



Exploring the Association of Violent Media Exposure with Dark Triad Traits: A Study on Young Adults

¹**Drishti, B.A.** (*Honours with Research*) Applied Psychology, Amity University, Noida, UP
Drishti28kr@gmail.com

²**Dr. Ritu Raj**, Associate Professor, AIPS, Amity University, Noida, UP
rraj@amity.edu

Abstract: The normalization of violent content in digital media has heightened apprehension regarding its psychological consequences, especially among young adults. Previous research has shown that viewing violent media content in digital media is related to aggression, and its relationship with socially aversive personality traits has been underrepresented in the existing body of research. The current study aimed to investigate the association between violent media exposure and Dark Triad traits, consisting of Machiavellianism, Narcissism, and Psychopathy, among a sample of 260 young adults employing a cross-sectional correlational research design. Descriptive analysis revealed that the level of exposure of violent media content and expressions of Dark Triad Traits were moderate and significant, respectively. Correlational analysis revealed significant positive correlations between violent media exposure and all three Dark Triad traits, with the relationship between violent media consumption and psychopathy being the strongest and most consistent. The results are in line with the personality-based model of media effects, indicating that viewing violent content has a differential relationship with maladaptive personality traits, especially those characterized by emotional callousness and impulsiveness.

Keywords: *Violent Media Exposure, Dark Triad, Machiavellianism, Narcissism, Psychopathy, Young Adults*

1. Introduction

1.1 *Background and Context*

The rise of digital technology has led to a surge in young adults' exposure to various forms of media, such as violent media in television, video games, social media, and short videos. Violence, which involves aggression and physical harm, has become a norm in modern entertainment media. Research indicates a significant relationship between exposure to violent media and increased aggression, as well as a decrease in prosocial behaviours (Guo, 2022). Longitudinal studies have found a significant relationship between early exposure to violent media and later developmental stages (Ybarra et al., 2022). It is worth noting, however, that people are different, and personality traits and emotional control are stronger predictors of aggression than exposure to violent media (Devilly et al., 2023). The Dark Triad, which comprises narcissism, Machiavellianism, and Psychopathy, has been associated with antisocial behaviours (Paulhus & Williams, 2002; Muris et al., 2017). People with high levels of Dark Triad personality traits may have different perspective on exposure to violent media, which they may see in a more positive light (Allen et al., 2022). Such individuals are more likely to exhibit higher levels of violence (Waite & Mooney, 2024). There is a scarcity of studies conducted in non-Western countries.

1.2 *Violent Media Exposure*

Violent media exposure has suggested that the repeated experience of interacting with aggressive content in television programs, social media, video games, and online sites can affect cognitive, emotional, and behavioural processes. It has been suggested that people exposed to violent media show high levels of both proactive and reactive aggression in different situational contexts (Han et al., 2020). Emotion is also seen to play a role in the relationship between violent media exposure and aggression. Emotions such as anger are suggested to be the link between violent media exposure and aggression (Han et al., 2020). Violent and sexualized media can trigger aggression-related thoughts, feelings, attitudes, and behaviours, as suggested by the meta-analytic evidence (Burnay et al., 2022). Furthermore, exposure to antisocial content in the media can lead to negative online behaviours such as trolling. Hostile attribution bias is suggested to be the mediator in this relationship (Qiu et al., 2024).

1.3 *Dark Triad Personality Traits*

The Dark Triad, which includes narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy, is a group of personality traits that are related but distinct, involving manipulation, low empathy, and aggressive or exploitative behaviour (Kowalski et al., 2018). These traits are moderately

intercorrelated, more common in males, and are associated with negative psychosocial outcomes and low agreeableness (Muris et al., 2017). These Dark Triad traits are associated with negative media use, trolling, emotional intelligence, and increased tolerance for violent behaviour (Kircaburun et al., 2019; Barberis et al., 2023; Qiu et al., 2024).

1.4 Association between Violent Media Exposure and Dark Triad Traits

Personality factors, such as Dark Triad, which encompass aggression, desensitization, low empathetic capacity, and finding violent images amusing (Allen et al., 2022), can affect the effect of violent media. Psychopathy is related to low moral distress, Machiavellianism to dominance, and narcissism to power and feelings of superiority, although the relationship with violent behaviour is less clear. It is related to low emotional intelligence and high levels of dark triad traits, such as trolling and social media usage (Kircaburun et al., 2019).

1.5 Problem Statements

With the prevalent rise of rampant and invasive multimedia exposure to young adults, media exposure interacts and affects personalities in significant ways. In the relevance of the research, the problem statements assess the interplay of the dark triad factors and traits in accordance with violent media formats and its impacts.

1.6 Research Objectives

1. To assess the level of Violent Media among young adults.
2. To measure the levels of Dark Triad Traits (Machiavellianism, Narcissism, and Psychopathy) in young adults.
3. To study the association between overall violent media exposure and Dark Triad Traits in young adults.
4. To explore the relationship between exposure to violent media and psychopathic traits.

1.7 Research Questions

1. What is the level of exposure to violent media among young adults?
2. What are the levels of Dark Triad Traits (Machiavellianism, Narcissism, and Psychopathy) in young adults?
3. Is there a significant association between overall Violent Media exposure and Dark Triad Traits in young adults?
4. How does exposure to violent media relate to psychopathic traits among young adults?

1.8 Hypotheses

H1. Young adults will exhibit a measurable level of exposure to violent media.

H2. Young adults will exhibit measurable levels of Machiavellianism, Narcissism, and Psychopathy.

H3. There will be a significant positive association between overall violent media exposure and Dark Triad Traits among young adults.

H4. Exposure to violent media will significantly predict psychopathic traits among young adults.

1.9 Research Gaps Identified

Despite the extensive research that has been conducted, several gaps still exist.

1. A great deal of the research that has been conducted is based on Western samples, which makes it difficult to generalize to a non-Western context such as India.
2. Several researches that have been conducted are based on the relationship between violent media exposure and Dark Triad personality traits, as well as violent media exposure and psychopathy, individually, but not integrating these constructs into a single model.
3. The relationship between violent media exposure and psychopathy, particularly among young adults, is a relationship that still needs to be investigated.
4. The changing forms of digital media, such as the use of streaming sites and short-form content, have not been adequately integrated into empirical models.

Hence, the relationship between violent media exposure and Dark Triad personality traits among young adults in the context of India is a gap that still needs to be filled and is new area of research that is emerging.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This paper employed a quantitative design of research. Cross-sectional and correlational methodology was opted to analyse the data. The design was appropriate as the primary objective to analyse the relationship between exposure to violent media and dark triad personality traits among young adults. Moreover, group comparisons and predictive analysis were integrated using analysis techniques such as t-test, ANOVA, correlational analysis and regression analysis.

2.2 Sampling

The sample consisted of 260 young adults falling in the age bracket of 18-26. Participants were recruited using non-probability convenience sampling and included both

male and female participants. There was adequate variability across both the variables. Gender was treated as control variable to examine its association with violent media exposure and dark triad traits.

2.3 Variables of the Study

Independent Variable (IV): Violent Media Exposure (Total score and subscales)

Dependent Variable (DV):

- Machiavellianism
- Narcissism
- Psychopathy
- SD3 total score

Control Variable: Gender

2.4 Measurement Tools

1. Content-based Media Exposure Scale (C-ME):

The Content-based Media Exposure Scale (C-ME), developed by A.H den Hamer et al., 2017, is a 17-item scale that measured violence, sex, substance use, prosocial and neutral media. Cronbach's $\alpha = .747$, this indicates satisfactory reliability for research purposes.

2. Short Dark Triad (SD3)

The SD3 was devised by Daniel N. Jones and Delroy L. Paulhus in 2014 to efficiently measure the three dark personality traits. It is 27-item scale (9 for each scale).

The Dark Triad traits were measured using the SD3 scale, assessing:

- Machiavellianism (M)
- Narcissism (N)
- Psychopathy (P)

Total Dark Triad score was also calculated.

2.5 Procedure

Data were collected through self-report questionnaires administered to participants. After obtaining informed consent, participants completed the violent media exposure scale and the SD3 inventory. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured throughout the process.

3. Result Analysis and Interpretation

3.1 Reliability Analysis

The overall scale demonstrated acceptable internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha of .747, indicating that the items used to measure violent media exposure were sufficiently reliable for further statistical analysis.

3.2 Descriptive Statistics

1. What is level of exposure to violent media among young adults?
2. What are the levels of Dark Triad Traits (Machiavellianism, Narcissism, and Psychopathy) among young adults?

Results:

The sample consisted of 260 participants.

Mean scores indicated moderate levels of violent media exposure and moderate expression of Dark Triad traits:

- Violent Media Total: $M = 51.6$, $SD = 9.25$
- Machiavellianism: $M = 27.8$, $SD = 6.70$
- Narcissism: $M = 26.3$, $SD = 5.64$
- Psychopathy: $M = 21.1$, $SD = 6.11$
- SD3 Total: $M = 75.2$, $SD = 13.7$

Skewness and kurtosis values were within acceptable limits, indicating approximate normal distribution.

Table 1: Descriptives

	VM (Total)	M	N	P	SD3 Total	Gender
N	260	260	260	260	260	260
Mean	51.6	27.8	26.3	21.1	75.2	
Median	51.5	27.0	26.0	21.0	75.0	
Standard deviation	9.25	6.70	5.64	6.11	13.7	
Minimum	17	9	12	9	41	
Maximum	83	74	45	41	118	
Skewness	0.00881	1.24	0.150	0.416	0.0397	
Std. error skewness	0.151	0.151	0.151	0.151	0.151	
Kurtosis	1.04	8.20	0.306	0.311	0.158	
Std. error kurtosis	0.301	0.301	0.301	0.301	0.301	

3.3 Correlation Analysis (Pearson's r)

3. Is there a significant association between overall violent media exposure and Dark Triad Traits in young adults?

Violent media exposure was significantly and positively correlated with all three Dark Triad traits:

- Machiavellianism: $r = .189$, $p < .01$
- Narcissism: $r = .140$, $p < .05$
- Psychopathy: $r = .255$, $p < .001$

Psychopathy showed the strongest relationship with violent media exposure

Intercorrelations among Dark Triad traits were moderate to strong, confirming theoretical overlap.

Table 2: *Correlation Matrix (Pearson)*

		VM (Total)	M	N	P
VM (Total)	Pearson's r	—			
	95% CI Upper	—			
	95% CI Lower	—			
M	Pearson's r	0.189**	—		
	95% CI Upper	0.303	—		
	95% CI Lower	0.069	—		
N	Pearson's r	0.140*	0.284***	—	
	95% CI Upper	0.258	0.392	—	
	95% CI Lower	0.019	0.168	—	
P	Pearson's r	0.255***	0.408***	0.373***	—
	95% CI Upper	0.365	0.504	0.473	—
	95% CI Lower	0.137	0.301	0.264	—

3.4 Gender Differences (Spearman Correlation)

Gender was not significantly correlated with:

- Violent Media Exposure ($\rho = .077$, $p = .216$)
- Machiavellianism ($\rho = .052$, $p = .408$)
- Narcissism ($\rho = .017$, $p = .786$)

However, gender showed a significant association with psychopathy:

- $\rho = .247$, $p < .001$

This indicates gender-related variation specifically in psychopathic traits.

Table 3: *Correlation Matrix (Spearman)*

		Gender	VM (Total)	M	N	P
Gender	Spearman's rho	—				
	df	—				
	p-value	—				
VM (Total)	Spearman's rho	0.077	—			
	df	258	—			
	p-value	.216	—			
M	Spearman's rho	0.052	0.183	—		
	df	258	258	—		
	p-value	.408	.003	—		
N	Spearman's rho	0.017	0.130	0.250	—	
	df	258	258	258	—	
	p-value	.786	.036	<.001	—	
P	Spearman's rho	0.247	0.229	0.464	0.368	—
	df	258	258	258	258	—
	p-value	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	—

3.5 One-Way ANOVA (Low, moderate, high exposure levels)

4. How does exposure to violent media relate to psychopathic traits among young adults?

Psychopathy

A significant effect was found:

$F(2,146) = 21.8, p < .001$

Post-hoc tests revealed:

- Both the moderate and high groups outperformed the low exposure group in terms of scores.
- No difference between moderate and high groups.

This suggests a threshold-like effect of violent media exposure on psychopathy.

Table 4: *Tukey Post-Hoc Test – P*

		Low	Moderate	High
Low	Mean difference	—	-4.39	-5.248
	p-value	—	<.001	<.001
Moderate	Mean difference		—	-0.858
	p-value		—	.616
High	Mean difference			—
	p-value			—

Machiavellianism

$F(2,156) = 4.21, p = .017$

High exposure group scored significantly higher than the low group.

Effect size was weaker compared to psychopathy.

Table 5: *Tukey Post-Hoc Test – M*

		Low	Moderate	High
Low	Mean difference	—	-1.72	-2.84
	p-value	—	.163	.026
Moderate	Mean difference		—	-1.12
	p-value		—	.545
High	Mean difference			—
	p-value			—

Narcissism

$F(2,156) = 0.776, p = .462$ -No significant group differences were observed.

Table 6: *Tukey Post-Hoc Test – N*

		Low	Moderate	High
Low	Mean difference	—	-0.858	0.0492
	p-value	—	.533	.998
Moderate	Mean difference		—	0.9077
	p-value		—	.577
High	Mean difference			—
	p-value			—

3.6 Linear Regression Analysis

3.6.1 Predicting Psychopathy

The overall regression model was significant: $R = .405, R^2 = .164, F(5,254) = 9.98, p < .001$

The model explained **16.4% of the variance** in psychopathy.

Significant Predictor:

- Violence Subscale ($\beta = .22, p = .008$)

Non-significant Predictors:

- Sex
- Substance Use

- Prosocial Media Exposure
- Neutral Media Exposure

This indicates that violent media exposure uniquely predicts psychopathy even after controlling for other variables.

Table 7: Model Coefficients - P

Predictor	Estimate	SE	t	p	Stand. Estimate
Intercept	14.8875	2.1530	6.915	<.001	
Violence	0.3616	0.1363	2.653	.008	0.2195
Sex	0.3775	0.2234	1.690	.092	0.1256
Substance use	0.3384	0.2540	1.332	.184	0.1246
Prosocial	-0.3461	0.2072	-1.670	.096	-0.1025
Neutral	0.0550	0.0651	0.844	.399	0.0524

3.6.2 Predicting Narcissism

$$R^2 = .0197$$

$$\beta = .14, p = .023$$

Violent media exposure explained 1.97% of variance in narcissism.

Table 8: Model Coefficients - N

Predictor	Estimate	SE	t	p	Stand. Estimate
Intercept	21.9141	1.9719	11.11	<.001	
VM (TOTAL)	0.0857	0.0376	2.28	.023	0.140

3.6.3 Predicting Machiavellianism

$$R^2 = .0356$$

$$\beta = .19, p = .002$$

Violent media exposure explained 3.56% of variance in Machiavellianism

Table 9: Model Coefficients - M

Predictor	Estimate	SE	t	p	Stand. Estimate
Intercept	20.727	2.3234	8.92	<.001	
VM (TOTAL)	0.137	0.0443	3.09	.002	0.189

3.7 Summary of the findings

1. Young adults exhibited moderate levels of violent media exposure and measurable levels of Dark Triad traits, confirming that these are normative features in young adults that should not be ignored.
2. All Dark Triad traits were found to have positive relationships with violent media exposure, though the strength of these relationships varied. Psychopathy had the strongest and most consistent relationship, followed by Machiavellianism, which had moderate relationships, and narcissism, which had weak relationships that were not significant at any level of exposure.
3. Higher levels of violent media exposure were found to have significant positive relationships with higher levels of psychopathy, showing a threshold effect between low and moderate levels of exposure.
4. Regression analyses found that violent media exposure was a significant predictor of psychopathy, even after controlling for gender, substance use, and other media forms. Moreover, this relationship explained more variance in psychopathy than in Machiavellianism or narcissism.
5. Gender was found to relate to psychopathy but not violent media exposure, showing that personality traits, specifically psychopathy, are the most salient features of young adults, and violent media exposure has differential relationships to the Dark Triad traits.

4. Discussion

The relationship between exposure to violent media and Dark Triad personality traits was examined, revealing moderate levels of exposure, which may be a result of the desensitization of violent media in digital media (Guo, 2022). All three personality traits were found to have a positive relationship with exposure to violent media, with psychopathy having the strongest relationship, indicating its potential as a predictor. Even moderate levels of exposure were found to have a relationship with psychopathy, which may be a result of emotional mechanisms, such as anger (Han et al., 2020). Machiavellianism was found to have a weaker relationship with manipulative and dominant cognitive mechanisms (Kircaburun et al., 2019), while narcissism was found to have a minimal relationship with exposure to violent media, indicating its unique nature (Muris et al., 2017). Gender differences were found in psychopathy, with higher levels in males, while no relationship was found with exposure to

violent media, indicating personality traits are more significant in this relationship (Muris et al., 2017).

4.1 Practical Theoretical Implications

The findings have significant implications for the role of media literacy and psychological interventions, which should extend to the development of empathy, emotional control, and moral thinking. Such interventions can be included in the educational curriculum to reduce the effects of violent media on the development of personality, including the presence of psychopathic features. The current research also makes a theoretical contribution to media psychology, as it demonstrated that media violence exposure has a differentially linked relationship with Dark Triad personality traits, rather than being equally linked to all personality factors. The strong relationship with psychopathy also supports a personality-based approach to understanding media effects, as opposed to a more direct cause-effect approach. The Dark Triad, as a set of personality factors, was also demonstrated to be heterogeneous, with psychopathy being particularly relevant because of factors such as impulsivity, emotional unresponsiveness, and low empathy.

4.2 Limitations

The limitations of the study lie in the fact that it is a cross-sectional study and thus cannot establish a cause-and-effect relationship between exposure to violent media and Dark Triad personality traits. The use of non-probability convenience sampling is another limitation of the study, as is the use of self-reporting methods, which may lead to biases in results, particularly in psychopathic personality traits.

Furthermore, there is a lack of control variables in the study, including empathy, moral disengagement, and sensation seeking tendencies. The age range of the sample is another limitation of the study. A limited range of ages may limit the generalizability of results.

4.3 Recommendations for Future Research

Future research has to be done using longitudinal and experimental designs in order to completely clarify the relationship between exposure to violent media and the dark triad personality. For example, does exposure to violent media change a person's personality, or does a person's personality influence their choice of media?

Future studies need to be conducted to fully elucidate the link between violent media exposure and the presence of psychopathy. For example, do personality changes occur after extended exposure to violent media, or do personality traits influence the choice of media content.

Future studies need to be conducted using diverse cultural samples. Most studies on the topic were conducted on Western samples. Future studies may also benefit from the use of qualitative research methods.

5. Conclusion

The current study investigated the relationship between exposure to violent media and Dark Triad personality traits- Machiavellianism, Narcissism, and Psychopathy- among young adults and reported moderate levels of both variables in a non-clinical sample. A positive correlation was found between exposure to violent media and all three Dark Triad personality traits, with psychopathy having the strongest association followed by a weak to moderate association with Machiavellianism and a minimal association with narcissism. Violent media exposure was also identified as a significant predictor of psychopathic personality traits when controlled for gender and other media exposure variables, demonstrating a unique contribution of violent media exposure in predicting psychopathic personality traits. Finally, gender differences were reported in psychopathy alone; however, personality variables were shown to play a greater role than exposure to media in psychopathy. The current study supports a personality-based approach to understanding media effects and emphasizes the importance of Dark Triad personality traits in media effects research.

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