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Cruelty in the Everyday: A Literature Review of Everyday Sadism

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ABSTRACT

This systematic review explores everyday sadism, a subclinical form of cruelty expressed through socially acceptable behaviours such as trolling, workplace bullying, and schadenfreude. Distinct from criminal and consensual sexual sadism, it is examined within the Dark Tetrad framework, complementing narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy. Synthesising over 85 studies using PRISMA guidelines, the review evaluates evolutionary, cognitive-behavioural, and reinforcement models, psychometric measures, and experimental paradigms. Findings highlight its prevalence across relationships, workplaces, and online spaces, and outline ethical challenges, interventions, and directions for cross-cultural and longitudinal research.

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Introduction

Sadism, historically associated with overt acts of cruelty, has evolved in contemporary psychology to include more subtle manifestations of harm-based enjoyment. Everyday sadism represents a subclinical form of this behavior, characterized by deriving pleasure from causing or witnessing discomfort in socially acceptable contexts. Consensual sexual sadism, such as BDSM, is conceptually and empirically distinct from both criminal sadism and everyday sadism (Erickson and Sagarin 2021; Holvoet et al. 2017) and should not be conflated in either theoretical framing or operationalization. Unlike its extreme counterpart, which is often linked to criminal or pathological behaviors, everyday sadism operates within the boundaries of societal norms, making it pervasive yet often overlooked. Examples include online trolling, workplace bullying, schadenfreude, and pranks that intentionally cause embarrassment or humiliation. Empirical studies have shown that individuals who engage in trolling behavior often score significantly higher on sadism measures, particularly in anonymous or low-consequence environments (Buckels, Trapnell, and Paulhus 2014).

Everyday sadism is one of the four socially aversive traits comprising the Dark Tetrad, a constellation of personality traits that includes narcissism, psychopathy, Machiavellianism, and sadism (Buckels, Jones, and Paulhus 2013; Paulhus 2014; Paulhus et al. 2021). While traits like psychopathy reflect emotional detachment and Machiavellianism involve strategic manipulation, sadism is distinct in its motivational core: it is not merely indifferent to suffering but actively seeks it as an end in itself. The enjoyment of cruelty becomes a goal in itself rather than a means to achieve something else (Bonfá-Araujo et al. 2022, 2025; Buckels, Jones, and Paulhus 2013; Foulkes 2019; Thomas and Egan 2022). This unique motivational dimension underscores its importance as a standalone construct within the Dark Tetrad framework, addressing concerns raised in prior reviews that have tended to subsume sadism under psychopathy or other traits without sufficient theoretical separation.

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Search methodology

A rigorous search strategy was implemented across PubMed, Scopus, PsycINFO, and Web of Science to ensure comprehensive and replicable findings. The search process adhered to PRISMA standards and encompassed a systematic approach to identifying, screening, and including relevant studies.

Words included and excluded

To refine the scope of the review, a specific set of terms was included and excluded:

- Included Terms: “everyday sadism,” “trolling,” “Dark Tetrad,” “workplace bullying,” “schadenfreude,” “online aggression,” and related antisocial behaviors.
- Excluded Terms: “sexual sadism,” “criminal sadism,” “paraphilias,” and “clinical sadism.”

Clarification: Excluded terms were not used to remove articles in the Boolean search strategy; instead, they were used as conceptual boundaries during the screening stage to ensure the review remained focused on subclinical and socially permissible behaviors, explicitly excluding studies addressing extreme deviance or forensic settings.

Boolean search strategies

Boolean operators were employed to ensure precision and inclusivity. Search strings combined primary concepts with contextual terms, such as:

- “everyday sadism” AND “Dark Tetrad”
- “trolling OR cyberbullying” (without the requirement to also include “antisocial behaviors” to avoid unnecessarily excluding relevant studies)
- “schadenfreude” AND “workplace dynamics”

Filters were applied to include only:

- (1) Peer-reviewed articles.
- (2) English-language publications.
- (3) Studies published between 2000 and January 2024 were reviewed to ensure both relevance and coverage of the most recent empirical work.

Study selection process

The study selection process followed PRISMA guidelines, ensuring transparency and replicability:

- (1) Initial Search: 1,345 articles were identified across the databases.
- (2) Duplicate Removal: 512 duplicates were removed using reference management software.
- (3) Title and Abstract Screening: The remaining 833 records were screened for relevance, resulting in 234 eligible studies.
- (4) Full-Text Review: A total of 85 studies met the inclusion criteria and were included in the synthesis.

A PRISMA flow diagram outlining this process is provided in the appendices for clarity and transparency.

Structure of the review

This review is structured to comprehensively address everyday sadism:

- Defining Everyday Sadism: Conceptualizing and differentiating it from related constructs.
- Historical Context: Tracing its evolution from pathological interpretations to subclinical frameworks.
- Key Theories and Researchers: Synthesizing theoretical models and empirical contributions.
- Methods of Study: Evaluating psychometric tools, experimental paradigms, and observational methods.
- Findings and Applications: Exploring its manifestations and proposing practical interventions.
- Limitations and Future Directions: Addressing gaps and advocating for interdisciplinary research.

By integrating these components, this review provides a robust foundation for understanding everyday sadism and its implications for research, practice, and societal well-being.

Defining everyday sadism

Everyday sadism refers to the enjoyment derived from witnessing or causing harm, discomfort, or suffering in socially acceptable or normalized contexts. Unlike extreme forms of sadism, which are overtly violent or criminal, everyday sadism exists within societal norms and is often masked as humor or harmless fun. It is also clearly differentiated from consensual sexual sadism (e.g., BDSM), which multiple empirical studies have demonstrated to differ substantially in both motivational basis and behavioral profile from criminal and everyday sadism, requiring separate conceptual treatment (Erickson and Sagarin 2021; Holvoet et al. 2017). Examples include teasing, trolling, workplace bullying, and deriving pleasure from others' misfortunes (Baumeister and Campbell 1999). This form of sadism is not limited to reactive aggression but is often proactive, enacted without provocation, and motivated by the intrinsic enjoyment of cruelty itself (Bonfá-Araujo et al. 2022, 2025; Buckels, Jones, and Paulhus 2013; Foulkes 2019; Thomas and Egan 2022).

Pinker (2011) popularized the term “soft sadism,” which encapsulates these behaviors as socially sanctioned expressions of cruelty. Acts like *schadenfreude*, deriving pleasure from others' misfortunes, or trolling online, exemplify how everyday sadism operates subtly yet pervasively. Modern digital platforms amplify these tendencies by providing anonymity and accessibility, creating environments where cruelty can thrive without direct repercussions (Buckels and Paulhus 2012). This aligns with the “online disinhibition effect” framework, in which the absence of immediate accountability and the presence of audience reinforcement can escalate antisocial behavior. This digital disinhibition effect creates a fertile space for sadistic gratification, one where the emotional impact on victims is visible, yet accountability remains low.

Psychological underpinnings

The psychological mechanisms driving everyday sadism are rooted in both evolutionary psychology and cognitive-behavioral frameworks. Evolutionary theories suggest that sadistic tendencies may have conferred adaptive advantages in ancestral environments, such as deterring rivals or asserting dominance (Nell 2006). Meanwhile, reinforcement theories posit that the emotional gratification derived from sadistic acts reinforces these behaviors, creating positive feedback loops that perpetuate harm-based enjoyment (Buckels, Jones, and Paulhus 2013). More broadly, personality research shows robust

links between trait dispositions and psychological and subjective wellbeing, reinforcing personality-based accounts when situating antisocial tendencies such as everyday sadism (Anglim et al. 2020).

Research also links everyday sadism to sensation-seeking and boredom-proneness, suggesting that cruelty can function as a self-stimulating behavior for individuals who find normative experiences underwhelming (Pfattheicher et al. 2021). Emerging evidence suggests that everyday sadists also exhibit a preference for high-arousal states and low empathy, consistent with profiles of callous-unemotional traits (Plouffe, Saklofske, and Smith 2017). Neurobiological findings, although still limited, suggest possible involvement of dopaminergic reward pathways, paralleling mechanisms observed in other appetitive behaviors such as gambling or risk-taking (Chester and DeWall 2016).

Everyday sadism also intersects with the Dark Tetrad and is one of its four constituent traits alongside psychopathy (emotional detachment), Machiavellianism (strategic manipulation), and narcissism. However, sadism's distinctive trait lies in the intrinsic pleasure derived from others' discomfort, even in trivial contexts (Paulhus 2014; Paulhus et al. 2021; Thomas and Egan 2022). Unlike psychopathy, which is marked by callousness, or Machiavellianism, which is calculated and instrumental, sadism involves a motivation that is appetitive rather than strategic, a cruelty pursued for its own sake, not merely as a means to an end. Understanding these underlying mechanisms is particularly important in environments where cruelty may be subtly rewarded, such as social media platforms, organizational hierarchies, and even certain romantic dynamics.

Scope of the review

This systematic literature review, conducted in accordance with Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines, synthesizes research on everyday sadism to address the following objectives:

- (1) To define and contextualize everyday sadism within theoretical frameworks.
- (2) To explore its behavioral manifestations in personal, professional, and societal contexts.
- (3) To evaluate methodological tools and approaches for studying everyday sadism.
- (4) To propose practical applications and future research directions for mitigating its adverse effects.
- (5) Historical Context

The concept of sadism, including its everyday manifestations, has evolved significantly over time. Initially confined to discussions of overt cruelty, such as physical violence or sexual deviance, the term has broadened to encompass subtler, socially mediated behaviors. This conceptual expansion mirrors broader shifts in psychology and sociology toward recognizing that aggression can operate within socially sanctioned frameworks, and that cruelty need not be physical to be impactful (Bonfá-Araujo et al. 2022; Foulkes 2019; Paulhus 2014; Plouffe, Saklofske, and Smith 2017; Thomas and Egan 2022).

Origins

The term "sadism" derives from the Marquis de Sade, an 18th-century French philosopher whose writings explored themes of power, domination, and pleasure derived from cruelty (Taylor 2009). While de Sade's works focused on sexual and criminal deviance, they laid the groundwork for later discussions of sadistic tendencies in psychology. Although de Sade's views were extreme, they brought visibility to the psychological appeal of cruelty, particularly its links to arousal, control, and moral transgression (Nell 2006). Historical accounts also indicate that these behaviors were not confined to sexual contexts but often intersected with political power, punishment practices, and entertainment, foreshadowing the modern recognition of cruelty in non-sexual, everyday domains (Praz 1992).

Psychoanalytic contributions

In the 19th century, figures like Krafft-Ebing (1886) introduced sadism as a clinical phenomenon, particularly in the context of sexual pathology. Sigmund Freud expanded this perspective, suggesting that sadism could emerge in sublimated forms, influencing interpersonal dynamics and everyday interactions (Freud 1930). Freud's framing laid the early groundwork for later understandings of aggression as multi-layered, potentially displaced, and not necessarily physically enacted, anticipating modern views of passive, verbal, or symbolic sadism. Although some psychoanalytic claims have since been challenged, the idea that sadistic drives can be redirected into socially acceptable outlets remains influential in contemporary models (Fonagy 2003).

Contemporary perspectives

The late 20th and early 21st centuries marked a shift toward understanding subclinical sadism. Buckels, Jones, and Paulhus (2013) reframed sadism as a common human trait, manifesting in behaviors like trolling, schadenfreude, and enjoying violent media. They demonstrated that individuals with higher sadism scores willingly inflicted harm on others for no material gain, simply for the enjoyment of doing so, a finding that helped distinguish sadism from utilitarian cruelty (Buckels, Jones, and Paulhus 2013). Subsequent meta-analyses (Bonfá-Araujo et al. 2022, 2025; Thomas and Egan 2022) have reinforced these findings, confirming that everyday sadism predicts aggressive behaviors across both online and offline contexts, even after controlling for other Dark Tetrad traits.

Steven Pinker (2011) contextualized sadism within the broader decline of overt violence, highlighting its persistence in socially acceptable forms. As Pinker noted, while overt brutality has declined, psychological cruelty remains entrenched, a point echoed by modern studies exploring sadism in settings such as video gaming, bullying, and dark humor consumption (Foulkes 2019; James, Strom, and Leskela 2014). The increasing integration of digital environments into daily life has created new contexts where sadism can manifest with reduced accountability but high visibility, reinforcing its social embeddedness (Chester and DeWall 2016). This historical trajectory underscores the need to examine everyday sadism not as an anomaly but as an integral aspect of human behavior shaped by evolving social norms and reinforced by contemporary digital environments.

Key theories and researchers

Understanding everyday sadism requires a multidimensional approach that integrates theories from personality psychology, evolutionary frameworks, and reinforcement-based models. It also benefits from cross-disciplinary insights from sociology, criminology, and communication studies, given the range of contexts in which cruelty manifests. This section examines key theoretical foundations, profiles prominent researchers, and addresses debates in the field.

Theoretical foundations

Personality psychology and the Dark Tetrad

Everyday sadism is one of the four socially aversive traits comprising the Dark Tetrad, which includes narcissism, psychopathy, Machiavellianism, and sadism (Buckels, Jones, and Paulhus 2013; Paulhus 2014; Paulhus et al. 2021). While narcissism centers on self-aggrandizement, psychopathy reflects emotional detachment, and Machiavellianism is rooted in strategic manipulation, sadism stands apart by its focus on deriving pleasure from others' suffering. Everyday sadism, unlike its extreme counterpart, encompasses socially acceptable behaviors like trolling or teasing (Bonfá-Araujo et al. 2022, 2025; Buckels, Trapnell, and Paulhus 2014; Foulkes 2019; Thomas and Egan 2022). Plouffe, Saklofske, and Smith (2017) further demonstrated that sadism uniquely predicts aggressive behavior beyond the explanatory power of the other three traits, confirming its distinctiveness and justifying its place in the

Dark Tetrad. Related work in sexual contexts shows that sadism within the Dark Tetrad is associated with specific sexual motivations and preferences in community samples (Plouffe and Wilson 2019).

Research distinguishes everyday sadism from related traits by highlighting the intrinsic gratification it offers, even in non-instrumental contexts (e.g., harming others for amusement). This unique motivational dimension underpins its inclusion in the Dark Tetrad framework, making it distinct from purely goal-oriented or unemotional behaviors like Machiavellianism or psychopathy (Buckels, Jones, and Paulhus 2013; Thomas and Egan 2022). The concept of “appetitive aggression” (Krahé 2013) supports this motivational perspective, describing harm as inherently pleasurable rather than reactive or defensive, and has been increasingly integrated into Dark Tetrad scholarship to explain the persistence of cruelty in low-stakes contexts.

Evolutionary psychology

Sadistic tendencies may have evolved as adaptive mechanisms for asserting dominance, deterring rivals, or solidifying social hierarchies in ancestral environments (Nell 2006). For example, acts of aggression that demonstrated strength could have conferred survival advantages, reinforcing these behaviors through natural selection. From this view, sadism is not an evolutionary accident but a behavioral strategy that, while maladaptive in many modern contexts, once had functional value in small-group competition and conflict. In modern contexts, these tendencies persist as remnants of evolutionary strategies but manifest in subtler forms, such as social exclusion or workplace bullying. Reidy et al. (2011) add that individuals high in trait sadism may be evolutionarily wired to interpret ambiguous social cues as hostile, reinforcing aggressive, preemptive behavior. Recent meta-analytic evidence (Bonfá-Araujo et al. 2025) further suggests that while psychopathy and sadism share some adaptive and antagonistic features, sadism’s motivational core, pleasure in others’ suffering, remains uniquely predictive of proactive aggression.

Reinforcement and learning theories

Everyday sadism is reinforced through positive feedback loops, where individuals derive emotional satisfaction from acts of cruelty or humiliation. Buckels, Jones, and Paulhus (2013) highlight that repeated engagement in sadistic behaviors creates a reward system, making these acts self-reinforcing. Anonymity in digital spaces further amplifies these tendencies, removing the immediate social consequences that might otherwise inhibit such behaviors (Sest and March 2017). Paulhus et al. (2021) note that sadistic individuals are more likely to seek out situations in which they have the power to harm, especially when social constraints are minimal, such as in competitive or anonymous settings. This reinforcement perspective aligns with operant conditioning principles, where harm functions as a positively reinforcing stimulus for the perpetrator, increasing the likelihood of repetition. This reinforcement perspective aligns with findings from Thomas and Egan’s (2022) meta-analysis, which identified consistent positive associations between everyday sadism and multiple forms of aggressive behavior, both online and offline.

Profiles of significant researchers

Paulhus and Williams (2002) pioneered the Dark Triad framework, which became foundational for understanding everyday sadism within broader malevolent personality traits. Their research has illuminated how sadism’s gratification component differentiates it from psychopathy and Machiavellianism, underscoring its relevance in subclinical populations. Subsequent longitudinal studies building on their work (e.g., Paulhus et al. 2021) have further clarified how these traits interact over time, reinforcing sadism’s predictive value for sustained patterns of cruelty.

Buckels, Jones, and Paulhus (2013, 2014) made groundbreaking contributions by conceptualizing and empirically validating everyday sadism. They developed the Varieties of Sadistic Tendencies (VAST) as a self-report scale to assess direct and vicarious sadism, rather than as a behavioral paradigm (Paulhus and Jones 2015; see also Buckels, Jones, and Paulhus 2013). In addition to

psychometric tools, Buckels and colleagues pioneered behavioral measures, such as the bug-killing paradigm and noise-blast tasks, that demonstrated how individuals engage in harm-based behaviors purely for enjoyment. Their bug-killing paradigm has become a standard in sadism research and continues to be used in replication studies, with consistent results confirming the reliability of their findings (James, Strom, and Leskela 2014; Thomas and Egan 2022). Notably, this paradigm has been adapted for online experimental platforms, allowing for greater sample diversity while maintaining ecological validity.

In *The Better Angels of Our Nature* (2011), Pinker contextualized sadism within the broader decline of overt violence in human history. He argued that while societal norms have reduced explicit cruelty, “soft sadism” persists in socially sanctioned forms, such as violent media or competitive humiliation. His framing has been influential in shifting discourse from pathologizing sadism exclusively toward recognizing its embeddedness in cultural and recreational practices.

Baumeister’s work on the psychology of evil (Baumeister and Campbell 1999) explored the cognitive mechanisms that enable individuals to justify cruel acts. He highlighted processes like dehumanization and moral disengagement as critical enablers of everyday sadism. Studies (e.g., Buckels, Trapnell, and Paulhus 2014; Foulkes 2019; Sest and March 2017; Craker & March 2016) have built on this, showing that sadists are more likely to endorse retributive justice and punishment, particularly when given moral justification to do so. This aligns with recent criminological perspectives emphasizing how legitimized cruelty can flourish under institutional or ideological sanction.

Debates and critiques

One critique of everyday sadism is its potential overlap with traits like psychopathy and narcissism. Blötner and Mokros (2023) argue that sadism may be a subset of psychopathy rather than a distinct construct. However, proponents of the Dark Tetrad framework contend that sadism’s intrinsic pleasure dimension warrants separate consideration. Plouffe, Saklofske, and Smith (2017) provided empirical evidence for sadism’s independence, showing it predicted real-world aggression even after controlling for other dark traits (Bonfá-Araujo et al. 2025). This debate remains unresolved, with some scholars calling for integrative models that capture both the shared variance and the unique motivational drivers of sadism.

Critics highlight the role of societal norms and cultural factors in shaping the expression of everyday sadism. For example, cultures that tolerate aggressive humor or public shaming may inadvertently normalize sadistic behaviors (Nisbett 2003). Cross-cultural research has begun to show significant variability in the acceptability and frequency of these behaviors, underscoring the need for culturally sensitive measurement tools. Sest and March (2017) also noted the unique role of online disinhibition in facilitating socially acceptable cruelty, particularly in youth populations.

Research on everyday sadism often involves experimental tasks that simulate harm or discomfort. Ethical concerns arise regarding the psychological impact on participants, particularly in studies using real or perceived harm (Buckels, Jones, and Paulhus 2013). Recent discussions also note that virtual reality (VR) paradigms, while eliminating physical risk, may still produce comparable psychological distress, necessitating careful harm minimization strategies (Thomas and Egan 2022). Reviewer feedback also highlighted the importance of ongoing debriefing and delayed follow-up in these studies, ensuring that any residual effects are identified and addressed. Future studies are called to balance scientific insight with participant well-being, especially as the field explores digital environments that blur ethical boundaries.

Methods & findings

Researching everyday sadism involves diverse methodologies, each designed to capture its subclinical and socially acceptable manifestations. This section reviews common approaches, key findings, and the challenges in studying this trait.

Common methodologies

Self-report measures are widely used for their scalability and efficiency in assessing sadistic tendencies. Examples include:

- (1) Short Sadistic Impulse Scale (SSIS): Developed by O'Meara, Davies, and Hammond (2011), this tool evaluates pleasure derived from harm-based behaviors (e.g., trolling or teasing). Items include statements like, "I have purposely hurt someone because I thought it was funny."
- (2) Comprehensive Assessment of Sadistic Tendencies (CAST): Developed by Buckels & Paulhus (2014) to differentiate direct and vicarious sadism, assessing both active engagement in harm and enjoyment from observing others' suffering.
- (3) Assessment strategies now often include subscales for verbal, physical, and vicarious sadism to increase precision and distinguish sadism from psychopathy or aggression (Paulhus et al. 2021; Plouffe, Saklofske, and Smith 2017).
- (4) Meta-analyses recommend integrating SSIS with measures of Dark Tetrad traits to clarify comorbidity patterns and isolate sadistic motivation (Bonfá-Araujo et al. 2025; Međedović and Petrović 2015).

Experimental methods provide insights into behavioral expressions of everyday sadism:

- (1) Varieties of Sadistic Tendencies (VAST): Formally introduced by Paulhus and Jones (2015; see also Buckels, Jones, and Paulhus 2013) as a self-report measure of direct and vicarious sadism, not a behavioral paradigm. In parallel, Buckels and colleagues pioneered behavioral tasks (e.g., bug-killing paradigm, noise-blast tasks) to observe harm-based choices. Findings revealed that individuals with higher SSIS or VAST scores were more likely to engage in gratuitous harm.
- (2) Online Simulations: Studies such as Sest and March (2017) examine trolling behavior in digital environments, capturing real-time expressions of everyday sadism.
- (3) Bug-Killing Paradigm: Participants are given a choice between killing insects or engaging in dull tasks. Those scoring high on SSIS often chose to kill insects, even with no material incentive (Buckels, Jones, and Paulhus 2013).
- (4) Cold Pressor Task modifications: Used to test whether sadistic individuals choose to administer or observe pain (James, Strom, and Leskela 2014).
- (5) Modified Pain Preference Tasks: Adaptations (e.g., Međedović et al. 2018) allow participants to select from neutral, unpleasant, or harmful stimuli, with sadistic individuals disproportionately selecting harmful options even without external rewards.

These methods extend into real-world contexts, including workplace bullying and online harassment. Content analysis of social media interactions offers ecological validity by capturing natural expressions of sadistic tendencies. Machine learning techniques are now being explored to detect linguistic markers of sadism in large datasets, particularly in toxic comment threads or gaming environments (Craker & March 2016). Qualitative interviews (Craker & March 2016) are also emerging as a method to capture the lived experience of high-sadism individuals, providing narrative depth that complements quantitative measures.

Examples of findings

- (1) Buckels, Jones, and Paulhus (2013) demonstrated that individuals with high SSIS scores willingly engaged in gratuitous harm (e.g., killing insects) for personal gratification, with medium-to-large effect sizes ($d = 0.60\text{--}0.80$) reported across behavioral measures. Subsequent replications (e.g., James, Strom, and Leskela 2014; Thomas and Egan 2022) have confirmed these behavioral trends across multiple cultural contexts.
- (2) Sest and March (2017) found a strong correlation between sadism and trolling, with sadistic individuals deriving enjoyment from upsetting others in anonymous digital settings ($r \approx .30\text{--}.40$, even after controlling for empathy and psychopathy). Machine learning text analysis has since been applied to online interactions, reinforcing these associations and identifying distinct linguistic markers of sadism (Craker & March 2016).
- (3) Reidy et al. (2011) linked everyday sadism to aggression, showing overlap with impulsivity and hostility, suggesting both proactive and reactive aggression pathways may be implicated. These findings suggest that interventions addressing emotional regulation may be as critical as those targeting moral disengagement.
- (4) Plouffe, Saklofske, and Smith (2017) found that sadism predicted proactive aggression more strongly than psychopathy, even after controlling for narcissism and Machiavellianism, reinforcing its unique motivational profile.
- (5) Paulhus et al. (2021) identified that direct sadism was more strongly linked to Dark Tetrad overlaps, while vicarious sadism remained more independent, supporting recent meta-analytic conclusions (Bonfá-Araujo et al. 2025) that these subtypes may have distinct correlates and intervention targets.

Challenges and limitations

Social desirability bias may lead participants to underreport sadistic tendencies, skewing results. Behavioral experiments involving harm, even simulated, raise ethical questions about participant welfare. Researchers must balance scientific inquiry with ethical responsibility. Recent discussions advocate for incorporating pre- and post-task psychological screening to monitor potential adverse effects (Thomas and Egan 2022). Studies often rely on WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic) populations, limiting generalizability to diverse cultural contexts (Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan 2010). Cross-cultural studies on sadism remain scarce but are increasingly necessary to understand how environmental and cultural norms affect the expression and acceptability of cruelty (Mededović and Petrović 2015). Emerging work in non-WEIRD contexts (e.g., Mededović et al. 2018) indicates that manifestations of sadism can differ significantly depending on societal norms around aggression and humor.

Additionally, ethical review boards may limit the intensity of experimental paradigms, thereby constraining ecological validity. Innovative proxies and simulations are being developed, but these often lack the visceral stakes that define real-world cruelty. This limitation has led some researchers to adopt mixed-reality or gamified designs, aiming to replicate competitive and emotionally charged scenarios without breaching ethical boundaries. Hybrid methodologies, combining qualitative interviews with ethically constrained behavioral measures, are emerging as a promising compromise to capture both the experiential and behavioral dimensions of everyday sadism (Craker & March 2016).

Testing for sadism

Testing for everyday sadism involves a combination of psychometric tools, experimental paradigms, and complementary methodologies. These approaches aim to assess sadistic tendencies in subclinical and socially acceptable contexts while capturing both self-reported and behavioral data.

Psychometric tools

Psychometric tools are foundational for measuring everyday sadism, offering scalability and replicability. Key instruments include:

Short sadistic impulse scale (SSIS)

- Description: Developed by O'Meara, Davies, and Hammond (2011), the SSIS is a concise self-report measure designed to assess subclinical sadistic tendencies. It evaluates an individual's pleasure derived from causing or observing harm.
- (a) Sample Items:
 - "I have purposely hurt someone because I thought it was funny."
 - "Hurting people sometimes gives me a thrill."
- (b) Reliability and Validity: The SSIS demonstrates high internal consistency ($\alpha > .80$) and has been validated in studies linking sadistic behaviors with antisocial tendencies (Buckels, Jones, and Paulhus 2013; Thomas and Egan 2022). Recent cross-validation studies in non-WEIRD populations (Mededović et al. 2018) indicate that while the core structure is robust, item phrasing may require cultural adaptation.

Comprehensive assessment of sadistic tendencies (CAST)

- Description: 2014 Developed by Buckels & Paulhus (2012), CAST differentiates direct and vicarious sadism and is widely used alongside SSIS and VAST to distinguish between direct and vicarious sadism. It includes both self-report items and scenario-based questions.
- Sample Items:
 - Direct Sadism: "I enjoy hurting people."
 - Vicarious Sadism: "I enjoy watching fights or seeing others get hurt."
- Applications: The CAST is particularly useful for exploring nuanced sadistic behaviors in everyday contexts.
- Additional Note: CAST has shown strong construct validity when distinguishing between instrumental and affective forms of sadism. It is increasingly recommended for research where differentiating motivational subtypes is critical for targeted intervention design.

Sadistic Personality questionnaire (SPQ)

- Description: Originally designed for clinical populations, the SPQ assesses sadistic traits across physical, emotional, and verbal dimensions (O'Meara, Davies, and Hammond 2011).
- Focus: It provides deeper insights into the motivations and emotional drivers behind sadistic behaviours. Although less commonly used in subclinical samples, adaptations for everyday contexts have shown promising convergent validity with SSIS and CAST (Dinić et al. 2020; Plouffe et al. 2019).

Dark Triad dirty dozen (DTDD) with sadism extensions

- Description: Short Dark Tetrad (SD4): A validated 28-item measure assessing Machiavellianism, narcissism, psychopathy, and sadism (Paulhus et al. 2021).
- (a) Sample Items:
 - "I enjoy seeing others suffer if they deserve it."
 - "Hurting people is sometimes justifiable."
- (b) Use Case: This tool captures sadism within the broader Dark Tetrad framework. However, it remains a brief screening measure, and reviewers caution that it should be supplemented with more detailed instruments for nuanced analysis.

Varieties of sadistic tendencies (VAST) – self-report measure

- Description: The VAST, developed by Buckels, Jones, and Paulhus (2013), is a self-report scale designed to measure direct and vicarious sadism. It is not a behavioural paradigm, though Buckels and colleagues have also developed separate behavioural tasks (e.g., bug-killing paradigm, noise-blast tasks) that are sometimes used alongside it.
- Application: The VAST is frequently used in conjunction with behavioral tasks to triangulate self-reported and observed sadistic tendencies, improving ecological validity while preserving ethical safeguards (Bonfá-Araujo et al. 2025).

Experimental paradigms

Experimental paradigms provide valuable behavioral data, revealing real-time manifestations of sadistic tendencies. Key methods include:

Varieties of sadistic tendencies (VAST) – self-report measure with behavioural extensions

- Description: Developed by Buckels, Jones, and Paulhus (2013), the VAST is a self-report scale measuring direct and vicarious sadism. While the VAST itself does not involve harm-delivery scenarios, Buckels and colleagues have used separate behavioural tasks, such as noise-blast or bug-killing experiments, alongside VAST scores to examine whether self-reported sadism predicts harmful behaviour.
- Findings: Individuals with higher SSIS or VAST scores often choose to inflict unnecessary harm, even when non-harmful alternatives are available. Replications in online and cross-cultural contexts (Thomas and Egan 2022; Mededović et al. 2018) suggest these patterns are not culture-bound.
- Ethical Considerations: Behavioral extensions of the VAST raise ethical concerns due to the use of real or simulated harm. These concerns have prompted the development of less harmful but still competitive or adversarial simulations (Thomas and Egan 2022).

Cyber-trolling simulations

- Description: Studies like Sest and March (2017) simulate online interactions to observe trolling behaviours. Participants engage in forums or social media platforms designed to provoke sadistic responses.
- Applications: This approach is particularly relevant for examining sadism in digital environments where anonymity and social reinforcement play a key role. Recent machine-learning analyses of trolling content (Craker & March, 2016) have identified linguistic markers predictive of sadistic engagement, offering scalable monitoring tools.

Modified pain preference tasks

- Description: In newer studies (e.g., Mededović et al. 2018), participants are asked to choose between neutral, unpleasant, or harmful stimuli to observe preferences under anonymity. Variants include options to deliver mild aversive stimuli (e.g., unpleasant sounds) to others.
- Findings: Those higher in sadism are more likely to select painful or disruptive tasks, even with no external reward, suggesting an intrinsically motivated pursuit of harm.
- Ethical Considerations: While these tasks avoid physical harm, they can still evoke distress, highlighting the need for robust debriefing procedures and harm-minimization strategies.

Complementary approaches

Observational studies

- Focus: Real-world settings, such as workplaces or online forums, provide ecological validity by capturing natural expressions of sadism.

- Examples: Analysis of social media content reveals patterns of trolling, harassment, and schadenfreude (Craker & March, 2016; March and Grieve 2017). Natural-language processing and sentiment analysis are now being used to detect sadistic communication patterns in large datasets with minimal human coder bias.

Physiological measures

- Description: Neuroimaging and biometrics, such as fMRI or skin conductance, explore the neural correlates of sadistic pleasure.
- Findings: Sadistic behaviors are associated with heightened activity in the ventral striatum and amygdala, regions linked to reward processing and arousal (Buckels, Jones, and Paulhus 2013; Chester and DeWall 2016). VR-based paradigms now allow researchers to measure physiological responses in immersive harm scenarios, though debates continue over whether virtual harm evokes equivalent emotional arousal to real-world acts.

Qualitative interviews

- Description: Emerging studies employ semi-structured interviews with individuals scoring high in sadistic traits to explore subjective experiences.
- Advantages: This method uncovers narratives, justifications, and contextual factors that might be missed by quantitative tools, providing insight into how individuals rationalize or normalize harm-based behaviors.

Challenges and limitations

- Social Desirability Bias: Participants may underreport sadistic tendencies due to stigma, fear of judgment, or self-presentation concerns, which can distort self-report data and reduce reliability. Embedding indirect questioning and behavioral validation measures is increasingly recommended to mitigate this bias.
- Ethical Constraints: Simulating harm, even in controlled environments, poses challenges for participant welfare. Ethics review boards may impose strict limitations on harm-based paradigms, potentially reducing the intensity or realism of experimental tasks.
- Cross-Cultural Variability: Most tools are validated in WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic) populations, limiting their applicability across diverse cultural contexts. New studies in Southeast Asia and South America suggest that humor norms, collectivism, and attitudes toward conflict can significantly influence sadistic expression.
- Ecological Validity: While lab-based tasks offer control, they may not fully capture real-world sadistic behaviors. Integrating hybrid designs, virtual reality simulations, or long-term observational studies can help bridge this gap and improve the generalizability of findings. Mixed-methods approaches are increasingly seen as the gold standard for balancing ethical constraints with ecological relevance.

Presence in everyday life

Everyday sadism manifests in various forms and is often overlooked due to its subtlety and perceived social normalization. It operates beneath the surface of social conventions, frequently disguised as humor, competition, or discipline. However, research indicates that these seemingly benign behaviors can have measurable psychological and social consequences for both perpetrators and targets (Plouffe, Saklofske, and Smith 2017; Reidy et al. 2011). This section explores how everyday sadism emerges in routine interactions, influences personal and professional relationships, and varies across cultural contexts.

Examples of daily interactions

Everyday sadism is pervasive in social interactions, particularly in environments where cruelty is reframed as entertainment, discipline, or social bonding. For example, online trolling involves deliberately provoking or upsetting others for personal amusement. Buckels, Trapnell, and Paulhus (2014) found that individuals who engage in trolling behavior consistently score higher on measures of sadism, psychopathy, Machiavellianism, and, to a lesser extent, narcissism, supporting its alignment with the broader Dark Tetrad framework. This digital form of cruelty is often downplayed as harmless banter but may contribute to a broader erosion of empathy in online environments (March and Grieve 2017). Converging evidence shows that personality traits predict mean-spirited online behaviour, including antagonistic commenting and ridicule (Greitemeyer and Sagioglou 2017).

Another example is *schadenfreude*, defined as the enjoyment of another person's misfortune. This can manifest in settings like competitive sports, academic rankings, or reality television. van Dijk et al. (2012) demonstrated that such emotional responses are not merely passive but can actively predict decisions to harm or withhold support. These findings suggest that *schadenfreude* may operate as an antecedent to more overt sadistic behaviors, particularly in competitive contexts.

Practical jokes and social pranks, while often dismissed as harmless fun, may reveal sadistic tendencies, especially when the intent is to humiliate, control, or embarrass others. According to Plouffe, Saklofske, and Smith (2017), the line between humor and cruelty is frequently crossed when sadistic individuals derive pleasure from another's discomfort, particularly in contexts with asymmetrical power dynamics. Longitudinal workplace studies have shown that repeated exposure to such behaviors can predict increased anxiety and withdrawal among targets (Zapf and Einarsen 2003).

Impact on personal relationships

Sadism disrupts intimacy and trust in interpersonal relationships. Individuals with everyday sadistic tendencies often manipulate or exploit the vulnerabilities of friends or partners, gaining satisfaction from emotional discomfort or humiliation. These interactions may be framed as "tough love" or "joking," yet they frequently leave lasting psychological harm and may exacerbate existing attachment insecurities.

In familial or social contexts, sadism can emerge as verbal belittling, controlling behaviors, or subtle degradation, which, over time, erodes emotional closeness and fosters resentment. Reidy et al. (2011) found that individuals high in trait aggression and sadism engage in coercive tactics that diminish relationship quality and increase the likelihood of interpersonal conflict. This pattern overlaps with coercive control dynamics observed in intimate partner violence research (Stark 2007), where harm is sustained and normalized over time. Repeated exposure to such behaviors may foster trauma bonds, where victims become psychologically entangled with their abuser, often misinterpreting harm as care or attention. This dynamic reflects the darker intersections between sadism, control, and vulnerability.

Workplace dynamics

In professional settings, everyday sadism contributes to dysfunctional and toxic work environments. Managers with sadistic tendencies may engage in abusive supervision, routinely humiliating, threatening, or undermining employees under the guise of performance management. Tepper (2000) showed that such behaviors result in elevated stress, reduced morale, and increased turnover intentions. These effects can cascade, leading to the normalization of abuse when bystanders fail to intervene (Einarsen et al. 2020). Colleagues who engage in gossip, exclusion, or reputational sabotage often do so with sadistic intent, deriving enjoyment from the distress or social isolation of others. These acts are not merely forms of passive aggression but reflect a desire to control, punish, or humiliate, as noted by Zapf and Einarsen (2003).

Counterproductive work behaviors (CWBs), such as intentionally withholding information, sabotaging projects, or spreading misinformation, are also linked to everyday sadism. Spector and Fox (2005) identified pleasure-driven aggression as a predictor of such behaviors, with sadistic individuals more likely to justify harm as either deserved or necessary. Emerging research in organizational psychology highlights the role of “moral disengagement” in allowing perpetrators to rationalize these acts (Bandura 1999).

Cultural variations

Cultural norms significantly shape the expression and social acceptability of everyday sadism. In individualistic cultures, such as the United States, overt displays of dominance and humiliation may be valorized under the guise of competitiveness or assertiveness. Public shaming, “roasting,” and disciplinary humiliation are often embedded in both school and corporate environments (Hofstede 2001). In such contexts, the boundary between legitimate performance feedback and sadistic abuse can become blurred, particularly in high-pressure industries.

In contrast, collectivistic cultures like Japan may express sadism in more passive-aggressive or indirect forms. Rather than confrontational acts, sadism may manifest through exclusion, silent treatment, or non-verbal expressions of disapproval designed to preserve group harmony while still inflicting psychological discomfort (Nisbett 2003). Recent cross-cultural studies suggest that these indirect forms can be equally damaging, though they may be less likely to be recognized or reported (Mededović and Petrović 2015).

Digital subcultures transcend national boundaries and frequently normalize sadistic behavior. From online trolling to doxxing and cyberbullying, virtual platforms provide anonymity and social reinforcement that amplify sadistic tendencies. March and Grieve (2017) highlighted how these spaces function as self-reinforcing echo chambers where cruelty is rewarded and empathy is diminished. These findings reinforce calls for platform-level interventions to reduce the prevalence and normalization of digital sadism.

Implications and applications

Understanding everyday sadism offers critical insights into its impact on psychological well-being, interpersonal relationships, and broader societal dynamics. This section explores its relevance to psychological practice, conflict resolution, and organizational interventions, while offering strategies to mitigate its adverse effects. Importantly, it emphasizes that sadistic behavior often operates in subclinical ranges, making early detection and targeted intervention critical before harm escalates to overt aggression.

Implications for psychological practice

Identifying everyday sadism is essential for comprehensive psychological assessments, particularly when addressing interpersonal or workplace conflict. Clinicians can integrate tools such as the Short Sadistic Impulse Scale (SSIS) and the Comprehensive Assessment of Sadistic Tendencies (CAST) to quantify and contextualize subclinical sadism in therapy settings (Buckels, Trapnell, and Paulhus 2014; O’Meara, Davies, and Hammond 2011). Using these tools alongside broader Dark Tetrad assessments (e.g., SD3) can provide a fuller understanding of an individual’s behavioral risk profile. These measures are particularly useful when patterns of relational aggression, manipulation, or emotional harm are evident during intake or ongoing treatment.

Addressing sadistic tendencies therapeutically requires a nuanced, multimodal approach. Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) offers structured techniques, such as cognitive restructuring, to target maladaptive beliefs that reinforce harm-based pleasure. Beck (2011) underscores the efficacy of CBT in modifying impulse-driven behaviors and promoting prosocial alternatives. Mindfulness-based

interventions, rooted in present-moment awareness and non-judgment, support emotional regulation and empathy, skills that counteract the impulsivity and emotional detachment often linked to everyday sadism (Kabat-Zinn 2013). Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) has also shown promise in reducing rigid thinking patterns and promoting values-driven action in individuals prone to manipulative or controlling behaviors (Hayes et al. 2012). Group therapy, especially in contexts involving familial conflict or workplace bullying, fosters interpersonal accountability and can expose participants to the emotional consequences of their actions in a supportive environment.

Victims of everyday sadism often struggle with diminished self-esteem, interpersonal mistrust, and emotional confusion. Therapeutic work with these clients should prioritize resilience-building by reinforcing adaptive coping strategies and fostering a coherent sense of self-worth. Boundary setting is another crucial component, empowering individuals to recognize and resist manipulative or coercive behaviors. Trauma-informed care, particularly frameworks sensitive to chronic relational harm, can provide a foundation for understanding the long-term impact of exposure to sadistic environments while supporting the rebuilding of psychological safety (Janoff-Bulman 1992). Psychoeducation about the mechanics of sadism, how it manifests, escalates, and is reinforced, can further help clients contextualize their experiences and reduce self-blame.

Applications in conflict resolution and interpersonal relationships

In conflict mediation, recognizing sadistic dynamics is essential for effective de-escalation. Mediators who identify these patterns can guide participants toward empathy-driven dialogue, highlighting the emotional impact of their actions and promoting self-reflection. Reframing techniques, where hostile exchanges are reconstructed as opportunities for growth or resolution, can shift the trajectory of interactions from aggression to cooperation. Incorporating restorative justice principles may also facilitate accountability, particularly in cases where harm has been minimized or justified by the aggressor. Buckels, Jones, and Paulhus (2013) argue that sadistic behaviors are often rationalized under the guise of humor or discipline, underscoring the need for intentional interventions that disrupt these justifications. This is particularly relevant in workplace or family disputes where “joking” is weaponized to disguise coercion or humiliation.

Within family and romantic contexts, sadism often surfaces as control, passive aggression, or emotional manipulation. These behaviors undermine intimacy and reinforce power imbalances. Couples or family therapy in such cases should focus on rebuilding trust and open communication. Addressing the underlying need for dominance or control can be supported by promoting emotional intelligence and conflict literacy. Reidy et al. (2011) demonstrated that individuals high in trait sadism often struggle with emotional attunement and interpersonal reciprocity, making targeted relational skill-building essential for therapeutic progress. This may include guided empathy exercises, perspective-taking interventions, and reinforcement of cooperative problem-solving behaviors.

Organisational interventions

At the organizational level, addressing everyday sadism requires integrated policy reform and sustained cultural change. Leadership training programs that emphasize emotional intelligence, ethical decision-making, and reflective supervision can significantly reduce the incidence of sadistic leadership behaviors (Tepper 2000). Ongoing professional development in these areas, rather than one-off workshops, is critical to embedding change. Embedding these competencies into recruitment, onboarding, and performance appraisal systems ensures they are not merely theoretical ideals but enforceable operational standards.

Clear anti-bullying policies are also critical. These must be more than symbolic statements; they require robust enforcement mechanisms, timely follow-up, and a culture of psychological safety to ensure that staff can report concerns without fear of retaliation. Anonymous reporting mechanisms, combined with transparent follow-up processes, strengthen organizational accountability and

encourage disclosure of sadistic or exploitative behaviors. Additionally, regular climate surveys can help organizations detect and address sadistic subcultures before they become entrenched.

Team-building and conflict-resolution workshops should be designed not simply to promote productivity but to cultivate workplace norms of respect, empathy, and collaborative problem-solving. These interventions reduce the likelihood of sadism flourishing in ambiguous or unregulated social spaces within the workplace. Organizations that integrate bystander intervention training into their culture can further empower employees to challenge cruelty when they witness it, reducing passive reinforcement of harmful norms. When individuals feel connected to their teams and understand the psychological impact of their behaviors, they are less likely to engage in cruelty, exclusion, or manipulation for personal gratification.

Limitations and future research

Despite notable progress in understanding everyday sadism, critical gaps persist in the literature. These gaps limit the field's ability to draw comprehensive conclusions about the origins, expression, and impacts of sadistic traits in non-clinical populations. A more nuanced, interdisciplinary approach is required to address these limitations, ensuring that the construct of everyday sadism is not only theoretically sound but also practically measurable across diverse contexts. This section identifies core limitations in the existing body of research and proposes targeted avenues for future investigation.

Limitations of current research

A central limitation concerns the conceptual overlap between everyday sadism and other Dark Tetrad traits, particularly psychopathy and narcissism. This overlap raises questions about discriminant validity and the degree to which sadism functions as a unique construct. Scholars such as Blötner and Mokros (2023) argue for a clearer delineation of these traits, warning that current measurement tools may inadvertently conflate overlapping features, such as impulsivity or lack of empathy, both of which are common to multiple domains. The lack of consensus on operational definitions compounds this problem, making it difficult to compare findings across studies or develop targeted interventions.

Another significant concern is the field's heavy reliance on self-report instruments. Tools such as the SSIS and CAST, while psychometrically robust, remain vulnerable to social desirability bias and self-perception distortions. Participants may downplay or fail to recognize their sadistic tendencies, especially given the moral stigma associated with deriving pleasure from harm (Buckels, Trapnell, and Paulhus 2014; O'Meara, Davies, and Hammond 2011). Consequently, findings from these studies may substantially underrepresent the true prevalence and nature of everyday sadism in the general population. Observer-reported measures, peer nominations, and behavioral task paradigms could provide valuable triangulation to reduce this methodological blind spot.

Cultural homogeneity further limits generalizability. Much of the existing research is based on WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic) populations, leaving substantial gaps in our understanding of how sadism may manifest differently across cultures. For instance, individualistic cultures such as the United States may encourage overt and confrontational forms of sadism, whereas collectivistic societies may promote more covert expressions that maintain group harmony (Nisbett 2003). Without diverse sampling, theories about everyday sadism risk reflecting a culturally biased perspective rather than universal human behavior. This limitation also extends to intersectional considerations, as very little research explores how gender, socioeconomic status, or minority group membership interacts with sadistic tendencies.

Ethical limitations also constrain empirical investigations. Experimental paradigms involving harm-based choices must adhere to strict ethical guidelines, which often preclude the observation of real-world sadistic acts. Even when simulated, such scenarios can raise concerns about psychological distress or long-term effects on participants. This restricts the scope of behavioral studies and reduces opportunities to observe spontaneous sadistic behaviors in naturalistic settings (Buckels, Jones, and

Paulhus 2013). As a result, the literature may be skewed toward studying “sanitised” or indirect forms of sadism, leaving gaps in understanding higher-intensity or context-dependent expressions.

Directions for future research

Clarifying the theoretical construct of sadism remains a pressing need. Future studies should explore the shared and unique developmental pathways of sadism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism, focusing on how these traits diverge in both behavioral expression and underlying motivation. Such work would support the creation of multidimensional models that better capture the spectrum of sadistic behavior, including clear distinctions between proactive, reactive, and vicarious forms of sadism. Incorporating validated behavioral tasks alongside self-report measures could strengthen construct validity and reduce bias.

Cross-cultural research is equally vital. Expanding the empirical base to include non-Western populations can illuminate how cultural values shape sadistic behavior and the social acceptability of harm-based pleasure. Comparative studies between collectivistic and individualistic societies could provide deeper insight into universal versus culture-specific expressions of everyday sadism. Longitudinal cross-cultural designs would be particularly valuable, capturing how globalization and digital interaction may alter sadistic expression over time.

Longitudinal research could provide much-needed clarity on the developmental trajectory of sadistic traits. At present, most findings are based on cross-sectional data, limiting understanding of how sadistic tendencies emerge, stabilize, or diminish over time. Adopting longitudinal designs would enable researchers to explore the interaction between early environmental factors, such as parenting style or peer influence, and later behavioral outcomes related to sadism. Such designs would also allow investigation into the malleability of sadistic traits and the effectiveness of early intervention strategies.

Interdisciplinary approaches hold considerable promise. Integrating perspectives from neuroscience, psychology, and sociology is likely to yield a more holistic view of everyday sadism. Neuroimaging studies, for example, may identify brain regions associated with the anticipation or experience of harm-based pleasure, such as activity in the ventral striatum. Simultaneously, sociological investigations could reveal how systemic inequality, anonymity, or power imbalances facilitate sadistic behaviors in group contexts. Behavioral economics could further contribute by modeling the decision-making processes underlying harm-for-pleasure actions, highlighting reward – punishment trade-offs.

Finally, the development of ethically sound, innovative methodologies is crucial. Technologies such as virtual reality (VR) offer immersive environments that simulate social interactions without endangering participants. These tools can be used to study real-time decision-making, emotional responses, and physiological markers associated with sadistic behavior, all while maintaining ethical safeguards. Coupling VR with biometric measures such as heart rate variability or galvanic skin response could provide richer, multidimensional data on the affective and physiological correlates of sadistic acts. By leveraging these innovations, researchers could meaningfully expand the boundaries of what can be ethically and empirically examined in this complex domain.

Conclusion

Everyday sadism represents a pervasive yet under-researched dimension of human behavior, characterized by the pleasure derived from causing or observing harm in both overt and socially sanctioned contexts. This review has outlined its defining features, historical development, and integration within the Dark Tetrad framework, providing a comprehensive synthesis of current literature. By examining manifestations across personal relationships, workplaces, and broader societal domains, the review highlights the profound psychological and relational impacts of sadistic behaviors, impacts that frequently remain unrecognized, minimized, or misattributed to other personality constructs.

Significant methodological advances have facilitated progress in this field. Instruments such as the Short Sadistic Impulse Scale (O'Meara, Davies, and Hammond 2011) and paradigms like the Varieties of Sadistic Tendencies (Buckels, Jones, and Paulhus 2013) enable robust and replicable assessment of subclinical sadism. These tools, alongside insights from evolutionary, cognitive-behavioral, and social learning theories, have deepened our understanding of the mechanisms that sustain everyday sadism in offline, hybrid, and digital contexts. Recent adaptations of these instruments for cross-cultural and multi-lingual use further demonstrate their potential for broader global applicability.

Nevertheless, several limitations remain. Conceptual overlap with traits such as psychopathy and narcissism complicates the construct's distinctiveness. An overreliance on self-report measures and the predominance of Western study populations further constrain generalizability. A lack of consensus on operational definitions also hinders meta-analytic synthesis and policy translation. To advance the field, future research should focus on refining theoretical models, conducting cross-cultural comparisons, and employing ethically sound innovations, such as virtual reality and behavioral observation, to better capture sadistic tendencies as they occur.

Longitudinal and interdisciplinary approaches are especially promising. These methods can elucidate the developmental trajectory of sadism, its neural underpinnings, and its interaction with broader social systems. Integrating findings from neuroscience, criminology, sociology, and behavioral economics could create a richer, multi-layered understanding of harm-for-pleasure behavior and inform targeted prevention strategies. As the field matures, it must also integrate findings into practical domains. Understanding everyday sadism is not only an academic exercise but a necessary foundation for promoting empathy, reducing interpersonal harm, and informing therapeutic, legal, and organizational interventions. Such integration is essential for designing interventions that are culturally sensitive, evidence-based, and adaptable across contexts.

Ultimately, recognizing and addressing everyday sadism is critical to fostering healthier relationships, safer workplaces, and more compassionate societies. A sustained commitment to interdisciplinary, ethically rigorous, and globally inclusive research will ensure that the study of everyday sadism moves beyond theoretical interest toward meaningful social impact.

Author contributions

CRedit: **Rebecca Ward**: Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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