**Dark Personality Traits, Burnout, and Relational Aggression in Young Adults: A Trait–State Interaction Perspective**

**Abstract**

**Background:**

Relational aggression—covert behaviours like social exclusion, guilt induction, and malicious humour—is increasingly observed among young adults. While dark personality traits (narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy) are known to predict such behaviours, the influence of burnout—a state of emotional exhaustion and detachment—on this relationship remains under explored.

**Aim:**

To examine how dark triad traits and burnout interact in predicting relational aggression in a non-clinical young adult population.

**Methods:**

A total of 200 participants aged 18–30 completed standardised self-report measures assessing dark triad traits, burnout, and relational aggression. Sociodemographic variables, including gender and substance use, were also analysed.

**Results:**

Higher levels of dark traits were associated with increased relational aggression. Males scored significantly higher in psychopathy and indirect aggression subtypes. Participants reporting cannabis and alcohol use showed higher aggression, with cannabis users scoring the highest. Interestingly, those with high dark traits but low burnout reported the most aggression, while high burnout weakened the expression of these traits. This suggests burnout may temporarily dampen socially harmful behaviours.

**Conclusion:**

Dark personality traits contribute to indirect aggression, but this effect is influenced by emotional exhaustion. Burnout may act as a psychological buffer, reducing the behavioural expression of these traits. These findings highlight the importance of assessing both personality and emotional state in understanding interpersonal difficulties, even in non-clinical populations.

**Keywords:** Dark Triad Personality Traits, Burnout, Relational Aggression, Young Adults, Substance Use

**Introduction**

The increasing prevalence of stress, emotional exhaustion, and deteriorating interpersonal functioning among young adults has become a growing psychological concern. This stage of life often brings many challenges, such as academic pressure, career uncertainty, changing relationships, and identity struggles.

For many young adults, these stressors accumulate, leading to burnout—a syndrome traditionally studied in occupational settings but now recognised as a pervasive response to chronic stress across diverse domains.[1,2] Burnout results from prolonged exposure to chronic stress, characterised by emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation (or disengagement), and a reduced sense of personal accomplishment.[3] It impairs interpersonal functioning and increases vulnerability to maladaptive behaviours.[2]

Emerging research suggests that certain personality traits may predispose individuals to maladaptive responses under stress. Of particular interest are the Dark Triad traits—narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy - that, while distinct, share common features such as emotional coldness, manipulation, and self-centredness.[4] Narcissism is characterised by grandiosity, a heightened sense of entitlement, and a fragile self-esteem that is highly sensitive to criticism. Under stress, narcissistic individuals may cope maladaptively by externalising blame, engaging in defensive hostility, or seeking validation through manipulative means.[5] Machiavellianism involves a strategic, manipulative interpersonal style, marked by cynicism, deceit, and a focus on personal gain. When stressed, Machiavellian individuals are more likely to resort to calculated social manipulation or exploitative behaviour rather than emotional expression or help-seeking.[6] Psychopathy, particularly in its subclinical form, is defined by impulsivity, callousness, and a lack of empathy or remorse. Under stress, individuals high in psychopathy may display aggressive or risk-taking behaviour, showing little concern for social norms or the well-being of others.[7]

Given their interpersonal nature, these traits are often expressed not through physical aggression, but through relational aggression—a more covert, strategic form of hostility that aligns closely with the emotional detachment and manipulative tendencies characteristic of the Dark Triad.

Relational aggression is a form of non-physical, indirect aggression that aims to harm others by damaging or manipulating their social relationships, reputation, or feelings of inclusion. Unlike overt aggression, which involves direct verbal or physical hostility, relational aggression is subtle, often hidden behind socially acceptable behaviour, and typically occurs within close relationships, peer groups, or social networks [8].

It commonly manifests in three key forms:

1. Social exclusion – deliberately isolating someone from a group, event, or social activity to punish, control, or reduce their social standing. This can involve leaving someone out, ignoring them, or encouraging others to avoid them.

2. Guilt induction – manipulating someone by making them feel responsible for another’s distress or unhappiness. It is a subtle form of emotional control that exploits close relational bonds.

3. Malicious humour – using sarcasm, ridicule, or “jokes” to belittle, embarrass, or undermine someone in a way that appears socially acceptable but inflicts psychological harm.

Relational aggression is particularly common in environments where social status, peer approval, or group dynamics are highly valued—such as schools, colleges, or workplaces. It often serves psychological functions such as asserting dominance, managing insecurities, or retaliating against perceived threats or slights [9]. Unlike physical aggression, relational aggression can be difficult to identify, as it is often cloaked in humour, passive behaviour, or strategic manipulation. Notably, individuals high in dark traits may be especially likely to use relational aggression as a socially acceptable form of manipulation, especially in high-pressure environments.

While these traits and aggression have been widely studied in relation to stress, it is important to recognise that stress and burnout are not the same. Stress typically involves pressure, whereas burnout reflects long-term emotional exhaustion, detachment, and decreased functioning. Although traditionally studied in occupational contexts, burnout has also been linked to irritability, emotional dysregulation, and—in some cases—aggression when emotional reserves are depleted [10]. However, findings are mixed: some research suggests burnout may suppress aggression due to withdrawal [11], while others indicate it can lower impulse control, increasing the likelihood of hostility or passive-aggressive behaviours [12].

Despite this, the combined role of burnout and dark personality traits in predicting relational aggression has received little attention. The relationship between these traits and relational (or indirect) aggression, particularly within the context of burnout, remains unclear. Most existing studies have either focused on overt aggression or examined these constructs in isolation. As such, there is a need to understand how trait-based predispositions and emotional states jointly influence covert aggressive behaviours, especially in non-clinical populations. Furthermore, psychological traits such as narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy are rarely studied outside clinical settings in India, especially in non-pathological young adult populations. Understanding how these traits interact with stress and coping behaviours like relational aggression is essential for developing culturally relevant mental health interventions and promoting emotional well-being in this vulnerable age group.

The aim of this study is to examine the relationship between Dark Triad personality traits, burnout, and relational aggression among young adults.

**Materials and methods**

This study employed a cross-sectional, observational research design to examine the relationship between dark triad personality traits, burnout, and relational aggression in young adults. Participants were recruited through convenience sampling via online platforms, including social media networks, email, and messaging groups. The target population comprised individuals aged 18 to 30 years, who were able to understand English and willing to provide informed consent. Participants who met these inclusion criteria were invited to complete a structured online questionnaire. Individuals with a history of major neuropsychiatric illness, as well as those who submitted incomplete or inconsistent responses, were excluded from the study to ensure data quality and reliability. Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Ethics Committee prior to data collection. All participants were informed of the study’s purpose, procedures, and their rights as research subjects. Participation was entirely voluntary, and responses were collected anonymously to maintain confidentiality and reduce social desirability bias.

Data collection was carried out using a self-administered online survey comprising demographic information and standardised psychological instruments. The Short Dark Triad (SD3) scale [13] was used to measure narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy. This 27-item measure includes nine items for each trait, rated on a Likert scale. Higher scores indicated greater expression of the respective traits.

Burnout was assessed using the Oldenburg Burnout Inventory (OLBI) [14], a 16-item tool measuring two dimensions: exhaustion and disengagement. Participants responded using a 4-point Likert scale, with higher scores reflecting greater burnout. Relational aggression was measured using the Indirect Aggression Scale—Aggressor Version, developed to assess subtle forms of interpersonal aggression, including social exclusion, guilt induction, and malicious humour [15]. The 25-item scale uses a 5-point Likert format, with higher scores reflecting more frequent engagement in relationally aggressive behaviours.

A sample size of approximately 200-250 participants was targeted to ensure adequate statistical power for correlation and regression analyses. A total of 218 individuals responded to the online survey. Of these, 14 participants were excluded due to a self-reported history of neuropsychiatric illness, and an additional 4 participants were excluded for submitting incomplete responses. After applying these exclusion criteria, the final sample size for analysis was 200 participants.

Statistical analysis was conducted using SPSS (Version 25). Descriptive statistics were first computed for all sociodemographic variables, including frequencies and percentages for categorical data such as age, sex, education, and income. Mean, standard deviation, and median scores were then calculated for each psychological scale: dark traits, burnout, and aggression. Based on the median values of total dark traits and total burnout, participants were divided into four groups: Low Trait–Low Burnout, Low Trait–High Burnout, High Trait–Low Burnout, and High Trait–High Burnout. Aggression scores across these groups were compared using one-way ANOVA. Levene’s test was applied to assess homogeneity of variances, and due to violation of this assumption, Games-Howell post hoc tests were used. To examine whether burnout moderated the relationship between dark traits and aggression, a moderation analysis was conducted using multiple linear regression with centred predictors and an interaction term. This was followed by bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples to derive robust confidence intervals for the interaction. To further explore the nature of the moderation, the Johnson-Neyman technique was applied to identify the specific range of burnout scores where the relationship between dark traits and aggression remained statistically significant. Statistical significance was set at p < .05.

**Observations and results**

**Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Total Psychological Scale Scores**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Variable** | **Median** | **Mean** | **SD** | **Min** | **Max** |
| **Total Dark Traits** | 79.0 | 78.79 | 11.22 | 47 | 109 |
| **Total Burnout** | 39.5 | 39.97 | 5.60 | 21 | 60 |
| **Total Aggression** | 40.0 | 43.90 | 15.86 | 25 | 92 |

Table 1 presents the summary statistics for the total scores of the psychological constructs assessed in the study. The mean score for Total Dark Triad Traits was 78.79 (SD = 11.22), indicating moderate levels of socially aversive personality traits in the sample. Total Burnout had a mean score of 39.97 (SD = 5.60), suggesting notable emotional exhaustion and disengagement among participants. Total Aggression had a higher variability, with a mean of 43.90 (SD = 15.86), indicating a wide range of indirect aggressive behaviours in the population.

**Table 2. Comparison of Total Aggression Scores Across Trait and Burnout Groups**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Group** | **N(%)** | **Mean difference in aggression** | **SD** | **Min** | **Max** | **F** | **P-value** |
| **Low Trait, Low Burnout** | 62(31) | 37.53 | 12.82 | 25 | 76 | 6.42 | <0.01 |
| **Low Trait, High Burnout** | 40(20) | 43.13 | 14.81 | 26 | 92 |
| **High Trait, Low Burnout** | 58(29) | 49.05 | 16.81 | 25 | 86 |
| **High Trait, High Burnout** | 40(20) | 47.05 | 16.71 | 25 | 77 |

Table 2 compares total aggression scores across four participant groups categorised by levels of dark personality traits and burnout. Individuals with high dark traits and low burnout had the highest mean aggression score (49.05), followed by those with high traits and high burnout (47.05). Participants with low traits and high burnout reported moderately elevated aggression (43.13), while those with low traits and low burnout had the lowest aggression levels (37.53). A one-way ANOVA confirmed that these differences were statistically significant, F(3, 196) = 6.42, p < .001, indicating that aggression levels varied meaningfully across the trait-burnout combinations.

**Table 3. Post Hoc (Games-Howell) Comparisons of Aggression Scores Across Trait-Burnout Groups**

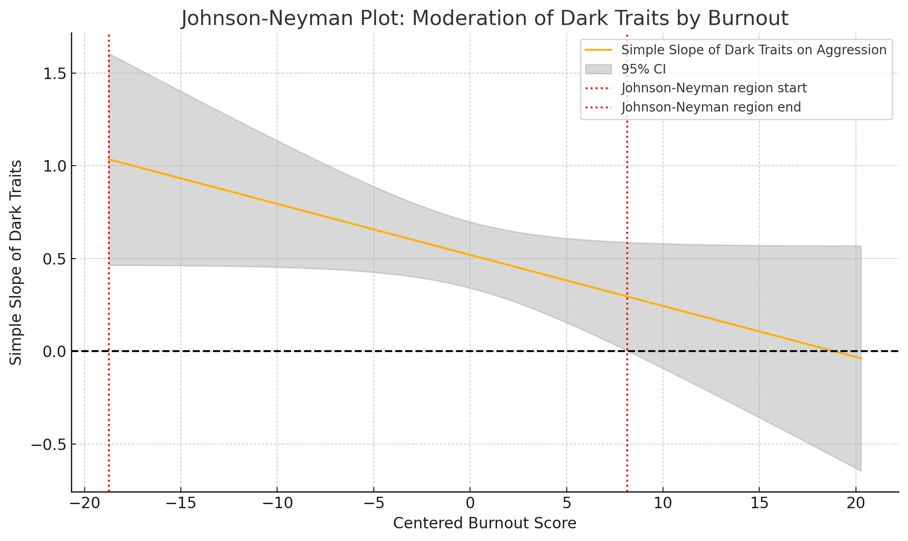
|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Comparison** | **Mean Difference in aggression scores** | **SE** | **p-value** |
| **Low Trait, Low Burnout vs Low Trait, High Burnout** | -5.59 | 2.85 | p = .212 |
| **Low Trait, Low Burnout vs High Trait, Low Burnout** | -11.52 | 2.74 | p < .001 |
| **Low Trait, Low Burnout vs High Trait, High Burnout** | -9.52 | 3.10 | p = .016 |
| **Low Trait, High Burnout vs High Trait, Low Burnout** | -5.93 | 3.22 | p = .261 |
| **Low Trait, High Burnout vs High Trait, High Burnout** | -2.00 | 3.44 | p = .937 |
| **High Trait, Low Burnout vs High Trait, High Burnout** | 3.93 | 3.53 | p = .683 |

Table 3 presents the results of Games-Howell post hoc comparisons examining differences in total aggression scores between all pairwise combinations of the four trait-burnout groups. The findings show that individuals with high dark traits and low burnout had significantly higher aggression scores than those with low traits and low burnout (p < .001), and similarly, those with high traits and high burnout also differed significantly from the low trait, low burnout group (p = .016). Other pairwise comparisons did not show statistically significant differences.

**Table 4. Moderation Analysis with Bootstrapped Confidence Intervals**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Predictor** | **Coefficient** | **Std. Error** | **95% CI Lower** | **95% CI Upper** | **p-value** | **Bootstrapped 95% CI** |
| **Dark traits** | 0.519 | 0.091 | 0.340 | 0.698 | 0.000 |  |
| **Burnout** | 0.038 | 0.180 | -0.318 | 0.393 | 0.835 |  |
| **Interaction (Dark traits x Burnout)** | -0.028 | 0.015 | -0.056 | 0.001 | 0.061 | [-0.059, -0.007] |

Table 4 presents the results of a linear regression analysis testing whether burnout moderates the relationship between dark personality traits and aggression, along with bootstrapped confidence intervals for added robustness. Dark Traits were a significant positive predictor of aggression (β = 0.519, p < .001), meaning individuals with higher dark traits tended to report more aggressive behaviours. Burnout alone did not significantly predict aggression (p = .835). The interaction term (Dark Traits × Burnout) had a negative coefficient (β = -0.028) and a marginal p-value of .061 in the standard regression, suggesting a potential dampening effect of burnout on the dark trait–aggression link. The bootstrapped confidence interval for the interaction term was [-0.059, -0.007], which did not include zero, confirming the interaction was statistically significant when bootstrapping was used.



**Figure 1. Johnson-Neyman Plot Showing Moderation of the Relationship Between Dark Traits and Aggression by Burnout**

This figure illustrates the Johnson-Neyman analysis, which identifies the range of burnout scores at which the relationship between dark traits and aggression is statistically significant. The x-axis represents centred burnout levels, while the y-axis shows the strength (slope) of the association between dark traits and aggression. The solid blue line indicates how this relationship changes across burnout levels. The shaded grey region represents the 95% confidence interval around the slope. The two vertical red dotted lines mark the Johnson-Neyman bounds — the range within which the relationship is statistically significant. Specifically, dark traits significantly predict aggression at lower to moderate levels of burnout, but this association becomes non-significant at higher burnout levels.

**Discussion**

This study examined the relationship between dark personality traits, burnout, and indirect aggression in a non-clinical adult population. This study aimed to understand not only how dark traits relate to relational aggression but also whether this association is moderated by burnout levels.

The sample consisted of young adults, with a near-equal gender distribution, with 51% male and 48% female participants. Most participants were single (83%), and many had high levels of education—50% were graduates and 32% had completed post graduation. In terms of work, about one-third (32.5%) were unemployed, while a similar number (31.5%) were working in professional jobs. More than half of the participants (57%) belonged to a higher income group, earning ₹1,00,000 or more per month.

The study found a moderately elevated presence of socially aversive personality features in this non-clinical adult population. Among the subcomponents, narcissism had the highest mean (28.64, SD = 5.49), followed by Machiavellianism (27.27, SD = 4.62) and psychopathy (22.71, SD = 5.50). This pattern is consistent with previous research showing that narcissistic and Machiavellian traits are more commonly seen than psychopathy in community samples, as psychopathy tends to involve more overtly antisocial behaviours [4,16](Table 1)

The mean burnout score was 39.68 (SD = 7.89), with sub scale scores of 19.83 (SD = 4.44) for exhaustion and 19.85 (SD = 4.45) for disengagement. These values suggest moderate burnout, which is in line with studies on young adults and students in high-pressure environments, where prolonged stress and emotional fatigue are increasingly common [17,18]. For relational aggression, the total score averaged 43.35 (SD = 11.76), with notable contributions from malicious humour (15.64, SD = 5.71) and social exclusion (17.06, SD = 5.98), while guilt induction was lower at 10.66 (SD = 4.22). These findings are consistent with prior research suggesting that in higher-functioning populations—particularly among young adults and those with higher education—aggression tends to manifest in more covert, socially manipulative ways rather than overt physical or verbal aggression [19].(Table 1)

Additional subgroup analyses showed that male participants scored significantly higher than females on psychopathy, as well as on components of indirect aggression, including guilt induction, malicious humour, and social exclusion. These findings align with the literature indicating that males tend to exhibit higher levels of antagonism, manipulativeness, and emotional detachment, traits commonly associated with psychopathy and Machiavellianism [20,21]. (Refer to supplementary material)

In terms of substance use, 11% of participants reported a history of substance use—primarily alcohol and cannabis—and these individuals scored significantly higher on aggression compared to non-users (*p* = .042). Among substance users, cannabis users showed the highest mean aggression scores (M = 58.80), followed by alcohol users (M = 51.73), while tobacco users had the lowest aggression scores (M = 32.50) despite reporting higher burnout levels. However, the differences between individual substance groups and non-users did not reach statistical significance, likely due to limited sample sizes in these subgroups. These findings align with previous research linking cannabis use to impulsivity, irritability, and emotional dysregulation [22]. (Refer to supplementary material)

Group comparisons based on combinations of dark traits and burnout levels revealed that individuals high in dark traits are more likely to express indirect aggression, especially when not emotionally depleted. Conversely, the Low Trait–High Burnout group reported the lowest aggression scores, indicating that burnout in the absence of high trait predisposition may reduce interpersonal reactivity. (Table 2) Post hoc comparisons (Games-Howell) confirmed that aggression was significantly higher in the High Trait–Low Burnout group compared to both Low Trait groups (p < .05), and that even within high trait individuals, burnout slightly attenuated aggression levels, though not always significantly. (Table 3)

To investigate the conditional relationship between dark traits and aggression, a moderation analysis was conducted using burnout as a moderator. The initial regression revealed that while dark traits significantly predicted aggression, burnout alone was not a significant predictor. However, the interaction term (Dark Traits × Burnout) was marginally non-significant, suggesting a moderation effect. To confirm this further, bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples was applied, which confirmed the robustness of the interaction and supports the notion that burnout moderates the effect of dark traits on aggression. Specifically, as burnout increased, the strength of the relationship between dark traits and aggression decreased—a finding aligned with our earlier group-wise comparisons.(Table 4)

To refine this interpretation, a Johnson-Neyman technique was employed. This analysis identified that the relationship between dark traits and aggression was significant only at low to moderate levels of burnout (up to approximately +0.4 SD from the mean) and became non-significant at higher burnout levels. (Figure 1) This finding strongly supports the idea that burnout isn’t just a result of stress—it may also act as a kind of control mechanism that holds back negative or harmful behaviours. While Indian literature has primarily explored burnout in occupational or academic contexts [17], studies have begun to note its emotional flattening effects [23]. Research by Bianchi et al. [10] and Schaufeli & Taris [11] conceptualise burnout as a state of emotional depletion, which may reduce one’s ability for manipulative or socially aggressive actions, even among individuals with high dark traits. The current findings therefore highlight the need for integrated trait-state models of behaviour. In clinical psychiatry, these findings suggest that the expression of socially aversive traits—such as manipulation, emotional detachment, and indirect aggression—is not solely determined by personality structure but is also shaped by the individual’s emotional state, particularly burnout. This shows why it is important to look at both a person’s personality traits and their current stress levels during psychiatric evaluations—especially in people who seem to be functioning well but still struggle with relationship problems. This kind of approach can help with better risk assessment, treatment planning, and early support for behaviour issues linked to personality.

The clear association between dark personality traits and relational aggression underscores the need for personality screening in clinical settings, especially in young adults who may not present with overt psychopathology but display interpersonal difficulties. These personality features are often overlooked, yet they have been shown to predict treatment non-compliance, interpersonal conflict, and poorer therapeutic alliance [24].

The study suggests that emotional exhaustion may temporarily inhibit the expression of dark traits. However, as burnout subsides, the potential for aggressive behaviours may resurface. This underscores the importance of comprehensive clinical interventions that not only aim to alleviate burnout but also address the underlying personality dynamics.

Integrating therapeutic approaches such as Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT) or Schema Therapy can be beneficial in helping individuals develop healthier interpersonal strategies and emotional regulation skills. [25,26]

The study has several limitations. The cross-sectional design limits causal interpretations, and although self-report measures may be prone to social desirability bias, the survey was anonymous and disclosure of name or gender was not mandatory, reducing response bias. The sample was predominantly urban, educated, and higher-income, which may limit generalisability to more diverse populations. Additionally, substance use data lacked detail on frequency and context.

Future research should further investigate the roles of gender and substance use in shaping relational aggression among individuals with dark personality traits. Longitudinal studies are needed to examine how burnout and dark traits jointly evolve over time and whether recovery from burnout reactivates suppressed aggressive behaviours. Clinical intervention-based longitudinal studies are particularly warranted to evaluate how targeted therapeutic approaches can mitigate the expression of relational aggression in individuals with high levels of dark traits and burnout.

**Conclusion**

This study looked at how certain personality traits, emotional exhaustion (burnout), and indirect forms of aggression are related in young adults. It found that people with higher levels of traits like narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy were more likely to show subtle aggressive behaviours, such as excluding others, making hurtful jokes, or using guilt to manipulate. These behaviours were more common in males and in those who used substances like alcohol and cannabis.

Interestingly, the study also found that emotional exhaustion reduced the chances of acting on these negative personality traits. People who had high dark traits but were emotionally drained showed less aggression than those who were not burned out. This suggests that burnout might temporarily hold back aggressive behaviour in some individuals.

Overall, the findings highlight how both personality and emotional state play a role in how people treat others. Even in young adults who appear mentally healthy, certain traits combined with low emotional control can lead to harmful behaviour. Paying attention to both personality and emotional well-being can help in understanding and preventing such issues.

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