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Dark necessities: The influence of the dark triad, costs, and benefits on bribery intention

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Abstract

Research shows positive relationships between the dark triad and corruption intention. However, it remains open, whether dark personalities align their behavior according to a cost-benefit analysis. This study examines whether high benefits of bribery strengthen the positive impact of the sub-facets of the dark triad (i.e., Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy) on bribe-taking intention, whether high costs of bribery buffer positive effects of the dark triad on bribe-taking intention, and whether positive effects of high benefits are buffered by high costs. Relationships are tested in an experimental vignette study (N = 164).

Results show that all three sub-facets of the dark triad are positively related to bribe-taking intention. Moreover, high costs weaken the positive effects of high benefits on bribe-taking intention. Most importantly, while narcissistic and psychopathic individuals feel particularly inclined to engage in bribery when benefits are high, dark individuals are not deterred by high costs. Findings imply that corruption arises from a complex interplay between personality and cost-benefit analyses. Important implications for corruption prevention are derived.

Keywords: bribery, dark triad, Rational Choice Theory, Situational Action Theory, crime, personality

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Introduction

Given the immense costs of corruption to the economy and society, research has increasingly focused on its causes and effects. There are different approaches to understand the conditions of corruption emergence, and literature suspects that corruption rests on different prospective decision-making processes including intrapersonal and interpersonal factors (Köbis et al., 2016). On the one hand, it seems plausible that personal dispositions and personality traits are related to corruption. The so-called dark triad of personality describes the combination of three interrelated ‘dark’ personality traits, namely 1) Machiavellianism (i.e., subclinical manipulative personality traits), 2) narcissism (i.e., subclinical forms of feelings of grandiosity, dominance, superiority, and sense of entitlement), and 3) psychopathy (i.e., subclinical forms of high impulsivity and thrill-seeking with low empathy and anxiety; Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Previous research has already shown that the dark triad and its sub-facets are strongly related to criminal behavior, including corruption (Hauser et al., 2021; Manara et al., 2020; Szabó et al., 2021; Zhao et al., 2016). On the other hand, it seems also plausible that situational characteristics or personal motives play an important role in corruption (Aguilera & Vadera, 2008; Rabl, 2011). Rational Choice Theory suggests that primarily an intrapersonal cost-benefit analysis determines whether or not a crime is committed (Juraev, 2018). In this case, decisions would be made according to the greatest subjective benefit and the lowest cost.

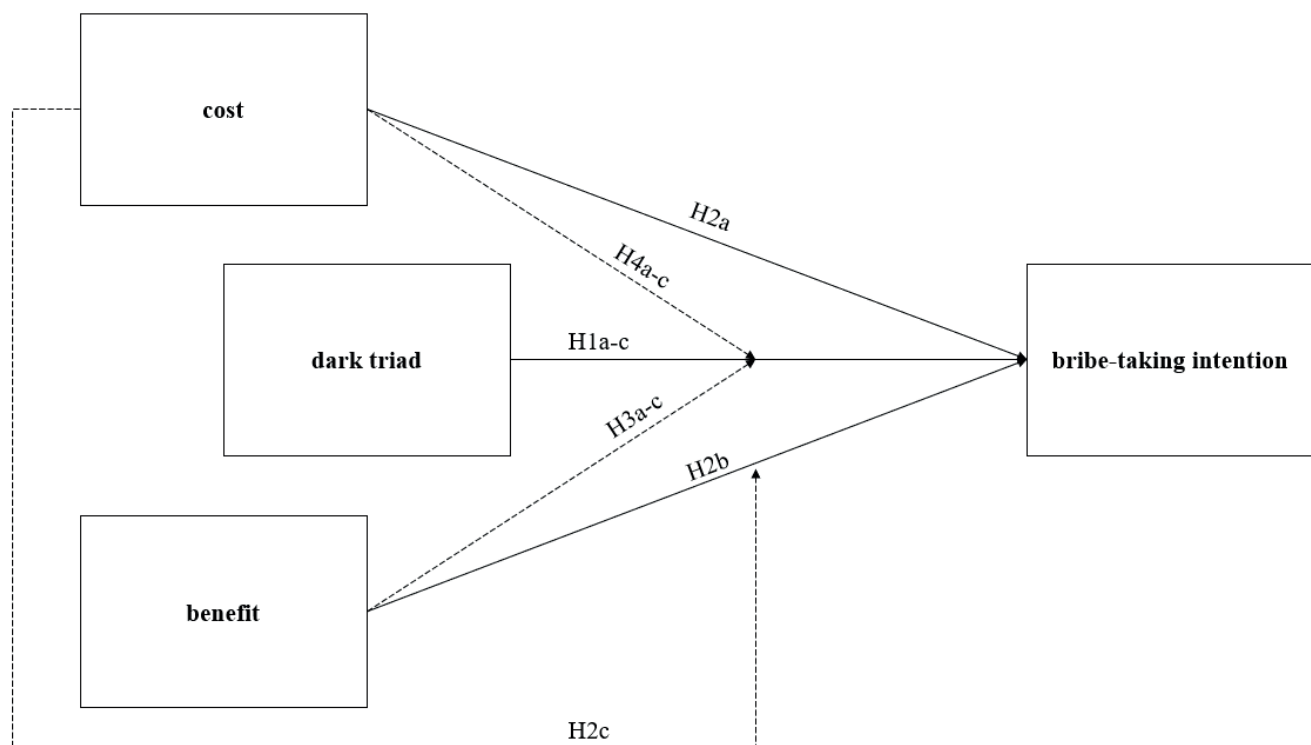
Considering both perspectives, it seems obvious that the emergence of corruption is not a one-dimensional phenomenon but results from a complex interplay of different

influencing factors such as personality traits and cost-benefit analyses. This would be in line with more recent approaches such as Situational Action Theory (Wikström, 2004), which postulates that crime results from an interplay of individual and situational factors.

However, up to now empirical research considering the complex interaction of personality and cost-benefit analyses on corruption intention is lacking. Studies have *either* looked at personality (e.g., Zhao et al., 2016) *or* the influence of costs and benefits (e.g., Paternoster & Simpson, 1996). Understanding the mechanisms underlying corruption intentions is crucial for developing effective prevention strategies. The dark personality traits are known to be associated with a higher propensity for corruption. However, corruption is not solely a product of personality traits; it also involves decision-making processes in which individuals may weigh potential costs (e.g., sanctions, detection risk) against perceived benefits (e.g., financial gain, power). Investigating the interaction between the dark triad and cost-benefit analyses provides a more nuanced understanding of corruption intentions. This knowledge can inform tailored interventions, ultimately reducing the prevalence of corrupt behavior in organizational contexts.

It remains an open question whether individuals who are more prone to engage in corruption because of their personality traits actually base their decision regarding corruption participation on the costs and benefits of that action. Therefore, the aim of this study is to examine 1) whether the dark triad is related to bribe-taking intentions, 2) whether high costs decrease, and high benefits increase bribe-taking intentions, 3) whether high costs weaken the positive effects of high benefits, and 4) whether personality effects on bribe-taking intention are influenced by the costs and benefits of bribery (see Figure 1).

Fig. 1. Research model of the direct and interactive effects between the dark triad, costs, and benefits on bribe-taking intention.



Note. Dashed lines represent moderating effects.

The respective relationships are examined in an experimental vignette study with survey elements.

The study contributes to the literature in several ways: From a theoretical perspective, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of the antecedents of corruption and further validates both Rational Choice and Situational Action Theory. From a methodological perspective, the systematic manipulation of the costs and benefits in experimental vignettes allows testing for causal assumptions, while excluding the influence of other third variables and strengthening the validity of the results (Atzmüller & Steiner, 2010; Schwickerath et al., 2016). The combination with survey elements measuring participants' levels of the dark triad initially allows to test whether individuals with a higher crime propensity would engage in bribery under certain combinations of costs and benefits. On a practical level, the present study contributes to corruption prevention. After examining the influences of costs and benefits of bribery, as well as their interaction with each other and the dark triad, an assessment can be made as to whether disciplinary sanctions or regular controls could have an influence on corruption.

The dark triad and corruption intention

Research suggests that criminal behavior is associated with certain personality traits (Eysenck, 1996). Particularly one personality constellation is considered in crime research: The dark triad. The dark triad was introduced by Paulhus and Williams (2002) and describes three interrelated personality traits, namely Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy. According to Paulhus and Williams, Machiavellianism describes individuals who are particularly cold and manipulative (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Machiavellianism is associated with a cynical worldview, the use of manipulative tactics, and an increased need for power and influence (Jones & Paulhus, 2014; Wisse & Sleafos, 2016). Narcissism describes personalities characterized by a high sense of entitlement and strong dominance, which perceive themselves as grandiose and superior (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Narcissistic individuals also show exploitative, entitlement, leadership and authority tendencies (Jones & Paulhus, 2014). Finally, psychopathy describes personalities characterized by high levels of impulsivity and thrill-seeking combined with low levels of empathy and anxiety (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). According to the literature, psychopathy is also associated with manipulations, callous affects, an erratic lifestyle, and antisocial behavior (Jones & Paulhus, 2014).

Previous research already revealed links between the dark triad and corruption intention. In 2016, a vignette study by Zhao, Zhang and Xu provided first empirical evidence for positive relationships of all three sub-facets of the dark triad and corruption intention: Individuals with high expressions on the dark triad showed both higher bribe-taking intentions and higher bribe-offering intentions than those with low expressions on the dark triad. The authors assume that 'dark' personalities' corruption tendencies are explained by their common use of manipulative, exploitative, and devious methods in order to achieve personal goals, as well as their erratic antisocial personality (Zhao et al., 2016).

Since then, these relationships were confirmed in further empirical studies (Hauser et al., 2021; Manara et al., 2020; Szabó et al., 2021). For instance, individuals high in Machiavellianism exhibit strategic manipulation and a focus on personal gain (Jones & Paulhus, 2014; Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Their calculated approach to decision-making enables them to exploit opportunities for corruption and unethical actions (Manara et al., 2020). In turn, narcissistic individuals are driven by a desire for admiration, power, and status (Jones & Paulhus, 2014; Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Their inflated sense of entitlement makes them more likely to rationalize corrupt behaviors to achieve personal goals, while underestimating the risk of detection. Finally, psychopathic traits, such as impulsivity, callousness, and a lack of remorse (Jones & Paulhus, 2014; Paulhus & Williams, 2002) contribute to corruption intention by diminishing emotional and moral inhibitions. Individuals high in psychopathy experience less guilt or fear of consequences (Marsh, 2013), making them more prone to engage in corruption without consideration for the harm caused to others.

In a first step, the current study aims to replicate previous findings on the relationship between the dark triad and corruption intention with regard to their bribe-taking intention. Based on previous studies (Szabó et al., 2021; Zhao et al., 2016), the following hypothesis is stated:

Hypothesis 1: a) Machiavellianism, b) narcissism, and c) psychopathy are positively related to bribe-taking intentions.

Costs, benefits, and corruption intention

Besides personality, also situational or motivational factors may influence corruption intention. Rational Choice Theory assumes that humans are economically acting individuals who invest their own resources according to a cost-benefit principle regarding the greatest subjective benefit. Accordingly, an individual's decision whether or not to commit a crime would be based on a cost-benefit trade-off when the possibility of committing a crime arises (Juraev, 2018), so that individuals would commit crimes when criminal behavior is rewarding, and the costs are low. In relation to white-collar crime, Rational Choice Theory is of particular importance. If a behavior is associated with high benefits and low costs, an economically minded person may consider a criminal act to be reasonable.

There are several factors that can arguably be classified as costs or benefits of criminal behavior. For example, formal sanctions against the organization or individual (e.g., fine or dismissal), informal sanctions against the organization or individual (e.g., loss of prestige or withdrawal from important projects), self-imposed punishments (e.g., shame or remorse), the punishment severity and its likelihood, or the risk that a crime will be discovered are among the costs discussed (Carson, 2014; Paternoster & Simpson, 1996; Treisman, 2000).

Consistent with these assumptions, a scenario-based vignette study by Modesto et al. showed a negative relationship between perceived severity of punishment and expected third-party corruption (Modesto et al., 2020). Results showed that individuals rated the likelihood that an individual would act corruptly lower when the expected punishment was higher.

Similarly, Bai et al. found a negative relationship between perceived likelihood of punishment and expected third-party corruption (Bai et al., 2014). Thus, individuals evaluate the likelihood of corruption as a function of not only the severity of the punishment, but also its likelihood. Moreover, a survey study by Paternoster and Simpson was able to show that the threat of criminal and civil sanctions against individuals, as well as the fear of informal sanctions, can reduce the intention to commit corporate offenses such as corruption (Paternoster & Simpson, 1996). The authors conclude that the decision to commit a corrupt act is indeed based on a cost-benefit trade-off.

However, empirical evidence on the impact of high costs of a criminal act, especially for the specific phenomenon of bribe-taking, remains scarce. Following the empirical findings of Modesto et al. (2020; Bai et al. 2014), as well as Paternoster and Simpson (1996), this study aims to replicate the negative effects of high costs on bribe-taking intentions. The following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 2a: High costs decrease bribe-taking intentions.

In line with Rational Choice Theory, previous research also suggests that corruption offenses are not only related to the costs of a corrupt act, but also to its economic benefits (Rabl, 2011). Moreover, it is argued that not only individual benefits, but also organizational benefits may play an important role in corruption offenses (e.g., monetary advantage or prestige; Paternoster & Simpson, 1996). However, as with the costs of corruption, there is only little empirical evidence on the relationship between the benefits of corruption and corruption intention.

A study by Piliavin et al. provided empirical evidence that financial benefits are positively related to the propensity to corrupt (Piliavin et al., 1986). In this study, subjects were more open to bribe offers when the bribe money was higher. Paternoster and Simpson also demonstrated positive relationships between monetary benefits and a positive organizational reputation and intention to corrupt. Accordingly, the likelihood of corruption increases not only when individuals expect high financial benefits in the form of revenue or cost savings, but also when they believe that their actions will improve their reputation and social standing (Paternoster & Simpson, 1996).

Since there is still little empirical evidence on the relationship between the benefits of a corrupt act and corruption intention, the aim of this study is to replicate and extend previous research findings. Consistent with the findings of Piliavin et al. (1986) and Paternoster and Simpson (1996), it is hypothesized that high benefits of a corrupt act make corruption offenses appear more attractive, so that individuals are more likely to engage in corruption. The following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 2b: High benefits increase bribe-taking intentions.

In addition to the direct effects of the costs and benefits of a corrupt act on corruption intention, it seems also plausible that costs and benefits influence each other. While high benefits are associated with a higher propensity to corrupt (Paternoster & Simpson, 1996; Piliavin et al., 1986), it is conceivable that high costs may mitigate this effect, as costs have a deterrent effect (Bai et al., 2014; Modesto et al., 2020; Paternoster & Simpson, 1996). For example, if a person is offered a valuable gift in the context of a business relationship, the person might initially be inclined to accept it because it could have a high monetary

or personal value. If it is unlikely that the person will become known to have accepted the gift, or if the expected sanctions are low, there is little to prevent the person from accepting the gift, thus engaging in corruption. However, if it is very likely that others will learn of the acceptance of the gift (e.g., supervisors or colleagues), or if the likelihood of punishment is very high, the costs may outweigh the benefits (e.g., a warning or termination). In this case, bribe-taking would be more likely to be discouraged.

Since high costs of an action tend to have a deterrent effect on corruption intention (Bai et al., 2014; Modesto et al., 2020; Paternoster & Simpson, 1996) so that it is likely that high costs may outweigh high benefits, the following is assumed:

Hypothesis 2c: High costs weaken the positive effects of high benefits on bribe-taking intentions.

The interplay between costs, benefits, and the dark triad on corruption intention

Considering the empirical evidence of both perspectives (i.e., personality and situational influences), it seems likely that individual and situational factors interact. Situational Action Theory (Wikström, 2004) postulates that *individuals are the source of their actions* as they perceive, choose, and execute their actions, but *the causes of action are situational* as the individuals' perception of action alternatives, process of choices, and execution of action are guided by the relevant input from a person-environment interaction. While individuals with a low crime propensity are largely immune to criminogenic exposure, individuals with a higher crime propensity are vulnerable to criminogenic exposure; the higher the crime propensity the stronger the influence from criminogenic exposure (Wikström et al., 2018).

There are already several studies supporting the assumptions of Situational Action Theory on general delinquency and offenses such as shoplifting, graffiti, or vandalism (e.g., Eklund & Fritzell, 2014; Pauwels et al., 2018; Svensson, 2015; Wikström et al., 2011). Empirical research applying Situational Action Theory to the specific case of bribery is yet lacking. However, in the light of Situational Action Theory and previous findings on the direct links between the dark triad and cost-benefit analyses with corruption intention, it is questionable whether dark individuals who are more susceptible to corruption base their decision making on the costs and benefits of an action.

First, it is likely that the positive relationship between the dark triad and corruption intention is even stronger when the benefits are high. Due to their manipulative nature and exploitative tendencies (Furnham et al., 2013; Jonason & Webster, 2010; Paulhus & Williams, 2002), Machiavellian personalities are strongly associated with corruption (Manara et al., 2020; Szabó et al., 2021; Zhao et al., 2016). These individuals strategically manipulate and exploit others to achieve their goals, often disregarding ethical considerations (Paulhus & Williams, 2002), so that social prestige and monetary benefits could play an important role as an amplifier to engage in corruption. If Machiavellians, who are more prone to corruption (Zhao et al., 2016), could gain social influence and prestige, the corrupt act might appear even

more attractive to them. Particularly the intent to achieve self-centered goals promotes corrupt practice and tolerance towards corruption (Wang & Sun, 2016). Since also narcissism is linked to corruption through a high striving for power and status (Szabó et al., 2021; Zhao et al., 2016), social or monetary gain might amplify their intentions, as they want to dominate and be superior (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). The same may apply for individuals scoring high on psychopathy. These individuals behave antisocial, impulsive and uninhibited (Amos et al., 2022; Paulhus & Williams, 2002), so that external incentives such as increasing social prestige or a high monetary gain may amplify their impulsive and thrill-seeking intentions. This would also be in line with Situational Action Theory, which assumes that the influence from criminogenic exposure is higher for individuals with higher crime propensity (Wikström et al., 2018). As it is argued that high benefits of bribery amplify 'dark' personalities' motivation to engage in bribery, the following hypothesis is put forward:

Hypothesis 3: The relationship between *a*) Machiavellianism, *b*) narcissism, and *c*) psychopathy and bribe-taking intentions is stronger when the benefits of an act are high.

Second, regarding the costs of corruption, it is conceivable that 'dark' individuals, who are more prone to corruption offenses (Zhao et al., 2016), may not be deterred from corruption by high costs. For example, Machiavellian personalities generally have a higher desire for power (Wisse & Sleebos, 2016). As they are used to manipulative tactics, they may not respond or simply ignore potential sanctions when they assume that a corruption offense can help them to achieve their goals (i.e., to gain power and influence). Narcissists, in turn, tend to behave unethically and immorally, and are characterized by a high sense of entitlement, malicious envy and superiority (Amos et al., 2022; Lange et al., 2018; Paulhus & Williams, 2002), so that they may overestimate themselves and thus underestimate the risks of detection and sanctions. Finally, individuals scoring high on psychopathy tend to be highly impulsive and behave in a largely antisocial manner. At the same time, they are not empathic and have a low fear potential (Paulhus & Williams, 2002), so that expected costs such as a high probability of detection or severe punishment are unlikely to impress them or affect their actions. Also this would be in line with Situational Action Theory, as the theory postulates that personalities who show a higher crime propensity are stronger influenced by criminogenic exposure (Wikström et al., 2018), which may also apply under the influence of high costs. As it is argued that individuals with high expressions on the dark triad do not respond to high costs, the following hypothesis is stated:

Hypothesis 4: The relationship between *a*) Machiavellianism, *b*) narcissism, and *c*) psychopathy and bribe-taking intentions is not influenced by high costs.

Method

Sample

An online study was conducted using a combination of a survey and experimental vignettes. Data were collected from

October to November 2022 via convenience sampling. Respondents were recruited through email distribution lists, social networks, and research websites. Participants recruited from research websites were incentivized with credits, allowing them to enhance the visibility of their own studies on the platform. The final sample consisted of $N = 164$ respondents.

Most participants reported being female (75%), while 23.2% reported being male (1.8% reported a different or other gender). Most respondents (51.2%) were between 18 and 25 years old (26-35 years: 29.9%; 36-45 years: 8.5%; 46-55 years: 5.5%; 56-65 years: 3.7%; 66 years or older: 1.2%). Nearly half of the respondents reported that their highest educational degree was a university degree (49.4%). Participants were employed in various sectors, for example media, education and research, administration, banking and insurance, construction, healthcare, retail, industry, IT, or social services.

Procedure

To test the hypotheses, a design combining an experimental vignette study (measuring effects of the within-subjects factors *costs* and *benefits*) and a survey (measuring the between-subjects factor *dark triad*) was chosen. Since the phenomenon of bribery is difficult to capture in practice, an actual response should be approached using constructed but realistic scenarios. Since individual cost-benefit assessments may vary from person to person, this approach was also used to control for and measure the impact of low or high costs and benefits on intended behavior. In this way, the impact of high and low costs and benefits on bribe-taking intentions can be compared within an individual. The survey part was chosen to measure the participants' personality. This approach allows to compare the effects of costs and benefits on bribe-taking intentions between individuals with different expressions of the dark triad.

In the experimental vignettes, participants were asked to put themselves in the role of a project manager in the public relations department of a large technology company. Since their supervisor was supposedly on vacation at the time, they had sole decision-making authority over the awarding of contracts. To find the right agencies for an advertising campaign for a new television, the project managers had four appointments with representatives from four different, external agencies: one appointment for a print campaign, one appointment for a social media campaign, one appointment for a radio campaign and one appointment for a TV campaign. This approach allowed the scenarios to be evaluated independently of each other. Each participant worked through a total of four scenarios with four different factor combinations of costs (low vs. high) and benefits (low vs. high), represented in the four vignettes (print campaign: cost *low* / benefit *low*; TV campaign: cost *low* / benefit *high*; radio campaign: cost *high* / benefit *low*; social media campaign: cost *high* / benefit *high*). Within the scenarios, benefits were defined as monetary and societal advantages, while costs were defined as potential sanctions and the detection risk. After each scenario, participants were asked to provide information on how they would behave in each situation to measure their

bribe-taking intention. Afterwards, the next scenario was presented without a time-lag. The sequence of the vignettes was randomized between participants to counteract sequence and attention effects. This procedure resulted in a 2 (*low costs* vs. *high costs*) x 2 (*low benefits* vs. *high benefits*) x 2 (*low expression of the dark triad* vs. *high expression of the dark triad*) factorial mixed study design.

Vignettes

Each vignette started with information about the upcoming appointment, for example: “*Today is the appointment for the TV campaign. You have the appointment with Mr. Seiler from the Puck agency. The Puck agency is a long-established agency, [...]*”. The agency representative then presents the plans for the campaign, for example: “*Mr. Seiler is primarily relying on prime-time advertising from 8 p.m. onwards. On the major private stations, you can look very closely at which TV formats are being watched by the target group you want to address. He also suggests running short spots in the broadcast hours to encourage the audience to buy.*” As the scenario unfolds, it becomes clear that the business partner really wants to bring the deal to a positive conclusion. For example, “*Mr. Seiler is trying to win you over for his agency at all costs: ‘We have worked with many large technology companies, but working with you as one of the market leaders would be something very special for us.’*” After addressing the content of each campaign, an offer was made, acceptance of which would constitute a criminal offense of bribery. For example, “*As a small thank you, I would like to invite you to the Media Ball. All the important representatives of the tech scene will be there! The costs for the ticket, travel and hotel will of course be covered by me.*”. Particularly abruptly appearing offers are known to increase the likelihood of corruption (Köbis et al., 2017). At the end of each scenario, it was also pointed out that the company would not allow such an offer to be accepted, for example: “*Of course you know that it is actually not permitted to accept such offers from potential contractors.*”. This was to ensure that all participants were equally aware that it was prohibited to accept the offer.

In addition, following Rational Choice Theory, the costs, and benefits of accepting the offer were manipulated as independent variables (*low costs* vs. *high costs* and *low benefits* vs. *high benefits*). For the operationalization of a high benefit, participants were also given information about the monetary and social benefits. According to the literature, monetary and societal benefits are important predictors of the willingness to engage in corruption (Paternoster & Simpson, 1996). For example, a high benefit was characterized by cues such as “*[...] it is usually hard to get such a ticket, and if you do, the tickets are priceless (monetary benefit: 84%). In addition, you could make important business contacts there, which would also make it easier for you to advance in your career (social benefit: 86%).*”. In contrast, for a low benefit statements were such as “*The tickets for this event are not very expensive (monetary benefit: 9%). It is unlikely that you will be able to make important contacts there (social benefit: 8%).*”.

To operationalize high costs, information on the risk of detection and the likelihood of serious professional

consequences have been systematically manipulated. According to the literature, detection risk and expected sanctions are important predictors of the propensity to corrupt (Treisman, 2000). For example, when the costs of a corrupt act were high, information such as this was placed: “*However, since the event will be reported in the professional press, it is likely that your colleagues or superiors will learn of your participation (risk of detection: 86%). If it then came out that you had allowed yourself to be invited, this could have serious disciplinary consequences for you (probability of serious professional consequences: 84%).*”. Low cost, on the other hand, had interspersed references like this: “*However, it is very unlikely that colleagues or your supervisor would find out (risk of detection: 9%) or that you would suffer serious professional consequences as a result (probability of serious professional consequences: 9%).*”.

Measures

Dark triad. As an independent variable, the expression of the dark triad was assessed using the German version of the Short Dark Triad Personality Scale by Malesza et al. (2019), originally developed by Jones and Paulhus (2014). The facets Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy were surveyed with nine items each and combined into an overall scale. An example item for measuring Machiavellianism is: “*It’s wise to keep track of information that you can use against people later.*”. An item measuring the facet narcissism for example is: “*I insist on getting the respect I deserve.*”. psychopathy was measured for example with items such as: “*I like to get revenge on authorities.*”. All items were answered on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*disagree*) to 5 (*agree*). Cronbach’s alpha was $\alpha = .77$ for Machiavellianism, $\alpha = .72$ for narcissism, and $\alpha = .77$ for psychopathy.

Bribe-taking intention. The dependent variable was the respondents’ willingness to accept a bribe. To this end, after each scenario, participants were asked to provide information in a single item about how they would act in each situation. The item was, “*Given all the information, how likely are you to accept the offer and award the contract to the agency?*”. Response options were on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*very unlikely*) to 5 (*very likely*).

Statistical procedure

All calculations were performed using IBM SPSS 24. To examine the direct and interactive relationships between the factors costs and benefits of an act in relation to bribe-taking intentions (H2a-c), a two-way repeated measures ANOVA was conducted. To examine the direct effects of the dark triad (H1a-c) and its interactive effects with costs and benefits in relation to bribe-taking intentions (H3a-c & H4a-c), three-way mixed ANOVAs with repeated measures were computed. The within-subjects factors were the costs (*low cost* vs. *high cost*) and benefits (*low benefits* vs. *high benefits*) of an act. The three sub-facets of the dark triad were considered as between-subjects factors. Age and gender served as control variables to counteract any bias due to age or gender effects.

Results

Participants' corruption intention was highest in the low cost / high benefit condition $M = 3.23$ ($SD = 1.22$) and the lowest in the high cost / low benefit condition $M = 1.62$ ($SD = 0.84$; low cost / low benefit $M = 2.62$ [$SD = 1.21$]; high cost / high benefit $M = 2.15$ [$SD = 1.06$]). All three sub-facets of the dark triad were positively related to overall corruption intention (Machiavellianism: $r = .26$, $p < .001$, narcissism $r = .26$, $p < .001$, psychopathy: $r = .25$, $p < .001$; see Table 1).

Hypothesis 1 assumed positive relationships between the dark triad and corruption intention. As expected, a mixed RM-ANOVA showed a positive relationship between Machiavellianism ($F [28,133] = 1.69$; $p < .05$; $\eta p^2 = .26$) as well as psychopathy and bribe-taking intentions ($F [28,133] = 2.31$; $p < .01$; $\eta p^2 = .31$). However, results showed no relationship between narcissism and bribe-taking intentions ($F [28,133] = 1.31$; $p = .17$; $\eta p^2 = .20$; see Table 2). H1a and H1c are confirmed, while H1b is rejected.

Tab. 2. Direct and interaction effects of the dark triad, costs, and benefits on bribe-taking intention.

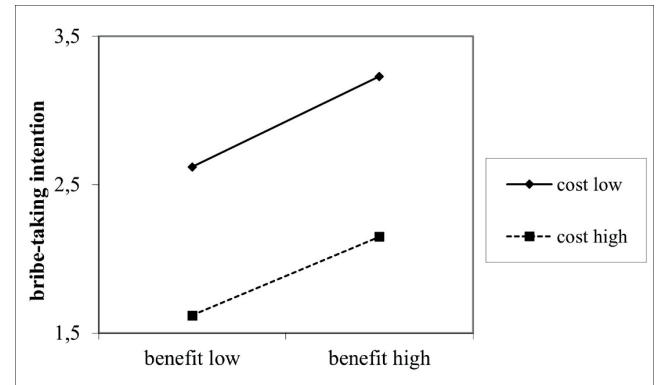
| | RMSSD | df | F | p | ηp^2 |
|---------------------------------|-------|----|--------|------|------------|
| <i>Between-subjects effects</i> | | | | | |
| Machiavellianism | | 28 | 1.692 | .026 | .263 |
| narcissism | | 26 | 1.307 | .165 | .201 |
| psychopathy | | 26 | 2.310 | .001 | .308 |
| <i>Within-subjects effects</i> | | | | | |
| costs | | 1 | 10.727 | .001 | .062 |
| costs x Machiavellianism | | 28 | 0.767 | .791 | .139 |
| costs x narcissism | | 26 | 1.337 | .146 | .205 |
| costs x psychopathy | | 26 | 0.961 | .523 | .150 |
| benefits | | 1 | 6.826 | .010 | .041 |
| benefits x Machiavellianism | | 28 | 1.264 | .190 | .210 |
| benefits x narcissism | | 26 | 1.741 | .022 | .251 |
| benefits x psychopathy | | 26 | 1.734 | .023 | .250 |
| costs x benefits | | 1 | 4.870 | .029 | .029 |

Notes. $N = 164$.

Hypothesis 2 stated that a high benefit of bribery has a positive, and that high costs have a negative effect on bribe-taking intentions. Moreover, it was expected that high costs can outweigh the positive effects of high benefits on bribe-taking intention. As expected, results of the RM-ANOVA showed a positive relationship between the benefits and bribe-taking intentions ($F [1,161] = 6.83$; $p < .05$; $\eta p^2 = .04$; see Table 2) and a negative relationship between the costs and bribe-taking intentions ($F [1,161] = 10.73$; $p < .01$; $\eta p^2 = .06$; see Table 2). Moreover, results showed an interaction between the benefits and costs of an act in relation to bribe-taking

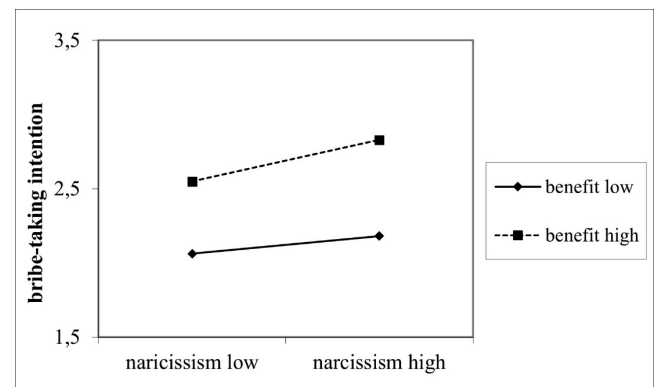
intention ($F [1,161] = 4.87$; $p < .05$; $\eta p^2 = .03$; see Table 2). The positive relationship between the benefits of a corrupt act and corruption intention was weaker when the costs of the act were high (see Figure 2). Hypotheses 2a-c are confirmed.

Fig. 2. Interaction between benefits and costs on bribe-taking intention.



Furthermore, Hypothesis 3 stated that the relationship between the dark triad and corruption intention is stronger when the benefits of an act are high. Consistent with this expectation, results showed a significant interaction between narcissism ($F [26,135] = 1.74$; $p < .05$; $\eta p^2 = .25$; see Table 2) as well as psychopathy ($F [26,135] = 1.73$; $p < .05$; $\eta p^2 = .25$; see Table 2) and the benefits of an act in relation to bribe-taking intention. The relationships between narcissism and psychopathy with bribe-taking intentions were stronger when the benefits were high (see Figure 3 and 4). However, the interaction between Machiavellianism and benefits was not significant ($F [28,133] = 1.26$; $p = .19$; $\eta p^2 = .21$; see Table 2). While Hypothesis 3a is rejected, Hypotheses 3b and 3c are confirmed.

Fig. 3. Interaction between narcissism and benefits on bribe-taking intention.

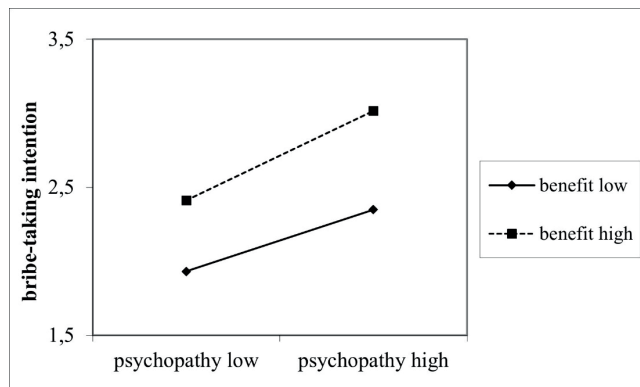


Tab. 1. Correlations between gender, age, Machiavellianism, narcissism, psychopathy, and corruption intention.

| | M | SD | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
|------------------------|-------|-----|---------|------|--------|--------|--------|---|
| 1 Gender | n/a | | - | | | | | |
| 2 Age | 18-25 | | .02 | - | | | | |
| 3 Machiavellianism | 3.00 | .64 | -.10 | .11 | (.77) | | | |
| 4 Narcissism | 2.63 | .61 | .00 | .00 | .32*** | (.72) | | |
| 5 Psychopathy | 2.09 | .62 | -.30*** | -.02 | .47*** | .39*** | (.77) | |
| 6 Corruption intention | 2.43 | .74 | .13 | -.14 | .26*** | .26*** | .25*** | - |

Notes. $N = 164$. *** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$. Cronbach's Alpha in parantheses.

Fig. 4. Interaction between psychopathy and benefits on bribe-taking intention.



Finally, Hypothesis 4 stated that the relationship between the dark triad and bribe-taking intention is not influenced by high costs. In line with the assumptions, results of the mixed RM-ANOVAs do not show significant interactions between the three sub-facets of the dark triad and the costs with respect to bribe-taking intention (Machiavellianism: $F [28,133] = 0.77$; $p = .79$, $\eta^2 = .14$; narcissism: $F [26,135] = 1.34$; $p = .15$, $\eta^2 = .21$; psychopathy: $F [26,135] = 0.96$; $p = .52$, $\eta^2 = .15$; see Table 2). Hypotheses 4a-c are confirmed.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationships between the dark triad, costs, benefits, and bribery. Consistent with the assumptions, results show positive relationships between the sub-facets of the dark triad and bribe-taking intentions. Moreover, the benefits of a corrupt act increase bribe-taking intentions, while the costs decrease bribe-taking intentions, and the effect of high benefits is weakened by high costs. The relationship between the dark triad and bribe-taking intentions is dependent on the benefits of an act, as individuals with high expressions of the dark triad (i.e., narcissism and psychopathy) are more likely to engage in bribery when the benefits are high. Most importantly, the relationship between the dark triad and the bribe-taking intention is not dependent on costs of an act, so that 'dark' individuals seem not to be deterred from corruption by high costs.

In line with previous research, the three sub-facets of the dark triad are positively related to bribe-taking intentions (Szabó et al., 2021; Zhao et al., 2016). As 'dark' individuals are willing to make personal gains at the expense of others (Jones, 2013) and use manipulative, exploitative, and devious methods due to their antisocial personality in order to achieve personal goals (Zhao et al., 2016), they are more likely to accept bribe-offers. However, while all three sub-facets were positively related to overall bribe-taking intention in the pure correlations, the direct effects of narcissism on corruption intention disappeared when accounting for costs and benefits in the RM-ANOVA. This indicates that narcissistic individuals particularly depend their decision on bribery participation on situational influences.

Consistent with Rational Choice Theory and previous literature, results show a positive effect of high benefits and a negative effect of high costs of an act on corruption intention (Paternoster & Simpson, 1996; Piliavin et al., 1986). That is, individuals are more likely to engage in bribery when either the expected costs of that act are low, or the benefits of that act are high. Previous empirical findings on the influence of costs and benefits are rather sparse, although the literature theoretically postulates such trade-offs (Carson, 2014; Paternoster & Simpson, 1996). Thus, this study contributes to empirical research by demonstrating relationships between 1) costs in terms of the risk of detection as well as the likelihood of punishment and 2) benefits in terms of monetary advantages as well as social prestige and bribe-taking intention.

Moreover, this study is the first to empirically show that the costs and benefits of an act offset each other regarding bribery: High costs of an act weaken the positive relationship between the benefits and bribe-taking intentions. Thus, individuals who feel a strong incentive to corrupt because of high benefits will refrain from doing so if the costs are too high. This is an important result confirming cost-benefit trade-offs as postulated in Rational Choice Theory. Results suggest that when the barriers to corruption are high (e.g., high risk of detection or strict sanctions), high corruption benefits, such as a financial gain or social prestige, may lose their attractiveness. The experimental design allows to infer causal relationships (Atzmüller & Steiner, 2010; Schwickerath et al., 2016), so that the results underline that corruption intention indeed depends on a trade-off between the costs and benefits of an action, as postulated in theory.

Moreover, results show that the relationship between the dark triad and bribe-taking intentions is influenced by the benefits of an act. As expected, and in line with Situational Action Theory (Wikström et al., 2018), individuals with high levels of narcissism and psychopathy feel more inclined to commit corruption when the benefits are high. As narcissists want to dominate and be superior (Paulhus & Williams, 2002), they aim for social and monetary gain due to their exploitative tendencies, malicious envy and a high sense of entitlement (Amos et al., 2022; Lange et al., 2018). Also psychopathic individuals respond stronger to social prestige or a high monetary gain as these benefits foster their impulsivity and thrill-seeking intentions so that they behave antisocial and uninhibited (Amos et al., 2022; Paulhus & Williams, 2002). However, this pattern was not evident for Machiavellianism. Machiavellians may generally behave in a cold and manipulative manner, so that they do not adjust their behavior according to its benefits or did not disclose their intentions in the current study.

In addition, results show that 'dark' individuals are less concerned about potential consequences because of their manipulative and exploitative tendencies (Jones & Paulhus, 2014; Paulhus & Williams, 2002), as they do not respond to the risks of high costs. This indicates that high hurdles and threatening sanctions fail to have a deterrent effect particularly for individuals who are more prone to corruption from the outset, as they are not deterred by high costs. However, while the costs in this study were rather mild (i.e., detection risk and disciplinary consequences), it is conceivable that harsher

sanctions could have deterrent effects, which should be tested in future studies.

Theoretical implications

The present study supports the notion that both personality and cost-benefit considerations are relevant influencing factors for corruption intention. While high costs of an act reduce bribery intention, high benefits promote the willingness to act corruptly. However, the effects of high benefits can be mitigated by high costs of an act, so that the willingness to accept a bribe is lower when benefits and costs of an action are high at the same time. Particularly 'dark' individuals, who are generally more prone to corrupt behavior, appear to be further incentivized to corrupt by high monetary and social benefits of corrupt actions. However, of all things individuals who are more prone to engage in corruption are not deterred by high costs of an act. These findings contribute to further theory development by replicating and extending previous findings on the relationship between personality, cost-benefit tradeoffs, and corruption intention.

First, this study replicates and extends previous findings on the relationship between cost-benefit tradeoffs and corruption intention (Paternoster & Simpson, 1996). While previous studies mainly examined the influence of monetary benefits (Piliavin et al., 1986) or civil sanctions (Paternoster & Simpson, 1996), this study considers the risk of detection and disciplinary consequences as a cost factor as well as societal benefits.

In addition, results contribute to the empirical validation of Rational Choice Theory by applying it to bribery. This study is the first to empirically examine the interplay between the costs and benefits of a bribery act in terms of bribe-taking intentions, contributing to a deeper understanding of the trade-off processes of costs and benefits in crime. Consistent with the assumptions of Rational Choice Theory (Juraev, 2018), the intention to corrupt depends on a cost-benefit analysis, where high benefits promote the willingness to corrupt, while high costs reduce the willingness and may even weaken the positive effects of high benefits. Also in line with the theory, individuals directed their actions according to a cost-benefit principle in terms of the greatest subjective benefit in the present study (Juraev, 2018).

Moreover, the findings further validate Situational Action Theory (Wikström, 2004). While Rational Choice Theory assumes a pure cost-benefit consideration in the sense of a rational choice, Situational Action Theory postulates an interplay between situational and personal factors. In line with Situational Action Theory and previous findings (Eklund & Fritzell, 2014; Svensson, 2015; Wikström et al., 2018), this study revealed that in addition to these processes, also personal dispositions play an important role in the development of criminality. It is precisely the interplay between personality and benefits that could be crucial in determining whether someone engages in corrupt acts or not, since high benefits generally increase corruption intention, but pose a stronger incentive for dark personalities. The study thus underscores previous assumptions that criminality arises from a complex interplay

of different factors and can serve as a starting point for further theory development (Pauwels et al., 2018; Wikström, 2004).

Limitations and recommendations for future research

The present study is subject to some limitations that should be considered when interpreting the results. First, results are limited in terms of their generalizability. The hypotheses were only tested using hypothetical scenarios. There is a risk that these results may be influenced by subjective perceptions, experiences, or expectations of the participants. For example, it is possible that participants underestimated the true costs of an action or overestimated its benefits because they have different ideas and perceptions of serious occupational consequences or monetary benefits. As a result, outcomes could overestimate or underestimate actual impacts. To address this problem, high and low costs and benefits were clearly defined in the introduction to the vignettes. In addition, the costs and benefits of an action were quantified with a specific percentage value so that the cost and benefit assessment was kept stable.

Second, results are subject to the risk of the intention-behavior gap (i.e., discrepancies between intended and actual behavior; Sheeran & Webb, 2016). While studies show that intentions are a strong predictor of actual behavior (Sheeran, 2002), not all individuals behave according to their actual intentions. Therefore, in reality, participants would not necessarily act as they indicated in this study, which limits the external validity of the results (Atzmüller & Steiner, 2010). However, the chosen design also brings many advantages, as it is difficult to study bribery in the field. In addition, the experimental setting allows for the inference of causal relationships, as the design can rule out the influence of third-party variables (Charness et al., 2012). To overcome the discrepancy between intention and behavior, future studies could use even more realistic behavioral experiments under laboratory conditions or replicate the current results in a field study. For example, scenarios could be re-enacted in live settings with professional actors to get even closer to the actual behavior of the subjects. However, the results of this study show that even hypothetical scenarios can produce the expected effects of cost-benefit analysis and - to some extent - personality on corruption intention. Therefore, it stands to reason that if the costs and benefits were real, the results would be even more pronounced than in this experiment. To test this pattern, the results should be replicated in field studies to increase generalizability.

Third, another important factor limiting the generalizability of the results is the sample of the study. The sample is not representative due to the sample size and the distribution of sociodemographic variables. At $N = 164$ subjects, the sample is relatively small. An a priori power analysis recommended a sample size between $N = 72$ and $N = 400$ to examine medium to small effects. Therefore, it is possible that some effects (e.g., moderating effects of personality) did not become significant due to insufficient statistical power. In addition, the study sample does not match all possible population composition factors. Compared with the average population, the sample is more likely than average to be female (75%), young (51.2%

between 18 and 25 years of age), and highly educated (49.4% had a university degree). Therefore, individuals who typically commit white-collar crimes may be underrepresented, which could skew the results. The presence of the dark triad, on the other hand, is similar to the averages of previous studies and therefore seems to be representative (e.g., Burtăverde et al., 2022; Schmitt et al., 2020; Zhao et al., 2016).

Nevertheless, it should be considered that the reported effects may be somewhat different than would have been the case with a more representative sample. For example, it remains open whether an older sample with a higher proportion of men would behave similarly with respect to the cost-benefit trade-offs. It is conceivable that the effects would be even stronger in this case. Future studies should therefore obtain population-representative samples to adequately cover all social strata and personality structures to generate reliable results.

Fourth, discussing decision-making processes, it is essential to also consider theories beyond Rational Choice Theory, as human behavior is not always driven solely by cost-benefit analyses. While Rational Choice Theory posits that individuals weigh the potential rewards and risks before engaging in a behavior (Juraev, 2018), research highlights its limitations in capturing the complexity of decision-making (see e.g., van Gelder, 2013). For instance, research has shown that decisions are often influenced by psychological, social, and situational factors: Gino and Ariely (2016) emphasize the role of cognitive biases and self-serving justifications in unethical behavior, while Tenbrunsel and Smith-Crowe (2008) argue that ethical decision-making is shaped by context and implicit norms, often diverging from rational calculations. A qualitative study by Manara et al. (2023) underscores this complexity, revealing that individuals may also engage in corrupt behavior due to external pressures, lack of awareness, or social influences. These findings suggest that incorporating alternative frameworks, such as behavioral ethics, social influence theory, or bounded rationality, might provide a more comprehensive understanding of decision-making processes, especially in contexts like corruption as also non-rational factors may play a critical role.

Finally, the measurement of corruption intention is a limiting factor in the present study. Participants had to use a single item after each scenario to indicate how they would behave in each situation. To increase the reliability of the results, future studies should use validated scales with more items to measure behavioral intention.

Practical implications

This study contributes to the public debate on whether high costs of crime in the form of harsh penalties and sanctions have a deterrent effect on potential offenders. In this context, results support the notion that high costs in the form of high risks of detection or disciplinary consequences do indeed have a deterrent effect on corruption intention and that they may even reduce the attractiveness of high benefits of corrupt acts. Since the results show that most individuals base their behavioral intentions on a cost-benefit trade-off, it seems necessary to consider the costs and benefits of corruption in corruption prevention. Corruption offenses may seem

particularly unattractive to potential perpetrators when the benefits are low, and the costs are high.

Since the benefits of an action are difficult to influence, it seems particularly worthwhile to focus on the costs of corruption. This study has shown that high costs seem to have a deterrent effect regardless of personality. Thus, high hurdles and the likelihood of sanctions could deter potential perpetrators from engaging in corruption. To keep the risk of detection high, companies could, for example, set up compliance departments. On the one hand, if organizational procedures are monitored from a legal perspective, opportunities to use corrupt business practices may decrease due to the risk of quick detection. On the other hand, compliance departments can detect corruption violations at an early stage and thus prevent final action.

To achieve an additional deterrent effect through possible sanctions, organizations should also develop compliance guidelines and communicate them transparently to their employees. Compliance guidelines comprise important principles and measures of an organization to comply with certain rules and thus to avoid violations of the rules. These guidelines should clearly describe which actions fall within the scope of corruption, how the organization will proceed in corresponding cases and what sanctions can be imposed. Studies show that knowledge about corruption is an important factor in reducing corruption (Carson, 2014). However, it is alarming that particularly individuals with high corruption tendencies (i.e., high scores on the dark triad) seem not to be deterred by high costs. It is therefore the task of research to look for factors that can also prevent these individuals from acting corruptly.

Conclusion

This study is the first to examine the interplay between the dark triad, costs, benefits, and corruption intention. In line with previous studies, dark personalities show higher corruption tendencies. Moreover, consistent with Rational Choice Theory, high costs may attenuate the positive effects of high benefits on bribery intention. Most importantly, and consistent with Situational Action Theory, this study shows that dark personalities feel particularly inclined to engage in bribery when the benefits of an act are high but are not deterred from bribery by high costs the first time. The findings shed light on the complex interplay between personality and cost-benefit considerations in relation to bribe-taking intentions.

Ethics approval and consent to participate

The study was carried out in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to conducting the study. An ethics approval was not required.

Availability of data statement

The data and materials are available from the author on reasonable request.

Competing interests

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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Authors' contributions

The author confirms sole responsibility for the following: study conception and design, data collection, analysis and interpretation of results, and manuscript preparation.

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