

Research Paper

## A Comparative Study of Dark Triad Traits in University Students In Tamil Nadu from Different Academic Disciplines

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### ABSTRACT

The Dark Triad of personality comprising Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy represents socially aversive traits characterized by manipulation, self-centeredness, lack of empathy, and impulsivity. These traits have received growing attention in psychological research due to their influence on interpersonal relationships, decision-making, and behavioral outcomes, particularly among young adults in competitive environments such as universities. The present study aims to conduct a comparative analysis of Dark Triad traits among university students in Tamil Nadu across different academic disciplines, including arts and science, commerce and management, engineering and technology, and medicine. Using a quantitative cross-sectional research design, data are collected from 411 undergraduate and postgraduate students through a standardized psychological instrument such as the Short Dark Triad (SD3) scale using random sampling method. Statistical techniques including descriptive statistics, t-test and analysis of variance (ANOVA), are employed to examine differences in Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy across academic streams. The study seeks to identify whether certain disciplines are associated with higher or lower levels of these traits and to explore patterns related to academic environments and competition. The findings are expected to contribute to the fields of personality and educational psychology by providing insights into the relationship between academic discipline and the expression of socially aversive personality traits among university students in Tamil Nadu, while also offering implications for student counseling, ethical development, and mental well-being initiatives within higher education institutions.

**Keywords:** *Dark Triad, Machiavellianism, Narcissism, Psychopathy, Academic disciplines, University students*

Personality plays a significant role in shaping an individual's behavior, interpersonal relationships, and decision-making processes. While traditional personality research has largely focused on socially desirable traits, increasing attention has been given to socially aversive personality characteristics collectively known as the Dark Triad. The concept of the Dark Triad refers to three distinct yet related personality traits: Machiavellianism, Narcissism, and Psychopathy. These traits are characterized by

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manipulative behavior, a sense of grandiosity, lack of empathy, and a tendency toward self-interest and exploitation of others.

The term Dark Triad was first introduced by Delroy L. Paulhus and Kevin M. Williams in 2002 to describe the common core of socially malevolent personality traits that share overlapping characteristics but remain conceptually distinct. Individuals high in Machiavellianism tend to exhibit strategic manipulation and cynical views of human nature, while narcissism is associated with excessive self-admiration, entitlement, and a strong need for admiration. Psychopathy, on the other hand, is characterized by impulsivity, callousness, lack of remorse, and antisocial tendencies. Although these traits are often studied in clinical or organizational settings, they are also present at subclinical levels within the general population, including among university students.

The university environment represents an important context for examining personality traits, as students are in a developmental stage where identity formation, social competition, and career aspirations are actively evolving. Academic disciplines may influence students' cognitive styles, value systems, and social interactions, which may in turn be associated with variations in personality characteristics. For instance, students in disciplines such as business, engineering, humanities, or social sciences may experience different academic pressures, competitive environments, and professional socialization processes. These contextual differences may contribute to variations in the expression of Dark Triad traits.

In recent years, research in the field of Personality Psychology has increasingly explored how the Dark Triad manifests in educational settings. Studies suggest that these traits may influence academic behaviors such as competitiveness, leadership tendencies, academic dishonesty, and interpersonal relationships among peers. However, findings across studies have been mixed, and cultural as well as educational contexts may play a significant role in shaping these patterns.

In the context of Tamil Nadu, higher education institutions host students from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds and academic streams. Despite the rapid expansion of universities in the region, limited research has examined the presence and variation of Dark Triad traits among students from different academic disciplines. Understanding these personality patterns is important for educators, counselors, and policymakers in promoting healthy academic environments and addressing potentially harmful interpersonal behaviors.

Therefore, the present study aims to conduct a comparative analysis of Dark Triad traits among university students in Tamil Nadu across different academic disciplines. By examining differences in Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy among students from various fields of study, this research seeks to contribute to a better understanding of how educational context may relate to socially aversive personality traits within the university population.

### **THEORETICAL FOUNDATION**

The **Dark Triad** is a psychological model introduced by Paulhus and Williams (2002) that identifies a constellation of three interrelated, subclinical personality constructs—narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy—characterized by socially aversive tendencies such as manipulation, exploitation, emotional coldness, and callous disregard for others. These traits, while conceptually distinct, empirically overlap and share a common core of

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malevolent interpersonal orientation, often linked to low agreeableness and tendencies toward self-serving, duplicitous behavior in non-clinical populations. This model serves as a valuable theoretical framework in personality psychology for examining "darker" aspects of human behavior that extend beyond traditional trait models like the Big Five. It highlights how these aversive traits cluster together, enabling researchers to investigate their combined and unique influences on social, occupational, and educational outcomes.

By applying this model, the research can reveal potential patterns in how disciplinary contexts relate to the expression of Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy among students. These insights hold practical value: they can guide targeted student support services, including counseling approaches, ethical development programs, empathy-building initiatives, and mental well-being efforts tailored to the specific needs of different academic streams in Tamil Nadu's higher education institutions.

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

#### *Review of Literature related to Dark Triad traits:*

**Das et al. (2025)** conducted a study titled contrasting empathy and shadows: exploring the interplay between dark empathy and personality traits among young adults in Indian educational settings. Utilizing a correlational design with self-report measures (Inter-relative Personality Index for empathy and Dirty Dozen for dark triad traits) on 150 Indian young adults aged 17–24 from higher education settings, the research investigated the relationship between empathy dimensions and dark triad traits. Correlation analysis revealed a significant positive association between dark empathy and dark triad traits, indicating that individuals high in dark empathy effectively leverage cognitive empathy to understand others' emotions for personal gain rather than purely prosocial purposes. These results highlight a nuanced "dark" application of empathy in non-clinical youth, where emotional skills can amplify manipulative tendencies.

**Kowalski et al. (2025)** examined Self-Report and Behavioral Procrastination in Relation to the Dark Triad Traits. Anchored in personality and procrastination theories, the study investigates how machiavellianism, psychopathy, and narcissism influence both self-reported and behavioral procrastination among university students navigating demanding academic coursework. Employing a short-term longitudinal design, 298 German undergraduates in a 15-week statistics course completed dark triad assessments, two self-report procrastination scales, and a behavioral task measuring discrepancies between planned and actual study time. Results indicated positive correlations between psychopathy and narcissism with both procrastination types, while machiavellianism showed no significant associations; notably, self-report and behavioral measures exhibited only weak convergence. These findings reveal divergent processes underlying procrastination manifestations, with impulsive and self-aggrandizing traits exacerbating delays in academic settings.

**Öztekin et al. (2025)** carried out a study titled The Dark Triad Traits and Suicide Risk in Turkish University Students: The Mediating Effect of Depression. Grounded in personality and mental health frameworks, the study explores how machiavellianism, psychopathy, and narcissism contribute to elevated suicide risk among university students, with depression as a pivotal mediator. Drawing on data from 448 Turkish undergraduates via an online survey, results show significant positive correlations between dark triad traits and depression, low self-perception, impulsivity, hopelessness, and suicidal ideation, with depression fully

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mediating these pathways to suicide probability. Psychopathy exhibited the strongest direct links to suicidal ideation, highlighting its acute role in exacerbating distress. This research illuminates the interplay of maladaptive personality traits and emotional vulnerability in academic settings, where stressors like academic pressure amplify risks.

**Silva et al. (2025)** studied *Fifty Shades of Black: When Negative Emotions Enhance the Relationship Between the Dark Triad and Knowledge Sabotage*. Drawing on trait activation theory, the study investigates how machiavellianism, psychopathy, and narcissism drive knowledge sabotage behaviors within higher education settings, with negative affect serving as a critical moderator. Findings from a survey of 221 academics reveal robust positive links between each dark triad trait and knowledge sabotage, intensified under high levels of negative emotions compared to low ones. This underscores how situational emotional triggers can amplify destructive tendencies, undermining collaborative knowledge sharing essential for institutional progress. The research highlights the need for emotion-regulation interventions and ethical training programs to curb such sabotage.

**Kokkinos et al. (2025)** investigated *Personality Shadows: Dark Triad Traits and Academic Major Choices Among Greek University Students*. This study examines how machiavellianism, psychopathy, and narcissism shape undergraduate major selections, identifying a general dark factor (D-factor) via advanced modeling. In a sample of 2,387 Greek university students, bifactor exploratory structural equation modeling confirmed the D-factor alongside specific traits, while latent profile analysis delineated four clusters: self-centric, tactful manipulators, ambitious manipulators, and omni-dark. Males showed higher omni-dark prevalence, hinting at socio-biological influences. These patterns reveal how dark traits align with career-oriented academic paths, potentially exacerbating imbalances in higher education. The findings advocate for personality-informed advising and interventions to optimize major fits, enhancing student engagement, retention, and equitable developmental outcomes in diverse academic environments.

**Schulze et al. (2024)** conducted a study on *Uncovering Hidden Framings in Dark Triad Self-Ratings: What Frames-of-Reference Do People Use When Responding to Generic Dark Triad Items?*, probing how respondents implicitly prioritize interaction contexts (e.g., work, family, friends, strangers) when rating machiavellianism, psychopathy, and narcissism via generic items referencing vague "others." In a sample of 814 adults using multitrait-multimethod analyses, generic ratings aligned most strongly with work-contextualized items, least with family ones, revealing trait-specific asymmetries that undermine predictive validity for behaviors like interpersonal deviance. Narcissism showed greater contextual homogeneity than the more variable machiavellianism and psychopathy. These hidden framings suggest self-report biases in academic assessments, where students might default to peer or instructor interactions over familial ones. The findings advocate for context-specific dark triad measures in higher education research and screening to enhance accuracy.

**Park et al. (2024)** investigated on *Functional and dysfunctional impulsivity mediates the relationships between 'Dark Triad' traits and cyberbullying perpetration*. This study probes how machiavellianism, psychopathy, and narcissism drive cyberbullying among university students, testing functional and dysfunctional impulsivity as mediators amid rising digital distress like depression and suicidality. Employing a cross-sectional online survey of 141 Malaysian undergraduates (63% male) with validated psychometric scales, mediation analyses confirmed dysfunctional impulsivity's full mediation of psychopathy's link to

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perpetration, while narcissism showed unmediated associations and machiavellianism correlated directly without impulsivity ties. These results illuminate impulsivity's pivotal, trait-specific role in fueling online aggression in academic contexts, where unchecked dark tendencies exacerbate peer victimization. The findings underscore early identification of at-risk students via targeted assessments to prevent entrenched behaviors.

**Uppal (2021)** pursued a study titled *Does it pay to be bad? An investigation of dark triad traits and job performance in India*. Utilizing curvilinear regression analysis on a sample of Indian employees, the research explored the non-linear relationships between dark triad traits (machiavellianism, psychopathy, and narcissism) and job performance outcomes. Key findings revealed positive associations at lower to moderate levels of dark triad traits, where traits like assertiveness and strategic thinking enhanced performance, but negative effects emerged at higher levels due to increased counterproductive behaviors. These results suggest a contextual "payoff" for mild dark traits in competitive workplaces, amplifying adaptive advantages without severe maladaptation. The findings highlight the curvilinear nature of dark personality in organizational settings, particularly in non-Western contexts.

**Balaji and Indradevi (2015)** carried out *An Empirical Study on Relationship between Dark Triad of Personality Traits and Big Five Personality Traits among General Adult Population*. Utilizing correlational survey methods on 104 non-clinical adults from a Southern Indian state, the research examined associations between Dark Triad traits (via the 27-item Short Dark Triad Test) and Big Five traits (via the 44-item Big Five Inventory). Significant relationships emerged, particularly inverse correlations between high dark triad traits and prosocial Big Five facets like agreeableness, openness, and conscientiousness. These results illuminate the contrasting interplay between "dark" and mainstream personality dimensions in everyday populations.

### ***Research Gap:***

A significant research gap exists in the study of Dark Triad traits (Machiavellianism, Narcissism, and Psychopathy) within India's diverse cultural and socioeconomic context. Most existing research comes from Western countries, while Indian studies are limited, often focusing only on basic links such as empathy or workplace performance, with almost no comparisons across different academic or professional fields. Moreover, those samples mainly include urban young professionals, leaving university students largely understudied. This means there is little understanding of how these "dark" traits develop during college years, or how they influence students' academic performance, relationships, ethical behavior, and career paths in a highly competitive educational environment like Tamil Nadu. Addressing this gap can help create better counseling, ethics training, and mental health support suited to India's diverse higher education environment.

### ***Need and Significance of the Study***

As university education in Tamil Nadu becomes increasingly competitive and diverse across academic disciplines, understanding the presence of Dark Triad traits (Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy) among students is important. These socially aversive traits can influence academic integrity, peer relationships, ethical decision-making, leadership behavior, and future career conduct. However, most research on the Dark Triad is Western-focused or limited to workplace settings, with little attention to Indian university students or differences across academic streams such as arts and science, commerce and management, engineering and technology, and medicine. This study addresses that gap by comparatively

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examining Dark Triad traits among university students in Tamil Nadu across different disciplines. The findings can help inform student counseling services, ethics and empathy-building programs, mental health initiatives, and institutional policies, ultimately supporting healthier and more ethical academic environments.

### ***Objectives and Hypothesis:***

#### **Objectives of the study**

1. To assess the level of dimensions of dark triad traits (Machiavellianism, Narcissism and Psychopathy) among university students.
2. To find out whether there is any significant difference among the university students based on their gender with respect to the dimensions of dark triad traits.
3. To find out whether there is any significant difference among the university students based on their discipline of study with respect to the dimensions of dark triad traits.

#### **Hypotheses of the Study:**

1. There is a significant difference among the university students based on their gender with respect to the dimensions of dark triad traits.
2. There is a significant difference among the university students based on their discipline of study with respect to the dimensions of dark triad traits.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### ***Research Method***

In the present study, the researcher has employed the normative survey method to study the Dark Triad personality traits among university students in Tamil Nadu.

### ***Sample***

The participants were university students. The investigator used a random sampling technique for collecting a sample of 411 university students from universities in Tamil Nadu. All the people and individuals involved, including data collection participants, were subject to voluntary participation and informed consent.

### ***Tools Used in the Study:***

The tool used for the present investigation is the Short Dark Triad (SD3) – Standardized by Daniel N. Jones and Delroy L. Paulhus (2014).

### ***Scoring Procedure***

The Short Dark Triad (SD3; Jones & Paulhus, 2014) is a 27-item assessment of three personality traits: Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy. All items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). Some items are reverse scored which includes item no.2, 6 and 8 in narcissism dimension and item no. 2 and 7 in psychopathy dimension. First, reverse the scoring for those reverse items (e.g., 1 becomes 5, 2 becomes 4, 3 stays 3, etc.). For each trait, calculate the mean score by averaging the responses to the nine corresponding items; the higher the mean score, the higher the level of that Dark Triad trait. (Subscales are typically: Machiavellianism items 1–9, narcissism items 10–18 and psychopathy items 19–27)

### ***Analysis and Interpretation of Data:***

The gathered data was processed and analyzed utilizing appropriate statistical techniques for relevant interpretation. One-way ANOVA, correlation, Students' t-test, and measures of

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central tendency were the statistical methods used to process and analyze the data and evaluate the hypotheses.

### *Testing of Objectives & Hypotheses*

**Objective 1:** To assess the level of dimensions of dark triad traits (Machiavellianism, Narcissism and Psychopathy) among university students.

**Table 1: Level of dark triad traits among university students**

| Dimensions of Dark Triad Traits | N   | Maximum Score | Mean  | Standard Deviation | Percentage of Mean |
|---------------------------------|-----|---------------|-------|--------------------|--------------------|
| Machiavellianism                | 411 | 43            | 28.46 | 5.309              | 66.2%              |
| Narcissism                      | 411 | 43            | 26.79 | 4.334              | 62.3%              |
| Psychopathy                     | 411 | 35            | 22.05 | 4.235              | 63%                |
| Dark Triad Traits Total         | 411 | 104           | 77.30 | 10.323             | 74.3%              |

The mean and standard deviation of machiavellianism personality trait among university students is presented in table 1. The maximum possible score of machiavellianism personality trait is 43. The mean score for machiavellianism personality trait is 28.46, and the percentage is 66.2%. Hence, from the mean score and its percentage, it is clear that university students have a moderate level of machiavellianism personality trait.

The mean and standard deviation of narcissism personality trait among university students is presented in table 1. The maximum possible score of narcissism personality trait is 43. The mean score of narcissism personality trait is 26.79, and the percentage is 62.3%. Hence, from the mean score and its percentage, it is clear that university students have a moderate level of narcissism personality trait.

The mean and standard deviation of the level of Psychopathy personality trait among university students is presented in table 1. The maximum possible score of psychopathy personality trait is 35. The mean score of psychopathy personality trait is 22.05, and the percentage is 63%. Hence, from the mean score and its percentage, it is clear that university students have a moderate level of psychopathy personality trait.

The mean and standard deviation of dark triad personality trait among university students is presented in table 1. The maximum possible score of dark triad personality trait is 104. The mean score of psychopathy personality trait is 77.30, and the percentage is 74.3%. Hence, from the mean score and its percentage, it is clear that the university students have a moderate level of dark triad personality trait.

**Hypothesis 1(a):** There is a significant difference among the university students based on their gender with respect to the dimensions of dark triad traits.

**Table 2: Showing significant difference among the university students based on their gender with respect to the dimensions of dark triad traits.**

| Sl. No. | Dimensions of Dark Triad Traits | Gender | N   | Mean  | SD           | 't' value | Significance           |
|---------|---------------------------------|--------|-----|-------|--------------|-----------|------------------------|
| 1       | Machiavellianism                | Male   | 236 | 28.22 | <b>5.388</b> | 1.092     | <b>Not Significant</b> |
|         |                                 | Female | 175 | 28.79 | <b>5.198</b> |           |                        |
| 2       | Narcissism                      | Male   | 236 | 26.95 | <b>4.220</b> | 0.883     | <b>Not</b>             |

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| Sl. No.                  | Dimensions of Dark Triad Traits | Gender        | N          | Mean         | SD            | 't' value    | Significance           |
|--------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------|------------|--------------|---------------|--------------|------------------------|
|                          |                                 | Female        | 175        | 26.57        | <b>4.486</b>  |              | <b>Significant</b>     |
| 3                        | Psychopathy                     | Male          | 236        | 22.12        | <b>4.385</b>  | 0.399        | <b>Not Significant</b> |
|                          |                                 | Female        | 175        | 21.95        | <b>4.034</b>  |              |                        |
| <b>Dark Triad Traits</b> |                                 | <b>Male</b>   | <b>236</b> | <b>77.29</b> | <b>10.855</b> | <b>0.027</b> | <b>Not Significant</b> |
|                          |                                 | <b>Female</b> | <b>175</b> | <b>77.32</b> | <b>9.589</b>  |              |                        |

From Table 2, it is inferred that the calculated 't' value (0.027) for the dark triad personality trait among university students is less than the table value (1.96). It is concluded that there is no significant difference in the dark triad personality traits and their dimensions with respect to gender, namely, machiavellianism ( $1.092 < 1.96$ ), narcissism ( $0.083 < 1.96$ ), and psychopathy ( $0.399 < 1.96$ ). Hence, the formulated hypothesis 1(a) is not accepted.

**Hypothesis 1(b):** There is a significant difference among the university students based on their discipline of study with respect to the dimensions of dark triad traits.

**Table 3: Showing significant difference among the university students based on their discipline of study with respect to the dimensions of dark triad traits.**

| Sl. No.                  | Dimensions of Dark Triad Traits | Source         | Sum of Squares | df  | Mean Square | F     | Significance             |
|--------------------------|---------------------------------|----------------|----------------|-----|-------------|-------|--------------------------|
| 1.                       | Machiavellianism                | Between Groups | 226.048        | 3   | 75.349      | 2.707 | <b>Not Significant</b>   |
|                          |                                 | Within Groups  | 11330.117      | 407 | 27.838      |       |                          |
|                          |                                 | Total          | 11556.165      | 410 |             |       |                          |
| 2.                       | Narcissism                      | Between Groups | 93.776         | 3   | 31.259      | 1.673 | <b>Not Significant</b>   |
|                          |                                 | Within Groups  | 7606.229       | 407 | 18.689      |       |                          |
|                          |                                 | Total          | 7700.005       | 410 |             |       |                          |
| 3.                       | Psychopathy                     | Between Groups | 191.510        | 3   | 63.837      | 3.627 | <b>Not Significant</b>   |
|                          |                                 | Within Groups  | 7162.417       | 407 | 17.598      |       |                          |
|                          |                                 | Total          | 7353.927       | 410 |             |       |                          |
| <b>Dark Triad Traits</b> |                                 | Between Groups | 1362.895       | 3   | 454.298     | 4.368 | <b>0.05 Significance</b> |
|                          |                                 | Within Groups  | 42328.088      | 407 | 104.000     |       |                          |
|                          |                                 | Total          | 43690.983      | 410 |             |       |                          |

From Table 3, it is inferred that the calculated 'F' values for Machiavellianism (2.707), Narcissism (1.673), and Psychopathy (3.627) are less than the table value (3.84). Therefore, it is concluded that there is no significant difference among university students based on their discipline of study with respect to the dimensions of dark triad traits. However, the calculated 'F' value for overall Dark Triad Traits (4.368) is greater than the table value (3.84) at the 0.05 level of significance, indicating that there is a significant difference among

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university students based on their discipline in terms of overall Dark Triad Personality Traits. Hence, the formulated hypothesis that “There is a significant difference among university students based on their discipline with respect to Dark Triad Personality Traits” is partially accepted, as significance is observed only for the overall Dark Triad traits but not for the individual traits.

### *Implication of the Study:*

- The findings can help higher education institutions understand how Dark Triad personality traits (Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy) may influence students’ academic behavior, peer interactions, and ethical decision-making across different academic disciplines.
- The results can assist university administrators and educators in developing discipline-specific counseling and guidance programs to promote positive interpersonal skills and responsible academic conduct among students.
- The study can support the design of ethics, empathy, and value-based education initiatives aimed at reducing socially aversive personality tendencies and encouraging healthier campus environments.
- The findings can be used by student support services to create targeted mental health and personality development programs that help students manage manipulative, self-centered, or impulsive behavioral tendencies.
- The research can help institutions frame policies and intervention strategies that foster cooperative learning, ethical leadership, and constructive social relationships among university students across diverse academic streams.

### *Recommendation of the Study:*

- Universities should introduce **personality development and ethical awareness programs** to help students understand and manage traits related to Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy.
- Counseling and student support services should be strengthened in higher education institutions to **identify and guide students who exhibit higher levels of Dark Triad traits**, promoting healthier interpersonal relationships and responsible behavior.
- Academic institutions should incorporate **value-based education, empathy training, and teamwork-oriented activities** within the curriculum to encourage positive social and ethical behavior among students from different disciplines.
- Universities can organize **workshops, seminars, and mentoring programs** that focus on leadership skills, emotional intelligence, and responsible decision-making among students.
- Future research should include **larger and more diverse samples of university students across different regions and disciplines**, and may also examine related variables such as academic stress, peer relationships, mental health, and ethical attitudes.

### *Suggestions*

- Universities may conduct personality development and emotional intelligence workshops for students.
- Institutions can promote group activities and collaborative learning to improve interpersonal skills.

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- Student counseling centers may conduct awareness programs on healthy personality development.
- Universities may organize seminars on ethical decision-making and responsible leadership.
- Awareness programs on mental health and self-regulation may be encouraged among students.

### CONCLUSION

The findings of the study revealed no significant differences in these traits among the disciplines, indicating that Dark Triad characteristics are relatively similar across academic streams. The study contributes to understanding personality traits among students in the Indian higher education context and highlights the importance of promoting ethical awareness, emotional intelligence, and positive personality development within universities. Further research with larger and more diverse samples may provide deeper insights into the role of personality traits in student behavior.

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### ***Conflict of Interest***

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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