

Abstract

Conventional wisdom suggests that individuals who decide to get even are driven by their emotions, and cannot be swayed by considering the potential consequences of their actions. If this is the case, then perceptions of revenge's consequences—its effectiveness and costliness—should be unrelated to the likelihood of taking revenge. The present study examined the relationships between these variables among 199 undergraduates (121 women). We asked participants to imagine that their romantic partners had cheated on them. They then gave ratings of how effective and how costly getting even would be, how angry they felt, as well as ratings of how likely they would be to engage in each strategy. Our model predicted significant variance in the rated likelihood of engaging in revenge ($R^2 = .59$), suggesting that these perceptions may play a prominent role in revenge decision making. A significant three-way interaction between effectiveness, costliness, and feelings of anger ($\beta = .89, p = .02$) helps clarify how such perceptions are related to the likelihood of getting even.

Competing Perspectives

- **Revenge as an emotion-driven, knee jerk reaction:**
 - “There is no more holding back a person driven toward revenge than an alcoholic determined to go on a binge. Any reasoning meets with cold disdain. Logic no longer prevails. Whether or not the situation is appropriate does not matter. It overrides prudence. Consequences for himself and others are brushed aside. He is as inaccessible as anybody who is in the grip of a blind passion” (Horney, 1948, p. 5).
- **Revenge as a reasoned decision-making process:**
 - “Speaking from extensive personal experience as a rather vindictive person, I believe that I have often gotten even with people by actions that were moderate and proportional...rarely have I been dominated by my vindictive feelings” (Murphy, 2000, p. 134).

Revenge Scenario

“You have always loved your partner. That has never been a question throughout the three years that you have been together. Yet finding out that you have been cheated on is painful. The knowledge of it, that your partner has been seeing someone else off and on for the last six months, has hurt worse than you could have expected. There is only one question now: what is there to do?”

Variables

Control:

- **Trait Vengeance**— Vengeance Scale, 28 items, 7 point scale $\alpha = .93$ (Stuckless & Goranson, 1992).
- **Social Desirability** – BIDR, 40 items, 7 point scale, $\alpha = .80$ (Paulhus, 1988)

Predictors:

- **Anger** – PANAS single item, 5 point scale (Watson, Clark & Tellegen; 1988)
 - “To what extent do you feel the following right now? – Anger”
- **Effectiveness** – 7 point scale
 - “How effective do you feel getting even would be?”
- **Costliness** – 7 point scale
 - “How severe do you feel the negative consequences would be for getting even?”

Criterion:

- **Revenge Likelihood** – 7 point scale
 - “If you had been cheated on, how likely would you be to do the following? – I would try to get even with my partner somehow.”

Results

Table 1. Zero-order correlations between all variables used in the regression analysis.

	BIDR	Vengeance	Anger	Effectiveness	Costliness
Vengeance	-.25***				
Anger	-.05	.23**			
Effectiveness	-.16*	.60***	.26***		
Costliness	-.04	-.22**	.05	-.19**	
Likelihood	-.30***	.55***	.32***	.70***	-.16*

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Table 2. Unstandardized betas, *t* statistics, and semi-partial r^2 values for variables predicting the rated likelihood of getting even.

	B(SE)	t	Semi-partial r^2
Social Desirability	-.29 (.10)	-2.80**	.03
Vengeance	.86 (.10)	8.34***	.24
Effectiveness	.95 (.11)	8.91***	.18
Costliness	-.06 (.09)	-.72	.001
Anger	.24 (.09)	2.83**	.02
Effectiveness*Costliness	-.006 (.08)	-.07	<.001
Effectiveness*Anger	-.16 (.08)	-1.95†	.01
Costliness*Anger	-.16 (.09)	-1.81†	.01
Eff*Cost*Anger	.16 (.07)	2.28*	.01

Note: † $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

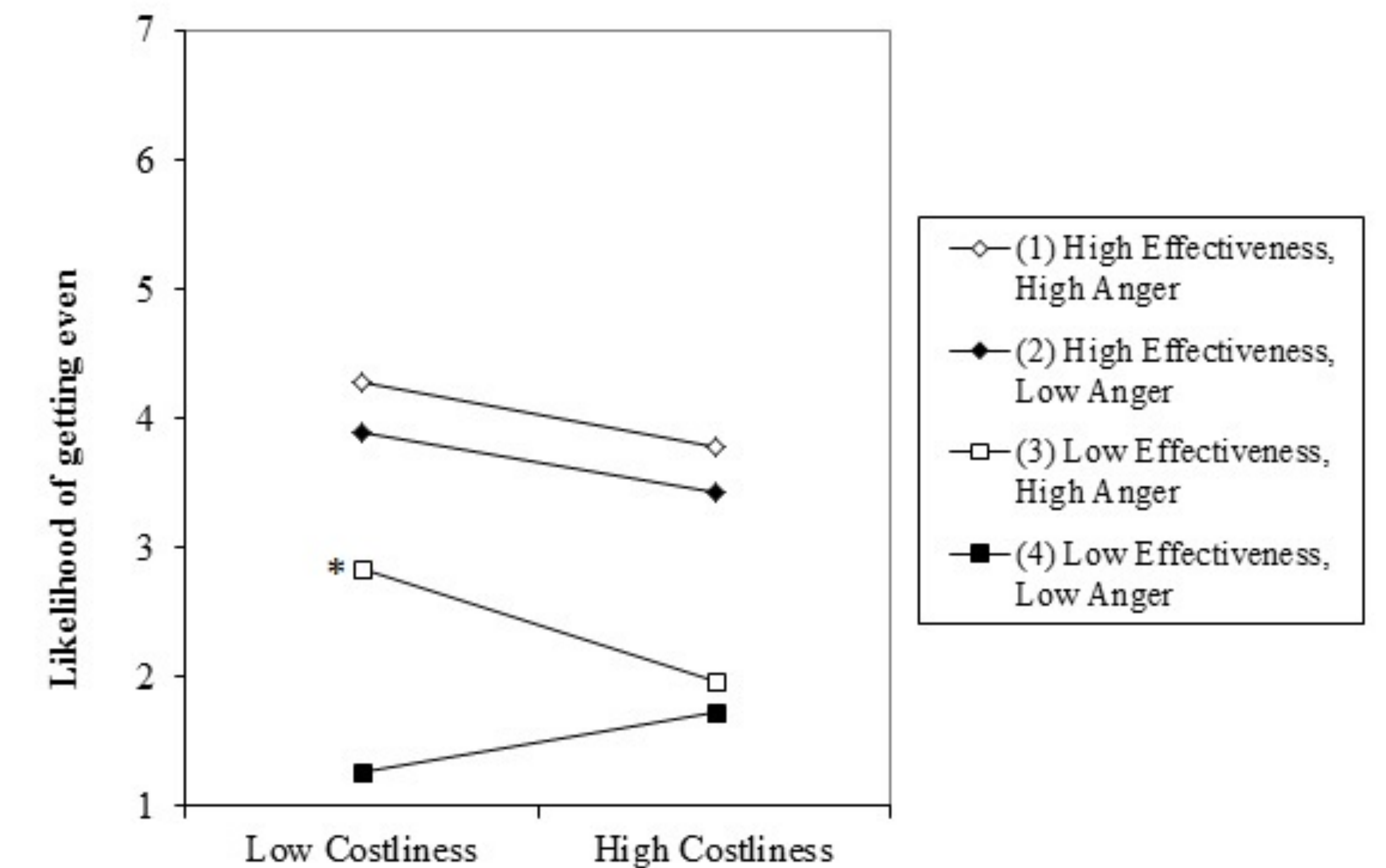


Figure 1. Plotted simple slopes representing the effects of costliness on the rated likelihood of taking revenge, moderated by effectiveness and anger. The only significant slope is (3), $b = -.43, t = -2.40, p = .02$. Significant slope differences include (1) and (4), $p = .03$, and (3) and (4), $p = .004$.

- The perceived effectiveness of revenge appears to strongly and consistently predict the rated likelihood of getting even with a romantic partner.
- The perceived costliness of revenge only appears to predict the rated likelihood of revenge when effectiveness is low and anger is high.
- Likewise, ratings of anger appears to predict revenge most when both effectiveness and costliness are low.

Conclusions

- Individuals may be consistently more likely to get even when they believe revenge will get them what they want.
- When revenge is perceived as ineffective, the costs of revenge, as well as emotion, may play a greater role in revenge decision-making.
- Those “driven” by anger may be dissuaded by how the consequences of revenge are perceived.
- Emotional considerations remain important. A balanced approach integrating theories of both emotion and social exchange may help us understand romantic revenge.



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