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Dark Triad and Men's Objectification of Women among Male University Students: Mediating Role of Sexual Preoccupation

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Abstract

Objective: The present study investigated the relationship between dark triad and sexual preoccupation with men's objectification of women among male university students.

Methodology: After the approval from Board of studies, this study was conducted as a cross-sectional correlational research. Through nonprobability purposive sampling, 200 male students of six different universities, with ages ranging from 18 to 25 years (M = 21.32, SD = 1.87), were enrolled in this study after taking informed consent. Assessment measures included personal information sheet, shorter dark triad scale, sexuality scale and men's objectification of women scale.

Results: The research findings revealed that the Machiavellianism (P=.20**), Narcissism (P= .16*) and Psychopathy (P=.38**) showed positive association with the men's objectification of women. However, sexual preoccupation depicted a negative relationship with psychopathy (P= -.18**) and men's objectification of women (P= -.32**). Moreover, Machiavellianism, Narcissism and Psychopathy were shown to be the predictors of men's objectification of women. Lastly, sexual preoccupation mediate the relationship of psychopathy and men's objectification of women.

Conclusion: These findings shed the light on complex interplay between dark personality traits and attitudes towards objectifying behavior, emphasizing the importance of understanding these dynamics in addressing issues related to objectification.

Keywords: Dark triad, Sexual preoccupation, Men's objectification, Males, University

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Introduction

In today's world, women and young girls from every corner of the globe encounter various forms of harassment and oppression simply because of their gender.¹ This includes catcalling, leering, inappropriate sexual remarks, physical assault, sexual harassment, and rape, which have unfortunately become common issues for women in this modern world.² Catcalling and acts of sexual violence are intricately linked,³ both stemming from the sexual objectification of women by men, whether through various forms of media or faceto-face interactions.⁴

This trend is particularly disturbing in our technologically advanced age, where women have become the focus of men's attention in multiple domains. In response, women worldwide are joining hands, sharing their experiences, standing against harassment and sexual abuse, and advocating for change, regardless of race, ethnicity, or circumstances.⁵ The prevalence of sexual objectification highlights the media's role in perpetuating this issue.

Numerous studies report that women are more sexually objectified than men, a trend exacerbated by media influence. Contemporary media often shifts men's perceptions of women from subjects to sex objects. For instance, women's magazines frequently publish articles on enticing the opposite sex, alongside advertisements for makeup and fashion items,⁴ spotlighting physical appeal in an indecent manner.⁶ This objectification is further linked to certain malevolent personality traits known as the dark triad.

Dark triad, consisting of, Narcissism, Psychopathy, and Machiavellianism, encompasses three socially malevolent traits [1]. Narcissists are self-centered, self-aggrandizing individuals with a sense of superiority and entitlement but also filled with self-doubt.7,8 In contrast, narcissism present in the dark triad is not clinical narcissism, rather has sub-clinical nature which does not interfere with one's day-to-day functioning.⁹ Psychopathy consists of cruelty, a lack of empathy, and antisocial behavior.¹⁰ It is marked by superficial emotions, impulsivity, ego-focus, carelessness and failure to display self-condemnation, guilt, embarrassment and worry.^{11,12} Machiavellianism, derived from Niccolò Machiavelli's philosophy, emphasizes that the ends justify the means, with machiavellians being manipulative and self-serving.¹³ To them, the key to life success is interpersonal manipulation, necessary to fulfill their goals.¹⁴ These traits contribute to the perpetuation of sexual objectification and harassment.

Sexual preoccupation refers to an individual's persistent engagement in sexual thoughts and behaviors, often leading to personal and legal problems. In other words, sexual preoccupation is a person's disposition to remain mentally busy thinking about sex the whole time. In almost all cases, associated to a high frequency of engaging in sexual behaviors.¹⁵ These sexual thoughts can influence future behavior, represent previous experiences, reflect sexual schemas, and are related to sexual offenses.^{16,17} The dark triad traits can intensify this preoccupation, creating a cycle of objectification and harmful behavior.

Objectification involves treating someone as an object, focusing solely on their physical characteristics.¹⁸ Men's objectification of women includes internalized sexual objectification, lack of empathy, and derogatory comments about women's bodies.³ Both men and women can experience and engage in sexual objectification, however women are impacted more significantly. For instance, women are more likely to be leered at than men, indicating a higher likelihood of objectification.¹⁹

By understanding these variables interconnections, we can better comprehend the complex dynamics at play. The dark triad traits can predispose individuals to view others as objects rather than people, facilitating sexual preoccupation and the objectification of women. Narcissistic individuals may see women as mere extensions of their desires, while those with psychopathic tendencies might lack the empathy to see women as equals. Machiavellians may manipulate others for personal gain, viewing objectification as a tool. This interplay of personality traits and behaviors underscores the importance of addressing underlying psychological factors to combat sexual objectification and harassment effectively.

Numerous studies have explored the relationship between the dark triad, sexual preoccupation, and men's objectification of women. Wright and Tokunaga examined how men's consumption of objectifying media influences their views on women, concluding that increased exposure to such material leads men to see women as sex objects, fostering attitudes that support sexual violence.²⁰ Stankiewicz and Rosselli analyzed 1,988 advertisements from 58 popular American magazines, finding that about half depicted women as sex objects, and nearly 10% portrayed them as sufferers. This portrayal was more prevalent in fashion magazines compared to news and other categories, leading readers to objectify women.²¹

An experimental study with 85 undergraduate males investigated the impact of sexual objectification in music videos on males' sexual beliefs. The results showed that exposure to highly sexually objectified female performers led to more harmful sexual beliefs, greater acceptance of interpersonal violence, and more negative attitudes about sexual harassment.²² Egan and Parmar conducted a survey on 226 males to explore the pathology underlying internet pornography use, finding significant correlations between neuroticism, conscientiousness, agreeableness, obsessional checking, and compulsive internet pornography use. This suggests that certain personality traits contribute to men's exposure to sexually explicit media (SEM), aiding the understanding of the relationship between personality traits and sexual objectification.²³

Davis, Dionne, and Shuster investigated whether specific personality traits and physical characteristics predict changes in appearance orientation among young females. They found that neurotic and narcissistic traits were positively related to self-objectification, with more attractive women being more appearance-centered, especially if they scored low on perfectionism. These findings help identify underlying personality traits related to men's sexual objectification of women.²⁴

In Pakistan, sexual objectification is relatively under-researched. Ullah used qualitative methods to assess how sexually explicit media constructs a sexually objectified image of female beauty. The study concluded that the normalization and reinforcement of body appearances as criteria of female beauty are detrimental to society and women specifically, who feel compelled to seek approval in men's imaginative world.²⁵

Although extensive research has been conducted on sexual objectification and its consequences for women, there is a notable gap in understanding what leads men to sexually objectify women. Little attention has been given to examining the links between men's personality traits, such as sensation seeking, psychopathy, or the dark triad, and other variables like sexual preoccupation. The research on these variables as predictors, mediators, or moderators of sexual objectification of women is still in its early stages and requires further exploration.

The objectification of women by men is a pervasive issue in contemporary society with detrimental effects on women's mental and physical well-being. While there is a lack of comprehensive studies on the underlying personality traits contributing to this behavior. This study aims to fill this gap by examining the role of dark triad traits—narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism—and sexual preoccupation in the sexual objectification of women. Understanding the interplay between these personality traits and the objectification of women is crucial for several reasons. It will provide deeper insights into the psychological mechanisms driving this behavior, inform more effective intervention strategies, and guide policymakers, educators, and mental health professionals in developing programs to address and reduce sexual objectification, fostering a more equitable and respectful society. This research is particularly important in cultures like Pakistan, where discussions about sexual objectification are often avoided or stigmatized. By shedding light on these issues, the study aims to break the taboo, encourage open conversations, and lead to greater awareness and proactive measures to combat the objectification of women.

Methodology

The cross-sectional correlational research design was used to study the relationship between the dark triad, sexual preoccupation and men's objectification of women in the male university students. Non-probability purposive sampling technique was employed to collect data from 200 male students (as calculated by G Power), studying at six different government, semi-government and private universities of Lahore. Male students with ages ranging from 18 to 25 years, who have high internet accessibility, were included. Students with any form of disability and limited proficiency in English were excluded.

A self-constructed demographic information questionnaire was employed to acquire information about age (in years), education level (in years), no. of siblings, birth order, accommodation (hostel resident or day scholar), socioeconomic status (upper class, middle class, or lower class), type of university (government, semi-government or private), participant's status (single, committed, engaged or married), family system (joint or nuclear), and rating of religiosity (not very much, not much, moderate, much or very much).

The Shorter Dark Triad Scale (SD3)¹ is a 24-item scale that is used to measure the dark triad. It assesses three personality traits including Machiavellianism, Narcissism, and Psychopathy. Machiavellianism is measured by nine items. To gauge Narcissism, the subscale has nine items as well.. Six items are included in the scale to assess Psychopathy. It is a 5-point likert scale that ranges from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree) with alpha reliabilities of .77, .78, and .80 for narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy respectively. It has high inter-item correlation.

Sexuality Scale² was used as an objective, self report instrument designed to measure three aspects of human sexuality: sexual esteem, sexual depression, and sexual preoccupation. It is a 30-item scale which has 10 items for each subscale. Only sexual preoccupation subscale was used in the present research with alpha reliability of .91.²

Men's Objectification of Women Scale³ was employed to assess men's objectification of women.lt has forty one items related with internalized sexual objectification, lack of empathy and commenting about women's bodies, and insulting unattractive women. It is a 5-point Likert-scale in which responses range from strongly disagree to strongly agree with alpha reliability of .92.³

After the approval of synopsis from Board of studies, permission to use the scales was obtained from the authors of the tools used in the study. An authority letter explaining the purpose and nature of the study was sought from the institute. After that, authorities of universities were contacted and asked to grant permission for data collection from their universities. Getting permission from the universities proved troubling as only one out of six universities allowed collecting data from its students, while others directly turned down the request. Therefore, the university students were approached online. Those who fulfilled inclusion criteria were requested to participate in the research. All the students, who participated, were guided about the purpose of research and the sensitivity of the questionnaires. Rapport was built by assuring them that their information would be kept confidential so that they could comfortably participate in the research without any fear or shame to get their personal information leaked. Their concerns were answered and an informed consent was taken. Demographic information sheet and relevant scales were provided to participants. Each participant was given the ethical right to withdraw. After collecting data, statistical analysis was done to obtain results.

Results

To test the assumption of normality Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk normality tests were used.

The table 1 shows that the Shapiro-Wilk test for overall data was not significant which means that data was normally distributed. Normality of the data was also checked graphically and histogram showed the normal distribution of study variables.

The reliability analysis was done for each assessment measure using Cronbach Alpha.

Table 2 shows that the reliabilities of all three assessment tools were ranging from .71 to .88. Reliabilities were adequate to pursue further analysis in connection with the current research hypotheses.

Pearson product moment correlation was used to find out relationship between the dark triad, sexual preoccupation and sexual objectification.

Results from table 3 shows that there was a significant positive relationship between the dark triad and men's objectification of women which means that themore a person possesses Narcissism, Psychopathy and Machiavellianism, the more likely he is to sexually objectify women. The relationship between sexual preoccupation and men's objectification of women is significantly negative which indicates that a more sexually preoccupied person is less likely to sexually objectify women. Apart from that, psychopathy and sexual preoccupation have a significantly negative relationship.

Lastly, it was hypothesized that sexual preoccupation mediated the relationship between the Dark triad (narcissism, psychopathy and machiavellianism) and men's objectification of women. To see the mediation, Barron and Kenny (1986) approach was used in this study. First assumption of Barron and Kenny approach was that the independent variable is shown to significantly influence the dependent variable in the first regression equation. Second assumption was that independent variable is shown to significantly influence the mediator variable in the second regression equation. Only psychopathy showed the significant relationship with Men's Objectification of women and with the mediator in second regression equation, that's why psychopathy was taken as an independent variable in the mediation analysis. For path a, Simple Regression analysis was run to see that Psychopathy negatively predicted Sexual Preoccupation in men, the results showed significant results (b=-.25**, SE= .09). For path b and c, Multiple Hierarchical Regression Analysis was run to see the indirect effect of Sexual Preoccupation in the relationship between Psychopathy and Men's Objectification of Women. Results are depicted in Table 4.

Table showed that overall variance explained by the model is 22% with Fin contributing to it in model 1. Barron and Kenny's (1986) approach was used. Psychopathy (independent variable) predicted Men's Objectification of Women (dependent variable, β 1.65, t= 5.95, p < .001). Psychopathy predicted Sexual preoccupation (mediator, β = -.25, t= -2.66, p < .01) and Sexual Preoccupation predicted Men's Objectification of Women (β = -.84, t= -4.09, p < .001). Relationship between independent variable and dependent variable remained significant but reduction in β value from 1.65 to 1.45 suggested partial mediation. This mediation effect was further ascertained as the indirect effect of psychopathy on men's objectification of women through sexual preoccupation was significant (Sobel's Z= 2.28, p < .01).

objectification of women that are mediated by sexual preoccupation.

Figure 1 shows the Standardized regression coefficient for psychopathy and men's objectification of women that are mediated by sexual preoccupation.. The above figure shows that the total effect of psychopathy, that was .34, was significant and predicted men's objectification of women when sexual preoccupation was held constant. However, when sexual preoccupation was added, then the direct effect of psychopathy and men's objectification of women, that was .39, remained significant. This means that Partial mediation occurs because independent variable's influence on the dependent variable is reduced after the mediator is controlled. The findings of the study thus partially support the hypothesis of mediation.

In order to assess the differences and relationship of type of students' accommodation, type of university and degree of religiosity with men's objectification of women analysis was run, but no relationship and differences were found.

Discussion

The study found that there was a significant positive relationship between the Narcissism, Psychopathy and Machiavellianism, and men's objectification of wom-

Table 1. Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk Normality tests for the Dark Triad, Sexual Preoccupation and Men's Objectification of women in male university students (N=200)

Variables	Kolmogorov-Smirnov			Shapiro-Wilk			
	Sta.	df	р	Sta.	df	р	
The Dark Triad	.06	200	.40	.99	200	.52	
Sexual preoccupation	.07	200	.10	.98	200	.07	
Men's sexual objectification of women	.05	200	.2	.99	200	.59	

Table 2. Mean, Standard Deviation and Reliability Coefficient of Scales (N=200)

			Range			
Scale	К	М	SD	α	Actual	Potential
The shorter dark triad scale	27	83.9	9.7	.71	60-111	27-135
Sexual preoccupation scale	10	34.3	6.3	.72	14-47	10-50
Men's sexual objectification scale	41	109.3	20.4	.88	58-165	41-205

Note: K=No. of items; α= Cronbach's alpha; M=Mean; SD=Standard Deviation

Table 3. Correlation between the dark triad, Sexual preoccupation, Men's objectification of women (N=200)

Veriables	Mach	Nar	Psy	SP	MOW
Variables	К	М	SD	α	Actual
1. Machiavellianism (Mach)		.28**	.17**	05	.20**
2. Narcissism (Nar)			.22**	04	.16*
3. Psychopathy (Psy)				18**	.38**
4. Sexual preoccupation (SP)					32**
5. Men's objectification of women (MOW)					

P<.05*, P<.01**

Table 4. Mediating Effect of Sexual Preoccupation on the dark triad (Psychopathy) and Men's objectification of women

Outcomes	Predictors	Direct Effect				Indirect Effect					
				95% CI		95% CI				95%	6 CI
		ΔR	β	LL	UL	ΔR	β	LL	UL		
Sexual Preoccupation	Psychopathy	.03	25**	43	06						
Men's Objectification	Psychopathy	.15	1.65***	1.11	2.20	.21	1.45***	.91	1.98		
	Sexual Preoccupation		84***	-1.24	44						
Total R2		.22									
F(2, 197)		27.49***									

Note. Sobel's z= 2.28, p < .05, ΔR =R Square change

*p < .05, **p < .01***p < .001.

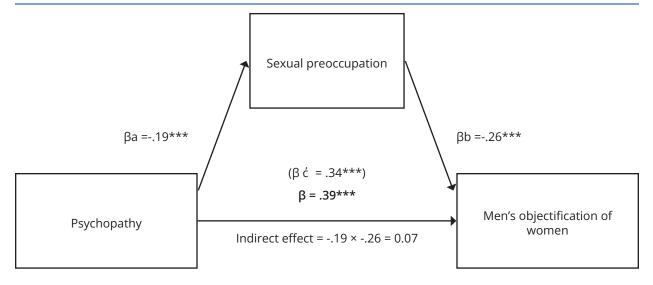


Figure 1: Standardized regression coefficient for psychopathy and men's objectification of women that are mediated by sexual preoccupation.

en, but sexual preoccupation was negatively related to psychopathy and men's objectification of women. The dark triad (Narcissism, Psychopathy and Machiavellianism) was found to predict men's objectification of women, and sexual preoccupation mediated the relationship between the psychopathy and men's objectification of women.

The positive correlation between the dark triad, and men's objectification of women implied that all three socially aversive personality traits(Narcissism, Machiavellianism and Psychopathy), positively correlated men's objectification of women which means that males who have high score on Narcissism, Machiavellianism and Psychopathy are more likely to sexually objectify women. This research finding can be linked with research done by Davis, Dionne, and Shuster²⁴ which showed that narcissistic and neurotic traits were positively related to the self-objectification, which is an outcome of sexual objectification. This current research finding regarding contribution of personality traits to men's objectification of women will facilitate the other researchers to study personality differences and personality types involved in the perception of women as sex objects by men.

The negative correlation between sexual preoccupation and men's objectification of women showed that males who remain sexually preoccupied or have persistent sexual thoughts are less likely to sexually objectify women. This was surprisingly a new finding-Sexual preoccupation and fantasies were not expected to negatively correlate with men's objectification of women, as sexual preoccupation is clinically defined and focuses on intrusive sexual thoughts, whereas objectification is a broader social issue. Including these constructs might have predicted a positive correlation with objectification, challenging initial assumptions. This highlights a need for future research on how sexual thoughts influence women's perceptions of men as sexual objects.

Although the relationship between the dark triad and sexual preoccupation was not found to be significant, yet the relationship of individual personality traits of dark triad was a bit different; high scores on Narcissism and Machiavellianism were not correlated with sexual preoccupation, but Psychopathy was negatively correlated with sexual preoccupation in males which means that psychopaths are less likely to be sexually preoccupied. These findings could be influenced by cultural factors. Cultures where collectivism and traditional gender roles are prominent, traits like Narcissism and Machiavellianism, which emphasize individualism and assertiveness, may not strongly correlate with sexual preoccupation. Conversely, traits associated with Psychopathy, such as emotional detachment and control, might exhibit a negative correlation with sexual preoccupation.

Furthermore, the results showed that the dark triad traits are the predictors of men's objectification of women which showed that males having high scores tend to sexually objectify women more. This prediction makes it more important to study personality traits, especially those which are related to social encounters such as extroversion or openness to understand men's objectification of women.

Moreover, it was also hypothesized that sexual preoccupation in male students mediated between the dark triad and men's objectification of women, but the analysis revealed that sexual preoccupation was a partial mediator between the psychopathy and men's objectification of women as it mediated the relationship between exposure to sexually explicit material and perception of women as sex objects.²⁶ Therefore, the mediation model was accepted. Finally, it is important to study men's objectification of women in Pakistan, especially in connection to pornography as Pakistan has been ranked as one of the top five countries in terms of pornography-related searches. This study will not only help understand how pornographic media is affecting Pakistani adolescents and young adults but also assist in understanding if pornography is leading them to perceive women as sex objects. The sexual preoccupation can also be studied again along with pornography to probe men's objectification of women as previously it was studied to have a mediating role between exposure to sexually explicit material and women's perception as sex object.

Conclusion

Men with high scores on the Dark Triad traits (Narcissism, Psychopathy, and Machiavellianism) tend to sexually objectify women more. The Dark Triad traits are predictors of men's objectification of women, indicating a strong positive relationship between these variables. There is a negative relationship between sexual preoccupation and men's objectification of women. At last Partial mediation was found between psychopathy and men's objectification of women through sexual preoccupation.

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Authors' Contribution Statement							
BM contributed to the design, acquisition, analysis, interpretation of data, drafting of the manuscript, and critical review of the manuscript. MZ contributed to the conception, design, acquisition, and drafting of the manuscript. MA contributed to the drafting of the manuscript, critical review of the manuscript, and final approval of the version to be published. All authors are accountable for their work and ensure the accuracy and integrity of the study.							
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Authors declared no conflict on interest None							
Data Sharing Statement							
The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.							