CONCEPTUALIZING REVENGE FANTASIES: INSIGHTS ON THEIR CONCEPTUAL DEFINITION AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FROM A QUALITATIVE INQUIRY

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A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY, SOCIAL-PERSONALITY

YORK UNIVERSITY

TORONTO, ONTARIO

AUGUST 2026

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Abstract

Interpersonal transgressions elicit a range of emotional, cognitive, and behavioural responses. Although revenge has been extensively studied, comparatively little attention has been given to revenge fantasies, or imagining retaliation without acting on it. The present study explored how individuals experience and make meaning of revenge fantasies following interpersonal transgressions. Participants completed a pre-screening survey about a recalled transgression and subsequently participated in semi-structured interviews. Sixteen interviews were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. Five themes were developed: justice restoration as a core function, symbolic recalibration of power, emotional persistence and cognitive replay, moral and identity-based inhibition, and consequences of fantasizing. Together, these findings suggest that revenge fantasies are structured mental simulations through which individuals attempt to restore fairness, reclaim power or agency, and process the emotional consequences of interpersonal harm. Revenge fantasies are proposed as internally-generated, private mental simulations involving imagined retaliatory or justice-restoring outcomes shaped by moral tension.

Acknowledgements

The completion of this thesis would not have been possible without the support of so many people who helped me along the way. I would first like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Ward Struthers, for his guidance, patience, and support throughout my time at York University. I am truly grateful for the opportunities he has given me to grow as a researcher and for always encouraging me to think more critically about my work while trusting my ideas. I am especially grateful for his mentorship and the ways he has encouraged me to develop my own research interests and become a more confident and independent researcher.

I would also like to thank Dr. Karen Fergus for her invaluable feedback and support throughout the development of this thesis. Her expertise in qualitative methodology was especially valuable as I navigated a methodology that was relatively unfamiliar to me. Her thoughtful questions and suggestions helped me think about this research in new ways and ultimately strengthened the final product.

On a personal note, I would like to thank my partner for being there through all of the stress, late nights, and moments when I questioned whether I was ever going to see the finish line. Thank you for listening to me talk about my thesis more than anyone probably should have had to and for reminding me to take breaks when I needed them. I am very grateful to have had you in my corner throughout this process.

I would also like to thank Haze and Hera, who provided much-needed feline company during the long nights, and served as much-needed distractions when I've been staring at the same paragraph for too long. You both may not have contributed to the research itself, but you definitely played a crucial role in getting me through it.

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Conceptualizing Revenge Fantasies: Insights on their Conceptual Definition and Theoretical Framework from a Qualitative Inquiry

Interpersonal relationships are central to how individuals experience and navigate everyday life (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). These relationships provide support, meaning, and a sense of belonging, but they also create conditions in which conflict is inevitable. At some point, most individuals will encounter situations in which they feel hurt, wronged, or treated unfairly by another person (Fitness, 2001). These interpersonal transgressions can range from relatively minor incidents, such as being ignored or dismissed, to more serious violations, including betrayal, rejection, or humiliation (McCullough et al., 2001). Regardless of severity, such experiences often disrupt how individuals think, feel, and behave, producing emotional reactions that may persist beyond the initial event (Leary et al., 2006).

Among these reactions, anger and hurt are particularly common (Fitness, 2001; McCullough et al., 2001). When individuals perceive that they have been treated unjustly, they may begin to question the intentions of the other person, revisit the event, and attempt to make sense of what occurred (Averill, 1982). This process is often not short-lived. Instead, individuals may continue to think about the transgression over time, repeatedly recalling details of the event and the emotions associated with it (Sukhodolsky et al., 2001). In doing so, the transgression remains psychologically active even in the absence of further interaction with the transgressor. As a result, individuals are responding not only to the original event, but also to their ongoing interpretation and re-evaluation of that experience.

In response to interpersonal harm, individuals may adopt a range of coping strategies. Some may choose to forgive, attempting to reduce negative feelings and restore the relationship (McCullough et al., 1998). Others may seek revenge, aiming to retaliate against the transgressor

in order to restore a sense of balance or justice (Bies & Tripp, 1996; McCullough et al., 2001). Still others may distance themselves from the situation, avoiding the transgressor and attempting to move forward without direct confrontation (Worthington, 2005). Although these responses are often treated as distinct outcomes, they are not always mutually exclusive. For example, individuals may outwardly disengage while continuing to experience resentment, or may consider retaliatory actions without acting on them (Wakeling & Barnett, 2011). This suggests that responses to transgressions extend beyond observable behaviour.

One implication of this is that responses to transgressions do not occur solely at the behavioural level. Although some individuals act on their desire to retaliate, many do not. Social norms, moral considerations, and anticipated consequences often constrain the expression of revenge (Gollwitzer & Denzler, 2009; Strelan et al., 2017). At the same time, the underlying motivation to retaliate or restore fairness does not necessarily disappear when action is constrained (Carlsmith et al., 2008). Instead, these motivations may persist in internal or cognitive forms. Individuals may imagine what they would like to say or do, mentally simulate scenarios in which the transgressor is confronted or punished, or reflect on alternative outcomes (Bushman et al., 2001; Denson et al., 2012). In this sense, responses to transgressions may continue as internal experiences even when no observable behaviour occurs.

These internal experiences are particularly relevant when considering the role of cognition in post-transgression responses. Thinking about a transgression is not a passive process. It often involves actively reconstructing the event, attributing meaning to the actions of others, and evaluating one's own position within the situation (Lazarus, 1991). This may include imagining alternative scenarios, rehearsing potential responses, and considering how the transgressor might be affected by different actions (Holmes et al., 2007). As a result, the

boundary between thinking and responding becomes less clear. Internal processes such as imagining, reflecting, and simulating may themselves function as meaningful responses to interpersonal harm.

Importantly, the notion of fantasy within this context warrants clarification. Rather than referring to unrealistic or detached imaginings, fantasies in the present work are understood as internally generated mental simulations that allow individuals to construct and explore hypothetical scenarios with emotional and motivational significance. These simulations are grounded in real interpersonal experiences and may serve as a way of engaging with unresolved thoughts, emotions, and desired outcomes in a private and consequence-free cognitive space. This perspective is particularly relevant when considering revenge fantasies, which may represent a specific form of such simulation in response to interpersonal harm.

Despite this, much of the existing research on post-transgression responses has focused on observable behaviours such as revenge and forgiveness. Revenge is generally understood as an attempt to inflict harm on a transgressor in order to restore equity or achieve a sense of justice (Bies & Tripp, 1996; McCullough et al., 2001). In contrast, forgiveness is typically conceptualized as a process in which negative thoughts, emotions, and motivations toward a transgressor are reduced, often alongside an increase in conciliatory responses (McCullough et al., 1998; Worthington, 2005). However, there is ongoing debate regarding what constitutes meaningful forgiveness. Some perspectives suggest that forgiveness involves not only a decrease in negative sentiment, but also the presence or restoration of positive regard toward the transgressor (Worthington, 2005). In this view, simply reducing negative feelings may not be sufficient to qualify as forgiveness since individuals may continue to experience lingering resentment or emotional distance.

This distinction is particularly relevant when considering related constructs such as grudges. Research suggests that holding a grudge may represent the inverse process of forgiveness as it is characterized by the persistence or intensification of negative sentiment alongside a lack of positive reappraisal (van Monsjou et al., 2023). Taken together, these perspectives highlight that post-transgression responses may not be adequately captured by a single continuum, but rather reflect qualitatively distinct patterns of emotional and cognitive engagement.

Although revenge, forgiveness, and grudges have contributed to a broader understanding of responses to harm, they do not fully capture the range of experiences that may occur following a transgression. This complexity further underscores the importance of examining internal processes, such as revenge fantasies, which may coexist with or operate independently from these broader response patterns.

In particular, a behavioural focus may overlook the ways in which individuals continue to engage with a transgression internally. Even in cases where individuals do not forgive or enact revenge, they may continue to think about the event, evaluate the transgressor's actions, and imagine possible responses (Sukhodolsky et al., 2001; Denson et al., 2012). These ongoing cognitive processes suggest that important aspects of post-transgression responding may not be adequately captured by existing constructs. One such aspect is the experience of imagining or fantasizing about revenge.

Revenge fantasies can be understood as mental simulations in which individuals imagine retaliating against a transgressor. These simulations may involve confronting the transgressor, exposing them, or otherwise restoring a perceived imbalance (Gollwitzer et al., 2011). Importantly, these fantasies do not require that any action be taken. Instead, they exist as internal

experiences that may occur repeatedly over time. In some cases, they may be brief and relatively inconsequential. In others, they may become more elaborate, emotionally charged, and persistent (Orth et al., 2006). Despite their apparent relevance, revenge fantasies have received relatively limited systematic attention in the psychological literature.

Where revenge fantasies have been examined, they are often situated within more extreme or clinical contexts, such as trauma, abuse, or severe victimization (Ehlers et al., 2002; Orth et al., 2006). In these contexts, fantasies of revenge may be understood as attempts to cope with feelings of powerlessness or injustice. Although this work provides important insights, it may not fully capture how revenge fantasies function in more common, everyday interpersonal conflicts. More broadly, much of the existing consideration of revenge fantasies has been shaped by researchers' and clinicians' interpretations, rather than grounded in the lived experiences of individuals who engage in them. As a result, current conceptualizations may reflect top-down assumptions about the nature and function of revenge fantasies, rather than how they are actually experienced and understood in everyday interpersonal contexts. As a result, there remains a gap in understanding how individuals experience, interpret, and use revenge fantasies in typical relational contexts.

Additionally, there is a lack of conceptual clarity surrounding what constitutes a revenge fantasy. It is not always clear how these experiences differ from related constructs such as rumination, intrusive thoughts, or general anger-related cognition (Sukhodolsky et al., 2001; Denson et al., 2012). For example, repeatedly thinking about a transgression may involve both rumination and imagined retaliation. Similarly, fantasizing about confronting a transgressor may overlap with planning or problem-solving. Without a clearer understanding of how revenge

fantasies are experienced and defined, it is difficult to determine their role within the broader landscape of post-transgression responses.

Taken together, these considerations suggest that revenge fantasies represent a potentially important but underexplored aspect of how individuals respond to interpersonal harm. They may serve as a way of engaging with unresolved emotions, restoring a sense of control, or mentally negotiating issues of fairness and justice (Gollwitzer & Denzler, 2009; McCullough et al., 2013). At the same time, their function and meaning are not well understood, particularly outside of clinical contexts. This limits the ability to situate revenge fantasies within existing theoretical frameworks and raises questions about how they relate to more established post-transgression responses constructs such as forgiveness, revenge, and grudges.

Accordingly, the present research aims to develop a more comprehensive understanding of revenge fantasies as a post-transgression response. Rather than assuming a predefined definition, this study adopts a qualitative approach to explore how individuals describe and make sense of their own experiences with revenge fantasies. By examining these experiences in participants' own words, the goal is to identify common patterns, meanings, and functions that may not be captured through existing measures or theoretical models. In doing so, this research seeks to clarify what revenge fantasies are, how they are experienced, and what role they may play in the broader process of responding to interpersonal transgressions.

Post-transgression Responses (PTRs)

Interpersonal transgressions often disrupt individuals' sense of fairness, trust, and relational stability, prompting a range of psychological and behavioural responses (McCullough et al., 2001). These responses are commonly conceptualized as post-transgression responses (PTRs), which include forgiveness, revenge, avoidance, and the maintenance of negative

affective states such as grudges (Strelan et al., 2017; van Monsjou et al., 2023; Worthington, 2005;). Although these responses are often examined as distinct outcomes, they reflect broader attempts to manage the emotional, cognitive, and relational consequences of being wronged.

Forgiveness has been widely studied as a prosocial response to transgressions, typically defined as a reduction in negative motivations such as revenge and avoidance, alongside an increase in benevolent intentions toward the transgressor (McCullough et al., 1998; Worthington, 2005). Research suggests that forgiveness can facilitate emotional recovery and relationship repair, particularly when individuals are motivated to maintain the relationship (Fincham et al., 2007). However, forgiveness is not always readily achieved. In many cases, individuals continue to experience lingering resentment, anger, or mistrust even when they attempt to forgive (Wakeling & Barnett, 2011). This highlights the complexity of PTRs and suggests that outward behavioural responses may not fully reflect individuals' internal experiences.

In contrast, revenge is typically conceptualized as a retaliatory response aimed at inflicting harm on the transgressor in order to restore a perceived imbalance (Bies & Tripp, 1996; McCullough et al., 2001). Although revenge is often viewed negatively from a moral or social standpoint, research suggests that it is a common, evolved, and, in some cases, intuitively appealing response to interpersonal harm (Gollwitzer & Denzler, 2009; McCullough et al., 2013). Importantly, PTRs such as forgiveness and revenge are not mutually exclusive. Individuals may simultaneously experience competing motivations, such as a desire to repair the relationship alongside a desire to retaliate (Strelan et al., 2017). This coexistence of motivations underscores the need to examine PTRs not only as behaviours, but also as dynamic psychological processes.

Beyond forgiveness and revenge, individuals may also respond to transgressions through avoidance or withdrawal. Avoidance involves reducing contact with the transgressor and disengaging from the relationship, often as a means of minimizing further harm (McCullough et al., 1998; Worthington, 2005). Although avoidance may provide short-term emotional relief, it does not necessarily resolve underlying emotional responses, which may continue to persist over time (Wakeling & Barnett, 2011). Similarly, individuals may develop and maintain grudges, characterized by persistent negative emotions, ongoing cognitive engagement with the transgression, and difficulty letting go of the experience (van Monsjou et al., 2018). These responses highlight that PTRs extend beyond discrete behavioural choices and often involve sustained internal processing.

Taken together, existing research suggests that responses to interpersonal transgressions are multifaceted, involving emotional, cognitive, and behavioural components. Although much of the literature has focused on observable outcomes such as forgiveness and revenge, less attention has been paid to the internal processes that accompany these responses. This gap is particularly relevant when considering how individuals continue to engage with transgressions over time, even in the absence of overt behaviour.

Revenge

Although revenge is often viewed as impulsive or emotionally driven, a growing body of research suggests that it serves identifiable psychological functions. From a functional perspective, revenge can be understood as a response aimed at restoring a sense of justice, rebalancing power, and deterring future harm (McCullough et al., 2013; Gollwitzer et al., 2011). When individuals perceive that they have been treated unfairly, retaliatory actions may be seen

as a way to communicate that such treatment is unacceptable and to reassert personal or relational boundaries (Bies & Tripp, 1996).

Revenge is also closely tied to perceptions of justice. Individuals often report a desire to "even the score" following a transgression, suggesting that revenge is motivated by a need to restore equity rather than simply to inflict harm (Carlsmith et al., 2008). In this sense, revenge may function as a form of informal punishment, aimed at correcting perceived imbalances and discouraging future violations (McCullough et al., 2013). This perspective aligns with evolutionary accounts, which propose that retaliatory responses may have developed as mechanisms for regulating social behaviour and maintaining cooperative relationships (Sell et al., 2009).

Despite its apparent functional value, revenge does not always produce the outcomes individuals expect. Research has shown that engaging in revenge may not reduce negative emotions and may, in some cases, prolong them (Carlsmith et al., 2008; Bushman et al., 2001). Rather than providing closure, retaliatory actions can maintain or even intensify cognitive engagement with the transgression, keeping the event psychologically salient over time (Denson et al., 2012). This suggests that the anticipated emotional benefits of revenge may be overestimated.

Additionally, the pursuit of revenge is often constrained by social, moral, and practical considerations. Individuals may refrain from retaliating due to concerns about social judgment, potential consequences, or personal values (Gollwitzer & Denzler, 2009; Strelan et al., 2017). These constraints create a discrepancy between the desire to retaliate and the likelihood of acting on that desire. As a result, individuals may continue to experience retaliatory motivations even when they do not engage in overt revenge behaviour.

This tension between motivation and action highlights an important limitation in how revenge has been conceptualized in the literature. By focusing primarily on behavioural expressions of revenge, existing research may overlook the ways in which retaliatory impulses persist in non-behavioural forms. Understanding these internal manifestations is essential for developing a more comprehensive account of how individuals respond to interpersonal harm.

Rumination and Cognitive Persistence

One mechanism that contributes to the persistence of post-transgression responses is rumination. Rumination refers to the repetitive and sustained focus on the causes, consequences, and emotional impact of an event (Sukhodolsky et al., 2001). In the context of interpersonal transgressions, rumination often involves repeatedly thinking about what happened, why it occurred, and how one was affected by it.

Research has consistently shown that rumination is associated with increased anger, negative affect, and aggressive tendencies (Denson et al., 2012). Rather than facilitating resolution, rumination tends to maintain emotional arousal and prolong the experience of distress (Bushman et al., 2001). This is particularly relevant for understanding revenge-related processes, as continued cognitive engagement with a transgression may sustain or intensify retaliatory motivations.

Importantly, rumination is not limited to passive recall. It often involves active cognitive elaboration, including imagining alternative scenarios, rehearsing potential responses, and considering how the transgressor might be affected by different actions (Holmes et al., 2007). These processes blur the distinction between thinking and responding, suggesting that cognitive activity may itself function as a form of response to interpersonal harm.

In this context, rumination may serve as a pathway through which retaliatory motivations are maintained and expressed. Even when individuals do not act on their desire for revenge, they may continue to engage with the transgression mentally, revisiting the event and exploring possible responses. This ongoing cognitive engagement provides a foundation for understanding more specific forms of internal responding, such as revenge fantasies.

Moral and Social Constraints on Retaliation

Although individuals may experience strong motivations to retaliate following a transgression, these motivations are often constrained by social and moral considerations. Norms surrounding appropriate behaviour, concerns about reputation, and potential consequences can all limit the likelihood that individuals will engage in overt revenge (Gollwitzer & Denzler, 2009; Strelan et al., 2017). For example, acting on retaliatory impulses may be perceived as socially undesirable or may risk escalating conflict, leading individuals to suppress or inhibit such behaviours. Moral considerations also play a role in shaping responses to transgressions. Individuals may view revenge as inconsistent with their personal values or as morally inappropriate, even when they feel justified in their desire to retaliate (Strelan et al., 2017). This can create internal conflict, as individuals balance competing motivations to restore justice and to adhere to moral standards.

As a result of these constraints, there is often a gap between what individuals feel and what they do. Retaliatory motivations may persist even when they are not expressed behaviourally, leading individuals to seek alternative ways of engaging with these impulses. This dynamic suggests that internal processes may play a critical role in how individuals navigate the tension between desire and constraint.

Revenge Fantasies as Internalized Retaliation

One way in which individuals may engage with retaliatory motivations in the absence of action is through revenge fantasies. Revenge fantasies can be understood as mental simulations in which individuals imagine retaliating against a transgressor, often in ways that restore a sense of balance, power, or justice (Gollwitzer et al., 2011). These fantasies may involve confronting the transgressor, exposing them, or imagining scenarios in which they experience consequences for their actions.

Unlike overt revenge, revenge fantasies occur entirely at the cognitive level. They do not require behavioural expression and may therefore be less constrained by social and moral considerations. This allows individuals to explore retaliatory scenarios without incurring the potential costs associated with acting on them. As such, revenge fantasies may represent a form of internalized retaliation that enables individuals to engage with unresolved motivations in a relatively safe context.

Despite their relevance, revenge fantasies have received limited attention in the literature. Where they have been examined, they are often studied in clinical or extreme contexts, such as trauma or severe victimization (Orth et al., 2006; Ehlers et al., 2002). In these cases, revenge fantasies are frequently interpreted as coping mechanisms for dealing with feelings of powerlessness or injustice. However, this focus on extreme contexts leaves open the question of how revenge fantasies function in more common, everyday interpersonal experiences.

Additionally, revenge fantasies are often conceptually conflated with related constructs such as rumination or intrusive thoughts. Although there is overlap, revenge fantasies involve a distinct element of imagined retaliation, which may serve different psychological functions. For example, whereas rumination typically involves repeatedly focusing on the transgression,

revenge fantasies involve actively constructing scenarios in which the transgressor is punished or confronted. This distinction suggests that revenge fantasies may represent a unique form of cognitive responding that warrants separate consideration.

Conceptual Distinctions and Theoretical Positioning

To better understand revenge fantasies, it is important to distinguish them from related constructs within the broader landscape of post-transgression responses. Revenge, as traditionally conceptualized, refers to behavioural actions taken to harm a transgressor (McCullough et al., 2001). In contrast, revenge fantasies involve imagined retaliation that does not necessarily translate into action. This distinction highlights the importance of considering both behavioural and cognitive forms of responding.

Revenge fantasies also share similarities with rumination and grudges, both of which involve ongoing cognitive engagement with a transgression. However, grudges are typically characterized by persistent negative emotions, a reluctance to forgive, and no desire to harm the transgressor, whereas revenge fantasies specifically involve imagined acts of retaliation (van Monsjou et al., 2018). Similarly, rumination involves repetitive thinking about the transgression, but does not necessarily include the construction of retaliatory scenarios.

These distinctions suggest that revenge fantasies occupy a unique position within post-transgression responding. They involve elements of emotional persistence, cognitive elaboration, and retaliatory motivation, but do not require behavioural expression. As such, they may serve as a bridge between internal and external responses, reflecting how individuals navigate the tension between wanting to retaliate and choosing not to act.

The Present Gap

Taken together, the existing literature provides a strong foundation for understanding

behavioural responses to interpersonal transgressions, as well as the cognitive processes that sustain them. However, there remains a lack of clarity regarding how individuals experience and interpret revenge fantasies, particularly in everyday contexts. Current research has largely overlooked these experiences or examined them in limited and specific populations, leaving their broader role insufficiently understood.

Additionally, the conceptual boundaries between revenge fantasies and related constructs remain unclear, making it difficult to situate them within existing theoretical frameworks. Without a clearer understanding of their meaning and function, it is challenging to determine how revenge fantasies contribute to the broader process of responding to interpersonal harm. Addressing this gap requires an approach that moves beyond predefined definitions and quantitative measures, allowing individuals to describe their experiences in their own terms. A qualitative approach is particularly well suited for this purpose, as it enables the exploration of nuanced and subjective experiences that may not be captured through existing constructs.

The Present Study

The existing literature provides a well-developed understanding of behavioural responses to interpersonal transgressions, including forgiveness, revenge, and avoidance, as well as the cognitive processes that sustain these responses over time. However, as outlined above, relatively little attention has been given to the role of revenge fantasies as a distinct form of post-transgression responding. Although individuals may frequently imagine retaliating against those who have harmed them, these experiences remain conceptually underdefined and empirically underexplored, particularly within everyday interpersonal contexts.

Much of the existing research that does address revenge fantasies has focused on extreme or clinical populations, such as individuals who have experienced trauma or severe victimization

(Ehlers et al., 2002; Orth et al., 2006). This work highlights the potential psychological significance of imagined retaliation, however, it does not fully capture how revenge fantasies function in more common relational experiences, where transgressions may be less severe but still meaningful. As a result, there remains a limited understanding of how individuals experience, interpret, and make sense of revenge fantasies in their day-to-day lives.

In addition to this contextual limitation, there is a lack of conceptual clarity surrounding revenge fantasies. It remains unclear how these experiences differ from related constructs such as rumination, intrusive thoughts, or broader anger-related cognition. Without a clearer understanding of what revenge fantasies entail, it is difficult to determine their role within the broader framework of post-transgression responses. This ambiguity also limits the development of theoretical models that can adequately account for both behavioural and cognitive forms of retaliation.

The present study seeks to address these gaps by adopting a qualitative approach to explore individuals' lived experiences of revenge fantasies. Rather than imposing predefined definitions, this study allows participants to describe their experiences in their own words, providing insight into how revenge fantasies are understood, experienced, and enacted at the cognitive level. This approach is particularly well suited for capturing the complexity and variability of these experiences, as well as identifying patterns that may not be evident through quantitative methods.

More specifically, this study aims to examine the content, meaning, and perceived function of revenge fantasies following interpersonal transgressions. By exploring how individuals describe these experiences, the study seeks to clarify how revenge fantasies are conceptualized and distinguished from related processes such as rumination and grudges, as well

as how they relate to broader motivations such as restoring justice, regaining a sense of control, or processing emotional distress. In doing so, the present research aims to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of post-transgression responses by identifying revenge fantasies as a meaningful and distinct form of internalized retaliation. In addition to clarifying the nature of these experiences, the present study contributes to the initial development of a process-oriented theoretical framework of revenge fantasies. By identifying recurring patterns in how these experiences emerge, are maintained, and are regulated, this work begins to articulate revenge fantasies as a structured psychological process situated within the broader landscape of post-transgression responding.

Methodology

Research Design and Methodological Approach

Qualitative Design and Rationale. The present study employed a qualitative research design to explore individuals' experiences of revenge fantasies following interpersonal transgressions. Given the exploratory nature of the research question and the limited conceptual clarity surrounding revenge fantasies, a qualitative approach was considered most appropriate. Rather than testing predefined hypotheses or applying existing measures, this approach allows for an in-depth examination of how individuals describe, interpret, and make sense of their own experiences.

Qualitative methods are particularly well suited for investigating phenomena that are not yet clearly defined or that involve complex, subjective processes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Revenge fantasies, as discussed in the preceding literature, represent an underexplored aspect of post-transgression responding, with limited agreement regarding their definition, structure, or function. As such, imposing rigid quantitative frameworks may risk overlooking important

nuances in how these experiences are understood and expressed. By contrast, a qualitative design allows participants to articulate their experiences in their own words, providing insight into meanings and patterns that may not be captured through standardized measures.

Within this qualitative framework, the present study utilized reflexive thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019). This method is particularly appropriate for examining experiential phenomena, as it enables the researcher to move beyond surface-level descriptions and identify underlying themes that reflect shared patterns in participants' accounts.

A reflexive approach to thematic analysis was adopted, emphasizing the active role of the researcher in the analytic process (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Rather than assuming that themes simply emerge from the data, this approach acknowledges that themes are developed through the researcher's engagement with the data, informed by both the dataset and the researcher's theoretical and experiential perspective. This is consistent with the interpretive orientation of the present study, which seeks to understand how participants construct and make meaning of their experiences with revenge fantasies.

Epistemological Positioning. The present study was situated within an interpretivist epistemological framework and informed by a hermeneutic orientation. From this perspective, experiences are not viewed as objective phenomena that can be directly accessed, but rather as meanings that individuals actively construct and interpret within particular social, relational, and historical contexts. Accordingly, the goal of the present study was not to identify a single objective truth about revenge fantasies, but to explore how individuals understand, describe, and make meaning of these experiences following interpersonal transgressions.

Consistent with this position, knowledge was viewed as co-constructed through the interaction between participant and researcher. Participants contributed their lived experiences

and interpretations, while the researcher brought theoretical knowledge, prior assumptions, and interpretive engagement to the analytic process. Reflexive thematic analysis was therefore selected because it acknowledges the active role of the researcher in generating themes and constructing meaning from the data rather than assuming that themes simply emerge from participant accounts.

Overall, the use of a qualitative design and reflexive thematic analysis aligns with the aims of the present study, which seeks to develop a richer and more nuanced understanding of revenge fantasies as a form of post-transgression responding. By prioritizing participants' subjective experiences and allowing themes to be developed inductively, this approach provides a foundation for clarifying the meaning and function of revenge fantasies within everyday interpersonal contexts.

Semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews are a valuable research tool because of their versatility (Kallio et al., 2016). This method is known for its give-and-take between researchers and participants that allows for improvisation or adjustment when desired (Kallio et al., 2016). A researcher generates questions beforehand based on previous knowledge, and creates an interview guide. This guide then provides a structure for the interviews but does not need to be strictly followed. In fact, during the interviews, researchers are encouraged to explore ideas that may not have been explicitly outlined in the interview guide (Kallio et al., 2016).

Using semi-structured interviews has five phases: (i) identifying the prerequisites for using semi-structured interviews, (ii) using prior knowledge, (iii) creating and developing the interview guide, (iv) pilot testing the guide, and (v) finalizing the guide (Kallio et al., 2016). The use of semi-structured interviews to develop an understanding of holding grudges is appropriate

because they are especially useful when studying complex and emotionally sensitive issues (Kallio et al., 2016). When developing the interview guide, it is important to draw from previous knowledge on the topic. However, when very little is known about a topic, consulting with experts is an option (Kallio et al., 2016). In developing the interview guide, the expert knowledge of supervisors and colleagues, as well as information obtained from similar past studies conducted in our research lab were used.

When drafting an interview guide, it is also important to ensure that the format of the questions is appropriate. That is, questions should be focused on the participant, not leading, clearly worded, single-faceted, and open-ended (Kallio et al., 2016). The goal is to elicit rich information that is spontaneous and a reflection of participants' actual experiences and perspectives on the subject matter (Kallio et al., 2016). After it has been developed, the interview guide needs to be evaluated (Kallio et al., 2016). To do so, consulting with one's supervisory committee to receive feedback on how the questions were phrased, worded, and whether they seemed appropriate, comprehensive, and valid to the construct of interest were done. Completing a graduate-level course taught by an expert in qualitative research, which provided insightful material and invaluable advice on how to best approach these interviews, was equally useful in ensuring that the chosen method was executed with as few flaws as possible. After completing these steps, the interview guide was finalized and ready for use in the semi-structured interviews.

Thematic Analysis. Thematic analysis is about recognizing and reporting patterns in data. It is flexible because it is not tied to any theoretical framework, and can be applied in a variety of research contexts (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Generally speaking, thematic analysis consists of generating codes and themes based on patterns perceived in qualitative data (Clarke & Braun, 2017). Codes refer to data units that are deemed both interesting and relevant to the

research question. Themes are larger patterns of meaning generated from codes that have shared meaning and help yield an overarching analytic structure. This analysis is based on identification, description, and interpretation of key aspects of the data.

Braun and Clarke (2006) outlined the best practices for conducting a thematic analysis. They identified six stages: (i) becoming familiar with the data, (ii) generating initial codes, (iii) looking for themes, (iv) reviewing themes, (v) defining themes, and (vi) reporting. As one progresses through these stages, the analysis should become less descriptive and more abstract (Attride-Sterling, 2001).

Once these themes have been identified and defined, one can review the hierarchical order of these themes, from higher-order themes, subthemes, codes, and meaning units. One can start with basic themes, taken from the text, then moves up to organizing themes, which cluster groups of basic themes into more abstract and synthesized groups. Organizing themes are then grouped into higher-order themes, which together summarize the most important aspects of the research question, telling a story about how the researcher cohesively interpreted the data.

Reflexivity. Given the interpretive nature of qualitative research, it is important to acknowledge the role of the researcher in shaping the research process and the meaning derived from the data. Researcher positionality provides an opportunity to reflect on how personal background, assumptions, and experiences may influence the formulation of research questions, data collection, and analysis.

Personal background. The primary researcher is a graduate student in psychology at York University. The research is situated within a broader program of work examining interpersonal conflict, post-transgression responses, and related emotional and cognitive processes. As such, the researcher approaches this topic with formal training in social and

personality psychology, as well as familiarity with existing literature on forgiveness, revenge, and grudge-holding.

In addition to this academic positioning, the researcher brings personal experiences that may shape their understanding of interpersonal transgressions and responses to harm. Like most individuals, the researcher has experienced situations involving conflict, perceived unfairness, or relational strain. These experiences may influence how the researcher interprets participants' accounts, particularly in relation to the emotional significance of being wronged and the motivations underlying revenge-related thoughts.

Prior to conducting the study, the researcher held initial assumptions about revenge fantasies as primarily negative or maladaptive responses, often associated with unresolved anger or difficulty letting go of a transgression. At the same time, the researcher also considered the possibility that revenge fantasies might serve functional roles, such as providing a sense of relief, control, or imagined justice. These assumptions were informed by both existing literature and personal intuitions about how individuals process interpersonal harm. Recognizing these preconceptions was an important step in minimizing their influence on the research process.

To address potential biases, the researcher adopted a reflexive approach throughout the study. During data collection and analysis, efforts were made to remain open to participants' perspectives and to avoid imposing predefined interpretations on their experiences. This involved attending closely to participants' language, allowing themes to emerge inductively, and regularly reflecting on how personal assumptions might shape interpretation. These reflections were done during or post-interview where the researcher kept a memo diary containing any thoughts related to each individual interview.

The analytic process was also informed by ongoing discussions with the research supervisor and committee members, who provided additional perspectives and critical feedback. This collaborative process helped to challenge potential biases and ensure that interpretations were grounded in the data rather than driven solely by the researcher's prior expectations. Engaging with multiple perspectives contributed to a more rigorous and balanced analysis. Overall, this positionality acknowledges that the researcher is not a neutral observer, but an active participant in the research process. By reflecting on both academic and personal positioning, and by adopting a reflexive approach to analysis, the study aims to provide a transparent and credible account of participants' experiences with revenge fantasies.

Participants

Participants were recruited through the Psychology Department's Undergraduate Research Participant Pool (URPP). Students enrolled in introductory psychology courses were eligible to participate and received course credit in exchange for their participation. Recruitment materials described the study broadly as an investigation of interpersonal experiences and emotional responses, without explicitly referencing revenge fantasies, in order to minimize demand characteristics.

A total of N = 276 participants completed the pre-screening portion of the study which required their responses to demographic, event, trait, and behavioural items. Participants were required to be at least 18 years of age and fluent in English to ensure they could meaningfully engage with the interview questions and articulate their experiences. Individuals who did not meet these criteria or who provided incomplete responses were excluded from the final dataset. The sample consisted primarily of undergraduate students ranging from ages 17 to 64 (M = 19.74, SD = 4.79), mostly female (n = 217; 78.34%), with diverse ethnic backgrounds with the

largest proportions identifying as White (21.45%), South Asian (19.27%), Black (17.09%), and Middle Eastern (17.09%). Additional representation included Southeast Asian (8.36%) and East Asian (6.18%) participants, as well as smaller proportions identifying as mixed ethnicity (5.45%), Latin American (2.18%), South American (0.73%), and other backgrounds (2.18%). Participants were also asked to indicate the relationship they have to the transgressor in their recalled scenario, with a majority identifying a friend (42.39%) as the actor of harm or wrongdoing (see Table 1).

Following the completion of the pre-screening survey, participants were invited to choose a timeslot to participate in the semi-structured interview portion of the study. A total of N = 18 participants completed these one-hour Zoom-based interviews.

Although the use of a student sample may limit the generalizability of the findings, it is appropriate for the present study, which aims to explore common interpersonal experiences rather than examine clinical or extreme populations. Interpersonal transgressions such as conflict, rejection, and perceived unfairness are prevalent in everyday life, including within university contexts. This sampling approach is also consistent with prior qualitative research conducted within this area, which has similarly relied on undergraduate populations to examine post-transgression experiences as a starting point (van Monsjou et al., 2023; Li et al., 2026). As such, this sample provides a relevant context for examining how individuals experience and interpret revenge fantasies in response to typical relational events.

Table 1

Sample Characteristics (N = 276)

Characteristic	Mean or *n*	*SD* or %
Age	19.74	4.79
Gender		
Female	217	78.34%
Male	58	20.94%
Nonbinary	1	0.36%
Prefer not to say	1	0.36%
Ethnicity		
White	59	21.45%
South Asian	53	19.27%
Black	47	17.09%
Middle Eastern	47	17.09%
Southeast Asian	23	8.36%
East Asian	17	6.18%
Mixed	15	5.45%
Latin American	6	2.18%
Other	6	2.18%
South American	2	0.73%
Relationship to Transgressor		
Friend	117	42.39%
Romantic partner	61	22.10%
Immediate family member	44	15.94%
Other	24	8.70%
Acquaintance	13	4.71%
Relative	10	3.62%
Boss	5	1.81%
Coworker	2	0.72%

Note. Percentages are based on the valid responses for each demographic variable.

Procedure

The study consisted of two parts: a pre-screening survey (Part 1) and a follow-up qualitative interview (Part 2). Both components were approved by the York University Ethics Review Board prior to data collection.

In Part 1, participants were recruited through the Undergraduate Research Participant Pool (URPP) and completed an online pre-screening survey. As part of the survey, participants were asked to recall a past interpersonal transgression in which they felt hurt, wronged, or treated unfairly by another individual. They were prompted to describe the event and report on their emotional and cognitive responses, including any thoughts related to retaliation. The survey also included standard demographic questions and relevant trait and state measures associated with post-transgression responding. Participation in Part 1 was voluntary, and individuals self-selected into the study based on their willingness to reflect on experiences involving retaliatory thoughts.

Upon completion of the pre-screening survey, participants were invited to take part in Part 2 of the study, which consisted of a semi-structured interview. Participation in Part 2 was voluntary and conducted on a separate sign-up basis. Part 2 involved one-on-one semi-structured interviews conducted via Zoom. Interviews ranged from approximately 60 to 75 minutes in length. Prior to the interview, participants provided informed consent and were reminded that they could decline to answer any questions or withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. During the interview, participants were asked to elaborate on the transgression they described in Part 1, with a particular focus on their thoughts, emotions, and any imagined or hypothetical responses toward the transgressor. The semi-structured format allowed the researcher to follow the interview guide while also asking follow-up questions to clarify and expand on participants' responses.

All interviews were audio-recorded using Zoom's recording function. Webcams and/or phone or tablet cameras were not required to be turned on during the interview, although 6 of the 18 participants voluntarily did while the rest chose to keep them off. Recordings were subsequently transcribed using Zoom's automated transcription feature and reviewed for accuracy by the researcher. Transcripts were cleaned to remove identifying information and to ensure clarity of responses. Following data cleaning, 16 transcripts were retained for analysis, with exclusions based on participants who did not meaningfully describe or acknowledge retaliatory thoughts. This final sample ($N = 16$) mirrored the proportion of characteristics of the overall sample. The finalized set of transcripts was then used for qualitative analysis.

Materials

Interview Guide. When creating and developing the interview guide, the researcher ensured that the questions being asked could provide rich information on several crucial aspects of revenge fantasies. The interview guide was designed to elicit participants' experiences of interpersonal transgressions and their associated thoughts, emotions, and responses, with a particular focus on revenge-related cognitions. Questions were open-ended and flexible, allowing participants to describe their experiences in their own words while providing sufficient structure to ensure that key topics were addressed.

The interview guide included prompts related to the nature of the transgression emotional reactions, ongoing thoughts about the event, and any imagined or hypothetical responses toward the transgressor. The guide prompts the researcher to begin by asking participants to describe the retaliatory thoughts they had experienced and to explain whether they considered these thoughts to constitute a revenge fantasy. Subsequent questions explored the circumstances surrounding the transgression, the participant's relationship with the transgressor, and the content and

characteristics of their retaliatory thoughts. For example, participants were asked, “What were the circumstances and occurrences that led to these thoughts?” and “What are the contents of these thoughts or fantasies?”. Participants were also asked about the circumstances in which these thoughts occurred, including when they tended to experience them and how long they had been present. Additional questions explored participants’ emotional and cognitive experiences while engaging in these thoughts, their initial and current responses to the transgression, and how their relationship with the transgressor had changed over time. Finally, participants were asked about their perceptions of the consequences of entertaining these thoughts, whether they anticipated continuing to experience them, and whether they intended to enact any of the retaliatory behaviours they had imagined. The semi-structured format allowed the researcher to maintain consistency across interviews while also adapting to unique experiences of each participant by using follow-up questions and probes to clarify participants’ responses and explore topics that emerged during the interview. The full semi-structured interview guide is provided in Appendix A.

Data Analytic Process

Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019). This approach is a qualitative method for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning, or themes, within a dataset. Reflexive thematic analysis is particularly well suited for exploring complex and underdefined phenomena, as it allows for flexibility in interpretation while emphasizing the active role of the researcher in the analytic process. Consistent with a reflexive approach, themes were not treated as emerging passively from the data. Rather, they were developed through the researcher’s engagement with the data, informed by both participants’ accounts and the researcher’s interpretive perspective (Braun &

Clarke, 2019). This aligns with the aims of the present study, which seeks to understand how individuals construct and make meaning of revenge fantasies in the context of interpersonal transgressions.

An inductive approach to analysis was used, such that themes were derived from the data rather than based on predefined theoretical categories. This was considered appropriate given the limited conceptual clarity surrounding revenge fantasies, as it allowed the findings to reflect participants' experiences without being constrained by existing frameworks. At the same time, the analysis was conducted within the broader context of research on post-transgression responses, including work on revenge, rumination, and grudges, which informed interpretation where relevant.

The analysis followed the six phases of reflexive thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006) that were previously mentioned briefly. First, the researcher familiarized themselves with the data by reviewing interview transcripts multiple times. This process began during transcription cleaning and continued through repeated readings, allowing the researcher to develop an initial sense of patterns and meanings within the dataset.

Second, initial codes were generated by systematically working through each transcript and identifying meaningful units of text. Responses were segmented into smaller units based on shifts in meaning, and each unit was assigned one or more codes depending on the complexity of the context being shared. In instances where multiple meanings were reflected within a single segment, multiple codes were applied to capture the breadth of the participant's account. These codes reflected both descriptive content and interpretive insights into participants' experiences. For example, a participant statement such as "I just wanted them to feel what I felt*"* was coded as *desire for experiential justice*, capturing the intention to restore fairness through imagined

equivalence of harm. Similarly, statements describing imagined success or self-improvement in response to a transgression were coded as *symbolic power recalibration*. These codes were developed to reflect both the explicit content of participants' responses and their underlying psychological meaning. Coding was conducted across all transcripts, and codes were compiled into a structured format for further analysis.

Third, the researcher searched for themes by examining patterns across codes. Codes that reflected similar ideas or experiences were grouped together, and potential themes were developed based on these groupings. This involved identifying recurring concepts, as well as considering how different codes related to one another within the broader dataset.

Fourth, potential themes were reviewed and refined. This involved evaluating whether the themes accurately represented the coded data and whether they formed a coherent pattern across the dataset. During this phase, some themes were collapsed, separated, or redefined, and subthemes were identified where appropriate. The goal was to ensure that each theme captured a meaningful and distinct aspect of participants' experiences.

Fifth, higher order themes were defined and named. This involved clearly articulating the central organizing concept of each theme and determining how it contributed to understanding revenge fantasies. Theme names were developed to reflect both the content and interpretive meaning of the data, resulting in a set of higher-order themes that captured key patterns across participants' accounts.

Finally, the themes were reported by integrating them into a coherent narrative that addressed the research aims. This involved selecting representative excerpts from the data,

interpreting their meaning, and situating the findings within the broader literature on post-transgression responses.

Throughout the analytic process, the researcher engaged in ongoing reflexivity, acknowledging how their perspectives and assumptions may shape interpretation. This included reflecting on coding decisions, revisiting earlier stages of analysis, and ensuring that interpretations remained grounded in the data. Regular discussions with the research supervisor also contributed to the development and refinement of themes, providing an additional level of critical reflection and ensuring analytic rigour.

Results

Overview of Themes

Through the reflexive thematic analysis, five core themes capturing how participants experienced and made sense of revenge fantasies following interpersonal transgressions were developed/constructed. These themes reflect not only the content of revenge fantasies, but also the broader psychological processes through which individuals respond to perceived harm. Across participants, revenge fantasies emerged as structured, meaning-driven cognitive responses shaped by emotional activation, moral considerations, and ongoing engagement with the transgression.

The five themes identified were: (1) justice restoration as a core function, (2) symbolic recalibration of power, (3) emotional persistence, (4) moral and identity-based inhibition, and (5) consequences of fantasizing. Together, these themes suggest that revenge fantasies are not simply impulsive or maladaptive thoughts, but are embedded within a broader system of private interpreting and responding to interpersonal harm.

Justice Restoration as a Core Function. A central feature of participants' revenge fantasies was the desire to restore a sense of justice or fairness following a perceived transgression. Rather than reflecting a purely destructive intent, these fantasies were often structured around proportionality, accountability, and recognition of harm. Participants frequently framed their imagined scenarios as attempts to "even the score," emphasizing that the goal was not to escalate harm, but to restore balance.

For instance, one participant described wanting the transgressor to "experience the same thing I went through, not more". A similar pattern was reflected in another participant's account, who expressed a desire for the transgressor to "go through the exact same things" they had experienced, emphasizing the importance of understanding the harm that was caused. These statements reflect a concern with proportionality, suggesting that the imagined retaliation was calibrated to match the original harm rather than exceed it. In this way, revenge fantasies appeared to function as a cognitive means of negotiating fairness, where individuals mentally simulate outcomes that would correct perceived injustice through equivalence of harm.

Importantly, participants also expressed a desire for the transgressor to understand the impact of their actions. This indicates that revenge fantasies are not solely about inflicting harm, but also about achieving recognition and validation. By imagining scenarios in which the transgressor is confronted with the consequences of their behaviour, individuals may attempt to resolve feelings of being wronged or dismissed.

One participant described wanting the transgressor to experience the same harm that had been inflicted upon them:

> "I thought I should have played the same game back and make her suffer the way I did. It felt unfair that she took advantage of my openness for selfish reasons. I wanted to prove that playing a dual-faced personality is dirty. She would only understand it if she experienced it herself."

This account reflects a recurring pattern across participants' narratives in which revenge fantasies were not centred solely on causing harm, but on restoring a perceived imbalance created by the transgression. Participants frequently emphasized fairness, understanding, and proportionality, suggesting that imagined retaliation was often viewed as a mechanism for restoring justice rather than inflicting indiscriminate suffering.

Taken together, these suggest that revenge fantasies serve a justice-restorative function. They allow individuals to engage with unresolved concerns about fairness and accountability in situations where direct resolution may not be possible. In this sense, revenge fantasies may operate as a cognitive extension of broader justice-related motivations following interpersonal harm.

Symbolic Recalibration of Power. In addition to restoring justice, participants' revenge fantasies frequently involved attempts to reclaim a sense of power or control that had been disrupted by the transgression. However, this recalibration of power was often imagined in indirect or symbolic ways rather than through direct confrontation or harm.

Participants described scenarios in which they would regain status, demonstrate success, or achieve emotional detachment in ways that repositioned them relative to the transgressor. For example, one participant noted imagining "[her] friend group realizing that [she] is living life like normal, even after being excluded by them", while another expressed a desire for the

transgressor to “witness how much better off I am without them, but they no longer have access to me”. The desire to reclaim power was often expressed through fantasies of personal success rather than direct retaliation. As one participant explained:

> "I imagined him seeing how much more successful I was than him, and that's like my payback. Not necessarily doing anything to him, but showing that I ended up better off."

Rather than imagining direct confrontation or punishment, participants frequently described scenarios in which they regained a sense of control through achievement, growth, or emotional independence. These fantasies appeared to function less as efforts to harm the transgressor and more as attempts to reclaim a sense of agency and status that had been disrupted by the transgression.

In these cases, retaliation is not enacted through harm, but through self-improvement and the imagined recognition of that improvement by the transgressor. This pattern suggests that revenge fantasies can function as a form of symbolic power recalibration. Rather than directly confronting the transgressor, individuals imagine scenarios in which the power imbalance created by the transgression is reversed or neutralized. These imagined outcomes often involve achieving personal success, withdrawing from the relationship, or redefining one’s position in relation to the transgressor.

Notably, these fantasies allow individuals to reclaim a sense of agency without engaging in behaviours that might carry social or moral consequences. By shifting the focus from harming the transgressor to improving one’s own position, revenge fantasies can serve as a psychologically adaptive way of restoring control in situations where direct retaliation is not feasible or desirable.

Emotional Persistence and Cognitive Replay. Revenge fantasies were closely linked to the persistence of emotional responses following a transgression. Participants frequently described these thoughts as recurring and difficult to fully disengage from, even when the intensity of the initial emotional reaction had decreased.

Many participants noted that their thoughts about retaliation would resurface during moments of reduced cognitive engagement, such as when they were alone or not actively focused on other tasks. One participant explained, “I am reminded about [the negative event] when my mind’s unoccupied”, and another expressed how memories of the event “pops up in my head when I’m not busy, or even just trying to sleep”, suggesting that these thoughts can emerge spontaneously rather than being intentionally generated. In some cases, participants also described a disconnect between their current emotional state and the persistence of these thoughts. For example, one participant noted, “I feel nothing for them now, but the event is still upsetting when I remember it”. This indicates that revenge fantasies may persist even when the individual no longer feels actively invested in the relationship, highlighting the enduring psychological impact of the transgression.

One participant described the recurring nature of revenge-related thoughts as something that persisted outside of conscious control:

> "But when I was alone, like, doing chores, lying in bed, sitting on the couch, they would come back. It was like a pest. Suppressing them gave them more power. Like compressing a spring. Eventually it snaps back. I realized I was suppressing consciously, but unconsciously it was still processing."

This account illustrates how revenge fantasies were often experienced not as deliberate attempts to dwell on a transgression, but as recurring cognitive processes that resurfaced during periods of reduced distraction. Participants frequently described these thoughts as difficult to fully disengage from, suggesting that revenge fantasies may function as a form of ongoing emotional processing rather than a singular reaction to harm.

This theme suggests that revenge fantasies are embedded within a broader pattern of emotional persistence, where unresolved feelings continue to be revisited over time. Rather than serving as isolated thoughts, these fantasies appear to be part of an ongoing process of making sense of and responding to interpersonal harm.

Moral and Identity-based Inhibition. Despite the presence of retaliatory thoughts, participants consistently emphasized a clear distinction between imagining revenge and acting on it. This distinction was often grounded in moral beliefs and aspects of personal identity, which functioned to inhibit the translation of fantasy into behaviour.

Participants described their revenge fantasies as something that existed separately from their "real" selves, often framing these thoughts as inconsistent with their values or upbringing. For example, when asked why they maintained these retaliatory thoughts as is without enactment, one participant stated, "that's not me, that's not how I was raised", and another similarly expressed, "that's not the kind of person I am". This distinction suggests that participants were aware of the potential consequences of retaliation and actively chose to maintain a boundary between imagination and action due to their beliefs and perceived self-image.

One participant clearly distinguished between imagining negative outcomes for the transgressor and actively pursuing those outcomes:

> "I don't want to be the one punishing him. I believe karma will get him. I don't want bad energy coming back to me or my daughter. I believe the universe handles it."

Although participants often entertained retaliatory thoughts, many simultaneously described moral principles that prevented them from acting on those thoughts. These accounts suggest that revenge fantasies were not necessarily experienced as incompatible with one's values; rather, the boundary between fantasy and enactment was often maintained through moral reasoning and identity-based considerations.

This theme reflects an ongoing tension between desire and restraint. While revenge fantasies provide a space for engaging with retaliatory impulses, moral and identity-based considerations limit the extent to which these impulses are acted upon. As a result, revenge fantasies remain internal, allowing individuals to explore these thoughts without compromising their values or self-concept.

Consequences of Fantasizing. Participants described a range of consequences associated with engaging in revenge fantasies, reflecting both beneficial and potentially detrimental effects. These consequences extended beyond immediate emotional reactions and influenced how individuals understood themselves, their relationships, and the transgression over time.

Some participants reported that engaging in revenge fantasies provided a sense of relief or emotional regulation. For example, one participant described it as “how I protect my peace now”, suggesting that these thoughts may serve a coping function. Another participant described their experience of fantasizing as “a reminder of what I went through,” while also

acknowledging that they “won’t do anything about it, but it’s nice to imagine what could’ve been done or said differently.” This account suggests that imagining alternative outcomes may provide a sense of emotional release or resolution, even in the absence of action. By imagining justice or resolution, individuals may temporarily alleviate feelings of frustration or helplessness. At the same time, participants acknowledged that these fantasies could reinforce their focus on the transgression, contributing to ongoing emotional engagement. This dual effect highlights the complexity of revenge fantasies, which may simultaneously regulate and maintain emotional responses.

For some participants, revenge fantasies became intertwined with broader experiences of personal growth and emotional liberation:

> "I was like, I will not spend a single cell on you any longer. Not a single cell to think about you, be mad at you, upset about you, or whatever is going to happen to you. I shifted into this neutrality. And when it was over, I was like, 'this is it.' And that for me, that was a way of punishing him in my head."

This account highlights how revenge fantasies were not always focused on inflicting harm upon the transgressor. Instead, participants sometimes described imagined retaliation as taking the form of emotional detachment, self-preservation, and the restoration of personal agency. In these instances, fantasizing appeared to facilitate a shift in focus from the transgressor toward one's own well-being and growth.

Additionally, engaging in revenge fantasies appeared to influence participants’ self-perception and moral self-evaluation. Some individuals expressed discomfort or conflict about having these thoughts, particularly when they viewed them as inconsistent with their values.

Others described changes in how they viewed the transgressor, often leading to increased emotional distance or negative evaluation. In addition to shaping emotional and relational outcomes, maintaining revenge fantasies without enacting them may allow individuals to preserve a sense of moral high ground relative to the transgressor. By imagining retaliation while choosing not to act, individuals may reinforce a self-concept rooted in restraint, control, and moral integrity. This dynamic parallels patterns observed in grudge holding, where individuals sustain negative evaluations of the offender while simultaneously positioning themselves as justified or morally superior (van Monsjou et al., 2023).

Overall, this theme suggests that revenge fantasies are not neutral cognitive experiences. Instead, they have meaningful implications for emotional processing, identity, and relational dynamics, shaping how individuals continue to engage with the aftermath of interpersonal harm. The sequence identified across participants' accounts also suggested that revenge fantasies were not isolated cognitive events, but part of a broader process that unfolded over time. One participant's account illustrates several components of this process:

> "After realizing that betrayal, I questioned why I acted so nicer to her, I even decided to give her the benefit of the doubt. [Then] the thoughts were automatic. They came back whenever I wasn't focused on something else. Eventually I tried to suppress them because I knew I wasn't actually going to act on them."

This account captures many of the processes reflected across participants' narratives, including the perception of harm, emotional activation, imagined retaliation, recurring cognitive engagement, and the eventual inhibition of behavioural enactment. Building upon these patterns, a process-oriented framework of revenge fantasies is proposed.

Table 2

Breakdown of Higher-order Themes, Subthemes, and Simplified Organizing Themes

Higher-order Themes	Subthemes	Organizing Themes
Justice Restoration as a Core Function	Experiential Justice	• *Imagined harm* is reflective of experienced harm • *Engaging in hypotheticals* to reconstruct the event and restore a sense of agency • *Past experiences* are framed as self-protection
	Desire for Recognition of Harm	• *Seeking justice* by wanting acknowledgement and understanding of wrongdoing
	Proportional Consequences	• *Seeking justice* through proportional and balanced consequences
Symbolic Recalibration of Power	Withdrawal as Punishment	• *Indirect or symbolic retaliation* that reasserts power through deprivation of access
	Success as Retaliation	• *Indirect or symbolic retaliation* that restores power through personal achievement • *Persistence* of symbolic retaliatory thoughts even after emotions fade
Emotional Persistence and Cognitive Replay	Lingering Resentment	• *Framing experiences* that fuel ongoing emotional responses • *Feelings or emotions* accumulate and sustains bitterness • *Persistence* of negative affect

	Intrusive Replay	• *Past experiences* reactivate the event through rumination
Moral and Identity-based Inhibition	Thought vs. Action	• *Moral beliefs* constrain behavioural enactment • *Moral beliefs* permit mental simulation
	Alignment with Self-concept	• *One's identity* inhibits revenge and deems it as conflicting with one's values
Consequences of Fantasizing	Relational Framing	• *Past experiences* allow for re-evaluation of relationships
	Personal Empowerment or Liberation	• *Fantasizing benefits the self* by promoting autonomy and relief from relational burden • *Deliberate* simulation supports sense-making of potential action • *One's identity* is positively evaluated for showing restraint
	Maintenance of Emotional Attachment	• *Fantasizing affects the self* through sustained cognitive and emotional engagement • *Fantasizing affects the other* through unawareness leading to negative relational impact • *Fantasizing affects recollection of event* through reappraisal
	Moral self-evaluation	• *One's identity* is challenged yet reaffirmed for non-enactment • *One's identity* is questioned for entertaining retaliatory thoughts

Toward a Process Model of Revenge Fantasies

Building on these findings, the present study proposes a process-oriented theoretical framework of revenge fantasies that integrates emotional activation, cognitive simulation, and moral regulation. This model begins with a perceived harm or moral violation, which triggers emotional responses such as anger, hurt, or resentment. These emotional states, in turn, give rise to private mental simulations in which individuals imagine justice-restoring or retaliatory outcomes in the safety of their minds.

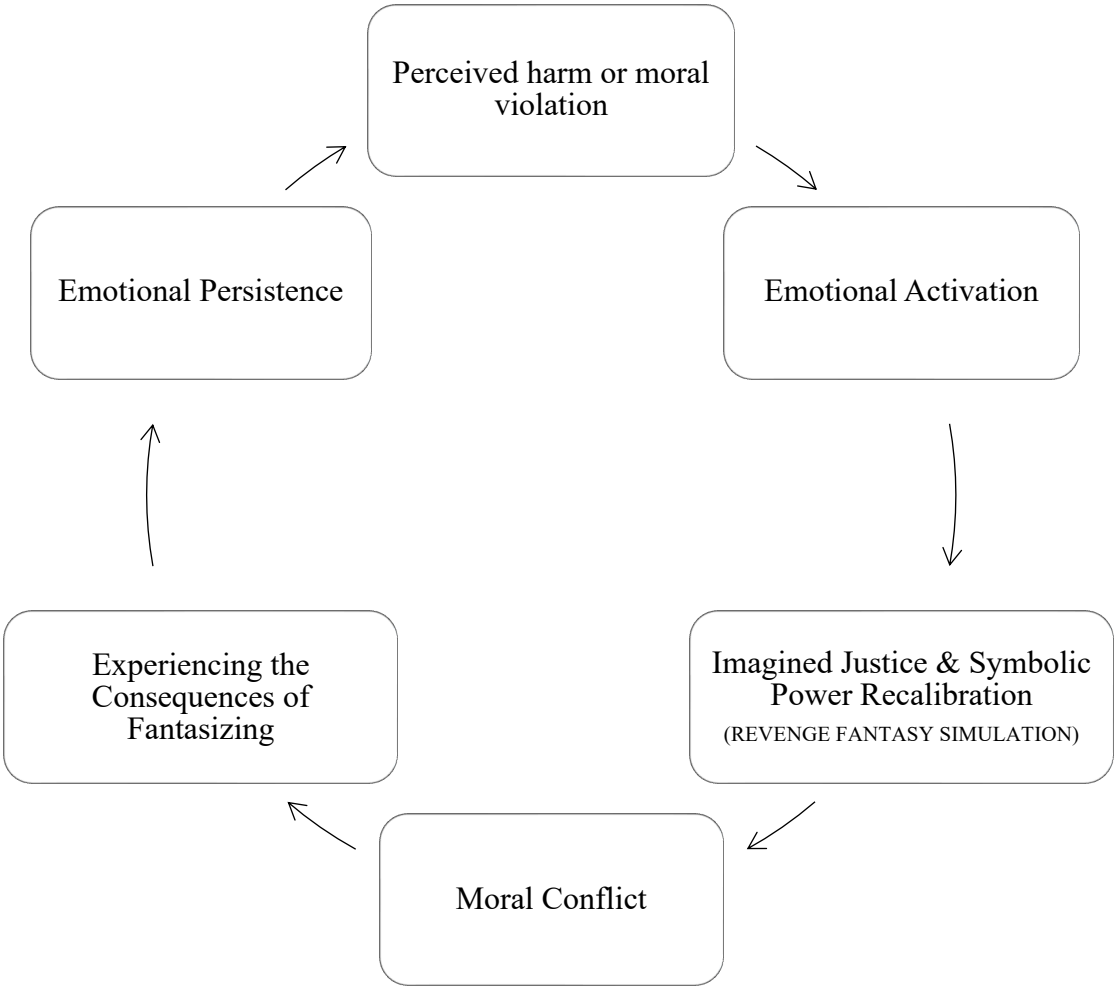
These simulations often involve symbolic recalibration of power, allowing individuals to restore a sense of agency without engaging in direct retaliation. However, the translation of these fantasies into behaviour is constrained by moral beliefs and identity-based considerations, which maintain a boundary between imagination and action. As a result, revenge fantasies remain internal, even as they provide a means of engaging with retaliatory motivations.

At the same time, engaging in these fantasies has consequences for emotional processing and self-perception. These consequences can reinforce ongoing engagement with the transgression, contributing to a cycle of emotional persistence. Over time, this cyclical process may sustain the psychological presence of the transgression, even in the absence of continued interaction with the transgressor.

This proposed model reflects the sequence identified in participants' accounts and provides a framework for understanding how revenge fantasies emerge, are regulated, and are maintained over time. Importantly, it highlights the interplay between emotional activation, cognitive simulation, and moral regulation, positioning revenge fantasies as a dynamic process rather than a static construct.

Figure 1

Theoretical Model of the Cycle of Revenge Fantasies



Discussion

Overview of Findings

The present study sought to develop a deeper understanding of revenge fantasies as a response to interpersonal transgressions. Using reflexive thematic analysis, five core themes were identified: (i) justice restoration as a core function, (ii) symbolic recalibration of power, (iii) emotional persistence and cognitive replay, (iv) moral and identity-based inhibition, and (v) consequences of fantasizing. Taken together, these findings suggest that revenge fantasies are not incidental or purely reactive thoughts, but structured cognitive processes that emerge in response to perceived harm, processed in private, and serve identifiable psychological functions.

More broadly, the findings highlight the importance of examining post-transgression responses beyond observable behaviour. Although existing research has largely focused on forgiveness and revenge as behavioural outcomes, the present study demonstrates that individuals may continue to engage with transgressions internally, even in the absence of overt action. In doing so, this work positions revenge fantasies as a distinct and meaningful form of post-transgression responding that operates at the intersection of cognition, emotion, and moral regulation.

Revenge Fantasies as Justice-Oriented Cognitive Processes

A central contribution of the present findings is the identification of revenge fantasies as fundamentally oriented toward justice restoration. Participants' accounts consistently reflected a concern with fairness, proportionality, and accountability, rather than an indiscriminate desire to harm the transgressor. This aligns with prior research suggesting that revenge is often motivated

by a perceived need to restore equity and respond to norm violations (Carlsmith et al., 2008; McCullough et al., 2013).

However, the present findings extend this literature in an important way by demonstrating that justice-related motivations can be enacted cognitively rather than behaviourally. That is, even when individuals do not pursue revenge in action, they may still engage in mental simulations that are structured around restoring balance. This suggests that revenge fantasies may function as a cognitive analogue to behavioural revenge, allowing individuals to symbolically resolve injustice without incurring the social, relational, or moral costs associated with acting on these impulses.

An additional interpretation emerging from the present findings is that revenge fantasies may derive part of their appeal from the psychological safety afforded by imagination. Participants were able to simulate retaliatory outcomes, explore feelings of anger and injustice, and restore a sense of agency without incurring the interpersonal, social, or moral consequences associated with behavioural retaliation. In this sense, fantasy may function as a protected cognitive space in which revenge-related motivations can be explored while remaining separate from action.

Importantly, participants' emphasis on proportionality further suggests that revenge fantasies are not simply expressions of unregulated anger. Instead, they appear to be guided by implicit moral frameworks that constrain the imagined outcomes. This challenges the assumption that revenge-related cognitions are inherently excessive or maladaptive, and instead positions them as structured, meaning-driven responses that are sensitive to considerations of fairness.

Recalibrating Power Without Action

A second key contribution of the present study is the identification of symbolic power recalibration as a core component of revenge fantasies. Participants frequently imagined scenarios in which they regained status, autonomy, or emotional distance, often without directly harming the transgressor. These findings suggest that revenge fantasies are not solely about retaliation, but also about restoring a sense of agency that has been disrupted by the transgression.

This interpretation is consistent with theoretical accounts that conceptualize anger and retaliatory motivations as mechanisms for recalibrating social relationships and perceived welfare trade-offs (Sell et al., 2009). However, the present findings extend these accounts by demonstrating that such recalibration can occur entirely at the level of imagination. Rather than engaging in behaviours that directly alter the relationship, individuals may mentally simulate outcomes that symbolically re-establish their position.

This distinction is important because it highlights an alternative pathway through which individuals can respond to interpersonal harm, particularly when one has low social power to affect others but high personal power to engage in revenge fantasy or when behavioural revenge might escalate the conflict. In situations where direct retaliation is constrained or undesirable, symbolic forms of recalibration may provide a means of restoring control while avoiding potential negative consequences. As such, revenge fantasies may serve an adaptive function by allowing individuals to address perceived imbalances in a way that is both effective and socially acceptable.

Revenge Fantasies as Structured Emotional Processing

The present findings also contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between revenge fantasies and emotional persistence. Consistent with prior research on rumination, participants described ongoing cognitive engagement with the transgression, often characterized by recurring thoughts and emotional activation (Denson et al., 2012). However, the findings suggest that revenge fantasies represent a more structured and goal-oriented form of cognitive processing.

Whereas rumination typically involves repeatedly focusing on the causes and consequences of an event, revenge fantasies involve actively constructing imagined scenarios that address the imbalance created by the transgression. In this sense, revenge fantasies may be understood as a form of prospective processing, in which individuals mentally simulate alternative outcomes that restore justice or power while maintaining one's moral integrity and in the safety of carrying this out in the privacy of one's thoughts and simulations.

This distinction has important implications. By framing revenge fantasies as structured simulations rather than passive repetition, the present study highlights their potential role in meaning-making. Rather than simply maintaining negative affect, these fantasies may serve as a way for individuals to actively engage with and attempt to resolve the psychological impact of the transgression. At the same time, because these simulations are not enacted, they may also contribute to the persistence of emotional engagement over time.

Moral Regulation and Identity Maintenance

A defining feature of participants' experiences was the consistent presence of moral and identity-based constraints on behaviour. Participants clearly distinguished between imagining

retaliation and acting on it, often emphasizing that engaging in revenge behaviour would conflict with their values or sense of self. This finding aligns with existing research demonstrating that moral considerations and self-concept play a key role in regulating responses to interpersonal harm (Strelan et al., 2017). However, the present study provides a more detailed account of how this regulation operates in practice. Rather than eliminating retaliatory motivations, moral and identity-based processes appear to redirect them into the cognitive domain.

This creates a dynamic in which individuals simultaneously entertain and inhibit retaliatory impulses. Revenge fantasies may therefore serve as a form of regulated expression, allowing individuals to engage with these impulses in a way that preserves their moral identity through the safety of information processing and simulation in the privacy of one's thoughts. In this sense, revenge fantasies are not simply constrained by morality, but actively shaped by it, reflecting an ongoing negotiation between desire and self-concept.

Consequences of Engaging in Revenge Fantasies

The present findings also highlight the complex consequences of engaging in revenge fantasies. Participants described both beneficial and detrimental effects, suggesting that these experiences cannot be easily categorized as adaptive or maladaptive.

On one hand, revenge fantasies may provide temporary emotional relief by allowing individuals to imagine justice or resolution. This is consistent with broader literature on mental simulation and emotion regulation, which suggests that imagining desired outcomes can influence affective states. On the other hand, these fantasies may also sustain attention on the transgression, reinforcing emotional persistence and preventing full disengagement.

In addition, engaging in revenge fantasies appears to influence how individuals understand themselves and their relationships. Participants reported experiencing tension when these thoughts conflicted with their values, as well as shifts in how they perceived the transgressor. These findings suggest that revenge fantasies play an active role in shaping both emotional and relational trajectories following interpersonal harm.

Taken together, these findings point to a broader conceptual question regarding the role of fantasy itself in post-transgression responding, particularly as a mechanism that allows individuals to engage with retaliatory impulses in a safe and private manner.

Fantasy as a Safe and Private Simulation Space

An important conceptual implication of the present findings concerns the role of fantasy itself. Across participants' accounts, revenge fantasies appeared to function as a form of private cognitive simulation, allowing individuals to engage with retaliatory impulses within a psychologically safe and internally contained space. Mental simulation and imagery processes have been shown to play an active role in emotional processing, enabling individuals to construct and experience hypothetical scenarios with affective significance (Holmes et al., 2007). In the context of interpersonal transgressions, this capacity allows individuals to imagine alternative outcomes, including those involving confrontation or retaliation, without incurring real-world consequences.

Importantly, these simulations occur in the absence of behavioural enactment, meaning they are less constrained by external social and moral repercussions, even as they remain internally regulated by personal values and identity (Gollwitzer & Denzler, 2009). This creates a unique cognitive environment in which individuals can explore retaliatory desires while

maintaining alignment with their self-concept. At the same time, the persistence of such imagined scenarios may be supported by broader processes of rumination and cognitive rehearsal, which sustain engagement with the transgression over time (Denson et al., 2012).

In this sense, the "fantasy" component is not merely descriptive, but functionally significant. It provides a consequence-free space for processing interpersonal harm, negotiating tensions between desire and restraint, and exploring potential responses. This perspective helps to explain why revenge fantasies may persist even when individuals have no intention of acting on them, as they serve as a mechanism for working through unresolved emotional and moral conflicts while maintaining behavioural inhibition. More broadly, this framing positions revenge fantasies as a form of internal responding that is distinct from both behavioural retaliation and passive rumination, highlighting the role of private simulation in shaping how individuals process and make sense of interpersonal harm.

Conceptual Definition of Revenge Fantasies

Building on the themes identified in the present study, revenge fantasies can be conceptualized as internally-generated, private mental simulations that emerge following interpersonal harm and involve imagining retaliatory or justice-restoring outcomes, often shaped by an ongoing tension between the desire to retaliate and the constraints imposed by moral beliefs and identity.

This definition reflects several key features that distinguish revenge fantasies from other post-transgression responses. First, revenge fantasies are fundamentally cognitive in nature, occurring as private internal simulations rather than enacted behaviours. Participants' accounts consistently emphasized that these experiences take place "in the safety of the mind," allowing

individuals to imagine scenarios that may never be acted upon. This internal quality is critical, as it enables individuals to engage with retaliatory motivations in the absence of behavioural expression.

Second, revenge fantasies are triggered by perceived interpersonal harm or moral violation. Across participants, these thoughts emerged in response to experiences of being wronged, mistreated, or treated unfairly. As such, revenge fantasies are not random or intrusive in isolation, but are embedded within broader processes of responding to transgressions. They represent one way in which individuals attempt to process and make sense of these experiences.

Third, the content of revenge fantasies is structured around imagined outcomes that restore justice or recalibrate power. Importantly, these outcomes are not limited to direct harm. As reflected in the themes of justice restoration and symbolic recalibration of power, participants often imagined scenarios in which fairness was re-established, recognition was achieved, or their own position was improved relative to the transgressor. This suggests that revenge fantasies are guided by meaning-driven goals, rather than being purely expressions of anger or hostility.

A defining feature of revenge fantasies, as identified in the present study, is the presence of moral and identity-based tension. Participants consistently described a clear boundary between imagining retaliation and acting on it, often grounded in their values or sense of self. This indicates that revenge fantasies are not simply unconstrained expressions of desire, but are shaped by internal regulatory processes. Individuals simultaneously engage with and inhibit retaliatory impulses, in the safety of privacy, resulting in fantasies that remain at the level of imagination.

In addition, revenge fantasies are closely linked to emotional persistence, often recurring over time and resurfacing in moments of reduced cognitive engagement. Rather than resolving the transgression, these fantasies may sustain or re-activate emotional responses such as anger, hurt, or resentment. At the same time, participants reported that engaging in these fantasies could provide temporary relief or a sense of resolution, highlighting their dual role in both maintaining and regulating emotional experiences.

Taken together, these features position revenge fantasies as a distinct form of post-transgression responding that integrates emotional, cognitive, and moral processes. They are not equivalent to behavioural revenge, as they do not involve action, nor are they reducible to rumination, which primarily involves repetitive focus on past events. Instead, revenge fantasies involve active mental simulation of alternative outcomes, often oriented toward justice or power, and are shaped by ongoing negotiation between desire and restraint.

By conceptualizing revenge fantasies in this way, the present study contributes to a more precise understanding of how individuals engage with interpersonal harm at the cognitive level. This definition not only clarifies the nature of revenge fantasies, but also provides a foundation for future research aimed at examining their antecedents, functions, and consequences within the broader landscape of post-transgression responses.

Limitations and Future Directions

The present study was designed to explore how individuals experience, understand, and make meaning of revenge fantasies following interpersonal transgressions. Consistent with the aims of qualitative inquiry, the findings are intended to provide a rich and contextualized

understanding of this phenomenon rather than establish universal patterns of behaviour. As such, several considerations should be acknowledged when interpreting the findings.

First, the present findings reflect the experiences of a relatively specific participant group consisting primarily of undergraduate students. Although participants described a diverse range of interpersonal transgressions, the meanings attributed to revenge fantasies may differ across age groups, cultural contexts, and relationship types. Rather than limiting the value of the findings, this highlights the contextual nature of qualitative knowledge and the importance of considering how revenge fantasies may be experienced differently across social and relational environments.

Second, participants were asked to retrospectively reflect on previous transgressions and their associated thoughts and feelings. As with all retrospective accounts, participants' narratives represent current interpretations of past experiences rather than direct recordings of those experiences as they occurred. The present study was primarily concerned with these subjective interpretations and meaning-making processes; however, it remains possible that participants' understandings of their revenge fantasies evolved over time as they reflected upon the transgression and its consequences.

Third, the findings represent one interpretive account of the data. Consistent with a reflexive thematic analysis approach, themes were developed through the interaction between participants' accounts and the researcher's interpretive engagement with the data. Alternative researchers may have emphasized different aspects of participants' narratives or generated somewhat different thematic structures. To support the trustworthiness of the analysis, reflexive practices, memoing, and ongoing discussions with supervisory committee members were incorporated throughout the analytic process. Nevertheless, the findings should be understood as

one theoretically informed interpretation rather than a singular or definitive representation of the phenomenon.

Despite these considerations, the present study provides one of the first in-depth qualitative examinations of revenge fantasies as a post-transgression response. The findings offer a conceptual foundation for future research by clarifying how revenge fantasies are experienced, the functions they appear to serve, and the processes through which they are regulated.

Future research may build upon these findings in several ways. First, the conceptual definition and thematic framework developed in the present study provide a basis for the development of quantitative measures of revenge fantasies. Such measures would allow researchers to examine the prevalence, frequency, and correlates of revenge fantasies across larger and more diverse populations.

Second, future work may seek to evaluate and refine the process-oriented framework proposed in the present study. Although the model emerged inductively from participants' accounts, quantitative and experimental approaches could be used to examine whether emotional activation, imagined justice restoration, symbolic power recalibration, moral inhibition, and emotional persistence operate in the manner suggested by the present findings. Such work would help determine whether the proposed framework reflects a broader psychological process underlying revenge fantasies.

Third, future research may examine the conditions under which revenge fantasies are beneficial or detrimental. Participants frequently described revenge fantasies as serving functions related to emotional processing, justice restoration, and personal empowerment. At the same time, they also reported experiences of intrusive replay, emotional persistence, and continued

attachment to the transgression. Understanding when revenge fantasies facilitate adaptation versus prolong distress may represent an important direction for both theoretical and applied research.

Finally, future studies may explore revenge fantasies within populations and contexts not represented in the present sample. Experiences of betrayal, victimization, romantic dissolution, workplace conflict, and chronic interpersonal harm may each give rise to distinct forms of revenge fantasy that warrant further investigation. Examining these experiences across diverse populations would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of revenge fantasies and their role in post-transgression adjustment.

Conclusion

The present study sought to develop a deeper understanding of revenge fantasies as a response to interpersonal transgressions. Although revenge has received considerable attention within the broader post-transgression literature, comparatively little research has examined the cognitive experiences that often occur in the absence of behavioural retaliation. By exploring participants' lived experiences of revenge fantasies, the present study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how individuals engage with perceived harm at the level of thought, imagination, and meaning-making.

Through reflexive thematic analysis, five core themes were identified: justice restoration as a core function, symbolic recalibration of power, emotional persistence and cognitive replay, moral and identity-based inhibition, and consequences of fantasizing. Collectively, these findings suggest that revenge fantasies are not simply expressions of anger or hostility. Rather, they represent structured cognitive simulations through which individuals attempt to make sense of

interpersonal harm, restore a sense of fairness or agency, and negotiate tensions between retaliatory desires and personal values.

The present findings also contribute to the development of a conceptual definition of revenge fantasies. Drawing from participants' accounts, revenge fantasies are proposed to be internally generated mental simulations that emerge following interpersonal harm and involve imagined retaliatory or justice-restoring outcomes. This definition helps distinguish revenge fantasies from related constructs such as anger, rumination, and behavioural revenge while providing a foundation for future theoretical and empirical work.

Beyond conceptual clarification, the study advances a preliminary process-oriented framework describing how revenge fantasies may emerge, be regulated, and persist over time. By highlighting the interplay between emotional activation, cognitive simulation, moral regulation, and ongoing emotional processing, the proposed framework positions revenge fantasies as a dynamic psychological process rather than a static cognitive event.

More broadly, the findings underscore the importance of examining internal responses to transgressions alongside observable behavioural outcomes. Individuals may choose not to seek revenge, yet continue to engage with harm through imagination, reflection, and private mental simulation. Understanding these experiences expands current perspectives on post-transgression responding and reveals revenge fantasies to be a meaningful and psychologically significant aspect of how individuals cope with interpersonal injury.

Taken together, the present study provides an initial foundation for understanding revenge fantasies as a distinct psychological phenomenon. By giving voice to participants' experiences and identifying common patterns across their accounts, this work contributes to the growing

literature on post-transgression processes while opening new avenues for future theory development, measurement, and empirical investigation.

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Appendix A

Semi-Structured Interview guide

Before the interview:

- Thank participants for agreeing to be interviewed
- Reiterate that all their responses will remain anonymous, and that they can skip any questions they would prefer not to answer or withdraw from the interview at any time
- Introduce them to the topic – interested in developing a better understanding of revenge fantasies.
- Ask them to provide a summary of the thoughts of retaliation they had following a transgression.

Probe by asking the participants follow-up questions to what they recalled.

- Why do you think you have them?
- How does imagining them make you feel?
- To reiterate a question in the pre-screening survey, do you consider this a revenge fantasy? Why? Why not?

[After they have shared what they consider a revenge fantasy and what it means to them]

Thanks for sharing that. Now, I'd like you to think of those thoughts of retaliation you may be harbouring against someone.

1. What were the circumstances and occurrences that led to these thoughts?
    - What happened?
    - What was the transgression the interviewee experienced?
2. Who are these thoughts/imagined scenarios against?
    - What is the interviewee's relationship to the person/transgressor?
3. What are the contents of these thoughts or fantasy?
    - What are they fantasizing about? Or what are they imagining of carrying out/doing?
    - What do they do when engaging in this revenge fantasy?
    - What occurs to them internally when engaging in it?
        i. i.e. how do they feel when they find themselves engaging in such thoughts

ii. is it something they do fully aware? Is it automatic?

4. **When** do you find yourself thinking about or fantasizing about getting back at someone?
    - Do they do this when they let their mind wander, when they start daydreaming, when they're reflecting on their day, before bed, randomly while doing tasks, etc.
    - For how long do you find yourself engaging in the act of fantasizing?
    - How long have you had this fantasy about the particular case/person?

Questions asking about what occurred immediately after the inciting incident:

1. What was going through your mind when this transgression happened?
2. How did it make you feel?
3. How did you initially react? What did you do?
4. What was your relationship like with this person before this event occurred?

Questions about the current state of mind:

2. What is your relationship with the person like now?
3. What are your current thoughts about the incident that occurred?
4. How do you currently feel about what happened?
    - Do they harbour the same negative and possibly vengeful feelings?
    - Has anything changed in how they view the transgression they experienced?
    - How so?
5. How are you treating this person now?
6. How is this person treating you now?
7. Do you think this person knows you're harbouring such thoughts against them?
8. How do you feel about harbouring these thoughts against them?
    - Do you think you have gained anything from entertaining these thoughts? Lost anything?
9. Going forward, do you think you will continue these thoughts of retaliation against them? Why or why not?
10. Are you planning on enacting the retaliative behaviours you've been thinking about?
    - Probe if they mention no intention of enacting on it

Appendix B

Pre-screening Survey Materials

Demographics

1) What is the gender with which you identify?

Scale: Man; Woman; Nonbinary (specify if you wish) [text box]; Prefer not to say

2) What is your sexual orientation?

Scale: Bisexual; Gay; Lesbian; Heterosexual; Queer;

Not listed (specify if you wish) [text box]; Prefer not to say

3) How old are you?

Scale: [text box]

4) What is the highest education you have received?

Scale: Less than high school degree; High school graduate (high school diploma or equivalent including GED; Some post-secondary but no degree; Associate degree in college; Bachelor's degree in college; Master's degree; Doctoral degree; Professional degree (e.g., JD, MD)

5) What is your employment status?

Scale: Working (paid employee), Working (self-employed), Not working (temporary layoff from a job), Not working (looking for work), Not working (retired), Not working (other (specify if you wish)) [text box], Student, Student with part-time job, Student with full-time job

6) Which racial or ethnic group do you best identify with?

Scale: Indigenous; Black; East Asian; Latin American; Middle Eastern; Polynesian; South American; South Asian; Southeast Asian; White; Mixed;

Other (specify if you wish) [text box]

7) How strongly do you identify with the ethnic group(s) selected above

Scale: 1 = Not at all, 4 = Neutral, 7 = Very much so

8) Which religion do you adhere to, if any?

Scale: Christianity / Catholicism/ Protestantism; Islam; Buddhism; Hinduism;

Judaism; Sikhism; Atheism; Agnosticism; No Faith;

Other (specify if you wish) [text box]

9) I am a religious person

Scale: 1 = Strongly disagree; 4 = Neither agree nor disagree; 7 = Strongly agree

10) What is your relationship status?

Scale: Single; Casual relationship; Committed relationship; Common law;

Married; Separated; Divorced; Widowed; Other (specify if you wish) [text box]

11) What is your approximate household income?

Scale: Less than $19,000; $20,000 - $29,999; $30,000 - $39,999;

$40,000 - $49,999; $50,000 - $59,999; $60,000 - $69,999;

$70,000 - $99,999; More than $100,000; Prefer not to say

Trait Grudge

1) Overall, I have a hard time letting go of negative feelings toward transgressors.

Scale: Strongly disagree 1 – Strongly agree 7

Trait Revenge

2) Overall, I try to get back at transgressors when they hurt me.

Scale: Strongly disagree 1 – Strongly agree 7

Trait Forgiveness

3) Overall, I consider myself a forgiving person.

Scale: Strongly disagree 1 – Strongly agree 7

Trait Apology

4) I often apologize when I hurt others.

Scale: Strongly disagree 1 – Strongly agree 7

Trait Self-Control

5) I can easily resist temptation.

Scale: Strongly disagree 1 – Strongly agree 7

Trait Rumination

6) I always think a lot about how I will behave in the future.

Scale: Strongly disagree 1 – Strongly agree 7

Social Power

7) I feel I have power to affect events in other people's lives.

8) I feel I have control over events in other people's lives.

Scale: 1 = Not at all, 4 = Somewhat, 7 = Very much so

Personal Power

9) I feel I have power to affect events in my life.

10) I feel I have control over events in my life.

Scale: 1 = Not at all, 4 = Somewhat, 7 = Very much so

Event Recall

Please take a moment to think about a time in the recent past in which **a negative event** occurred between you and another person **that led to your fantasizing about revenge**. Think about when you experienced a transgression by being hurt by the other person (physically, psychologically, emotionally, etc.). If you cannot recall a time in the recent past, then please think about the most memorable negative event you can in which another person hurt you.

This other person could be a friend, family member, romantic partner, or coworker. The negative event could have been due to something they did or failed to do but it must have led to fantasizing about revenge or getting back at that person.

The negative event may relate to, but is not limited to work (e.g., team project), school (e.g., class assignment), or interpersonal issues (e.g., argument with a significant other).

Please describe what happened and the revenge fantasy you're experiencing or have experienced.

Scale: [text box]

Event Recall Check

1) Were you able to recall a negative event that led to fantasizing about revenge?

Scale: Yes, No

Event items

The following set of questions pertain to the specific event you just recalled. Please answer these questions while thinking about this event in which you hurt the other person.

1) What is your relationship to the other person?

Scale: Immediate family member (e.g., parent, sibling), Relative (e.g., aunt, uncle, cousin), Significant other (e.g., husband, wife, fiancé), Romantic partner (e.g., boyfriend, girlfriend), Friend, Coworker

2) How old was the other person?

Scale: [text box]

3) What is the other person's gender?

Scale: Man, Woman, Nonbinary (specify if you wish) [text box], Prefer not to say

4) How long ago did the negative event occur?

Scale: Less than 1 month ago, Between 1 and 3 months ago, Between 4 and 6 months ago, More than 6 months ago (specify the approximate time) [textbox]

5) Do you recall the exact date it occurred?

Scale: [text box]

6) Do you recall the time of day it occurred?

Scale: Morning, Afternoon, Evening, Night

7) How negative was this event?

8) To what extent did the event have a negative effect on the other person?

9) To what extent did the event have a negative effect on you?

Scale: 1 = Not at all negative, 4 = Somewhat negative, 7 = Very negative

10) To what extent was your relationship with the other person harmed by this event?

Scale: 1 = Not at all, 4 = Somewhat, 7 = Very much so