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Virtuous victimhood as a Dark Triad resource transfer strategy☆

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ABSTRACT

Virtuous victim signals have been described as a resource transfer strategy motivated by dark traits of narcissism and Machiavellianism Ok et al. (2021). Here we report direct replication of key predictions of this claim, test robustness to alternative predictors, and explore possible roles for sadism within virtuous-victim signalling. Study 1 (N = 750, preregistered) replicated significant, large, associations of virtuous victim signalling with communal narcissism and Machiavellianism. Study 2 (N = 750, preregistered) tested robustness of the association using an alternative victim signalling measure. The results again replicated, this time with larger effects (β = 0.41 for narcissism and β = 0.22 for Machiavellianism). Virtuous-victim status releases resources to the claimant but also leaves the accused as targets for attack. We therefore explored (study 3) whether a further dark trait – sadism –predicted exploitation of this victimization opportunity. Sadism was significantly and specifically associated with engaging in and enjoying attacks on accused. The results provide independent support for virtuous victim signalling as narcissistic Machiavellianism. Dark traits may be adapted to exploit the resources released to victims, and opportunities for resource-capture provided by victimizing others under a righteous guise.

1. Introduction

What motivates victim-signalling – the "*public and intentional expression of one's disadvantages, suffering, oppression, or personal limitations*" (Ok et al., 2021, p. 1635)? And why does victim-signalling at times co-occur with virtue-signalling in what is known as "virtuous-victim signalling"? Being victimized often leads to feelings of vulnerability (Janoff-Bulman & Frieze, 1983) and, as such, genuine victims often avoid actively signalling their victim status (Fohring, 2018). This raises the question: why do some people actively signal victimhood? Noor et al. (2012) and others have demonstrated what they term "*competitive victimhood*" in which victims are enabled to claim not only compensation from nonvictims, but also immunization from claims on their own moral transgressions – be these deceit, intimidation, or even violence – in transferring resources to themselves or to their social group (Gray & Wegner, 2011). Building on this work, Ok et al. (2021) proposed that the combination of virtue signalling together with victim signalling is a strategic manipulation of non-victims, designed to elicit a transfer of resources from the non-victims to the victim signaller. Importantly, Ok et al. (2021) proposed and validated that this virtuous-victim signal is driven by dark traits of narcissism and amoral Machiavellianism. Here we 1) report a direct replication of the key study (study five) reported by Ok et al. (2021); 2) test robustness of the strategic manipulation model of victim signalling to different outcome measures, and 3) test association with sadism or taking pleasure in or causing pain to others, which has been proposed as a fourth dark trait extending the dark triad to a "dark tedrad".

Testifying to the cooperative nature of human moral foundations (Atari et al., 2023) recent studies indicate that those perceived as victims are "hyper-moralised" – that is, not only do they receive aid, they are seen as deserving of aid, while those accused of causing harm are seen as legitimate targets for punishment. For instance across 17 studies Jordan and Kouchaki (2021) found robust evidence for what they term the "Virtuous Victim" effect. They showed that, independent of objective evidence of morality, victims are perceived as being *more* moral than nonvictims. This hyper-moralization effect is suggested to release resources to the victim and legitimize punishment of the victimizer. To state this another way, observers will provide resources to those they

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perceive as having been treated unjustly yet who are also morally upstanding. This characteristic of moral cooperators can be exploited. The combination of victim status with virtue signals offers up positive outcomes ranging from support and special consideration, to redress of purported losses (Campbell & Manning, 2018; Choi et al., 2010), or benefits directed to one's social group (Taylor & McKirnan, 1984). Along with claims for compensation from nonvictims, work by Gray and Wegner (2011) shows that those perceived as victims are immunized against claims on their own moral transgressions, which enables victim signalers to engage in illegitimate transfer of resources to themselves or to their social group with relative impunity. These forces lead to what has been described as to "*competitive victimhood*" (Noor et al., 2012). Concordant with rewards on offer for presenting as a victim, the view of oneself as victim can arise in the absence of traumatic and intense victimization (Gabay et al., 2020; Klar et al., 2013). This latter research showing that presenting as a victim often occurs in the absence of objective victimization highlights the potential of individual differences at play that could help to explain why some people want to be a victim and others do not. Such individual differences will, we discuss below primarily revolve around dark triad traits.

Ok et al. (2021) posit that the combination of victim signals with "*symbolic demonstrations that can lead observers to make favorable inferences about the signaler's moral character*" (Ok et al., 2021, p. 1635) – i.e., virtue signals motivate others in a moral community to offer redress in the form of aid to the ostensible victim, and punishment of those held responsible. Ok et al. (2021) validated their conjecture that virtuous victim signallers do, in fact, elicit better treatment. In a series of vignette and other studies they found that signals of virtue in conjunction with victim signals are associated with better treatment and resource transfer to the victim-signaller. For instance in study 1, Ok et al. (2021) found that help offered to people described in vignettes varied with victim status (for instance a gunshot victim) and virtue status (e.g., located at a school versus a strip club), with the virtuous-victim combination eliciting the predicted maximal positive helping response. Similarly, Jordan and Kouchaki (2021) found that victim signals increase perceptions not only of victimhood, but of virtue. These empirical results across multiple research groups align with theoretical support for the rewards of virtuous-victimhood, which are great enough to create "competitive victimhood" spirals as individuals compete to have the most victimhood and thus be prioritized for wealth redistribution to them (Noor et al., 2012). The evolutionary psychology of support for redistribution also makes clear predictions regarding non-reciprocated aid from nonvictims to victims. These models show that resource transfer is processed in terms of a "three player game", with evolved motives directed to the less well off than oneself, and those better-off than oneself. In particular, the less well off (which would include victims) evoke compassion (Lin & Bates, 2021; Sznycer et al., 2017), while unequal distribution evokes an evolved egalitarian motive (Atari et al., 2023; Black, 2011) motivating redistribution toward the less well-off (Lin & Bates, 2024).

Based on this evidence that traits which increased rates of virtuous-victimhood signalling would enable the individuals holding these traits to prosper by releasing resources from others and recruiting non-victims to punish the signaller's competitors, Ok et al. (2021) hypothesised that virtuous victim signals may function as a tool for social influence and that they are primarily emitted by individuals with a manipulative orientation. Ok et al. (2021) suggest further that by amplifying communication, social media may also boost benefits of virtuous victim signalling, allowing group activism to extract more resources (e.g., Mackey, 2014). Concrete examples of victim signals include adorning statements of need with claims of being mistreated by a partner, disclosing having a parent with an addiction, discussing how one's needs are not being heard by political leaders, expressing that "people like me" are underrepresented in the media etc. Examples of virtue signals include telling people you volunteer at a charity to raise funds for the mentally disabled youth in the community and wearing lapel-badges and bracelets identifying one as a supporter of fashionable causes. Resource transfer from non-victims would include money, transportation, offers of accommodation, as well as forgiveness for transgressions.

1.1. The role of communal narcissism and amoral Machiavellianism

Importantly Ok et al. (2021) also found that virtuous victim signals were not isolated behaviors, but were associated with other indicators of anti-social behavior such as cheating. This latter finding is consistent with the view that virtuous victim signalling is itself a manifestation of traits which are more generally associated with dark behavior, which they go on to test. Having predicted that the combination of victim + virtue signals is maximally effective at extracting resources from compassionate and egalitarian others, Ok et al. (2021) hypothesised that this lure of positive consequences will have the paradoxical effect that virtuous victimhood signalling may be most common among non-victims high on traits underlying grandiosity and manipulation in the service of self-interest. They theorised that key motives supporting this strategy are 1) a motive to assert oneself as more valuable than others and 2) lack of moral constraint in manipulating others to achieve goals. This lead them to predict that virtuous victim signals will be positively associated with the socially aversive traits of narcissism – egocentric behavior, and (sub-clinical) grandiose admiration for oneself – and Machiavellianism – reflected in manipulation of others for gain accompanied by cynical views of others (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Considerable research has validated both narcissism and Machiavellianism as associated with attacks on systems, individuals and social norms from cheating and lying, to bullying and violence (e.g., Muris et al., 2017).

Narcissism is a broad concept involving a core motive to assert one's self-worth over that of others accompanied by a perception of the self which is inflated and unrealistic which may manifest diversly, from agentic to vulnerable forms (Miller et al., 2017). The expression of narcissism has also been modelled in two distinct realms: disagreeable, high-agentic perceptions of the self as superior e.g., "*I am the most intelligent person*", and more agreeable, communal-oriented expressions, portraying the self as supremely valuable to others, e.g., "*I am the most helpful person*" (Gebauer et al., 2012). Ok et al. (2021) argue that communal expressions of narcissism drive virtuous victim signalling via motivating displays of high moral character – emphasising their superiority to others in the communal domain (Gebauer et al., 2012).

Ok et al. (2021) used a range of measures of Machiavellianism including the Dirty Dozen (Study 2b), and the Short Dark Triad (Study 3). These scales, however, overlap with psychopathy more than is desirable, and do not distinguish sub-structure of the trait (Miller et al., 2019). In their fifth study, therefore, they utilised a multidimensional measure of Machiavellianism created by Dahling et al. (2008). This has subscales tapping (a) amoral manipulation, (b) controlling others, (c) status seeking, and (d) distrust of others. Just as Ok et al. (2021) predicted communal narcissism would out-predict general narcissism, they predicted that because amoral manipulation measures valuing behaviors based on how they benefit the self, irrespective of moral standards or expense to others (Dahling et al., 2008), that this amoral subscale would be the strongest predictor of virtuous victim signalling. This was supported, with a beta of 0.19 ($p < 0.05$) for amoral manipulation and non-significant incremental effects of the other three dimensions.

Effects of Machiavellianism and narcissism take place alongside potentially confounding traits such as confabulation and actual victim status which may also influence perceived victimization, and, Ok et al. (2021) rule these out as confounds. They therefore control for income, socioeconomic status, mental and physical disability, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. They also controlled for internalized moral identity using the internalization dimension of the Aquino and Reed (2002) moral identity scale, assessing the extent to which the subject would, for example, be ashamed to lack virtuous character traits. Finally, to rule out the possibility that confabulations or exaggerations are the origin of

the victimhood reporting, Ok et al. (2021) controlled for Fantasy Proneness (Merckelbach et al., 2001), predicting, successfully, that Machiavellianism and Narcissism would persist as significant positive predictors of virtuous victim signalling despite controlling for confabulatory victimhood. Controlling for these variables, Ok et al. (2021) confirmed that virtuous victim signal scores were associated with anti-social behaviors such as purchasing counterfeit goods and (Study 4) actual cheating.

1.2. Extension to sadistic personality

We took the opportunity not only to replicate Ok et al. (2021) study 5, but to conduct exploratory research testing the utility of a fourth dark trait – sadism – which was not included in testing by Ok et al. (2021). In contemplating the strategic manipulation model of virtuous victim signal proposed by Ok et al. (2021), it occurred to us, though no academic supporting literature was found on which to base this speculation, that willingness to assert victimhood may be amplified by the motive of sadistic pleasure in the downfall of weakened opponents. Sadistic personality describes the tendency to assert power and dominance by cruelty – humiliation and/or physical, sexual, or psychological suffering on others (O'Meara et al., 2011). Subclinical sadism varies dimensionally (Paulhus & Jones, 2015), and a number of valid and reliable measures exist for use in normal populations, e.g. (Plouffe et al., 2017). We therefore explored whether sadism scores would account for incremental variance in virtuous victim signal.

All methods and hypotheses were pre-registered on AsPredicted.org as 'Ok replication Study 1' (#117642): https://aspredicted.org/ZQS_6KY.

2. Method

We report how we determined our sample size, all data exclusions (if any), all manipulations, and all measures in the study. Table 1 documents the identity of each of our scale choices with those of (Ok et al., 2021).

2.1. Sample size

To be informative, studies must be well powered, allowing for adequate failures of replication to lead to theory being treated as refuted. In the case of replication, informative levels of power are those which would lead a well-functioning scientific community to treat the true effect as likely zero, i.e., to accept the null hypothesis of no effect. We therefore aimed to recruit a sufficiently large sample such that a null result would be highly unlikely to be arise from sampling error around a true effect which the original authors would view as compatible with their theory being true. Based on the "small telescopes" logic developed by Simonsohn (2015), we recruited a sample 2.5 times the size of Ok et al. (2021). This the sample size, Simonsohn (2015) showed, which, when the true effect is zero, i.e., when a study is not replicable other than by chance, give a replication ≥80 % power to reject an "experimental null" hypothesis if the target study had only 33 % power to detect it, termed an effect of $d_{33\%}$. Subjects in the original study 5 were 300 US volunteers tested online. We therefore chose a sample size of 2.5 * 300 for an N of 750 to achieve $d_{33\%}$.

Table 1
Comparison of scales used by Ok et al. (2021) and in the present replication studies.

Measure	Ok et al. (2021) Study 5	Present study 1	Present study 2
Narcissism	CNS	same	same
Machiavellianism	MPS	same	same
Victim signal	VSS	same	TIV
Virtue measure	MIS	same	same
Control measures	Range	same	same
Sadism	NA	ASP	VAST
Sample	300 US adults from Amazon Mechanical Turk	750 UK adults from Prolific academic (Douglas et al., 2023)	750 UK adults from Prolific academic.

Note: *CNS* = Communal narcissism scale (Gebauer et al., 2012); *MPS* = Machiavellian Personality Scale (Dahling et al., 2008); *VSS* = Victim Signalling Scale Ok et al. (2021); *MIS* = Moral Identity Symbolization (Aquino & Reed, 2002); *TIV* = Tendency to Interpersonal Victimhood (Gabay et al., 2020); *ASP* = Assessment of Sadistic Personality (Plouffe et al., 2017); *VAST* = Varieties of Sadistic Tendencies (VAST: Paulhus & Jones, 2015).

2.2. Participants

Seven hundred and fifty UK respondents (374 Female, 372 Male, 4 Non-binary, mean age = 44, SD = 14) were recruited from Prolific academic (a high quality web service for recruiting paid participants: Douglas et al., 2023) for a study named "Personality and Life Experiences". All participants were aged over 18 years old. Ethnic composition was: Asian or British Asian 30; Black, Black British, Caribbean or African 15; Middle Eastern 1; Mixed 16; Other 2; White 686. Participation was voluntary and participants received a small monetary compensation. The present study was conducted in according to the principles expressed in the Declaration of Helsinki. All participants were fully informed about the study and provided informed consent to participate online documented in the form of an online button press.

2.3. Materials and procedure

Victim signalling was measured using the 10-item victim signalling scale (Ok et al., 2021). This scale was developed by Ok et al. (2021) from a pool of items asking respondents how often they presented information about victimhood, for instance "*Pointed out how I am not able to pursue my goals and dreams because of external factors*", and refined across three samples, Ok et al. (2021) to produce a reliable 10-item measure of victim signalling. An example item is [I have] "*Pointed out how I am not able to pursue my goals and dreams because of external factors*" assessed on a 1–5 scale from never to always. Omega-t (ω-t) reliability of victim signalling was 0.84.

Virtue-signalling was measured using the "moral identity symbolization" scale of the 10-item moral identity scale (Aquino & Reed, 2002). This is a well-validated scale measuring personal identification with virtue and public signalling of virtue, of which we used the public signalling of virtue scale. Participants are asked to imagine someone who embodies a list of nine morally positive characteristics (e.g., fair, compassionate, honest), and they would think, feel, and act. They then use a use a 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) to indicate their agreement to each of 10 items, five of which assess symbolization "*I often wear clothes that identify me as having these characteristics*" and five assess internalization ("*I strongly desire to have these characteristics*"). Reliability (ω-t) of the symbolization subscale was 0.86 and for identification was 0.83.

Machiavellianism was measured using the 16-item Machiavellian Personality Scale (MPS: Dahling et al., 2008). This consists of four subscales of (a) amoral manipulation, (b) controlling others, (c) status seeking, and (d) distrust of others. Participants responded the items using a 5-point scale from 1 (*does not describe me at all*) to 5 (*describes me to a great extent*). An example item for amoral manipulation is "*I believe that lying is necessary to maintain a competitive advantage over others*". Reliability (ω-t) was 0.89.

Narcissism was measured using the communal narcissism scale (Gebauer et al., 2012). This consists of 16 items such as "*I am the most caring person in my social surrounding.*" Participants respond to each on a 7-point scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Reliability (ω-t) of the symbolization subscale was 0.93.

Fantasy proneness was assessed using the 25 item Creative Experiences Questionnaire (CEQ: Merckelbach et al., 2001), a self-report

measure of fantasy proneness which uses a binary Yes/No answer format, scored as the sum of *yes* responses. An example item is: "*Sometimes I act as if I am somebody else and I completely identify myself with that role*". Reliability (ω-t) was 0.82.

Sadism was measured using the 9-item Assessment of Sadistic Personality (Plouffe et al., 2017). This uses a 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) response scale. An example item is "*I would not purposely hurt anybody, even if I didn't like them*" (R). Reliability (ω-t) of the scale was 0.86.

Demographics. Lastly, participants completed the same set of demographic questions as described in Ok Study 2b (see https://osf.io/uxsb5) namely age, sexual orientation, ever having had mental illness, physical illness, religion, relative income, and social class.

2.4. Procedure

Participants were tested online using a Qualtrics survey to which they were forwarded after accepting the study on Prolific.com. After providing informed consent, they completed the victim signalling and moral identity scales, followed by the remaining scales, and, finally, the demographics.

2.5. Results

Descriptive statistics and correlations among the main variables are shown in Table 2. Machiavellianism and narcissism were largely independent, and both showed positive zero-order correlations with virtue signal and victim signal measures. Based on the Ok et al. (2021) prediction that is it is the sum of victim– signalling and virtue-signalling that captures their manipulative value, the DV for testing their predictions was the sum score of standardized moral identity-symbolization and victim-signalling scores.

The empirical hypotheses were tested using multiple regression, with virtuous-victim score as the DV and IVs of demographic risk measure and confounder scales (age, sex, income, and SES, as well as physical and mental illness (coded as ever had = 1), sexual orientation (non-heterosexual coded as 1), fantasy proneness, and moral identity internalization) entered in an initial analysis, with a second regression adding Machiavellianism, communal narcissism and sadism to test for the predicted role of these traits. This regression was highly significant, accounting for 45 % of variance in virtue-victim signal frequency (see Table 3). As predicted, virtuous victim signalling was predicted by communal narcissism, (β = 0.35 [0.29, 0.41], $t = 11.19$, $p < 0.001$) and Machiavellianism (β = 0.08 [0.02, 0.14], $t = 2.68$, $p = 0.008$). Also replicating the findings of Ok et al. (2021), high scores on fantasy proneness were also associated with victim signalling (β = 0.2 [0.14, 0.26], $t = 6.42$, $p < 0.001$).

Follow-up analyses tested the four method factors of Machiavellianism to test replication of the specific role of amoral Machiavellianism over other manifestations. The hypothesis that the amoral subscale of Machiavellianism was particularly related to virtuous victim signal was not supported. Instead, each appeared to predict similar outcomes, with amoral Machiavellianism not being significant in an analysis contain the four Machiavellianism sub-scales ($\beta = 0.06$ [−0.01, 0.13], $t = 1.56$, $p = 0.119$). Instead, at this sub-scale level, the distrust sub-scale was significant ($\beta = 0.11$ [0.04, 0.18], $t = 2.96$, $p = 0.003$). The specific effect of the amoral subscale, then appears to be a false positive in Ok et al. (2021). Finally, our exploratory extension to sadism revealed no incremental validity (estimated at zero) when added to this regression (β = 0 [−0.06, 0.07], $t = 0.13$, $p = 0.9$).

Table 3
Hierarchical regression analyses predicting virtuous-victim signalling score, study 1.

Variable	Model 1		Model 2	
	β	SE	*β*	SE
(Intercept)	−0.15***	(0.04)	−0.17***	(0.04)
Age	−0.21***	(0.03)	−0.14***	(0.03)
Race	0.28*	(0.11)	0.15	(0.11)
Education	0.08*	(0.03)	0.10**	(0.03)
Sexual orientation	0.15	(0.10)	0.28**	(0.09)
Mental health	0.36***	(0.08)	0.39***	(0.07)
Physical health	0.15	(0.09)	0.19*	(0.08)
Religion	0.08*	(0.03)	0.06*	(0.03)
Social class	0.08*	(0.04)	0.03	(0.03)
Income	−0.07	(0.04)	−0.09**	(0.03)
Moral symbolism	0.18***	(0.03)	0.14***	(0.03)
Fantasy	0.31***	(0.03)	0.20***	(0.03)
Narcissism			0.35***	(0.03)
Machiavellianism			0.08*	(0.03)
Sadism			0.00	(0.03)
N	750		750	
R^2	0.34		0.45	

Continuous predictors are mean-centred and scaled to a standard deviation of 1.
*** $p < 0.001$.
** $p < 0.01$.
* $p < 0.05$.

2.6. Discussion

Study 1 replicated key pre-registered hypothesised predictions regarding virtuous victim signalling and its strong association with high scores on Machiavellianism and narcissism. We discuss firs the correlations in Table 2, followed by a discussion of the more focussed and consequential regression testing of the Ok et al. (2021) theory.

The moral symbolizing (virtue signalling) and moral internalization (actually valuing high moral foundations) of the Aquino and Reed (2002) measure were only modestly positively correlated, suggesting that much of virtue signalling is unrelated to valuing virtue. Compatible with Ok's theory, where moral symbolization predicted victim signalling, moral internalization did not. Also compatible with Ok's theory, at this level of zero-order correlations, Machiavellianism, Narcissism and Sadism all showed significant association with victim signalling. The sadism measure surprisingly correlated slightly negatively with Narcissism. We explore an alternative sadism measure in the next study.

The regression testing confirmed the Ok et al. (2021) model of virtuous victim signalling as a manifestation of Machiavellianism and Narcissism. Virtuous victim signallers were motivated to open the door to pursuit of gain by signalling themselves as virtuous victims, disregarding moral standards (Machiavellianism) while claiming moral

Table 2
Descriptive statistics and correlations (SE) among key variables in study 1.

	Mean (SD)	1	2	3	4	5
1 Victim Signalling	20.74 (6.23)					
2 Moral Symbol	18.74 (6.15)	0.20 (0.04)**				
3 Moral Internal	31.09 (3.86)	−0.01 (0.04) NS	0.34 (0.03)**			
4 Machiavellianism	29.14 (9.25)	0.28 (0.03)**	−0.01 (0.04) NS	−0.25 (0.03)**		
5 Narcissism	57.27 (15.72)	0.21 (0.03)**	0.54 (0.03)**	0.23 (0.03)**	0.12 (0.04) **	
6 Sadism	15.43 (4.25)	0.16 (0.04)**	−0.09 (0.04)**	−0.30 (0.03)**	0.45 (0.03)**	−0.05 (0.04)**

Note. $N = 750$. NS = $p > 0.05$.
** $p < 0.001$

superiority and value for themselves (communal narcissism). These associations held true after controlling for multiple demographic measures predicting actual victimhood. The results also survived control for fantasy-proneness, making it unlikely the victim signals emerged from confabulation, and thus increasing support for their strategic (as opposed to real or fantastic) nature. As seen in the table of correlations among the measures ().

The results support the conjecture that the combination of victimhood signalling together with virtue signalling is mostly driven by strategic motives, specifically Narcissism and Machiavellianism. The results support the validity of Aquino and Reed (2002) measure of public identification with positive moral characteristics, for instance via products and clothing that communicate having these characteristics, irrespective of whether the person in fact possesses, or even value, the characteristic. The results also constitute support for the reliability and utility of the virtuous-victim scale developed by Ok et al. (2021).

The results did not, however, support a unique role of amoral Machiavellianism in virtuous victim signalling. In addition, our speculation that sadism may play an incremental role in strategic virtuous victim signalling was disconfirmed. Given these positive results for the core prediction, we therefore conducted a second replication to test generalisability beyond the victim signalling scale developed by Ok et al. (2021), and modifying the measure of sadism to reliably refute our hypothesis that this might account for additional variance above narcissism and broad Machiavellianism.

3. Study 2

In study 2, we wished to test generalization across alternative implementations of victimhood, choosing the Tendency for Interpersonal Victimhood (TIV: Gabay et al., 2020). Moreover, as a range of measures of sadism have been developed (O'Meara et al., 2011; Paulhus & Jones, 2015), we wished to test if an alternate, longer measure – the 16-item Varieties of Sadistic Tendencies (VAST: Paulhus & Jones, 2015) might have predictive value.

3.1. New measure of victim signalling

Gabay et al. (2020) define a tendency for interpersonal victimhood (TIV) as explaining people who interpret the many imperfect and ambiguous situations of life as malevolent actions of which they are the innocent victim and generalise this to many of their relationships. They developed the 22-item TIV to measure this construct, based on four method factors within which victimhood is manifested: 1) *need for recognition* – the motive to be recognised and empathized with as a victim (Noor et al., 2012; Twali et al., 2020); 2) *moral-elitism* –superiority via perceiving oneself as morally immaculate and opponents as immoral (Leahy, 2012); 3) *lack of empathy* – reflected in diminution of others and their suffering, mirroring the victim signaller's preoccupation with their own suffering (Urlic et al., 2010); and 4) *rumination* – maintaining distress by attending to victimhood and strategizing retribution (Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2008). These should predict sensitivity to hurt, negative attributions about those offending the victim, and intense, long-lasting processing leading to lack of forgiveness, and a high desire for taking revenge, hurting the person or group that offended them. Across four studies, the TIV proved both structurally to follow this four-aspect structure, to be reliable (test-retest reliability of 0.77), and to have the predicted association with negative emotion, offense taking, victim-sensitivity (Schmitt et al., 2005), as well as a strong desire for revenge among other correlates such as enabling control over others (e.g. via accusations of them of unethical behavior), and entitled aggression (Zitek et al., 2010). If the virtuous-victim model is correct, the TIV implementation of victim signalling should have the same association with narcissism and sadism. Finally, we wished to test robustness of the narcissism link to inclusion of additional covariates. As self-esteem has been suggested as distinct (Hyatt et al., 2018), but often assumed intuitively to be similar to narcissism (Brummelman et al., 2016), we wished to test its effects as a control variable, to extend confidence to resilience to confounds. We therefore in Study 2 added and tested the effect of the Rosenberg Self-Esteem scale (RSE: Rosenberg, 1965).

We pre-registered this study, and it can be verified at AsPredicted 'Ok replication Study 2' (#117649) https://aspredicted.org/2BP_CR9

3.2. Methods

Participants A total of $N = 750$ UK subjects were recruited (mean age = 40.9 years, SD 13.34). Of these 373 were female, 367, Male, 5 Non-binary and 5 preferred not to say. Ethnic makeup was 652 White, Asian 36, Black 23, Mixed 25, South-Asian 6, Middle Eastern 2, Hispanic 1, Other 5. Participation was voluntary and subjects received a small compensation. The present study was conducted in according to the principles expressed in the Declaration of Helsinki. All participants were fully informed about the study and provided informed consent to participate online documented in the form of an online button press.

3.3. Measures

Virtue-signalling, ***Machiavellianism***, ***Narcissism***, and ***Fantasy Proneness*** were measured as in study 1, with the "moral identity symbolization" scale of the 10-item moral identity scale (Aquino & Reed, 2002), 16-item Machiavellian Personality Scale (MPS: Dahling et al., 2008) the 16-item communal narcissism scale (Gebauer et al., 2012), and the 25 item Creative Experiences Questionnaire (CEQ: Merckelbach et al., 2001) respectively. The demographic measures were also unchanged.

Victim signalling was changed from the victim signalling scale (Ok et al., 2021) to the TIV (Gabay et al., 2020), This 22-item scale assesses victim signalling across four subscales of need for recognition, moral elitism, lack of empathy, and rumination. An example items is "*It is important to me that people who hurt me acknowledge that an injustice has been done to me*" with participants responding on a 1–7 Likert scale from Strongly disagree to Strongly agree. Reliabilities (ω t) for the four scales were 0.87, 0.83, 0.86, 0.91 respectively. The scale was used as a total measure.

Sadism was measured using the 19-item Varieties of Sadistic Tendencies (VAST: Paulhus & Jones, 2015). This widely used scale uses a 5-point Likert response (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). An example item is "*In video games, I like the realistic blood spurts*" (R). Reliability (ω t) was 0.83.

Self-esteem was measured using the 10-item Rosenberg Self-Esteem scale (Rosenberg, 1965). An example item is "*On the whole, I am satisfied with myself*", rated on a 4-point scale ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree". Reliability (ω t) was 0.82.

3.4. Procedure

Participants gave informed consent, then completed the 10-item victim signalling scale and the moral identity scale first, followed by the remaining scales and, finally, the demographics.

3.5. Results

Table 4 displays the descriptive statistics and correlations among the main variables.

The hypotheses were tested in a multiple regression including the four dimensions of Machiavellianism, communal narcissism. Demographics (age, sex, income, and SES, as well as physical and mental illness (coded as ever had = 1), sexual orientation (all non-heterosexual coded as 1), fantasy proneness, and moral identity internalization were entered as control variables.

The hypotheses we tested for replication all succeeded. These were

Table 4
Descriptive statistics and correlations (SE) among key variables in study 2.

	Mean (SD)	1	2	3	4	5
1 TIV	93.95 (17.53)					
2 Moral Symbol	18.67 (5.73)	0.27 (0.03)				
3 Moral Internal	30.63 (4.02)	−0.02 (0.04)	0.21 (0.03)			
4 Mach	30.79 (10.52)	0.4 (0.03)	0.07 (0.04)	−0.27 (0.03)		
5 Narc	57.24 (15.48)	0.36 (0.03)	0.46 (0.03)	0.11 (0.04)	0.22 (0.03)	
6 VAST	28.64 (7.71)	0.14 (0.04)	−0.03 (0.04)	−0.36 (0.03)	0.51 (0.03)	0.07 (0.04)

tested in a multiple regression including the four dimensions of Machiavellianism, communal narcissism. Demographics of age, sex, and SES, as well as measured fantasy proneness, moral identity internalization were entered as control variables.

As predicted, virtuous victim signalling was predicted by communal narcissism and amoral Machiavellianism (See Table 5). This result is presented graphically in Fig. 1.

Further replicating the findings of Ok et al. (2021), high scores on fantasy proneness were associated with victim signalling. As in Study 1, and contrary to predictions based on Ok et al. (2021), the specific amoral component of Machiavellianism again did not show any specific role ($\beta = 0.07$ [−0.01, 0.15], $t = 1.67$, $p = 0.095$), with the results suggesting that if any subscale were to be used, the strongest of the four was distrust $\beta = 0.17$ [0.09, 0.25], $t = 4.2$, $p < 0.001$), further supporting general Machiavellianism as the source of the effect. Sadism was again estimated at near zero effect and non-significant statistically. Finally, contrary our exploratory hypothesis that controlling self-esteem might enhance the effects, this was not the case, and adding this variable left the model effects unchanged in any meaningful way.

3.6. Discussion

Study 2 provided a second independent source of evidence for virtuous victim signalling as a strategic manipulation for undertaken by amoral and manipulative individuals, willing to violate moral standards for self-gain, and, separately, prone to narcissistic establishment of their own moral superiority. Despite moving to a measure of victim signal developed independently of the original report, the effects of narcissism and Machiavellianism replicated with *larger* effect in this replication study. The positive associations again were robust to control for proposed confounders such as fantasy proneness. The results thus confirm virtuous victim signal as robustly driven by strategic manipulation, in turn linked to dark traits. The association was again demonstrated to be specific to narcissism and Machiavellianism, with a new measure of sadism again showing near zero effect.

Table 5
Hierarchical regression analyses predicting composite signalling score, parameter (and SE) for study 2.

	Model 1		Model 2	
(Intercept)	0.01*	(0.04)	−0.02**	(0.04)
Age	−0.19***	(0.04)	−0.05	(0.03)
Non-white race	0.04	(0.11)	−0.02	(0.10)
Education	−0.05	(0.04)	−0.01	(0.03)
Sexual orientation	−0.04	(0.11)	0.01	(0.10)
Mental health	−0.07	(0.09)	0.09	(0.08)
Physical health	0.03	(0.11)	0.00	(0.10)
Religiosity	0.15***	(0.04)	0.04	(0.03)
Class	0.01	(0.04)	−0.06	(0.04)
Income	0.02	(0.04)	0.01	(0.04)
Moral Symbolisation	0.11***	(0.03)	0.12***	(0.03)
Fantasy Proneness	0.27***	(0.04)	0.13***	(0.03)
Narcissism			0.41***	(0.03)
Machiavellianism			0.22***	(0.04)
VAST sad			−0.06	(0.04)
N	750		750	
R^2	0.17		0.35	

Continuous variables are mean-centred and scaled by 1 standard deviation. Both models significant at $p < 0.001$.
*** $p < 0.001$.
** $p < 0.01$.
* $p < 0.05$.

4. Study 3

Given the null results for sadism as a predictor of claiming victimhood, we wished to test if this dark trait plays any role in behaviors enabled by claims of victim status, such as exploiting the strategic opportunity to coerce and inflict harm on others enabled by the social legitimization of victims punishing individuals or groups accused of victimization. We speculated that, because victim groups are empowered to seek retribution against alleged oppressors (Sullivan et al., 2012) that sadism, because it motivates opportunistically harming innocent others, may play a role in this "*competitive victimhood*" *complex*. If individuals high on Machiavellian and narcissism exploit the egalitarian resource-release response to victim-claims, we speculated that sadism may exploit this resource-capture opportunity to victimize the accused (whether rightly or wrongly), knowing that nonvictims will react to the victim's signals by morally licensing attacks on those accused of being the victimizers (Jordan & Kouchaki, 2021). We speculated, therefore, that sadism would predict victimizing the accused.

Victimization has been studied extensively (Aquino & Thau, 2009), and the phenomena of Witch-hunts and other attacks on vulnerable-accused have been studied, however, at the time of running these studies we found no scale designed to assess exploiting individuals and groups accused of harm, taking pleasure in this opportunity to attack potentially resource rich or vulnerable others. Individuals high on this proposed victimizing behavior measure would be expected to opportunistically inflict harm on people rendered vulnerable by a loss of social support, for instance after accusations of misbehaviour whether well founded or not. The victimizing of people rendered vulnerable will create opportunities to exploit their resources, rewarding the sadistic individual.

While the concept may be related to scapegoating – inordinate blaming of targeted individuals or groups for a negative outcome (Rothschild et al., 2012) – scales developed to date focus on claims of being scapegoated e.g., "*I have been blamed for things that are not my fault*". Validating a scale directed toward victimizing, reports available since running our study (Furian & March, 2023; Marrington et al., 2023) suggest that provocative and distressing online behavior ("trolling") conducted for amusement is linked to psychopathy and "negative social potency" (experiencing antisocial interpersonal interactions as rewarding). To assess a range of types of enjoyment and behavior hurting those made vulnerable by accusation of victimizing others, we created a new scale. We predicted that sadism would predict frequency of pleasure-motivated attack behavior directed at individuals or groups accused of victimizing.

4.1. Methods

Participants were all 442 study 2 participants who could be contacted and volunteered to take part. Mean age was 43.39 (SD 13.12), Female ($n = 206$), Male ($n = 231$), other = 5. Ethnicity was: Asian 22; Black, 11;

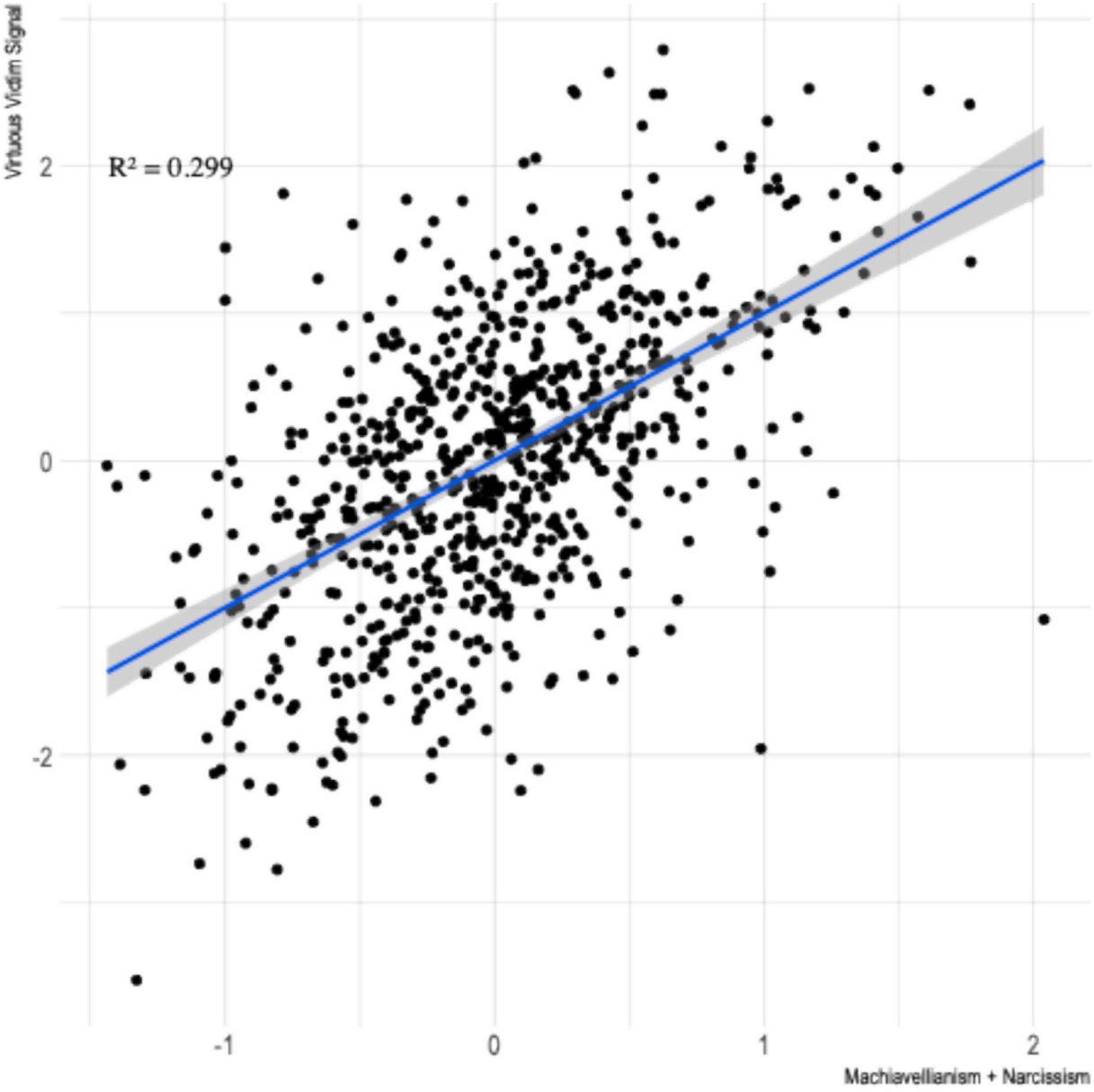

Fig. 1. Prediction of virtuous-victim scores by narcissism and Machiavellianism (Study 2).

Hispanic 1; Middle Eastern 1; Mixed 19; Other 2; South-Asian 1. White 385. Participation was voluntary and participants received a small compensation. The present study was conducted in according to the principles expressed in the Declaration of Helsinki. All participants were fully informed about the study and provided informed consent to participate online documented in the form of an online button press.

4.2. Measures

The items of the victimizer scale developed here are shown in Table 6. These were developed to be appropriate for general use, and to assess enjoyment and pleasure in various forms of cancelling, complaint etc. independent of actual wrongdoing by victims. A pool of items was generated based by the lead author based on newspaper reporting, social media such as twitter (now X) of "witch hunting" and a literature search of historical acts associated with historical witch hunts. Example items include I "*Enjoyed helping cancel someone (get them shunned by their community or social group due to perceived wrongdoings, whether real or fabricated)*". The resulting 18-item victimizer scale was presented with options "Never", "Rarely", "Sometimes", "Often", "Always", matching those used in the Ok et al. (2021) Victim Signal scale.

4.3. Procedure

Testing took place online as in study 1 and 2. All participants first provided consent. Items were preceded by an introductory statement that "*Below are some things that you might say or do when you interact with other people. Think about all of your interactions with people around you, and please evaluate how often you have expressed yourself, acted or communicated in the ways described below in any given week. There are no right or wrong answers, so please be as honest as you can.*". This was followed by the items of the scale.

4.4. Results

Loadings of each item of the victimizer scale on a one-factor model are shown in Table 6. Confirming the nature of the scale, the two strongest loading items were "*Enjoyed helping cancel someone (get them*

Table 6
Items of the victimizer scale, ordered by loading on a one-factor model.

Item #	Loading	Item text
12	0.75	Piled on to someone accused of being disrespectful at work or online.
11	0.75	Publicly shamed, condemned or ridiculed someone who is threatened with being "cancelled".
13	0.75	Joined in on the persecution and condemnation of an individual or group accused of victimizing others.
15	0.74	Enjoyed helping cancel someone (get them shunned by their community or social group due to perceived wrongdoings, whether real or fabricated)
14	0.71	Joined in accusing people of improper behavior and seeking to have them punished.
8	0.69	Shaming or publicly embarrassing or mocking someone (on social media or in person).
5	0.69	Sought to hurt the reputation of someone accused by others of victimizing.
7	0.63	Sought to punish someone who made a mistake or error of judgement.
9	0.62	Derived pleasure from the suffering of celebrities, colleagues being condemned of victimizing others.
16	0.62	Joined in scapegoating or blaming a perceived problem or threat on a specific person or group of people.
1	0.49	Spoken about how bad some person is who has been accused of victimizing someone.
18	0.47	Enjoyed the persecution of people and groups accused of victimizing others, e.g. #metoo #BLM.
2	0.45	Spoke about those accused of victimizing others should be criminalized by society.
6	0.42	Called out transgressions by others.
4	0.39	Explained that people must not tolerate those accused of behaving badly.
17	0.38	Found accusations of poor behavior of celebrities entertaining.
3	0.37	Shared how I feel uncomfortable about a famous person due to their comments.
10	0.29	Offered someone forgiveness or a way back when they make amends for hurting others. (R)

shunned by their community or social group due to perceived wrongdoings, whether real or fabricated)" and "*Joined in on the persecution and condemnation of an individual or group accused of victimizing others*." For purposes of analysis, the scale was scored as the sum of responses to all items.

We next tested our prediction that sadism would incrementally predict reporting engaging in attacks on accused persecutors using the victimizer scale. We used regressions closely modelled on those used in study 1 and 2, i.e., controlling for demographic risks, fantasy proneness, as well as narcissism and Machiavellianism, to test the unique effect of sadism.

As can be seen in Table 7, Sadism and Machiavellianism significantly predicted victimizer behavior with effects that were both statistically and substantively significant (see also Fig. 2).

In follow-up analyses, aimed at refining the victimizer scale, a parallel analysis of the items was conducted. This suggested two factors, with some items defining a more moralistic willingness to punish rather than a pleasure. Repeating the analyses with factor scores on the first factor of the scale, however, yielded effect estimates very close to those with the sum-score scale.

4.5. Discussion

Whereas studies 1 and 2 found no effect of sadism as a predictor of claiming victimhood, study 3 demonstrated that dark sadism is associated with victimizing. Sadism was associated as predicted with self-reports of higher rates of inflicting harm on individuals and groups accused of victimization. This supported the suggestion that sadism may be adapted to exploit strategic opportunities, specifically the legitimization of punishing and inflicting harm on individuals or groups which is created by successful virtuous victim signalling. If individuals high on

Table 7
Study 3 predicting victimizer behavior from sadism and Machiavellianism.

	Model 1		Model 2	
(Intercept)	−0.07**	(0.06)	−0.06	(0.05)
Age	0.01	(0.05)	0.04	(0.05)
race1	0.09	(0.14)	0.08	(0.13)
education	0.08	(0.04)	0.09*	(0.04)
orientation1	0.04	(0.14)	0.07	(0.14)
mental1	0.13	(0.11)	0.11	(0.11)
physical1	0.17	(0.14)	0.14	(0.13)
religiosity	0.05	(0.05)	0.07	(0.05)
class	−0.03	(0.05)	−0.03	(0.05)
income	0.12*	(0.05)	0.10	(0.05)
Moral Internal	−0.02	(0.05)	0.03	(0.05)
Fantasy proneness	0.11*	(0.05)	0.10*	(0.05)
Narcissism	0.01	(0.05)	0.01	(0.05)
Machiavellianism	0.40***	(0.05)	0.30***	(0.05)
VAST Sadism			0.22***	(0.05)
N	442		442	
R2	0.23		0.26	

All continuous predictors are mean-centred and scaled by 1 standard deviation.
*** $p < 0.001$.
** $p < 0.01$.
* $p < 0.05$.

Machiavellianism and narcissism exploit the resource-release response of nonvictims, sadism appears, as predicted, to exploit the opportunity created by victims in the form of the moral license granted by nonvictims, legitimizing attacks on the victimizer by removing moral protection from those accused (Jordan & Kouchaki, 2021). Further work could examine this finding, perhaps using alternative constructs of victimization (Aquino & Thau, 2009), and scapegoating (Rothschild et al., 2012) or novel scales (e.g., Furian & March, 2023; Marrington et al., 2023).

5. General discussion

Studies 1 and 2 replicated key pre-registered predictions regarding virtuous victim signalling. The Ok et al. (2021) victim-signalling scale was validated as a reliable measure, and the TIV (Gabay et al., 2020) was shown to have similar and perhaps improved properties. High rates of virtuous victim signal (i.e., the sum of virtue and victim signalling) emerged as strongly predicted by narcissism and Machiavellianism. This predicted pattern of associated dark traits supported the strategic manipulation explanation of virtuous victim signal as exploiting ambiguities in the behavior of others to claim victim status while also advertising signals of virtue, motivated by Machiavellian disregard of moral standards and by narcissistic moral superiority. Supporting specificity of the dark traits enabling this strategy, narcissism and Machiavellianism were independent contributors to strategic manipulative victim signalling, while sadism was not associated with virtuous victim signal. Sadism, proposed as a fourth dark trait (O'Meara et al., 2011), did not increase virtuous-victim signalling, but instead significantly increased associated with victimizing behavior as did Machiavellianism (study 3).

For the longest time, those suggesting morality could evolve were faced with the seemingly insurmountable problem that altruistic organisms would be exploited by recipients of aid who fail to provide benefit in return to the altruists (Hamilton, 1964). Researchers were able to find, however, mechanisms by which apparently altruistic behavior could evolve (Trivers, 1971). While selection for motives such as compassion and egalitarian fairness which resource release to those appearing in need (Atari et al., 2023; Lin & Bates, 2021; Sznycer et al., 2017) are now well accepted, the attack surface of such moral organisms –the original problem identified in sustaining moral, cooperative, and altruistic behaviors – remains a valid threat. The present data suggest that Dark tetrad traits may be adapted precisely to exploit moral motives such as compassion and equal-shares fairness. In a compassionate

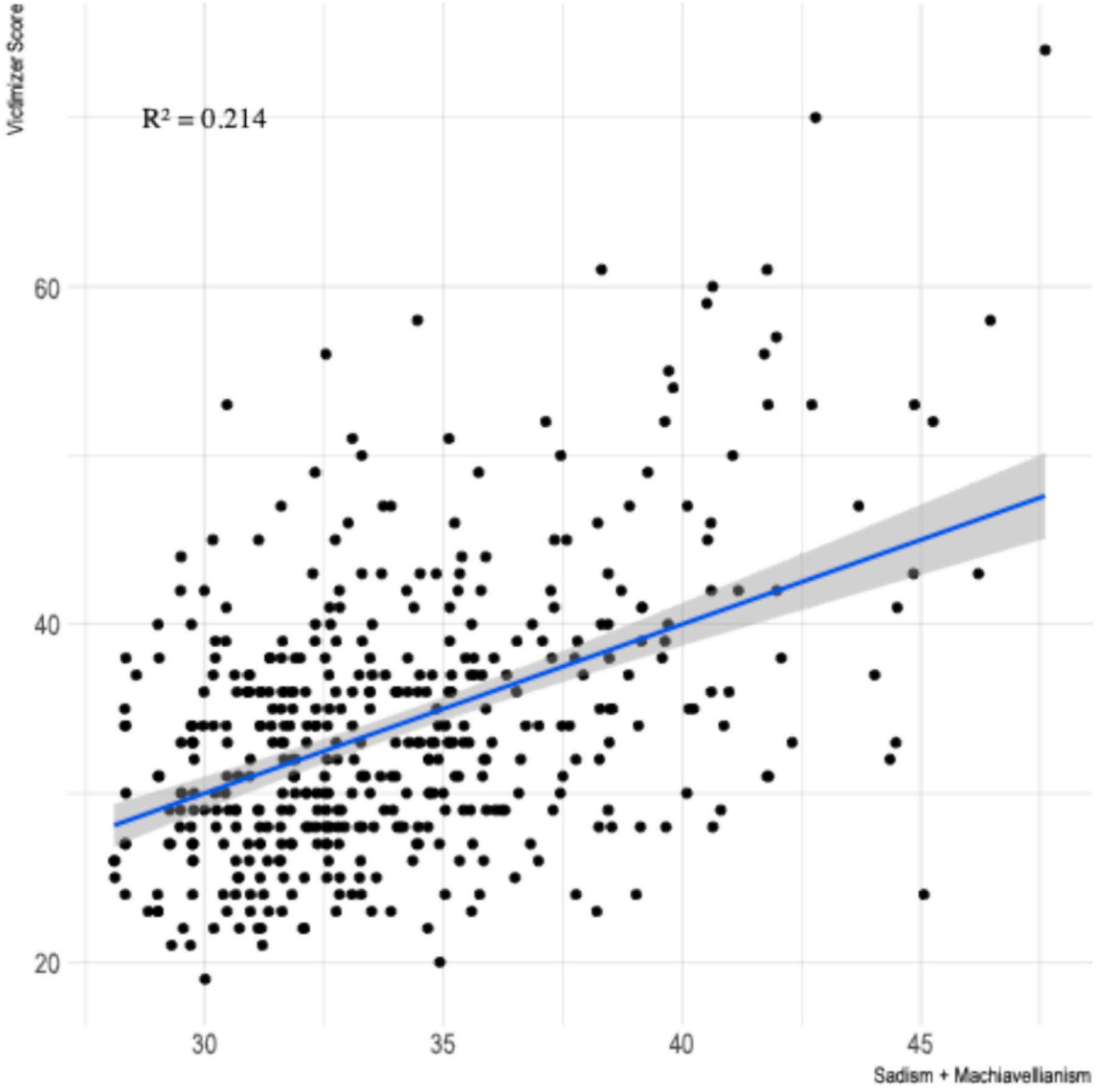

Fig. 2. Prediction of victimizer scale scores by sadism and Machiavellianism (Study 3).

community, false signals of injustice, if not scrutinized and punished, and, especially, if associated with signals of virtue, will activate valuable resource transfers to the individuals or coalitions posing as virtuous victims. Signals of virtue increase the willingness of others to engage in non-reciprocated transfers to victims (Ok et al., 2021), and claiming injury increases perceived virtue (Jordan & Kouchaki, 2021). Study 3 further suggests that sadism exploits the opportunity to harm (transfer resources from) those who may be better off but who are falsely targeted for harm-claims. We conjecture that the dark traits may be adaptations to exploit altruism(s) by triggering resource release via virtuous victim signals and resource capture via opportunistic victimizing of accused individuals and groups licensed for un-punished attacks.

The effect sizes of the predictors in accounting for virtuous-victim signal, and for victimizing suggest that the findings are not obscure or merely statistically reliable, but rather may apply in many cases of those making public claims of virtuous victimhood and demands for recompense. These substantial effect sizes suggest that this strategic manipulation may be more common than is widely known (Campbell & Manning, 2018).

5.1. *Limitations and future directions*

Strengths of the studies include the use of validated reliable scales, and use of alternate instruments to demonstrate independence from specific instruments. Results are subject to general limitations of self-report and limits on how reliably participants can report on how they feel about victimization. Subjects were recruited in the UK, providing a useful generalization from the US participants used by Ok et al. (2021). Three factors lend the conclusions strong support: 1) The predictions were pre-registered, 2) The samples were large; 3) The effect replicated despite a change in the virtuous victim signal measure (study 2). The larger effects with this new measure give confidence that the effect does not rely on any quirk of the original victim scale and instead is robust. A fourth source of confidence in the result, the associations held controlling for multiple pre-registered confounders including fantasy proneness and proxies for actual victimization, making it unlikely the effects emerged via confabulation, or confounding, increasing support for the strategic nature of the behavior. One prediction did not replicate: rather than being restricted to the amoral Machiavellianism subscale, the association of virtuous victim signals with was found most strongly at the level of total Machiavellianism. This deserves further study.

The finding that virtuous victim signalling functions as a social

influence tactic linked to dark traits of narcissism Machiavellianism may be extended in future to additional behaviors. Promoting awareness of this strategy might usefully alert otherwise-unknowing nonvictims to be more cautious and alert in their responses to virtuous victim signals, reducing the rewards offered (Ok et al., 2021 studies 1–3) and thus reducing the virtuous-spiral (no pun intended) of competitive victimhood linked to this strategy (Noor et al., 2012). It is likely this is especially relevant in social media activism which can be exploiting by people high on narcissism and Machiavellianism competing for victim status (Graso et al., 2020). A reviewer suggested that the causal direction may be reversed, with virtue signalling raising narcissism. While there is no theoretical expectation for this, it could be tested in future studies. Finally, the victimizing scale developed here warrants further research. In particular, Chen et al. (2022) have theorised what they term a "*vigilante identity*" a trait adapted to detect norm violations, and, when it is detected that organizational justice is perceived to fail – creating an situation where others feel justice has not been served, react under cover of the "vigilante" role to punish the accused. Research distinguishing potentially legitimate third-party punishment motives from exploitative attack motives would be valuable to test if victimisers are distinct from "legitimate" (non-exploitative) vigilantes or if these are a single trait.

6. Conclusion

The idea that virtuous victim signalling is a strategic behavior manipulating moral agents to achieve resource transfer was tested and supported. Results were robust across both a direct replication and a test of robustness to alternative measures of tendency to victim signal. The effect sizes are substantial, suggesting that much of observed proclivity to victim signal likely is driven by narcissism and Machiavellianism. Evidence that the strategy is effective, and that the effect is robust to actual moral status and victimization implies that significant aid is being directed to narcissists who are not victims rather than to those legitimately deserving of aid. Sadism apparently extends this exploitation beyond exploiting those triggered to offering resource release, into a license to attack the accused.

Ethical statement

All subjects were aged over 18 years old. Participation was voluntary and subjects received a small compensation. The Ethics Committee of the department of psychology of the University of Edinburgh approved the implementation of the present study. The present study was conducted in according to the principles expressed in the Declaration of Helsinki. All participants were fully informed about the study and provided informed consent to participate online documented in the form of an online button press.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Timothy C. Bates: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Supervision, Software, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation. **Ciara Grant:** Investigation. **Leila Hobbs:** Investigation. **Claire Johnston:** Investigation. **Shahrzad Moghaddam:** Investigation. **Kate Sinclair:** Investigation.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

I have shared the link to my data and code in the paper.

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