

Gender Differences in Dark Triad Traits Among Post-Pandemic Youth

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ABSTRACT

The present study examines gender differences in Dark Triad personality traits—Machiavellianism, Narcissism, and Psychopathy—among Indian post-pandemic youth. With the Short Dark Triad (SD3) scale of Jones and Paulhus, the responses were collected from 150 participants (75 males and 75 females) aged between 15 and 29 years. Null hypothesis that no gender differences exist in Dark Triad traits was contrasted against the alternative hypothesis of considerable gender differences in one or more of the three traits. Statistical contrast with independent t-tests revealed that males scored significantly greater on psychopathy and Machiavellianism, but there was no difference in narcissism. The findings are in line with existing research that has reported gender disparities in dark personality features and contribute to a rich comprehension of post-pandemic behavioural patterns. The implications of the findings are discussed in light of psychological assessment, personality development, and gender studies.

Keywords: Machiavellianism, Narcissism, Psychopathy, SD3 Scale, Gender Differences, Post-Pandemic Generation, Personality Characteristics

The study of personality traits has long been a central focus in psychology, particularly in understanding socially aversive characteristics that influence human behaviour. Among these, the dark triad traits—machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy—have gained significant attention for their role in manipulative, self-serving, and emotionally detached behaviours (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). These traits are not only prevalent in clinical or criminal settings but also manifest in everyday social, academic, and professional interactions, influencing interpersonal relationships and decision-making (Jonason & Webster, 2010). The exploration of Dark Triad traits in youth is particularly important due to their potential long-term effects on social adaptation, academic performance, and emotional well-being. Young adulthood is a period marked by critical life transitions, including career exploration, identity formation, and increasing independence, making it a key stage for the emergence and reinforcement of personality traits (Furnham et al., 2013). The post-pandemic era has further reshaped psychological well-being, exacerbating stress, uncertainty, and competitive pressures, which may have amplified dark triad behaviours in younger populations (Zajenkowski et al., 2020). As personality traits play a significant role in shaping future professional and personal outcomes, investigating dark triad traits in youth becomes

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essential for identifying behavioural patterns that may impact mental health, relationships, and societal functioning.

Dark triad traits, while often associated with negative connotations, can also provide certain advantages in competitive environments, such as leadership, negotiation, and strategic thinking (Jonason et al., 2015). However, unchecked expressions of these traits can lead to difficulties in forming healthy relationships, ethical decision-making, and overall psychological well-being (Miller et al., 2010). The dark triad traits, consisting of Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy, represent a constellation of socially aversive personality characteristics that are associated with manipulation, self-interest, and emotional detachment. The concept was first introduced by Paulhus and Williams (2002) as a framework for understanding individuals who exhibit exploitative and antagonistic behaviours while functioning in everyday social settings. Though these traits overlap in their emphasis on callousness and strategic self-enhancement, they remain distinct in their core motivations and behavioural expressions (Furnham et al., 2013). Machiavellianism is primarily characterized by manipulative tactics and long-term strategic deception, narcissism is rooted in excessive self-admiration and entitlement, while psychopathy is associated with impulsivity, emotional detachment, and a disregard for others' well-being (Jones & Paulhus, 2014). Historically, these traits have been examined from different psychological perspectives. Machiavellianism has its roots in the political philosophy of Niccolò Machiavelli, whose work *The Prince* (1513) advocated for cunning and strategic manipulation to achieve power (Christie & Geis, 2013). Narcissism, on the other hand, was introduced in psychoanalytic theory, with Freud (1914) describing it as an exaggerated form of self-love that can manifest in both grandiose and vulnerable forms (Miller et al., 2010). Psychopathy, originally conceptualized in forensic and clinical settings, was extensively studied by Cleckley (1951) and later operationalized by Hare (2003), highlighting the trait's connection to emotional coldness, impulsivity, and antisocial tendencies.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had profound and far-reaching effects on youth, reshaping their cognitive, emotional, and social landscapes. The sudden disruption of routine life, prolonged periods of uncertainty, and widespread social restrictions led to increased stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms among young individuals (Guessoum et al., 2020). Studies indicate that youth experienced a decline in emotional well-being due to school closures, lack of peer interactions, and concerns about their academic and professional futures (Rogers et al., 2021). The pandemic also heightened existential anxieties, leading to shifts in self-perception, risk-taking behaviours, and overall resilience, which have implications for personality development (Panchal et al., 2023). With in-person social interactions severely limited, digital dependence surged, leading to significant changes in personality traits, including increased narcissism, social manipulation, and emotional detachment (Twenge & Campbell, 2009). One of the most significant psychological impacts has been the exacerbation of dark triad traits, particularly in response to heightened environmental stressors. Research suggests that heightened digital engagement fosters traits associated with the dark triad, as users become more inclined to engage in deceptive self-promotion (Machiavellianism), seek admiration through curated online personas (narcissism), and exhibit callous or insensitive behaviours in anonymous online settings (psychopathy) (Pabian et al., 2015). Real-world examples further illustrate this transformation, as reports of cyberbullying, online trolling, and digital fraud increased significantly during the pandemic, highlighting how detachment from real-world consequences influenced behavioural patterns.

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Gender differences in dark triad traits—Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy—have been a subject of considerable research, revealing distinct patterns in how these traits manifest across men and women. Studies suggest that men typically exhibit higher levels of all three dark triad traits compared to women, with the largest differences observed in psychopathy and narcissism (Jonason & Webster, 2010; Paulhus & Williams, 2002). This disparity is often attributed to evolutionary and socialization theories, where men, driven by competition and status-seeking, are more likely to engage in risk-taking, aggression, and manipulative behaviours (Buss & Duntley, 2013). Women, on the other hand, tend to display dark triad traits in more covert and socially nuanced ways, such as relational aggression, indirect manipulation, and emotional exploitation (Book et al., 2015). The expression of dark triad traits also varies across different cultural and societal contexts, with gender norms playing a crucial role in shaping behavioural manifestations. The pandemic further intensified these gendered expressions of dark triad traits. Studies have shown that post-pandemic stressors, including job insecurity, social isolation, and digital dependence, led to an increase in manipulative and self-serving behaviours among both genders but in different ways (Blagov, 2021). Men displayed higher externalizing behaviours such as online trolling, increased risk-taking, and financial fraud, whereas women exhibited more relational aggression, social comparison, and passive-aggressive strategies in digital spaces (Moor & Anderson, 2019).

METHODOLOGY

Sample

The current research utilised a comparative quantitative design to investigate gender differences in Dark Triad traits in post-pandemic youth. 150 participants were used through convenience sampling, and the participants were represented equally as 75 males and 75 females in the age group of 15 to 29 years. The participants were taken from diverse professional and educational backgrounds to promote variability in personality traits and response. The inclusion criteria mandated participants to identify themselves as either female or male and within the specific age group. Exclusion was from participation if a participant has ever had a history of psychiatric disorder or was under clinical psychological treatment in order to prevent confounding factors. Informed consent was sought from all the participants prior to participation, with their voluntary participation in the research and their right to withdraw at any time ensured.

Instrument

To quantify the Dark Triad dimensions, this research utilised the Short Dark Triad (SD3) Scale, a validated psychometric measure by Daniel N. Jones and Delroy L. Paulhus in 2014. The SD3 is a 27-item self-reporting scale measuring the three fundamental Dark Triad's scales: Machiavellianism, Narcissism, and Psychopathy. Nine specific items for each triad are rated on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), where high scores reflect greater presence of respective trait in the person. The SD3 has been extensively cross-validated in psychological studies and has high internal consistency and hence is an appropriate measure of socially aversive personality.

SD3 subscales aim at different personality domains. Machiavellianism subscale tests manipulateness, strategic dishonesty, and pragmatic worldview with examples like "It's smart to recall facts that you can use on other people later." The Narcissism subscale is used to score self-aggrandizement, grandiosity, and sense of entitlement, as shown by items like "I like to be the centre of attention." The Psychopathy subscale is used to score impulsivity, callousness without guilt, and antisocial behaviour, as in sentences like "People who play

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games with me always end up regretting it." The SD3 was used in this study because it was short, it was a reliable scale, and it had good psychometric properties. Also, several studies have demonstrated the cross-cultural applicability of the SD3, making it a suitable tool for assessing personality traits within the Indian population.

Procedure

Data collection was performed through an online survey format to maximise access to a varied sample and protect participant anonymity. The survey link was shared via academic networks, social media, and professional groups to provide extensive coverage. Before proceeding with the survey, participants were initially invited to read an informed consent form explaining the aims of the study, the voluntary status of participation, response confidentiality, and the provision to withdraw at any moment. The survey was framed in two sections. The demographic information was first collected in the first section through questions where age, gender, occupation and place of current residence were asked, and participants gave respective details to define the sample adequately. The second section consisted of administering the SD3 scale for which participants were asked to provide responses to every item truthfully representing their usual behaviour and not situational influence. On average, the participants took between 10 and 15 minutes to fill out the questionnaire. Responses were automatically saved and stored safely for analysis, with no missing or duplicate entries.

RESULTS

The present study examined gender differences in the Dark Triad personality traits—Machiavellianism, Narcissism, and Psychopathy—among post-pandemic youth. Descriptive statistics, independent samples *t*-tests, and effect size metrics (Cohen's *d*, Hedges' *g*, and Glass's Δ) were employed for analysis.

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1: Results of mean, standard deviation, standard error mean on the measures of psychopathy in females and males (N = 150)

Trait	Gender	Mean(M)	Std. Deviation (SD)	Std. Error Mean (SE)
Psychopathy	Male	24.51	5.42	0.57
	Female	21.53	4.93	0.63
Narcissism	Male	29.41	4.86	0.56
	Female	28.83	4.88	0.56
Machiavellianism	Male	31.52	5.37	0.61
	Female	30.37	5.26	0.62

Table 1 summarises the means (M), standard deviations (SD), and standard errors of the mean (SEM) for each Dark Triad trait, categorised by gender.

Psychopathy

An independent samples *t*-test revealed a statistically significant gender difference in psychopathy scores, $t(148) = 5.18, p < .001$. Male adolescents (M= 24.51, SD= 5.42) scored significantly higher than females (M= 21.53, SD= 4.93). The mean difference of 2.97 points represents a substantial divergence.

Effect sizes indicated a moderate magnitude of difference:

Cohen's $d = 0.574$

Hedges' $g = 0.571$

Glass's $\Delta = 0.548$

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These findings suggest that male adolescents exhibit elevated levels of psychopathic traits, which may reflect underlying tendencies toward impulsivity, diminished empathy, and risk-seeking behaviours—commonly associated with psychopathy in male populations.

Narcissism

No significant gender difference was observed in narcissism scores, $t(148) = 0.738$, $p = .231$. Males ($M = 29.41$, $SD = 4.86$) and females ($M = 28.83$, $SD = 4.88$) showed similar scores, with a minimal mean difference of 0.58.

Effect size metrics revealed negligible differences:

Cohen's $d = 0.120$

Hedges' $g = 0.120$

Glass's $\Delta = 0.121$

These results suggest a gender-neutral distribution of narcissistic traits, likely influenced by shared social pressures and identity development patterns across both sexes in collectivistic post-pandemic environments.

Machiavellianism

Although males ($M = 31.52$, $SD = 5.37$) reported slightly higher machiavellianism than females ($M = 30.37$, $SD = 5.26$), the difference was not statistically significant, $t(148) = 1.32$, $p = .094$. The mean difference of 1.15 points reflects only a slight deviation.

Effect sizes indicated a small difference:

Cohen's $d = 0.216$

Hedges' $g = 0.214$

Glass's $\Delta = 0.213$

These results imply that manipulative interpersonal strategies are only marginally more prevalent among males and may be more influenced by situational or environmental factors than gender-based predispositions.

Summary of Findings

Table 2: Inferential Statistics and Effect Sizes for Gender Differences in Dark Triad Traits

Trait	t (df = 148)	p -value	Cohen's d	Effect Size Interpretation
Psychopathy	5.18	< .001	0.574	Moderate
Narcissism	0.738	.231	0.120	Negligible
Machiavellianism	1.32	.094	0.216	Small

Table 2 provides a summary of inferential statistics and effect sizes of gender differences among the three Dark Triad traits. The result shows a statistically significant gender difference in psychopathy, with $t(148) = 5.18$ and $p < .001$, which is extremely significant. The 0.574 Cohen's d reflects a moderate effect size such that the difference between males and females in psychopathy scores is not only statistically significant but also of substantial magnitude.

In comparison, narcissism recorded a t -value of 0.738 and a p -value of .231, indicating there was no gender difference. The corresponding Cohen's d of 0.120 is an effect that is trivial,

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confirming that narcissistic personality traits are spread evenly between females and males within the sample.

For machiavellianism, the t -value of 1.32 and p -value of .094 show that the difference noted here is not statistically significant, although it is at the borderline for the conventional cut-off ($p < .05$). The effect size (Cohen's $d = 0.216$) is small, showing that males did score higher, but its practical value is zero.

Together, these findings indicate that psychopathy is where gender variations are greatest, and narcissism and machiavellianism are more similar by gender—a pattern particularly relevant to what dark personality is like in today's post-pandemic youth generation.

DISCUSSION

The current study explored gender differences in the Dark Triad traits of Machiavellianism, Narcissism, and Psychopathy in Indian young people in the post-pandemic era. Applying the Short Dark Triad (SD3) scale, the research queried the manner in which these undesirable social traits present across genders within a generation driven by record-level social disintegration, isolation, and digital overload. The results showed a statistically significant gender difference in psychopathy, with men scoring higher than women, and no significant differences for narcissism and machiavellianism. The results are discussed below in terms of theoretical, socio-cultural, and psychological considerations.

Psychopathy: A Gendered Disposition Amplified by Context

The second strongest finding was that males scored significantly higher on psychopathy ($M = 24.51$) than females ($M = 21.53$). Psychopathy is defined by emotional coldness, impulsivity, and callousness, and is also typically defined by antisocial behavior. This gender difference is consistent with earlier research indicating that men externalize stress and misery by acting out in risk-taking, rule-breaking, and cold-cold behavior (Vernon et al., 2008).

From a biosocial perspective, this imbalance can be partially accounted for by higher baseline levels of testosterone in men that are associated with aggression and impulsivity (Carré & Archer, 2018). Social learning theory also suggests that boys are socialized to be dominant, competitive, and emotionally controlled—traits which would predispose them to psychopathy-like behavior, most notably in adversity such as the post-pandemic period.

The digital disinhibition effect (Suler, 2004) should also be considered. Increased online anonymity and lower accountability during the pandemic may have rendered emotionally disengaged behavior such as trolling, manipulation, and cyber-aggression more normal, particularly among males. Also, terror management theory proposes that threats to one's existence, such as a global health crisis, can enhance defensive self-serving processes—aligning with the rise in psychopathy-related tendencies during the pandemic.

Narcissism: A Trait Levelling with Digital Culture

In contrast to classic findings, no significant gender difference in narcissism was found in the study males ($M = 29.41$), and females ($M = 28.83$, $p = .231$). Classic models of narcissism (e.g., Grijalva et al., 2015) are inclined to hypothesize greater grandiose narcissism in men, which can be accounted for by entitlement, assertiveness, and dominance. In the digitally mediated post-pandemic world, however, this difference may be diminishing.

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Social media platforms promote staged self-presentation and ongoing seeking of validation, leading to the normalization of narcissistic traits among both genders (Twenge & Campbell, 2009). The normalisation hypothesis posits that as societal norms change, once-stigmatised traits in a particular sex become more socially accepted. Thus, self-admiration, which was considered a male trait, is now endorsed by all users through online reward systems like comments and likes.

It is also possible that the SD3's emphasis on grandiose narcissism may have obscured more nuanced gender differences in vulnerable narcissism—where there is hypersensitivity and defensiveness—that previous research suggests can be more prevalent in women (Foster et al., 2003). Future studies must account for multi-dimensional narcissism scales to uncover such nuances.

Machiavellianism: Strategic Behavior Beyond Gender Lines

Although men scored a little bit higher on machiavellianism ($M = 31.52$) than did women ($M = 30.37$), this difference did not reach the level of statistical significance ($p = .094$). This fits with literature pointing to machiavellianism as being a situationally adaptive trait and not one of strong gender associations.

Machiavellianism, consisting of strategic manipulation, cognitive control, and goal-directed deception, is applied commonly regardless of sex in competitive environments such as workplaces, schools, or virtual realms. Social role theory (Eagly & Wood, 2012) suggests that gendered behavior is preserved by the environmental requirements of the situation rather than by biological factors. In the post-pandemic era, where electronic networking and persuasion have replaced the classical hierarchy, males and females may have adapted as much to strategic conduct.

Furthermore, the gender convergence hypothesis infers that as women increasingly become available for leadership roles and assume traditionally "masculine" domains (e.g., assertiveness, negotiation), their behavioral types, like machiavellianism tactics, are more in line with men (Jonason & Davis, 2018).

However, just like in any empirical research, this study has its area for improvement. The convenience sampling can limit generalisability, and the employment of self-report data could be vulnerable to social desirability bias. In addition, though the SD3 scale is a good and highly validated measure, it primarily tests grandiose types of narcissism and might not fully express its vulnerable ones. Future studies could investigate a more diverse sample population, longitudinal studies to assess personality change across time, and mixed method studies to enhance the contextual and emotional bases of Dark Triad traits. These directions would not only replicate the current findings but also enrich our understanding of youth personality in an increasingly transforming socio-cultural world.

The present study offers valuable implications in the domains of psychology, education, and youth development through the identification of gender differences in Dark Triad personality traits—Machiavellianism, Narcissism, and Psychopathy—among post-pandemic Indian youth. The findings can be used by mental health professionals, educators, and organisational leaders in designing gender-specific interventions and personality development programs, particularly in post-pandemic contexts where emotional regulation and interpersonal dynamics have been radically altered. The study also contributes to personality, digital dependence, social isolation, and evolving gender roles that construct behavior literature.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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