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# Intimate Partner Cyberstalking: Exploring Vulnerable Narcissism, Secondary Psychopathy, Borderline Traits, and Rejection Sensitivity

Allison Duffy, BPsych,<sup>1</sup> Evita March, PhD,<sup>2</sup> and Peter K. Jonason, PhD<sup>3,4</sup>

## Abstract

Intimate partner cyberstalking refers to the monitoring and controlling of an intimate partner through technologies. Unlike the cyberstalking of strangers, less is known about the motives and perpetration of intimate partner cyberstalking. In this study, we explore how vulnerable narcissism, secondary psychopathy, and borderline traits (i.e., the “Vulnerable Dark Triad”) and rejection sensitivity relate to the perpetration of intimate partner cyberstalking. Participants ( $N=278$ ; 58 percent women) were recruited through social media and completed an anonymous online questionnaire. Positive correlations were observed between vulnerable narcissism, secondary psychopathy, borderline traits, rejection sensitivity, and intimate partner cyberstalking. Borderline traits moderated the relationship between participant sex (men and women) and intimate partner cyberstalking, and women with high borderline traits were most likely to cyberstalk intimate partners. Lastly, there was a significant indirect effect of vulnerable narcissism on intimate partner cyberstalking through rejection sensitivity. These findings highlight the importance of relational insecurity and rejection sensitivity in intimate partner cyberstalking and provide useful directions for future research exploring cyberstalking behaviors in intimate relationships.

**Keywords:** cyberstalking, vulnerable narcissism, secondary psychopathy, borderline, rejection sensitivity

## Introduction

ONLINE MONITORING AND SURVEILLANCE of (current or former) intimate partners is broadly referred to as intimate partner cyberstalking.<sup>1–3</sup> Compared with offline stalking, cyberstalking intimate partners is fast, readily available, and relatively inexpensive, making it an ideal option for perpetrators to gain stealth-like access to their victims.<sup>4</sup> Although researchers have highlighted the cyberstalking of intimate partners as a worthwhile phenomenon to explore, such research remains comparatively limited compared with the cyberstalking of strangers. The negative psychological impact of intimate partner cyberstalking<sup>5</sup> and the relatively

high prevalence<sup>6</sup> necessitates ongoing research identifying potential risk factors of perpetration, such as high hostile sexism<sup>7</sup> and an anxious attachment style.<sup>8</sup>

Subclinical narcissism (e.g., grandiosity and entitlement<sup>9</sup>), Machiavellianism (e.g., cynicism and manipulation of others<sup>10</sup>), psychopathy (e.g., callousness and impulsivity<sup>11</sup>), and sadism (i.e., enjoying harming others<sup>12</sup>) have all been correlated with more cyberstalking of intimate partners.<sup>13</sup> However, many of these studies have conceptualized and measured these traits (i.e., the “Dark Tetrad”<sup>14</sup>) as overall factors (i.e., unidimensional, total traits). Given these traits are conceptualized as dimensional,<sup>15</sup> an overall factor conceptualization may limit comprehensive representation of

<sup>1</sup>School of Psychology, Charles Sturt University, Bathurst, Australia.

<sup>2</sup>Psychology, Institute of Health and Wellbeing, Federation University Australia, Berwick, Australia.

<sup>3</sup>Department of Psychology, University of Padua, Padua, Italy.

<sup>4</sup>Department of Psychology, Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University, Warsaw, Poland.

these traits.<sup>16</sup> A preliminary study exploring the dimensions of the Dark Tetrad traits and intimate partner cyberstalking demonstrated unique utility of the vulnerable (compared with the grandiose) dimension of narcissism and the secondary (compared with the primary) dimension of psychopathy to predict perpetration of intimate partner cyberstalking.<sup>3</sup>

As vulnerable narcissism and secondary psychopathy are both captured in the “Vulnerable Dark Triad”<sup>15</sup> of personality, and as the “Dark Triad/Tetrad” traits may best align with primary psychopathy<sup>17</sup> and grandiose narcissism,<sup>18</sup> we speculate that the Vulnerable Dark Triad may be an appropriate model of personality to explore as predictors of intimate partner cyberstalking.

The “Vulnerable Dark Triad” includes the three interrelated personality traits of vulnerable narcissism, secondary psychopathy, and nonclinical borderline traits. Unlike the cool, calculated, and reserved Dark Triad trait counterparts, the traits comprising the Vulnerable Dark Triad are characterized by low agreeableness and high neuroticism, emotional reactivity, and anxiety.<sup>19,20</sup> Compared with grandiose narcissism, which is typified by high grandiosity and agency,<sup>21</sup> vulnerable narcissism is characterized by high neuroticism,<sup>15</sup> defensiveness, and insecurity.<sup>22</sup> Vulnerable narcissism may be more closely related to Borderline Personality Disorder than to Narcissistic Personality Disorder,<sup>15</sup> and those with high levels of vulnerable narcissism are particularly sensitive to rejection.<sup>23</sup> Compared with primary psychopathy, which is characterized by a callous nature, manipulation of others, and a lack of fear,<sup>24</sup> secondary psychopathy includes greater hostility, emotional reactivity, and poor impulse control.<sup>25</sup>

Lastly, those with high levels of borderline traits have difficulty regulating emotions, low self-esteem, high impulsivity and defensiveness,<sup>19</sup> and typically express high levels of rejection sensitivity.<sup>26</sup> Although Borderline Personality Disorder has been linked to perpetration of offline stalking,<sup>27</sup> borderline traits and intimate partner cyberstalking remains unexplored. Given the shared variance between vulnerable narcissism, secondary psychopathy, and borderline traits, and that borderline traits are characterized by rejection sensitivity and interpersonal aggression,<sup>28</sup> there is rationale to expect that people with high levels of borderline traits will perpetrate more intimate partner cyberstalking.

In addition to the Vulnerable Dark Triad traits, we also explore rejection sensitivity. Rejection sensitivity, the anxious expectation, and overreaction to rejection cues,<sup>29</sup> is associated with neuroticism and anxiety.<sup>30</sup> People with high rejection sensitivity react to potential rejection with anger, hostility, and jealousy, often to control the situation and the other person’s behavior.<sup>31</sup> As stalking has previously been attributed to a need to control the relationship,<sup>32</sup> and intimate partner cyberstalking correlates with controlling relationship behaviors,<sup>3</sup> it is likely that rejection sensitivity will associate with perpetration of intimate partner cyberstalking.

We also explore potential interactions among sex, the Vulnerable Dark Triad traits, and rejection sensitivity. Vulnerable narcissism has demonstrated unique predictive utility for women, and secondary psychopathy had demonstrated unique predictive utility for men, when perpetrating intimate partner cyberstalking.<sup>3</sup> We sought to establish if such findings could be replicated and extend these interactions to the related constructs of borderline personality traits and rejection sensitivity.

In sum, there are three main aims of this brief, exploratory study. First, we explore the associations among sex, the Vulnerable Dark Triad traits, rejection sensitivity, and perpetration of intimate partner cyberstalking. We predict positive associations will exist between all traits and intimate partner cyberstalking. Second, we explore whether the Vulnerable Dark Triad traits and rejection sensitivity moderate associations between sex and intimate partner cyberstalking perpetration. Lastly, we explore if the Vulnerable Dark Triad traits are related to intimate partner cyberstalking perpetration through rejection sensitivity. Given the largely explorative nature of the second and third aim, directional hypotheses are not generated.

## Methods

### Participants and procedure

Ethics approval was obtained from the relevant educational institution (Project H21161). Participants ( $N=278$ ) were recruited through social media (e.g., Facebook, Reddit) advertisements and completed an anonymous online questionnaire (~20 minutes). Participants (58 percent women, 42 percent men) were 21–67 years of age ( $M_{age}=35.78$ ;  $SD_{age}=9.09$ ) and 24.8 percent were currently students. Participants predominantly resided in Australia (81.5 percent), identified as heterosexual (64 percent), and were in a long-term relationship (65.5 percent). An *a priori* power analysis<sup>33</sup> indicated that a sample size of 108 was required for analyses, and this was satisfied in men ( $n=114$ ) and women ( $n=161$ ).

### Measures

Vulnerable narcissism was assessed with the Hypersensitive Narcissism Scale.<sup>34</sup> The self-report measure includes 10 items (e.g., “I often interpret the remarks of others in a personal way”); current Cronbach’s  $\alpha=0.88$  and participants rate their agreement from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

Secondary psychopathy was assessed with the secondary psychopathy subscale of the Self-Reported Psychopathy Scale III.<sup>35</sup> The subscale includes 32 items (e.g., “I’ve often done something dangerous just for the thrill of it”); current Cronbach’s  $\alpha=0.81$  and participants rate their agreement from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

Subclinical borderline traits were assessed with the McLean Screening Instrument for Borderline Personality Disorder.<sup>36</sup> The self-report measure includes 10 items (e.g., “Have any of your closest relationships been troubled by a lot of arguments or repeated breakups?”); current Cronbach’s  $\alpha=0.83$ , and participants respond yes (score of 1) or no (score of 0).

Rejection sensitivity was assessed with the Rejection Sensitivity Adult Questionnaire,<sup>30</sup> a self-report measure that includes nine scenarios (e.g., “You ask your parents or other family members to come to an occasion important to you”). For each scenario, concern (e.g., “how concerned or anxious would you be over whether or not they would want to come?”), and likelihood (e.g., “I would expect that they would want to come”) are assessed on a 6-point Likert scale (1 = *low*; 6 = *very*). Total scores are calculated by subtracting

likelihood from concern for each scenario and averaging all scenarios (current Cronbach's  $\alpha=0.94$ ).

Perpetration of intimate partner cyberstalking was measured with the Intimate Partner Cyberstalking scale.<sup>1</sup> The self-report measure includes 21 items (e.g., "I have checked my partner's messages [e.g., e-mail, Facebook, phone] without them knowing"; current Cronbach's  $\alpha=0.95$ ). and participants rate their agreement from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

**Results**

Analyses were run on SPSS version 27 and Jamovi version 2.2.5. For both sexes, all Vulnerable Dark Triad traits and rejection sensitivity shared positive correlations with intimate partner cyberstalking perpetration (Table 1). Fisher's  $z$  calculations indicated that the associations between vulnerable narcissism and intimate partner cyberstalking and rejection sensitivity and intimate partner cyberstalking were stronger for women, indicating potential moderation. Four moderation analyses were run through PROCESS<sup>37</sup> to test the potential for sex to moderate the relationships between the Vulnerable Dark Triad traits and rejection sensitivity and intimate partner cyberstalking. Only the interaction between sex and borderline traits was significant ( $B=1.31, SE=0.64, p=0.042$ ) with the effect located at average ( $B=4.48, SE=2.01, p=0.026$ ) and high ( $B=8.58, SE=2.86, p=0.003$ ) levels of borderline traits. Women with high borderline trait scores perpetrated the most intimate partner cyberstalking (Fig. 1).

Last, we tested the possibility that rejection sensitivity might serve as a mechanism that draws those high in the Vulnerable Dark Triad to engage in intimate partner cyberstalking. We conducted three mediation analysis with 95 percent bias-corrected confidence intervals and 5,000 bootstrapped samples. There was a significant indirect effect on intimate partner cyberstalking through rejection sensitivity for vulnerable narcissism ( $B=0.29, SE=0.07, p<0.001$ ),

secondary psychopathy ( $B=0.20, SE=0.03, p<0.001$ ), and borderline traits ( $B=0.61, SE=0.23, p=0.008$ ). To control for shared variance between these traits, path analyses were conducted with SPSS Amos using bootstrapping method with 95 percent bias-corrected confidence intervals and 5,000 bootstrapped samples (Fig. 2). There was a significant indirect effect of vulnerable narcissism on intimate partner cyberstalking through rejection sensitivity ( $B=0.23, SE=0.07, 95\%$  confidence interval [0.12 to 0.40]). There were no other indirect effects, and model fit was good (root-mean-squared error of approximation=0.51).

**Discussion**

In the current exploratory study, we aimed to explore (1) the associations between all variables, (2) the potential for the Vulnerable Dark Triad traits to moderate relationships between sex and intimate partner cyberstalking, and (3) potential indirect pathways through rejection sensitivity. For both sexes, higher vulnerable narcissism, secondary psychopathy, borderline traits, and rejection sensitivity were associated with increased perpetration of intimate partner cyberstalking, thus supporting the hypothesis. The association between vulnerable narcissism and intimate partner cyberstalking corroborates previous findings,<sup>3</sup> indicating that those who cyberstalk intimate partners may be more neurotic,<sup>15</sup> insecure,<sup>22</sup> and jealous.<sup>38</sup>

Furthermore, the association between secondary psychopathy and intimate partner cyberstalking also corroborates previous findings,<sup>3</sup> suggesting those who cyberstalk intimate partners may have lower self-control<sup>39</sup> and higher impulsivity.<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, sex was not found to moderate the relationship between these traits and intimate partner cyberstalking, indicating that for both men and women as levels of vulnerable narcissism and secondary psychopathy increase, so too does their cyberstalking of intimate partners.

The current study is the first to establish an association between borderline personality traits and intimate partner

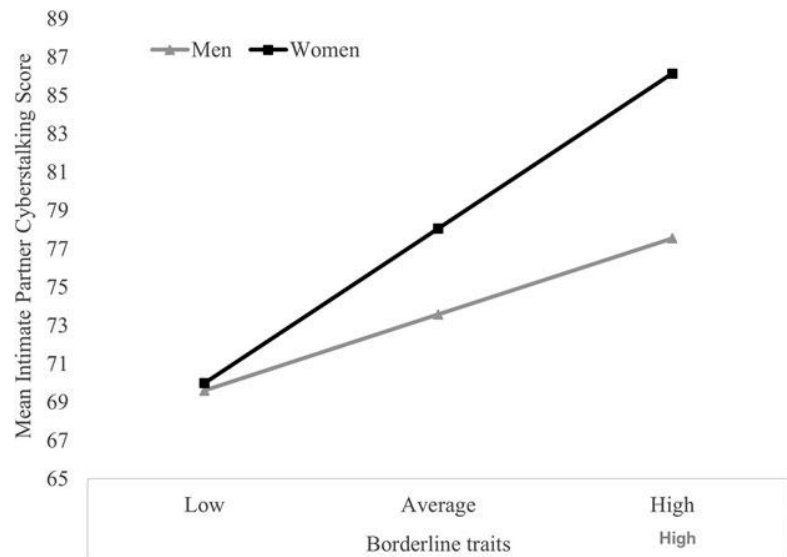
TABLE 1. TOTAL AND SEX DIFFERENTIATED ZERO-ORDER CORRELATIONS, DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS, AND  $t$  TESTS

	1	2	3	4	5
<b>Total correlations</b>					
1. Vulnerable narcissism	—				
2. Secondary psychopathy	0.67**	—			
3. Borderline traits	0.37**	0.41**	—		
4. Rejection sensitivity	0.61**	0.46**	0.18*	—	
5. Intimate partner cyberstalking	0.85**	0.76**	0.36**	0.65**	—
<b>Correlations by sex</b>					
1. Vulnerable narcissism	—	0.66** <sub>a</sub>	0.50** <sub>b</sub>	0.67** <sub>b</sub>	0.85** <sub>a</sub>
2. Secondary psychopathy	0.65** <sub>a</sub>	—	0.48** <sub>a</sub>	0.57** <sub>b</sub>	0.77** <sub>a</sub>
3. Borderline traits	0.21** <sub>a</sub>	0.33** <sub>a</sub>	—	0.28** <sub>b</sub>	0.49** <sub>b</sub>
4. Rejection sensitivity	0.49** <sub>a</sub>	0.29** <sub>a</sub>	0.03 <sub>a</sub>	—	0.72** <sub>b</sub>
5. Intimate partner cyberstalking	0.85** <sub>a</sub>	0.74** <sub>a</sub>	0.21* <sub>a</sub>	0.54** <sub>a</sub>	—
Total, $M$ ( $SD$ )	37.27 (7.59)	98.39 (15.10)	5.14 (3.12)	21.06 (7.33)	76.34 (17.75)
Men, $M$ ( $SD$ )	35.99 (7.89)	96.07 (16.39)	4.98 (3.17)	19.27 (7.23)	73.38 (19.29)
Women, $M$ ( $SD$ )	38.14 (7.29)	99.88 (14.03)	5.25 (3.11)	22.30 (7.18)	78.35 (16.37)
$t$ value	-2.33*	-2.07*	-0.71	-3.34*	-2.31*
Hedge's $g$	-0.28	-0.25	-0.09	-0.42	-0.28

Note: Correlation coefficients below the diagonal are for men, correlation coefficients above the diagonal are for women; different subscripts indicate correlations between sexes differ at Fisher's  $z, p<0.05$ .

\* $p<0.05$ ; \*\* $p<0.01$ .

**FIG. 1.** Interaction of sex (men and women) and borderline traits (*low, average, and high*) on rates of interpersonal cyberstalking (intimate partner cyberstalking) scores. Y-axis starts at 65.



cyberstalking. As people with high borderline traits may respond to relational conflict and uncertainty by engaging in clinging and/or controlling relationship behaviors,<sup>26</sup> this may explain their tendency to cyberstalk intimate partners—a potentially controlling relationship behavior.<sup>3</sup> Borderline traits (average and high levels) also moderated the relationship between sex and intimate partner cyberstalking. At low levels of borderline traits men and women perpetrated similar rates of intimate partner cyberstalking. However, for both men and women, as levels of borderline traits increased, so too did their perpetration of intimate partner cyberstalking. Furthermore, at higher levels of borderline traits, women perpetrated more intimate partner cyberstalking than men. As this is the first study to explore the interaction of sex and borderline traits, interpretation of the tendency for women with higher borderline traits to perpetrate intimate partner cyberstalking more so than men is somewhat speculative.

Still, this finding indicates that for both men and women higher impulsivity,<sup>15</sup> emotion regulation difficulties,<sup>26</sup> and a fear of abandonment<sup>31</sup> (i.e., borderline traits) are associated with increased cyberstalking of intimate partners, and this effect is especially pronounced for women. Although beyond the scope of the current study, we recommend future researchers seek to establish which characteristics of borderline traits (i.e., emotion regulation, fear of abandonment)

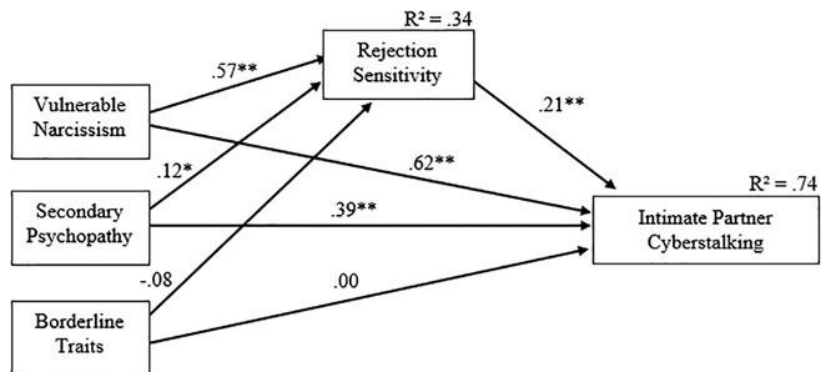
may best relate to this increased perpetration, and why this effect is especially pronounced for women.

Lastly, we found people with high rejection sensitivity perpetrate more intimate partner cyberstalking, a behavior likely employed to uncover information that may signal rejection—for example, if their partner is being unfaithful or plans to terminate the relationship. We also found a significant indirect effect of vulnerable narcissism on intimate partner cyberstalking through rejection sensitivity. Although speculative, it is likely that the fragile ego characteristic of vulnerable narcissism<sup>40</sup> leads to greater sensitivity to potential rejection threats,<sup>41</sup> which in turn leads to increased online monitoring of an intimate partner.

**Implications, Limitations, and Future Directions**

Although beyond the scope of the current study, the findings implicate Attachment Theory as a potentially useful theoretical framework to understand intimate partner cyberstalking. Insecure attachment and early childhood experiences of rejection can lead to feelings of jealousy and mistrust in interpersonal relationships,<sup>27</sup> which could in turn result in hypersensitive relationship behaviors such as online monitoring and control. These findings also have clinical implications; for example, therapeutic interventions could

**FIG. 2.** Path analysis with rejection sensitivity mediating associations between Vulnerable Dark Triad traits and intimate partner cyberstalking; \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ .



focus on developing healthy coping strategies for people who have high rejection sensitivity, so that their anxiety in response to perceived relational threats does not lead to perpetrating intimate partner cyberstalking.

Through self-report, we assessed an online behavior that is largely considered to be socially unacceptable.<sup>42</sup> Although responses were anonymous, social desirability and response bias remains a potential confound of these results,<sup>43</sup> and we recommend future research includes a measure of social desirability (e.g., Marlowe–Crowne<sup>44</sup>). Furthermore, as recent research has established intimate partner cyberstalking to also be dimensional,<sup>2</sup> comprising passive, invasive, and duplicitous forms, future researchers should seek to explore associations between these “vulnerable” personality traits, rejection sensitivity, and the dimensions of intimate partner cyberstalking.

Lastly, we recommend future researchers turn their attention to the impact of intimate partner cyberstalking on the perpetrator. Our findings demonstrate that the intimate partner cyberstalker is characterized by high neuroticism and fragile ego (i.e., vulnerable narcissism), dysfunctional impulsivity (i.e., secondary psychopathy), fear of abandonment (i.e., borderline traits), and high rejection sensitivity. Based on these characteristics, they likely engage in these covert online monitoring behaviors to extract information that could signal potential relational threats—such as unfaithfulness or termination. It is possible that, should they not find incriminating information about their intimate partner, their relief and reduced anxiety likely reinforces ongoing cyberstalking behavior. Ongoing research that seeks to understand both the experience and perpetration of intimate partner cyberstalking will contribute to evidence-based management and interventions of the potentially harmful interpersonal online behavior.

### Authors' Contributions

A.D.: Conceptualization, methodology, formal analysis, and writing—original draft. E.M.: Conceptualization, formal analysis, supervision, and writing—review and editing. P.K.J.: Supervision, and writing—review and editing.

### Author Disclosure Statement

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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Address correspondence to:

*Dr. Evita March  
Psychology  
Institute of Health and Wellbeing  
Federation University Australia  
100 Clyde Road  
Berwick, VIC 3806  
Australia*

*E-mail: e.march@federation.edu.au*