



Machiavellianism and Aggression as Predictors of Emotional Manipulation

Sarwar Khawaja

SK Research-Oxford Business College, UK

Katarina Sokić

SK Research-Oxford Business College, UK

Algebra University, Croatia

Fayyaz Hussain Qureshi

SK Research-Oxford Business College, UK

Helena Nikolić

Faculty of Economics and Business, University of Zagreb, Croatia

Abstract

Background: Emotional manipulation, Machiavellianism, and aggression represent individual characteristics that can substantially shape behaviour and interactions in organisational settings. These traits are linked to counterproductive work behaviours, weakened team functioning, and diminished leadership effectiveness. **Objectives:** This study examines how Machiavellianism, proactive aggression, and reactive aggression predict emotional manipulation, poor emotional skills, and the concealment of emotions, with a specific focus on their relevance for organisational dynamics and workplace relationships. **Methods/Approach:** The Emotional Manipulation Scale, the Short Dark Triad, and the Reactive-Proactive Aggression Questionnaire were applied to a sample of 332 individuals. Data was collected online from a convenience sample of the general population. **Results:** Machiavellianism positively predicted emotional manipulation, poor emotional skills, and emotional concealment. Proactive aggression predicted emotional manipulation and emotional concealment, while reactive aggression predicted emotional manipulation. Machiavellianism added incremental value beyond reactive and proactive aggression in explaining all three emotional outcomes. **Conclusions:** The findings highlight Machiavellianism as a key behavioural risk factor in organisational contexts, shaping manipulative tendencies that can undermine cooperation, leadership quality, and organisational performance. The results provide valuable implications for management, HR practices, and organisational diagnostics.

Keywords: Machiavellianism; leadership; aggression; emotional manipulation; human resource management; counterproductive work behaviour.

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Introduction

Emotional manipulation is the intentional modification or control of another's behaviour or emotions for personal gain. Successful emotional manipulation requires an understanding of and sensitivity to others' emotions, as well as practical social skills (Bacon & Regan, 2016). We can assume that successful manipulators possess a higher level of emotional intelligence, given their understanding of emotional functioning. The literature has described emotional manipulation as a negative aspect of emotional intelligence (Austin et al., 2007), but previous studies have only partially supported this claim. Some research has shown no correlation between emotional intelligence and emotional manipulation (e.g., Austin et al., 2007). In contrast, others have found that a person's gender significantly influences this relationship (Grieve & Mahar, 2010; Grieve & Panebianco, 2013). According to Bacon and Regan (2016), emotional manipulators use their understanding of emotions to satisfy their own emotional needs in socially unacceptable ways. Some of these strategies or tactics include indirect aggression, making others feel negative about their own decisions, and similar behaviours.

It is important to note that emotional manipulation is often covert. For instance, when a socially resourceful aggressor psychologically harms a person, they may appear to have noble intentions toward the victim (Bacon & Regan, 2016). Emotional manipulation strategies are methods individuals use to achieve their desires through emotional influence. Buss (1987) developed a taxonomy that categorised manipulation strategies into 12 distinct types: charm, silent treatment, coercion, reasoning, regression, self-deprecation, invoking responsibility, comparison with others, offering pleasure, monetary reward, rudeness, and reciprocity. Grieve & Panebianco (2013) identify the following determinants of emotional manipulation: emotional intelligence, high social processing capabilities, indirect aggression, and cognitive distortions.

Evolutionary psychology identified three fundamental mechanisms through which individuals or their personalities engage with the social environment: selection, evocation, and manipulation (Buss et al., 1987). The final mechanism, manipulation, pertains to the methods by which individuals deliberately attempt to alter others' behaviours. Specific motives, objectives, and aims to motivate manipulative behaviour; the application of manipulation strategies depends on the desired outcomes. Emotional manipulation is associated with both adaptive and maladaptive personality traits. For instance, Austin et al. (2007) found a positive correlation between Machiavellianism and a measure of emotional manipulation. The basic characteristics of individuals with pronounced Machiavellian traits include high manipulateness, a tendency to exploit others, and a low sense of morality.

Over time, the adjective Machiavellian has become synonymous with a manipulative strategy of social interaction and a personality style that utilises others as tools for personal gain, regardless of the cost. In the workplace, people refer to "Machiavellians" as "social chameleons" due to their ability to adopt the attitudes and behaviours of those around them while simultaneously manipulating the situation to their advantage. This allows them to form strong social bonds, earn the trust and respect of colleagues (O'Boyle et al., 2012), and establish a positive reputation. However, once the workplace recognises their manipulation, their influence diminishes. Only extrinsic motivation drives the behaviour of Machiavellians, prioritising their desires for money, power, status, and competition with others (Jones & Paulhus, 2009). Zettler et al. (2011) linked Machiavellianism to decreased loyalty to organisations, supervisors, and work teams. Additionally, subordinates often perceive managers with prominent Machiavellian traits as abusers, focusing on power

maintenance and manipulative behaviour (Kiazad et al., 2010; Korma et al., 2022). However, some research (Spurk et al., 2016) demonstrates a positive correlation between Machiavellianism, political skills, and the need for success, all of which are crucial for reputation and career success.

Given that manipulative behaviours, including emotional manipulation, are increasingly recognised as important predictors of organisational functioning, understanding these constructs has direct implications for economics and business. Individuals exhibiting high levels of Machiavellianism and aggressive tendencies can influence the quality of workplace relationships, shape leadership dynamics, undermine organisational culture, and reduce employee productivity and satisfaction. Such behavioural patterns are associated with elevated risks of corrupt practices, opportunistic economic decision-making, increased turnover costs, and reduced team performance. Consequently, examining the links between Machiavellianism, proactive and reactive aggression, and emotional manipulation is essential not only for psychological theory but also for management, human resource practices, and the broader understanding of factors that affect organisational outcomes and economic performance.

To our best knowledge, no research has examined whether Machiavellianism added incrementally to proactive and reactive aggression in predicting emotional manipulation. Given the debate on Machiavellianism (Aldousari & Ickes, 2021; Wastell & Booth, 2003), it is important to evaluate its significance for aggression and manipulative personality traits.

Therefore, this study aims to investigate the associations between Machiavellianism, proactive and reactive aggression, and emotional manipulation.

Literature review

Machiavellianism and manipulation

Machiavellianism is a personality trait defined by manipulation, deception, and a cynical perspective of human nature. Individuals exhibiting elevated Machiavellian traits exhibit pessimism and reduced belief in humanity (Christie & Geis, 1970; Cohen-Zimmerman et al., 2017). Machiavellianism denotes a pronounced propensity for manipulation, frequently characterised by reduced empathy, limited emotional expression, a preoccupation with personal objectives, and an unconventional moral perspective (Spain et al., 2014). Wilson et al. (1996) propose a comprehensive analysis of the construct of Machiavellianism, viewing it as manipulateness and considering Machiavellianism within the framework of evolutionary psychology.

The first consideration is that the ability to manipulate others is a defining component of social intelligence, which was the primary selective force in the evolution of human intelligence (Bilić et al., 2023). However, this perspective, which favours "more" manipulative behaviour over "less," is relatively one-dimensional and fails to establish a connection between Machiavellianism, intelligence, and life success. On the other hand, evolutionary game theory provides an alternative explanation: manipulative behaviour is beneficial in some situations but detrimental in others, leading to a diversity of people's social strategies. Therefore, Wilson et al. (1996) suggest that, in evolutionary game theory models, Machiavellians may use cooperative and exploitative strategies more flexibly than others, or be more willing to exploit those who use cooperative strategies immediately.

Accordingly, the authors predict that these exploitative characteristics put Machiavellians at a disadvantage in long-term interactions, as others tend to avoid them. In contrast, individuals with low Machiavellianism tend to achieve better results

through cooperation with others. In management and political environments, Machiavellianism is among the most important factors contributing to corruption (Ashforth et al., 2003; Hamididin & El Keshky, 2023; Putri et al., 2021). Machiavellian individuals are prone to acting in ways that are detrimental to organisations. However, this is still worth researching because of the harm it may cause companies that hire them.

Machiavellian individuals are more likely to use opportunistic economic tactics (Sakalaki et al., 2007). Machiavellians can subtly influence others to make decisions that align with their interests, thereby putting employees and the organisation's well-being at risk. Machiavellians use emotional manipulation at work, manipulating colleagues, spreading false information, and undermining projects, among other things. These counterproductive workplace behaviours foster an environment that encourages others to engage in more of the same.

Emotional manipulation combines Machiavellian traits with adverse workplace consequences that negatively impact organisations (O'Boyle et al., 2012). Emotional manipulation at work has far-reaching effects that go beyond the individuals directly affected. According to Azizli et al. (2016), Machiavellian people's dishonest tactics may cause stress, anxiety, or feelings of betrayal among their coworkers. These negative emotions can erode self-esteem and lead to burnout over time, ultimately harming one's health and productivity at work. Their tactics have the potential to undermine teamwork by fostering mistrust and suspicion among workers. According to Roeser et al. (2016), this toxicity can reduce job satisfaction, hinder creativity, and increase the likelihood that people will seek alternative employment. Recent research (Hamididin & El Keshky, 2023) showed that Machiavellianism is associated with a greater tendency toward corruption. Previous studies (e.g., Jones, 2013) indicate a significant correlation between Dark Triad qualities and a tendency to engage in risky behaviour involving others' finances for personal gain at others' expense.

Machiavellianism and emotional manipulation share many similarities, with a prominent one being their support for interpersonal manipulation to influence others' actions. Emotional manipulation is the use of dishonest interpersonal techniques to control other people's emotions to achieve personal goals. It can employ subtle strategies, such as offering compliments to gain favours or employing wrath and hostility to influence others' behaviour.

Machiavellianism and leadership

Machiavellians are frequently in leadership roles, which is not surprising given their strong drive for achievement, control, and manipulation. However, despite their effective methods for attaining high positions, certain traits can undermine their standing as leaders. A leader's responsibility is to efficiently resolve all duties and allocate work based on team members' competencies to attain objectives, with the leader's power, intelligence, and manipulation skills being crucial (Graham, 1996). Machiavellian leaders exhibit adverse traits, including a detrimental disposition toward subordinates and the exploitation of their authority to enhance their influence and self-image (LeBreton et al., 2018).

Machiavellian leaders are defined by their direct approach, exceptional adaptability to varying circumstances, and willingness to consider team members' counsel when faced with increased demands; however, they *prioritise* their abilities over emotions, focusing solely on factors that contribute to the group's success (Drory & Gluskinos, 1980). Their leadership success is inherently short-lived, as they *cannot* manipulate others covertly over time. Once subordinates *recognise* the manipulation, they tend to resist the leader's directives, resulting in deteriorated group dynamics

and, ultimately, diminished work effectiveness (Graham, 1996). Moreover, while they excel at creating control and fostering task orientation, they are less effective at cultivating positive connections and communication within the group (Drory & Gluskinos, 1980). Since they are unable *to influence others over an extended period subtly*, those with high Machiavellianism are not long-term successful leaders. When subordinates *recognise* manipulation, they begin to oppose the leader's directives, leading to poor group relations and, *subsequently*, diminished work performance (Graham, 1996). Furthermore, while they excel at establishing control and promoting task orientation, they are less effective at fostering positive relationships and communication within the group (Drory & Gluskinos, 1980). They not only disregard their subordinates' emotions but also frequently engage in deliberate mistreatment, particularly when they perceive themselves as having greater power, as evidenced by subordinates' evaluations of relational quality (Wisse & Sleebos, 2016). Unethical conduct toward subordinates can have a detrimental impact on employee happiness and performance, ultimately leading to adverse outcomes for the *organisation* (Wisse & Sleebos, 2016).

Aggression and manipulation

Aggression is a complex phenomenon that generally refers to any behaviour intended to cause injury or damage to someone or something (Coie et al., 1997). Different authors define aggression in different ways. The literature mentions direct, indirect, open, covert, relational, instrumental, hostile, reactive, and proactive aggression (Pulkkinen, 1996). Reactive aggression, whether genuine or perceived by the individual, is characterised by an external stimulus, event, or behaviour (such as a threat, provocation, or obstruction of a goal). On the other hand, proactive aggressiveness refers to deliberate actions intended to achieve a specific goal, possibly through aggressive methods, or to assert control over others (e.g., bullying), and it does not require anger or provocation to manifest (Raine et al., 2006). The concept of reactive aggression partially overlaps with emotional, impulsive, and hostile aggression, whereas proactive aggression is similar to instrumental and predatory aggression (Kempes et al., 2005).

The concept of aggression closely relates to the terms anger and irritability. Anger fuels aggressive behaviour: it is an unpleasant emotion that triggers the autonomic nervous system, ranging from irritation to rage, and motivates individuals to take action toward a goal (Leibenluft & Stoddard, 2013).

Previous studies have demonstrated that the long-term consequences of these two fundamental types of aggression vary. For instance, Pulkkinen (1996) has demonstrated that proactive aggression is a strong predictor of future criminal activity in early adulthood and delinquent behaviour in youth. Conversely, reactive aggression does not serve as a risk factor for future violent behaviours (Vitaro et al., 1998); however, it is a notable predictor of victimisation in intimate relationships (Poulin & Boivin, 2000).

Given the disparate long-term outcomes, we can hypothesise distinct risk or protective factors for these two types of aggression. Indirect aggression, which is more manipulative than direct forms of physical and verbal aggression, significantly correlates with better social skills (Björkqvist et al., 2000). Higher social skills might be necessary for more complex, more deceptive, and more indirect aggression. Bullies and other socially adept attackers can stealthily pick ways to inflict indirect injury on another person while preserving their positive picture (Sutton et al., 1999).

Hypothesis development

The main aim of this study was to investigate the associations among Machiavellianism, proactive and reactive aggression, and emotional manipulation, and to test whether Machiavellianism added incrementally to aggression in predicting emotional manipulation, poor emotional skills, and the concealment of emotions. The discussion above led to the following hypotheses.

Consistent with the theory that Machiavellianism indexes manipulation, deception, a lack of faith in humanity, less empathy, reduced emotional expression, a preoccupation with personal objectives, and an unconventional moral perspective (Christie & Geis, 1970; Jones & Paulhus, 2009), and empirical evidence of the association between Machiavellianism and emotional manipulations (Austin et al., 2007; Nagler et al., 2014), it is expected that:

- *Hypothesis 1a*: Machiavellianism is positively related to emotional manipulation.
- *Hypothesis 1b*: Machiavellianism is positively related to poor emotional skills.

Based on the theory that reactive aggression is characterised as violent behaviour that occurs in response to an external stimulus, event, or behaviour and that proactive aggressiveness denotes premeditated conduct aimed at attaining a specific objective, potentially using aggressive means, or exerting dominance over others and does not necessitate anger or provocation for its manifestation (Raine et al., 2006), and in line with previous findings (Grieve & Panebianco, 2013), it is predicted:

- *Hypothesis 2a*: Proactive aggression is positively related to emotional manipulation.
- *Hypothesis 2b*: Proactive aggression is positively related to emotional concealment of emotions.
- *Hypothesis 2c*: Reactive aggression is negatively related to emotional manipulation.
- *Hypothesis 2d*: Reactive aggression is negatively related to the concealment of emotions.

Based on findings that Machiavellianism entails both adaptive and maladaptive characteristics (Bianchi & Mirkovic, 2020; Czibor & Bereczkei, 2012) and empirical evidence (Dinić & Wertag, 2018), it is predicted that:

- *Hypothesis 3a*: Machiavellianism is positively related to proactive aggression.
- *Hypothesis 3b*: Machiavellianism is positively related to reactive aggression.

In light of the positive associations between Machiavellianism and adaptive traits (e.g., Czibor & Bereczkei, 2012; Muhammad Jahangir et al., 2025), we investigated whether Machiavellianism incrementally predicts aggression in relation to emotional manipulation and the concealment of emotions. In view of this, it is expected that:

- *Hypothesis 4a*: Machiavellianism would add incrementally to reactive and proactive aggression in predicting emotional manipulation.
- *Hypothesis 4b*: Machiavellianism would add incrementally to reactive and proactive aggression in predicting the concealment of emotions.

Methodology

Sample and data collection

The initial sample consisted of 374 individuals. Data from 42 participants were excluded due to incomplete information, resulting in a final sample of 332 (67% female), with ages ranging from 19 to 61 years ($M = 39.34$, $SD = 9.67$). Our sample size exceeds the minimum of 250 specified for correlational studies by Schönbrodt et al. (2013). Data was collected online from a convenience sample of the general population in the summer of 2024. The study was conducted anonymously,

participation was voluntary, and no rewards were provided. Participants were notified that they may withdraw from the study at any moment.

Measures

Emotional manipulation was measured with the Emotional Manipulation Scale (EMS; Austin et al., 2007). The EMS consists of 25 statements that assess an individual's tendency to manipulate another person's mood or emotional state. The person is asked to rate each statement on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (completely) to indicate how much it applies to them. EMS consists of three subscales: emotional manipulation (e.g., "I know how to turn two people against each other."), poor emotional skills (e.g., "I am not very good at motivating people."), Moreover, concealment of emotions (e.g., "When someone has made me upset or angry, I tend to downplay my feelings."). The subscales are scored separately, with higher scores indicating a greater tendency to manipulate emotions, poorer emotional skills, and a greater tendency to conceal emotions.

Machiavellianism was measured by the 9-item Machiavellianism scale from the Short Dark Triad (Jones & Paulhus, 2014). Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Example items include: "It is wise to keep track of information that you can use against people later," "Avoid direct conflict with others because they may be useful in the future," and "I like to use clever manipulation to get my way." The overall score on the Machiavellianism scale is derived by summing the responses to the individual items.

The Reactive-Proactive Aggression Questionnaire (RPQ; Raine et al., 2006) measured aggression. RPQ is a self-report instrument that differentiates between reactive and proactive aggression. The RPQ consists of 23 items, divided into 11 assessing reactive aggression and 12 evaluating proactive aggression. Participants are required to evaluate each item on a Likert-type scale regarding the frequency of their behaviour: 0 indicates never, 1 indicates sometimes, and two indicates often. The overall aggressiveness score and the scores on the two aggression subscales are derived by summing the responses to the individual items. Provocation or stimuli perceived as provocative typically elicit reactive aggression, characterised by violent or impulsive behaviours. Examples of such behaviours include "reacting violently when provoked by others" and "becoming angry or mad when you do not get your way." Proactive aggression, also known as instrumental or prepared aggression, denotes goal-directed predatory behaviour, such as bullying or theft, that is generally unprovoked. Examples of this behaviour include "having fights with others to show who was on top" and "threatening and bullying someone."

Data Analyses

To determine the bivariate correlations between emotional manipulation, Machiavellianism, and aggression, zero-order correlations (Pearson product-moment correlation) were calculated. To assess the unique (incremental) variance in emotional manipulation explained by Machiavellianism and aggression, a further set of hierarchical regression analyses was conducted. In all models, gender, age, reactive and proactive aggression, and Machiavellianism were entered as predictors in Step 1, and Machiavellianism was entered in Step 2.

Results

Descriptive statistics

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for emotional manipulation, Machiavellianism, and both proactive and reactive aggressiveness, along with internal consistency reliabilities and means and standard deviations. The scales and subscales for emotional manipulation, Machiavellianism, and aggression exhibit a satisfactory range. The Cronbach's alphas for all study variables exceeded .75, indicating adequate internal consistency.

Table 1

Descriptive statistics for emotional manipulation, Machiavellianism, and aggression scales and subscales, and internal consistency values ($n = 332$)

	Mean	SD	Range Max.	Range Actual	Sk	Ku	α
EMS							
Total	2.31	0.21	1-5	1.14-4.78	0.96	1.21	0.84
Emotional manipulation	2.67	0.17	1-5	1.89-4.59	0.64	1.61	0.78
Poor emotional skills	2.69	0.48	1-5	1.12-4.65	0.33	1.56	0.80
Concealment of emotions	2.61	0.98	1-5	1.22-4.93	0.76	0.91	0.77
Machiavellianism	2.5	0.43	1-9	1.68-8.21	0.67	1.32	0.82
RPQ							
Total	0.61	0.30	0-2	.06-1.92	0.89	1.27	0.84
Reactive aggression	0.84	0.47	0-2	.08-2.00	0.56	0.98	0.80
Proactive aggression	0.42	0.28	0-2	.04-1.86	0.87	1.15	0.79

Note: EMS = Emotional Manipulation Scale; RPQ = The Reactive-Proactive Aggression Questionnaire. α = Cronbach's α . Sk – skewness, Ku – kurtosis.

Source: Authors' work

Bivariate correlations

Table 2 displays simple bivariate (zero-order) correlations between all measured variables. Bivariate correlations among the EMS subscales were small to moderate, indicating partial overlap, consistent with previous studies (Austin et al., 2007). Reactive aggression was significantly correlated with proactive aggression, consistent with previous findings (e.g., Pechorro et al., 2015).

Since we found significant correlations among the RPQ subscales, we tested for multicollinearity in each model by estimating variance inflation factors (VIFs). The VIF value was 1.67 for reactive aggression and 1.82 for proactive aggression, indicating that multicollinearity was not a problem in the regression models.

Bivariate correlations between the EMS dimensions, Machiavellianism, and proactive and reactive aggression partially supported our hypothesis. The prediction confirms that Machiavellianism is positively correlated with emotional manipulation and poor emotional skills (H1a and H1b). Additionally, Machiavellianism is positively correlated with the concealment of emotions.

As predicted, proactive aggression is positively related to emotional manipulation (H2a) and concealment of emotions (H2b), and reactive aggression is negatively related to concealment of emotions (H2d). Contrary to our prediction, reactive aggression is positively related to emotional manipulation. Machiavellianism positively correlates with both reactive and proactive aggression, as predicted (H3a and H3b).

Table 2
Bivariate correlations (n = 332)

Variable	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.
1. Emotional manipulation	1					
2. Poor emotional skills	-0.31**	1				
3. Concealment of emotions	-0.15*	0.32**	1			
4. Machiavellianism	0.52**	0.21**	0.24**	1		
5. Reactive aggression	0.36**	0.27**	-0.31**	0.35**	1	
6. Proactive aggression	0.48**	0.19*	0.22**	0.61**	0.56**	1

Note: *p <0.05, **p <0.01.

Source: Authors' work

Incremental value of Machiavellianism in predicting emotional manipulation, poor emotional skills, and concealment of emotions

The results of hierarchical regression analyses are presented in Table 3. In line with Hypothesis 1a and Hypothesis 1b, Machiavellianism positively predicted emotional manipulation ($\beta = 0.37, p = 0.0001$) and poor emotional skills ($\beta = 0.14, p = 0.034$). Additionally, Machiavellianism positively predicted emotional concealment ($\beta = 0.22, p = 0.002$). Proactive aggression positively predicted emotional manipulation ($\beta = 0.21, p = 0.0001$) and concealment of emotions ($\beta = 0.17, p = 0.042$), while reactive aggression positively predicted emotional manipulation, thus partially confirming Hypothesis 2. The results supported Hypothesis 4; they showed that Machiavellianism did make reactive and proactive aggression more common when looking at differences in emotional manipulation ($R^2 = 0.10, p = 0.0002$), poor emotional skills ($R^2 = 0.02, p = 0.022$), and concealment of emotions ($R^2 = 0.06, p = 0.0002$). Machiavellianism and proactive and reactive aggression together accounted for an additional 28% of the variance in emotional manipulation, 12% of the variance in poor emotional skills, and 18% of the variance in the concealment of emotion.

Table 3
Hierarchical regression investigating the incremental value of Machiavellianism in understanding emotional manipulation, poor emotional skills, and concealment of emotions (n = 332)

	Emotional manipulation	Poor emotional skills	Concealment of emotions
Model 1			
Gender	0.14*	0.17*	0.19**
Age	0.09	-0.02	-0.08
Reactive aggression	0.20**	0.15*	-0.32**
Proactive aggression	0.38**	0.12*	0.24**
R2	0.17**	0.10**	0.11**
Model 2			
Gender	0.10*	0.06	0.13*
Age	0.04	-0.01	-0.01
Reactive aggression	0.11*	0.09	-0.07
Proactive aggression	0.21**	0.07	0.17*
Machiavellianism	0.37**	0.14*	0.22**
R2	0.28**	0.12**	0.18**
ΔR2	0.10**	0.02*	0.06**

Note: The standardised regression coefficients are presented. R^2 = coefficient of determination. ΔR^2 = change in Machiavellianism entered in a separate step after controlling for reactive aggression and proactive aggression. *p <0.05, **p <0.01.

Source: Authors' work

Taken together, the results provide consistent empirical support for the central propositions of the study. Across all analytical steps, Machiavellianism emerged as a robust and unique predictor of emotional manipulation, poor emotional skills, and the concealment of emotions, even after accounting for proactive and reactive aggression. Although both forms of aggression contributed to the prediction of emotional manipulation and emotional concealment, their effects were smaller and less stable than those of Machiavellianism. The pattern of correlations and regression coefficients indicates that individuals high in Machiavellian traits display a broader constellation of behaviours associated with strategic emotional influence and interpersonal control. Furthermore, the incremental variance explained by Machiavellianism demonstrates that this trait captures aspects of manipulative behaviour not sufficiently accounted for by aggression alone.

Discussion

This study aimed to investigate the associations among Machiavellianism, proactive and reactive aggression, and emotional manipulation, and to test whether Machiavellianism added incrementally to aggression in predicting emotional manipulation, poor emotional skills, and concealment of emotions. The findings indicated that emotional manipulation is associated with both adaptive and maladaptive traits, and they partially confirmed the predictions.

Consistent with the hypotheses and previous studies (Austin et al., 2007; Nagler et al., 2014), Machiavellianism was found to be moderately bivariate with emotional manipulation and poor emotional skills. Furthermore, the concealment of emotions positively correlates with Machiavellianism.

These results are consistent with the theoretical assumptions that Machiavellianism indexes manipulation, deception, a lack of faith in humanity, reduced empathy, reduced emotional expression, a preoccupation with personal objectives, and an unconventional moral perspective (Christie & Geis, 1970; Jones & Paulhus, 2009).

In accordance with the hypotheses, proactive aggression is positively related to emotional manipulation and concealment of emotions, whereas reactive aggression is negatively related to concealment of emotions, contrary to H2c. This is in line with the assumptions that reactive aggression is characterised as violent behaviour that occurs in response to an external stimulus, event, or behaviour and that proactive aggressiveness denotes premeditated conduct aimed at attaining a specific objective, potentially using aggressive means or exerting dominance over others and does not necessitate anger or provocation for its manifestation (Raine et al., 2006), and in line with previous findings (Grieve & Panebianco, 2013). Contrary to our prediction, reactive aggression is positively related to emotional manipulation.

In line with the hypotheses, Machiavellianism was predicted to be associated with high levels of both proactive and reactive aggression. This finding is consistent with a previous study (Dinić & Wertag, 2018) and aligns with research indicating that Machiavellianism encompasses both adaptive and maladaptive characteristics (Bianchi & Mirkovic, 2020; Czibor & Bereczkei, 2012). These findings correspond with the theoretical notion that Machiavellianism correlates with adaptive characteristics, including emotional resilience and the absence of anxiety or neurotic symptoms. Although Machiavellianism is often associated with manipulation and low morality, certain traits linked to this construct may support interpersonal success in specific contexts. This aligns with the notion that dark personality traits are not inherently dysfunctional. For example, Sokić and Horvat (2018) found that boldness—a core component of the triarchic model of psychopathy—positively predicts emotional

intelligence and interpersonal competence. Their findings suggest that individuals high in boldness can engage in socially effective behaviours, even when their personality profiles include elements typically considered maladaptive. This highlights the importance of distinguishing between destructive and instrumental forms of manipulative behaviour when interpreting the real-world implications of dark traits.

While Machiavellian individuals are primarily driven by extrinsic goals such as power, money, and status (Jones & Paulhus, 2009), research in educational settings highlights the importance of intrinsic motivation in fostering mental well-being and personal fulfilment (Qureshi et al., 2024). This contrast suggests that although Machiavellian strategies may offer short-term advantages, they may come at the cost of long-term psychological resilience and internal satisfaction.

In keeping with the hypotheses, Machiavellianism incrementally predicted greater emotional manipulation, poorer emotional skills, and greater emotional concealment, aligning with the positive associations between Machiavellianism and adaptive traits (e.g., Czibor & Bereczkei, 2012; Muhammad Jahangir et al., 2025). Also, this confirms that Machiavellianism, as defined by Jones and Paulhus (2009), includes a tendency to manipulate, callousness, and strategic inhibition.

The findings also carry important implications for organisational settings, particularly in the domains of leadership effectiveness, team functioning, and human resource management. The strong and incremental role of Machiavellianism in predicting emotional manipulation and related emotional competencies suggests that individuals high on this trait may strategically influence workplace interactions in ways that undermine trust, collaboration, and psychological safety. Given that such individuals may attain leadership positions due to their social adaptability and instrumental use of interpersonal skills, organisations may inadvertently place them in roles where their manipulative tendencies can have broader systemic effects. Emotional manipulation—when embedded in everyday workplace exchanges—can erode team cohesion, increase employee stress, and contribute to counterproductive work behaviours, ultimately impairing organisational performance. These results underscore the importance of incorporating assessments of maladaptive interpersonal tendencies into selection, leadership development, and organisational risk-management processes, ensuring that companies can better anticipate and mitigate the potential impact of Machiavellian behavioural patterns on the work environment.

Beyond methodological considerations, the findings also carry practical relevance for organisations. The demonstrated incremental effect of Machiavellianism on emotional manipulation, poor emotional skills, and emotional concealment suggests that this trait represents a meaningful behavioural risk factor in workplace environments. Individuals high in Machiavellian tendencies may engage in subtle forms of interpersonal influence that undermine team processes, erode trust, and contribute to counterproductive work behaviours. These dynamics can affect leadership quality, employee well-being, and overall organisational performance. As a result, organisations may benefit from integrating assessments of maladaptive interpersonal tendencies into their leadership development, talent management, and organisational risk-prevention strategies.

Conclusion

This study has several limitations. First, the sample is convenient and mostly highly educated, which makes it impossible to generalise the results to a larger population of employees. Second, when testing socially undesirable traits or behaviours, individuals often hesitate to provide socially desirable answers, even under

anonymous testing conditions, due to potential issues with self-deception or impression management. Third, because all measures are based on self-assessment, correlations among variables may be inflated due to shared method variance. Fourth, the method does not permit the drawing of conclusions about the causal relationship.

The online conduct of the research raises the issue of controlling for situational factors. In terms of control, it is crucial to address some of the research's shortcomings, including the limited ability to control external factors in online research. However, it is important to emphasise that research has shown that online research produces results consistent with those obtained by traditional methods (Gosling et al., 2004). The quality of responses obtained in online research is comparable to that obtained in classic paper-and-pencil surveys (Gordon & McNew, 2008), with the proviso that online research can encourage greater self-disclosure from participants (Davis, 1999) and that responding is less socially desirable in online surveys than in classic paper-and-pencil questionnaires, all of which influenced the choice of this method of data collection. Despite the previously mentioned shortcomings, this study improved our understanding of the mechanisms linking Machiavellianism, aggression, and specific forms of emotional manipulation by addressing limitations of prior research, examining the relationships among emotional manipulation, Machiavellianism, and aggression, and acknowledging the multidimensional nature of the constructs (excluding Machiavellianism).

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About the authors

Professor Sarwar Khawaja is a British educationist, thought leader, sociopreneur, and philanthropist. He is an Honorary Professor of Business Management in the Department of International Business at the University of Małopolska J.Dietl in Kraków, Poland. As the Founder of SK HUB, Chairman of the Executive Board at Oxford Business College, and Chairman and CEO of Ealing College Upper School, he has more than three decades of experience in leading and transforming educational institutions in the UK and abroad. He is a Fellow of the Higher Education Academy (FHEA) and a Life Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts (FRSA), as well as a Harvard, Cambridge, Oxford, and City University alumnus. He is a member of the British Educational Leadership, Management and Administration Society (BELMAS) in the UK. He is Chairman of Oxford Education Group, which is dedicated to improving higher education, learning technologies, and the academic ecosystem. He has co-authored a critically acclaimed book, 'The Teacher', along with the internationally bestselling author, Nobel Prize nominee, and the inventor of mind mapping, Tony Buzan. 'The Teacher' was released worldwide and is being translated into several languages. In 2018, he was accepted by the European Economic Senate (EES) as a Senator. He is also Chairman of the European Council on Global Relations. The author can be contacted at sarwar.khawaja@oxfordbusinesscollege.ac.uk.

Katarina Sokić, PhD, works as a senior lecturer at the Algebra University in Zagreb. She graduated from the University of Zagreb, Faculty of Law, where she received her MA in civil law. She then got her PhD in Psychology from the University of Zagreb, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences. In her research, she primarily focuses on the psychology of individual differences and personality psychology. The author can be contacted at katarina.sokic@algebra.hr.

Dr Fayyaz Hussain Qureshi is an academic researcher with extensive expertise in higher education management, business innovation, and strategic marketing. He holds a comprehensive academic background with a master's in English Literature, dual MBA degrees in Marketing and Finance, an MSc in Internet Technologies, and a Doctorate in Marketing. Dr. Qureshi has pursued continuous professional development through certifications from esteemed institutions, including Harvard Business School. He is currently serving as the Head of Research at Oxford Business College, the Founder and Head of the Oxford Business Innovation and Incubation Centre (OxBIIC), and a PGR (Doctoral) supervisor at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David (UWTSD). Dr Qureshi's research interests include student satisfaction, online education, and the effects of COVID-19 on higher education. He has authored over 40 recent publications. The author can be contacted at fayyaz.qureshi@oxfordbusinesscollege.ac.uk.

Helena Nikolić graduated from the Faculty of Economics and Business of the University of Zagreb, where she also received her PhD degree in "Determinants of export activities of Croatian companies in the Eastern European countries" in 2015. Helena holds the position of Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Economics and Business Zagreb, Department of Trade and International Business. Previously, she had worked at the Croatian Bank for Reconstruction and Development in the Export Credit Insurance Department for two years. The author can be contacted at hnikolic@efzg.hr.