manipulateness, egocentricity, and thrill-seeking (Skeem et al., 2011). In romantic relationships, these individuals tend to be emotionally cold, prioritize dominance, and frequently engage in exploitative or manipulative behaviors (Jonason et al., 2015).

Tanchotsrinon et al. (2017) reported that individuals high in psychopathy prefer short-term, non-committal relationships characterized by power imbalances. Such individuals are more

likely to engage in emotionally abusive or deceptive behaviors, often leaving partners confused and emotionally harmed.

### ***Key Behavioural Patterns Associated with Dark Triad Traits***

Across various studies, individuals with Dark Triad traits exhibit consistent behavioral patterns, including:

- Emotional detachment and lack of empathy (Hare, 1991; Wai & Tiliopoulos, 2012)
- Manipulative relational strategies (Ali & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2010)
- Grandiosity and need for admiration (Kohut, 1977; Campbell & Foster, 2002)
- Blame-shifting and deflection of responsibility (Kaufman et al., 2019)
- Predominance of short-term mating strategies (Jonason & Kavanagh, 2010)

These individuals often use emotional mimicry—appearing empathetic or affectionate only to serve personal goals (Wai & Tiliopoulos, 2012). The pattern of idealization followed by devaluation is common, where a partner is initially placed on a pedestal and then swiftly discarded once they no longer serve the narcissistic or manipulative agenda (Campbell & Foster, 2002).

To provide a counterpoint to the Dark Triad, Kaufman et al. (2019) proposed the Light Triad, encompassing traits such as humanism, Kantianism, and faith in humanity. These attributes are associated with genuine relational

closeness, ethical behavior, and prosocial interpersonal tendencies. The contrast between dark and light traits offers a valuable framework for understanding individual differences in relational dynamics and mate preferences.

### **Method**

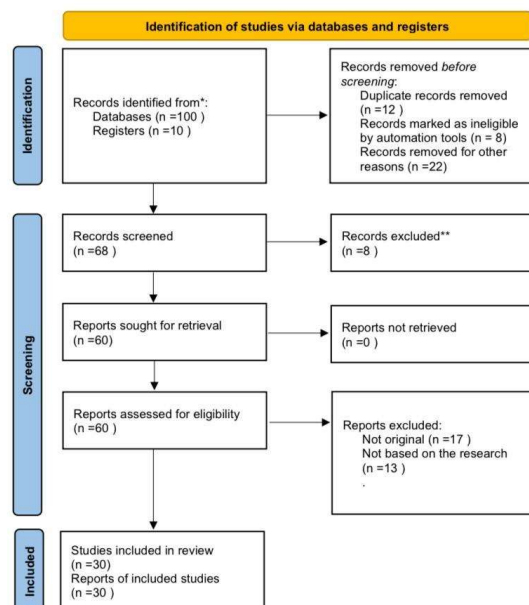
The present study was conducted in adherence to PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines, with the aim of exploring the influence of the Dark Triad personality traits—Narcissism, Machiavellianism, and Psychopathy—on romantic relationship preferences and dynamics. This qualitative review synthesizes existing research to understand how these personality constructs shape individuals' interpersonal strategies, emotional expression, and mating behavior .

To identify relevant literature, a systematic search was conducted across multiple academic databases, including PubMed, Google Scholar, SCOPUS, and PsycINFO. A combination of keywords and Boolean operators was used to refine the search, including terms such as: “Dark Triad,” “narcissism,” “Machiavellianism,” “psychopathy,” “romantic relationships,” “mate preferences,” “short-term mating,” “long-term mating,” “relationship satisfaction,” and “interpersonal manipulation.”

The inclusion criteria encompassed peer-reviewed articles published in English that

focused on the relationship between Dark Triad traits and romantic or sexual preferences. Studies that primarily examined these traits in other interpersonal contexts (e.g., workplace, family) or that lacked psychological or behavioral analysis were excluded.

After initial screening and duplicate removal, a total of 68 articles were selected for full-text review. Of these, 30 met the eligibility criteria and were included in the final synthesis. The selected studies utilized a variety of research methodologies, including cross-sectional surveys, personality assessments, and thematic analyses, allowing for a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of how individuals with high Dark Triad traits engage in romantic contexts.



**Fig 1.1** Selection process of research literature

## Result

A comprehensive synthesis of 30 peer-reviewed studies revealed consistent associations between the Dark Triad traits—narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy—and women’s romantic preferences, particularly in short-term mating contexts. The analysis yielded the following thematic findings:

### *Short-Term Attraction to Dark Traits*

Across multiple studies (e.g., Jonason et al., 2015; Carter et al., 2014), women demonstrated a marked attraction to individuals high in Dark Triad traits in short-term relationship contexts. This attraction is often driven by perceived traits such as confidence, assertiveness, and dominance, which are evolutionarily linked to mate desirability.

### *Narcissism: Charm and Grandiosity as Initial Lures*

Narcissistic traits such as charm, self-assuredness, and social dominance enhanced immediate romantic appeal (Dufner et al., 2013). However, narcissists’ entitlement, need for admiration, and lack of empathy contributed to relational instability, dissatisfaction, and infidelity over time (Brewer et al., 2020; Vrabel et al., 2021).

### *Machiavellianism: Emotional Detachment and Strategic Manipulation*

Women's attraction to Machiavellian individuals was less rooted in emotional appeal and more linked to perceived intelligence, charisma, or power (Ali & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2010). These individuals often employed calculated manipulation and coercive mate-retention tactics, fostering distrust, inequality, and emotional distance in relationships (Brewer & Abell, 2017; Ináncsi et al., 2018).

### ***Psychopathy: Sensation-Seeking, Superficial Charm, and Volatile Dynamics***

Psychopathic individuals were rated as highly attractive for short-term flings due to thrill-seeking and uninhibited behavior (Brazil & Volk, 2022). However, their impulsivity, lack of remorse, and emotional callousness led to high-conflict, unstable relationships, often involving emotional or psychological abuse (Watts et al., 2019).

### ***Role of Individual Differences in Women***

The reviewed literature consistently noted that certain personality traits and demographic factors in women—such as sensation-seeking, anxiety, age, and attachment style—moderated attraction to dark personalities (Grosz et al., 2015; Qureshi et al., 2016). Younger women and those with insecure attachment styles were more likely to romanticize such traits.

### ***Sociocultural Reinforcement of the Dark Triad Allure***

Cultural and media representations were found to amplify the desirability of Dark Triad traits. The romanticization of morally ambiguous or criminal male characters in literature, film, and popular media (e.g., "bad boy" archetypes) often normalizes toxic relational dynamics and reinforces psychological attraction to these traits (Majeed & Saeed, 2022).

### ***Patterns of Assortative Mating and Relationship Outcomes***

Evidence supported assortative mating patterns, where women high in sensation-seeking or with unresolved trauma were more likely to pair with Dark Triad individuals, resulting in emotionally volatile, manipulative, and short-lived relationships (Blanchard et al., 2016; Kardum et al., 2018).

In summary, the results underscore a complex psychological and cultural interplay where socially aversive traits exert a paradoxical romantic appeal, especially under certain individual and situational conditions. While such attraction may offer short-term excitement, it is consistently associated with long-term relational dysfunction and emotional harm.

## **Discussion**

This review synthesizes existing research on how the Dark Triad—narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy—influences romantic relationship preferences and dynamics. Across studies, these traits consistently predict a

preference for short-term, self-serving relationship strategies, with notable implications for partner selection, relational dynamics, and overall satisfaction.

### ***Narcissism and Romantic Relationships***

Narcissism, characterized by grandiosity, entitlement, and a need for admiration, significantly shapes romantic behavior. Narcissistic individuals typically prioritize personal gratification over emotional connection, favoring short-term, non-committal relationships. Research indicates that while their confidence and charm can enhance short-term attractiveness, their self-centeredness often leads to relational dissatisfaction and infidelity in long-term contexts (Čopková & Lörincová, 2021; Brewer et al., 2020).

The dual nature of narcissism—admiration and rivalry—adds complexity to these dynamics. While admiration fosters initial attraction, rivalry undermines trust and stability over time (Wurst et al., 2017). Additionally, narcissism can exacerbate perception discrepancies between partners, contributing to relational strain (Ye et al., 2016). Partner attraction to narcissists often hinges on specific traits like sensation-seeking or anxiety, underscoring the role of individual differences in shaping these dynamics (Grosz et al., 2015).

### ***Machiavellianism and Strategic Romantic Behaviour***

Machiavellian individuals approach relationships with a strategic mindset, prioritizing self-interest and control. They often view romantic relationships as opportunities for manipulation rather than emotional connection, which leads to dissatisfaction and strained dynamics (Ináncsi et al., 2018).

Research shows that Machiavellians employ competitive mate retention tactics and are more likely to engage in coercion, which undermines trust and intimacy (Brewer & Abell, 2017). Positive assortative mating—the tendency to partner with those sharing similar strategic tendencies—can create relationships characterized by mutual manipulation and conflict (Ináncsi et al., 2016). This suggests that while Machiavellians may find partners who share their strategic worldview, such pairings are prone to instability.

### ***Psychopathy and Short-Term Mating Strategies***

Psychopathy, defined by impulsivity, lack of empathy, and antisocial behavior, strongly predicts a preference for short-term mating strategies. These individuals prioritize immediate rewards and sexual opportunities, often at the expense of emotional investment and relational stability (Brazil & Volk, 2022; Brazil & Forth, 2020).

Research highlights the role of assortative mating in psychopathy, with individuals high in psychopathic traits often attracted to partners sharing similar

characteristics (Watts et al., 2019). Such pairings can lead to volatile relationships marked by mutual manipulation and power struggles. Furthermore, psychopathic traits influence partner preferences, with primary psychopathy favoring submissive partners and secondary psychopathy seeking dominant ones, reflecting complex dynamics in relational power and control (Blanchard et al., 2016).

### **Conclusion**

The Dark Triad traits—Narcissism, Machiavellianism, and Psychopathy—play a significant role in shaping romantic relationship preferences and dynamics, predominantly favoring short-term, self-serving mating strategies. These traits exhibit distinct but overlapping influences on relationship behaviors, marked by manipulation, lack of emotional investment, and prioritization of personal gain over relational stability.

Studies have found significant correlations between Dark Triad traits and short-term relationship preferences. For example, Jonason et al. (2015) reported a strong positive correlation ( $r = 0.56$ ) between narcissism and short-term mating orientation. Similarly, Brewer et al. (2018) found that individuals high in Machiavellianism exhibited 40% more manipulative behaviors than those low in these traits.

### ***Narcissism***

Narcissism, characterized by grandiosity, entitlement, and a need for admiration, drives a preference for short-term relationships that prioritize self-gratification. While narcissists may initially attract partners with their charm and confidence, their egocentric tendencies and propensity for rivalry often result in relational dissatisfaction, increased infidelity, and a lack of long-term commitment viability.

### ***Machiavellianism***

Machiavellian individuals adopt a strategic and manipulative approach to relationships, focusing on self-interest and control. Their distrustful and pragmatic outlook leads to behaviors such as mate retention tactics and competition, which strain relational trust and satisfaction. The propensity of Machiavellians to partner with individuals who share similar traits creates dynamics of mutual manipulation, further undermining relational stability.

### ***Psychopathy***

Psychopathy, defined by impulsivity, lack of empathy, and antisocial tendencies, is closely tied to short-term mating strategies that prioritize immediate rewards over long-term connection. Psychopathic individuals often leverage charm and dominance to attract partners but exhibit behaviors that lead to unstable, conflict-laden relationships. Assortative mating among psychopathic individuals intensifies relational volatility, emphasizing power imbalances and mutual manipulation.



In summary, the Dark Triad traits significantly shape romantic preferences and relational outcomes, fostering short-term, manipulative relationship patterns that prioritize self-interest over emotional connection and stability. These findings underscore the importance of understanding how personality traits influence relational behaviors, providing insights into the mechanisms underlying maladaptive romantic dynamics and offering a foundation for promoting healthier interpersonal relationships.

#### Author contributions

Conceptualization, Author 1.; Methodology, Author 2.; Software, Author 2.; Validation, Author 1.; Formal analysis, Author 2.; Investigation, Author 1.; resources, Author 1.; data curation, Author 1.; Writing—original draft preparation, Author 2 writing—review, and editing, Author 1,2 .; visualization, Author 2.; supervision, Author 1 project administration. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

#### Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

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