



Brief Reports

Flirting for me or flirting for we? The Dark and Light Triads as predictors of flirting motive

Braden T. Hall^{a,*}, Toni Rebaldo^a, Amelia Geist^a, Angel Reed^b, Darren George^a^a Department of Psychology, The University of Alabama, United States^b Department of Human Development and Family Sciences, University of Connecticut, United States

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ABSTRACT

The present study examined how personality traits within the Dark Triad (narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy) and Light Triad (faith in humanity, humanism, and Kantianism) are associated with distinct flirting motives. Specifically, we examined the traits' associations with relational motives (i.e., flirting intended to initiate or enhance a relationship) and instrumental motives (i.e., flirting intended to achieve a goal or obtain resources). Data from 955 triads (main participant and two informants) showed that, upon controlling for flirting frequency and skill, Dark Triad traits were associated with an increased adoption of instrumental motives. Light Triad traits, however, were mostly unrelated to specific flirting motives. Findings highlight the utility in considering personality when examining flirting behavior and provide novel insight for both flirting and personality researchers.

1. Introduction

Existing research regarding flirting distinguishes at least six motivations for the behavior: relational, sexual, exploring, esteem, fun, and instrumental (Henningsen, 2004). Among these, two stand in contrast to one another: relational (flirting intended to initiate a new relationship or enhance the quality of an existing relationship) and instrumental (flirting intended to lead another person to provide the flirter with some reward or assistance).

Relational flirting tends to be mutually beneficial and grounded in genuine interest in others (Henningsen, 2004). Friends may flirt to become romantically involved, married individuals might flirt to increase intimacy within the relationship, or work colleagues might flirt to improve professional relationships (Frisby, 2009; Henningsen, 2004; Yelvington, 1996). Instrumental flirting, on the other hand, tends to prioritize asymmetric benefit (Henningsen, 2004). For instance, people may flirt with work supervisors to gain professional rewards (Yelvington, 1996), with customers to improve tips or feedback (Seeger-Guttman & Medler-Liraz, 2023), with professors to influence grades (Rowland et al., 1982), and/or in bars to get free drinks (Jensen et al., 2019).

Despite interest in why people flirt (e.g., Henningsen, 2004), no work, to our knowledge, has examined the individual differences that

promote the adoption of specific flirting motives. In theory, an individual's flirting motive may align with their general social orientations. Individuals with a relatively selfish orientation may be more inclined to engage in instrumental flirting because such behavior can serve as a means to acquire resources or influence people's behavior, while individuals with a more communal orientation may prefer relational flirting because such behavior can be considered moral and mutually beneficial to those involved. However, these ideas are speculative and have yet to be empirically examined. The present study proposes that the adoption of these two flirting motives may be partially explained by two distinct personality frameworks: the Dark Triad and the Light Triad.

1.1. The Dark Triad and flirting motive

The Dark Triad (DT) encompasses three sub-clinical forms of "dark" personality traits: narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy (Jones & Paulhus, 2017). Narcissism is characterized by unreasonable entitlement and a need for admiration. Narcissistic individuals may be more likely to flirt in general given their boldness and charm (Back et al., 2010), but these individuals may also be uniquely more likely to engage in instrumental flirting given their chronic pursuit of selfish goals and desire for positive attention (Jonason et al., 2015). Machiavellianism is

* Corresponding author at: The University of Alabama, 505 Hackberry Lane, Tuscaloosa, AL, 35487, United States.

E-mail address: bthall3@crimson.ua.edu (B.T. Hall).

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characterized by strategic manipulation, cynicism, and exploitation of others (Jones & Paulhus, 2017; Monaghan et al., 2020), so instrumental flirting may serve a utilitarian purpose for individuals high in the trait. Finally, psychopathy is characterized by impulsivity, callousness, and a general disregard for the feelings of others (Jones & Paulhus, 2017). While these individuals are less goal-oriented than individuals higher in narcissism and Machiavellianism, they tend to engage in riskier sexual and thrill-seeking behavior (Fulton et al., 2010). So, individuals higher in psychopathy may be more likely to engage in instrumental flirting for the thrill of the behavior and anticipated rewards.

Taken together, we expected that DT traits, both at the trait-level and when considered jointly, would be primarily associated with instrumental, not relational, flirting motives.

1.2. The Light Triad and flirting motive

The Light Triad (LT) is a newly developed constellation of three personality constructs: faith in humanity, humanism, and Kantianism (Kaufman et al., 2019). Faith in humanity is broadly defined as the absence of suspicion and belief that people are fundamentally good and worthy of trust. Humanism is characterized by valuing the worth and dignity of others and celebrating their good qualities and accomplishments. Finally, Kantianism is defined as living life based on deeply held principles rather than fluctuating emotions or opinions. While little empirical research has examined the LT, studies suggest that LT traits are positively associated with empathy, perspective taking, romance, and love for others and negatively related to uncommitted sex, selfishness, and game-playing love (Kaufman et al., 2019). Thus, taken together, individuals higher in LT traits may be less inclined to engage in instrumental flirting and may be more likely to adopt flirting strategies based on genuine human connection or romantic interest (i.e., relational flirting; Kaufman et al., 2019).

Taken together, we expected that LT traits, both at the trait-level and when considered jointly, would be primarily associated with relational, not instrumental, flirting motives.

1.3. The current study

To investigate how DT and LT traits influence flirting motives, participants reported how often and how well they believed they flirted in seven different social settings as well as the degree to which they flirted for relational or instrumental purposes in each setting. To minimize social desirability bias and advance existing flirting research beyond self-reports, we collected two informant reports for each main participant regarding their flirting.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants and procedure

We collected data via an online survey from 2865 participants grouped into 955 triads: main participants ($n = 955$; 70.6 % female; 80.9 % White; $M_{\text{age}} = 27.3$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 13.0$; 46.9 % single, 35.1 % dating, 5.3 % cohabiting, 12.7 % married) paired with two informants ($n = 1910$; 67.9 % female). Participants and informants were recruited by students in an undergraduate research methods class at a large university in the southeast U.S. Main participants provided their informants' email addresses and students sent the informants a survey link. Both informants reported on the main participants' behavior and did not report on each other, and we removed cases where a main participant had less than 2 informants.

2.2. Materials and measures

Upon consenting, participants were presented with an operational definition of flirting intended to standardize participants' understanding

of flirting and reduce interpretive variability. Participants were also presented with examples of flirting in seven¹ different settings, then completed the measures below. Informants completed identical measures in which questions were designed to describe the main participant's behavior, not their own. See supplementary materials for definition, examples, and measure items.²

2.2.1. Flirting frequency, skill, and motive

For all flirting variables, scores were averaged across the main participant and the two informants and collapsed across seven settings to index the relevant variable. For each variable, we assessed average-rater absolute agreement and report intraclass correlation coefficients (ICCs). To index flirting frequency, participants reported how often they (or the main participant) flirted (1 = *never*; 2 = *rarely*; 3 = *1–3 times per month*; 4 = *once a week*; 5 = *2–6 times per week*; 6 = *daily*; 7 = *multiple times a day*) in seven different settings ($M = 3.23$, $SD = 1.71$; $\alpha = 0.84$; $ICC = 0.61$). To index flirting skill, participants reported how well they (or the main participant) flirted (1 = *does not apply*; 2 = *very poor*; 3 = *poor*; 4 = *average*; 5 = *good*; 6 = *very good*; 7 = *excellent*) in each setting ($M = 4.13$, $SD = 1.80$; $\alpha = 0.85$; $ICC = 0.55$). To index relational motives, participants reported to what extent they (or the main participant) flirted to "enhance a relationship" (1 = *not at all*; 7 = *very much so*) in each setting ($M = 3.96$, $SD = 1.96$; $\alpha = 0.85$; $ICC = 0.48$). Finally, to index instrumental motives, participants reported to what extent they (or the main participant) flirted to "get something [they] want[ed] from someone" (1 = *not at all*; 7 = *very much so*) in each setting ($M = 3.56$, $SD = 2.02$; $\alpha = 0.90$; $ICC = 0.55$).

2.2.2. Dark Triad traits (Jones & Paulhus, 2014)

Participants reported their (dis)agreement (1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*) with 27 items. After appropriate reverse coding, nine items were averaged to index narcissism ($M = 3.00$, $SD = 0.63$; $\alpha = 0.69$), nine items were averaged to index Machiavellianism ($M = 2.98$, $SD = 0.69$; $\alpha = 0.76$), and nine items were averaged to index psychopathy ($M = 2.11$, $SD = 0.69$; $\alpha = 0.76$). All items were averaged to index total DT traits ($M = 2.69$, $SD = 0.51$; $\alpha = 0.83$).

2.2.3. Light Triad traits (Kaufman et al., 2019)

Participants reported their (dis)agreement (1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*) with twelve items. Four items were averaged to index faith in humanity ($M = 3.66$, $SD = 0.55$; $\alpha = 0.81$), four items were averaged to index humanism ($M = 4.81$, $SD = 0.64$; $\alpha = 0.75$), and four items were averaged to index Kantianism ($M = 4.04$, $SD = 0.73$; $\alpha = 0.70$). All items were averaged to index total LT traits ($M = 3.96$, $SD = 0.55$; $\alpha = 0.81$).

3. Results and discussion

Given the nested nature of the self and informant ratings, we analyzed the data using multilevel modeling. Additionally, because sex differences often emerge in flirting research (e.g., Henningsen, 2004), we included sex as a moderator. Specifically, we used linear mixed-effects models and included flirting frequency, flirting skill, the relevant trait, sex, and a trait*sex interaction term as predictors, and included rater and setting as fixed effects. We included flirting frequency and skill as control variables in order to assess the unique variance associated with motive once isolated from general flirting behavior. We also included participant ID as a random intercept to account for repeated observations within participants.

¹ Settings included romantic contexts, sexual contexts, at work, at parties, at restaurants/bard, at school, and with strangers. We originally included an additional context (home), but we removed these upon reviewer recommendation.

² https://osf.io/xak6u/?view_only=cd4f8b2934654c85bd5791334b8e38aa.

3.1. Effects of sex and setting

Sex did not moderate any of the relationships between the traits and motives (see Tables 1 and 2). However, there was a main effect of sex for instrumental motives wherein women were more likely to adopt instrumental motives than men (see Table 2). This effect may be because women are often on the receiving end of material rewards in flirting contexts (e.g., free drinks; Jensen et al., 2019). Indeed, people tend to consider instrumental flirting more effective for women than men (e.g., Rowland et al., 1982).

As shown in Table 1, all flirting settings had negative associations with relational motives. This is sensible given that the romantic setting was the reference category, and suggests that, when considering relational flirting, context may matter more than personality traits. However, as shown in Table 2, setting had weak and mostly nonsignificant effects on instrumental motives. Compared to romantic settings, instrumental motives were less common when flirting with strangers or flirting at school. However, instrumental motives were more common in sexual contexts, likely because people are focused on achieving the goal of having sex.

3.2. Relational motives

As shown in Table 1, total DT and LT scores were unrelated to relational motives. At the trait-level, narcissism, Machiavellianism, psychopathy, faith in humanity, and Kantianism were unrelated to relational motives; only humanism was positively related to relational motives, albeit this effect was small. Thus, given the strong effect of setting on relational motives, it seems that relational flirting is driven by the situation rather than personality traits.

3.3. Instrumental motives

As shown in Table 2, total DT scores were positively associated with instrumental motives while total LT scores were negatively associated with instrumental motives. At the trait level, psychopathy and Machiavellianism were positively associated with instrumental motives, while narcissism, faith in humanity, humanism, and Kantianism were unrelated to instrumental motives, although associations were in the anticipated direction. These findings are consistent with prior work linking DT traits to expediency and willingness to manipulate others for personal gain (Jonason et al., 2015). Further, trait-level results supported prior theorizing that Machiavellianism and psychopathy may be “darker” than narcissism (Rauthmann & Kolar, 2012) and especially

oriented toward manipulation and strategic gain. Narcissism, however, was unrelated to relational and instrumental motives, suggesting that narcissistic individuals may flirt without a particular motive in mind or may flirt merely to receive positive attention (Back, 2018). Additionally, given the weak and inconsistent effects of setting, the adoption of instrumental flirting motives, compared to relational motives, seems more strongly driven by dispositional factors.

The negative effects for instrumental flirting among overall LT scores suggest that those higher in LT traits are rather reluctant to engage in instrumental flirting, possibly because it violates moral values (Kaufman et al., 2019). The null effects among specific LT traits, however, coupled with null associations between LT traits and flirting frequency and skill, suggest that individuals higher in LT traits do not necessarily prioritize flirting behavior or engage in it often.

3.4. Limitations and future directions

First, the present study is cross-sectional, so we are unable to make causal inferences as to whether personality traits directionally affect flirting motives. Future longitudinal or experimental studies could determine whether this is the case. Second, the sample was predominantly White and female, which limits generalizability. Third, while the informant-based approach is a strength of the present study, future studies should attempt to replicate the present findings using other methods (e.g., behavioral observations). Additionally, we did not collect information regarding main participants’ relationships with their informants. Such information could provide an interesting variable for future analysis.

4. Conclusions

All told, the present study highlights that the goals people have when flirting can be shaped by individual differences, although these effects are subtle. Results offer unique insight into the personality factors that influence flirting motives, suggest that flirting can serve a personality-expressive function, and suggest utility in examining flirting behavior from an individual-difference perspective.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Braden T. Hall: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Toni Rebaldo:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization. **Amelia Geist:** Writing – review & editing, Writing –

Table 1
Effects of Dark and Light Triad traits on relational flirting motives controlling for flirting frequency, flirting skill, informant ratings, setting, and sex.

	Narcissism	Machiavellianism	Psychopathy	DT total	Faith in humanity	Humanism	Kantianism	LT total
	β (SE)	β (SE)	β (SE)	β (SE)	β (SE)	β (SE)	β (SE)	β (SE)
Intercept	4.31 (0.04)	4.31 (0.04)	4.31 (0.04)	4.31 (0.04)	4.32 (0.04)	4.33 (0.04)	4.31 (0.04)	4.32 (0.04)
Flirting frequency	0.53 (0.01)	0.53 (0.01)	0.53 (0.01)	0.53 (0.01)	0.53 (0.01)	0.54 (0.01)	0.53 (0.01)	0.54 (0.01)
Flirting skill	0.91 (0.01)	0.91 (0.01)	0.91 (0.01)	0.91 (0.01)	0.91 (0.01)	0.91 (0.01)	0.91 (0.01)	0.91 (0.01)
Informant 1	0.18 (0.02)	0.18 (0.02)	0.18 (0.02)	0.18 (0.02)	0.18 (0.02)	0.18 (0.02)	0.18 (0.02)	0.18 (0.02)
Informant 2	0.19 (0.02)	0.19 (0.02)	0.19 (0.02)	0.19 (0.02)	0.19 (0.02)	0.19 (0.02)	0.19 (0.02)	0.19 (0.02)
Work	−0.51 (0.03)	−0.51 (0.03)	−0.51 (0.03)	−0.51 (0.03)	−0.51 (0.03)	−0.51 (0.03)	−0.51 (0.03)	−0.51 (0.03)
Party	−0.41 (0.03)	−0.40 (0.03)	−0.40 (0.03)	−0.40 (0.03)	−0.40 (0.03)	−0.40 (0.03)	−0.40 (0.03)	−0.40 (0.03)
Strangers	−0.80 (0.03)	−0.80 (0.03)	−0.80 (0.03)	−0.80 (0.03)	−0.80 (0.03)	−0.80 (0.03)	−0.80 (0.03)	−0.80 (0.03)
Restaurant/bar	−0.61 (0.03)	−0.60 (0.03)	−0.61 (0.03)	−0.61 (0.03)	−0.60 (0.03)	−0.60 (0.03)	−0.60 (0.03)	−0.60 (0.03)
School	−0.72 (0.03)	−0.72 (0.03)	−0.72 (0.03)	−0.72 (0.03)	−0.72 (0.03)	−0.72 (0.03)	−0.72 (0.03)	−0.72 (0.03)
Sexual	−0.05 (0.03)	−0.05 (0.03)	−0.05 (0.03)	−0.05 (0.03)	−0.05 (0.03)	−0.05 (0.03)	−0.05 (0.03)	−0.05 (0.03)
Trait	0.07 (0.03)	−0.01 (0.03)	0.04 (0.03)	0.04 (0.03)	−0.05 (0.03)	0.09 (0.03)	−0.01 (0.03)	0.06 (0.03)
Sex	−0.05 (0.04)	−0.05 (0.03)	−0.04 (0.04)	−0.04 (0.04)	−0.06 (0.04)	−0.07 (0.04)	−0.05 (0.04)	−0.06 (0.04)
Trait × sex	−0.04 (0.04)	0.03 (0.04)	−0.03 (0.04)	−0.02 (0.04)	0.01 (0.04)	−0.04 (0.04)	0.01 (0.04)	−0.01 (0.04)
Rand. intercept variance	0.20	0.20	0.20	0.20	0.20	0.20	0.20	0.20
Residual variance	1.46	1.46	1.46	1.46	1.46	1.46	1.46	1.46

Note. Bolded items significant at $p < .01$. Reference category = romantic setting, male, self-report. Rows Work-Sexual = settings. Trait refers to effect of trait in top row. All predictors except sex z-scored. All models use same model structure.

Table 2

Effects of Dark and Light Triad traits on instrumental flirting motives controlling for flirting frequency, flirting skill, informant ratings, setting, and sex.

	Narcissism	Machiavellianism	Psychopathy	DT total	Faith in humanity	Humanism	Kantianism	LT total
	β (SE)	β (SE)	β (SE)	β (SE)	β (SE)	β (SE)	β (SE)	β (SE)
Intercept	3.47 (0.05)	3.44 (0.06)	3.41 (0.06)	3.41 (0.05)	3.47 (0.06)	3.48 (0.06)	3.48 (0.06)	3.46 (0.06)
Flirting frequency	0.54 (0.02)	0.55 (0.02)	0.54 (0.02)	0.54 (0.02)	0.55 (0.02)	0.55 (0.02)	0.55 (0.02)	0.55 (0.02)
Flirting skill	0.62 (0.02)	0.62 (0.02)	0.62 (0.02)	0.62 (0.01)	0.62 (0.02)	0.63 (0.02)	0.63 (0.02)	0.62 (0.02)
Informant 1	0.08 (0.02)	0.08 (0.02)	0.08 (0.02)	0.08 (0.02)	0.08 (0.02)	0.08 (0.02)	0.08 (0.02)	0.08 (0.02)
Informant 2	0.05 (0.02)	0.05 (0.02)	0.05 (0.02)	0.05 (0.02)	0.05 (0.02)	0.05 (0.02)	0.05 (0.02)	0.05 (0.02)
Work	-0.03 (0.04)	-0.02 (0.04)	-0.03 (0.04)	-0.03 (0.04)	-0.02 (0.04)	-0.02 (0.04)	-0.02 (0.04)	-0.02 (0.04)
Party	-0.10 (0.04)	-0.10 (0.04)	-0.10 (0.04)	-0.10 (0.04)	-0.10 (0.04)	-0.10 (0.04)	-0.10 (0.04)	-0.10 (0.04)
Strangers	-0.32 (0.04)	-0.31 (0.04)	-0.31 (0.04)	-0.31 (0.04)	-0.31 (0.04)	-0.31 (0.04)	-0.31 (0.04)	-0.31 (0.04)
Restaurant/bar	0.03 (0.04)	0.03 (0.04)	0.03 (0.04)	0.03 (0.04)	0.03 (0.04)	0.03 (0.04)	0.03 (0.04)	0.03 (0.04)
School	-0.33 (0.04)	-0.33 (0.04)	-0.33 (0.04)	-0.34 (0.04)	-0.33 (0.04)	-0.33 (0.04)	-0.33 (0.04)	-0.33 (0.04)
Sexual	0.17 (0.03)	0.18 (0.04)	0.17 (0.04)	0.17 (0.04)	0.18 (0.04)	0.18 (0.05)	0.18 (0.04)	0.18 (0.04)
Trait	0.13 (0.05)	0.21 (0.05)	0.32 (0.05)	0.31 (0.05)	-0.06 (0.05)	-0.03 (0.05)	-0.03 (0.05)	-0.13 (0.05)
Sex	0.18 (0.06)	0.22 (0.06)	0.26 (0.05)	0.26 (0.05)	0.18 (0.06)	0.17 (0.06)	0.17 (0.06)	0.19 (0.06)
Trait × sex	0.04 (0.06)	0.06 (0.05)	-0.05 (0.06)	-0.00 (0.06)	-0.02 (0.06)	-0.04 (0.06)	-0.04 (0.06)	-0.02 (0.06)
Rand. Intercept variance	0.53	0.49	0.48	0.46	0.55	0.55	0.55	0.53
Residual variance	2.05	2.05	2.05	2.05	2.05	2.05	2.05	20.5

Note. Bolded items significant at $p < .01$. Reference category = romantic setting, male, self-report. Rows Work-Sexual = settings. Trait refers to effect of trait in top row. All predictors except sex z-scored. All models use same model structure.

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Data availability

Data shared via OSF link in document.

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