

The Influence of Dark Triad Personality Traits on Risk-Taking Behavior Among Young Adults

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ABSTRACT

The study examined the relationship between Dark Triad personality traits, namely Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy, and risk-taking behavior among young adults. In addition, the study also explored whether gender differences existed in Dark Triad traits and risk-taking. A quantitative correlational research design was employed, and data were collected from 150 young adults using standardized self-report measures. Pearson correlation analysis and independent samples t-tests were used to analyze the data and test the hypotheses. The findings revealed that psychopathy was the only significant positive predictor of risk-taking behavior ($r = .48, p < .001$). Machiavellianism and narcissism, on the other hand, did not significantly correlate with risk-taking behavior, indicating that people who possess these traits may exhibit more deliberate and self-protective behavioral patterns as opposed to impulsive risk-taking. The findings emphasize the need of distinguishing the Dark Triad traits while studying personality-related risk behaviors among young adults.

Keywords: Dark Triad, machiavellianism, narcissism, psychopathy, risk-taking behavior, young adults

INTRODUCTION

Over the last few decades, civilization has gone through tremendous social, cultural, and technical changes that have had a profound impact on human behavior and interpersonal interactions. In today's modern world, young adults are continuously exposed to conditions that promote competition, impulsivity, sensation-seeking, and personal accomplishment. Increased social media exposure, shifting social standards, scholastic pressure, and changing lifestyle patterns have all influenced how people perceive risk, relationships, and decision-making. As a result, understanding the psychological elements that impact risky behavior in young adults is becoming increasingly crucial.

Young adulthood, which typically ranges from 18 to 25 years old, is seen as a vital developmental stage marked by identity exploration, independence, and experimentation. During this time, people make critical decisions about their education, careers, income, and relationships. However, this developmental period is also linked to increased susceptibility to maladaptive risk-taking behaviors such as reckless driving, hazardous sexual practices, substance abuse, impulsive online behavior, and financial irresponsibility (Steinberg, 2010). While modest risk-taking can help with personal development and exploration, excessive or unhealthy risk-taking can have a negative impact on psychological well-being, academic performance, and social adjustment. Therefore, recognizing personality traits related with such behaviors is vital for prevention and intervention.

The Dark Triad, which includes Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy, has received a lot of attention in recent psychological study. These socially unpleasant personality qualities are defined by manipulation, emotional coldness, self-centeredness, lack of empathy, impulsivity, and a tendency to exploit others for personal benefit. Individuals with

high Machiavellianism tend to be strategic, manipulative, and morally detached, whereas narcissists exhibit grandiosity, entitlement, and an obsessive need for admiration. Psychopathy is related with impulsivity, thrill-seeking, emotional detachment, and antisocial behavior. Although these characteristics occur on a continuum in the general population, high levels may contribute to negative interpersonal and behavioral outcomes.

Previous research has consistently connected Dark Triad features to a variety of risk-taking behaviors. Individuals that exhibit these characteristics are more likely to participate in dangerous driving, aggressive behavior, impulsive decision-making, risky sexual behaviors, substance abuse, and unethical online conduct (Crysel et al., 2013). From an evolutionary standpoint, these characteristics could indicate a preference for rapid rewards, short-term gains, and dominance-oriented techniques over long-term stability and cooperative partnerships. As a result, people with high levels of Dark Triad qualities may be more ready to participate in behaviors that include uncertainty, danger, or breaking societal rules in the quest of thrill or personal gain.

Due to tremendous socioeconomic and cultural shifts in India, research into Dark Triad features has grown in importance. Traditional collectivist beliefs are progressively interacting with current individualistic desires, resulting in shifting behavioural patterns among adolescents. Recent Indian research has revealed gender variations and psychological repercussions connected with Dark Triad features. For example, males are frequently shown to score higher on psychopathy and Machiavellianism, although women may experience more emotional pain as a result of these qualities (Bhargava, 2025). Other research has associated Dark Triad features with casual relationship preferences, poor mental health outcomes, social media addiction, and impulsive online behavior among Indian youth (Belwal & Khanam, 2023; Shrivastava, 2023). According to recent media reports, there is a growing public worry over young people' violence, impulsivity, manipulative behavior, and emotional insensitivity. Reports of cyberbullying, toxic influencer culture, online harassment, and rising antisocial inclinations among adolescents mirror behavioral patterns commonly associated with Dark Triad personality traits (India Today, 2024; Outlook India, 2024). Excessive social media exposure, as well as the normalization of manipulative or attention-seeking behaviours, may reinforce dangerous and socially unacceptable behaviours among young people (The Hindu, 2024; Times of India, 2024). These findings show that socially aversive personality qualities are more than just theoretical constructs; they are becoming increasingly obvious concerns in modern society.

Despite growing international and Indian research on Dark Triad features, only a few studies have specifically studied their association with risk-taking behavior among young adults in India. Existing research frequently focuses on particular behavioral outcomes such as violence, online behavior, or relationship patterns, but comprehensive investigations on general risk-taking behaviour remain scarce. Given the rising psychological and social obstacles that young adults encounter in today's society, studying the impact of Dark Triad personality traits on risk-taking behavior has become critical. As a result, the current study seeks to evaluate the relationship between Dark Triad personality traits and risk-taking behavior among young adults.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Hypothesis

H1: There is a significant positive relationship between narcissism and risk-taking.

H2: There is a significant positive relationship between Machiavellianism and risk-taking.

H3: There is a significant positive relationship between psychopathy and risk-taking.

H4: There is a significant gender difference in risk-taking.

H5: There is a significant gender difference in narcissism.

H6: There is a significant gender difference in Machiavellianism.

H7: There is a significant gender difference in psychopathy.

Participants:

150 participants (75 male & 75 females)

Inclusion Criteria:

Participants meeting the following criteria were included in the study :

1. Participants must be aged between 18-25 years at the time of data collection.
2. Participants must be currently enrolled in or must have completed undergraduate studies.

3. Participants must identify as male and female.
4. Participants must possess sufficient English language proficiency to understand and respond to the questionnaire items.
5. Participants must provide informed consent for voluntary participation.

Exclusion criteria:

Participants were not included in the study if :

1. They were below 18 or above 25 years of age.
2. They had any diagnosed psychiatric disorder or neurological impairment that could affect cognitive or emotional functioning.
3. They had a history of substance abuse that could influence personality traits and decision making.
4. They were unable to read or comprehend English adequately.
5. They were single children, as siblings interactions may influence the development of Dark Triad traits and risk-taking behavior.

Instruments:

Short Dark Triad Scale (SD3)

To assess Dark Triad personality traits among participants, the Short Dark Triad (SD3) developed by Delroy L. Paulhus and Daniel N. Jones (2014) was used. It is a self report tool used to evaluate the three aspects of the Dark Triad personality traits: psychopathy, narcissism, and Machiavellianism.

Risk-Taking Behavior Scale

Risk-taking behaviour was assessed using the Domain-Specific Risk-Taking Scale (DOSPERT) developed by Elke U. Weber, Ann-Renée Blais, and Nancy E. Betz (2002). It is a self-report tool that assesses people's tendency to participate in risky behaviors in a variety of contexts, including social, ethical, financial, health/safety, and recreational settings.

Procedure and Analysis

To ensure clarity, transparency and consistency a structured and sequential research approach was followed. A stratified random sampling technique was used to ensure balanced representation of both male and female participants aged between 18 and 25 years from different colleges and universities across India. Prior permission was obtained from the concerned institutional authorities before approaching potential participants. Eligible participants were invited to participate through classroom visits and online college groups based on their willingness and availability to take part in the study.

After the selection of participants a structured Google Form was used to collect the data. The beginning of the form included uniform instructions like an informed consent statement clearly outlining the purpose of the study following a digital consent checkbox of voluntary participation. Failure to provide consent leads to elimination of the form.

There were three sections to the questionnaire :

- Demographic details - name(optional), age,gender,current education
- Short Dark Triad (SD3) Scale.
- Domain-Specific Risk-Taking Scale (DOSPERT)

Participants were not time bound and were given enough time to complete the questionnaire. Following the completion of data collection the responses were carefully examined and arranged. For additional analysis the collected data was coded and imported into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Before moving on to the statistical analysis the dataset was screened for the inclusion and exclusion criteria, and incomplete or inconsistent responses were removed. Appropriate statistical methods were then used based on the objectives and hypotheses of the study. Descriptive statistics such as mean and standard deviation were calculated to summarize demographic characteristics and study variables. Pearson's correlation coefficient was used to examine the relationship between Dark Triad personality traits and risk-taking behavior. Furthermore, t-ratio was applied to analyze gender differences in the study variables. The level of significance for all statistical analyses was set at $p < .05$.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

The current study aimed to identify the link between Dark Triad personality traits and risk-taking behaviour in young adults. The study also looked at gender differences in Dark Triad personality traits and risk-taking behaviors. The study's findings provide insight on how socially aversive personality traits influence behaviour in young people. The findings are examined in connection to each hypothesis.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics and Assumption Testing of Study Variables (N=150)

Variable	Mean (M)	Std. Deviation (SD)	Range
Machiavellianism	28.54	5.01	14 – 41
Narcissism	26.71	4.47	12 – 35
Psychopathy	21.38	5.21	9 – 33
Risk-Taking Behavior	106.68	21.45	44 – 161

Interpretation

The obtained data were screened prior to statistical analysis to examine the assumptions of normality. The distributions of risk-taking behavior, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism were shown to be normal by Shapiro-Wilk tests ($p > .05$). Narcissism, however, violated the normality assumption ($p = .03$, Skewness = -0.39). The skewness value stayed within the permitted range in spite of this minor variance. As a result, the dataset was seen as appropriate for a further statistical analysis.

Table 2 : Correlation with Risk-Taking Behavior

Hypothesis	Relationship	Coefficient	p-value	Result
H1	Narcissism & Risk-Taking	$r = .107$.196	Rejected
H2	Machiavellianism & Risk-Taking	$r = .127$.124	Rejected
H3	Psychopathy & Risk-Taking	$r = .480$	$< .001$	Accepted

Interpretation

Hypothesis 1:

The findings showed that there was no statistically significant correlation ($r = .107$, $p = .19$) between narcissism and risk-taking behavior. As a result, the alternative hypothesis was rejected and the null hypothesis was accepted. This result implies that among young individuals, narcissism was not significantly linked to risk-taking behavior. The results suggest that narcissistic people might be more focused on upholding a positive self-image and refraining from actions that might harm their reputation. Even though they may come across as self-assured and attention-seeking, narcissistic people may not always participate in risky behavior unless it presents opportunities for social recognition or praise. These results are in line with other research indicating that behavioral risk-taking is not always closely associated with narcissistic features.

Hypothesis:

The findings showed that there was no statistically significant correlation between risk-taking behavior and Machiavellianism ($r = .127$, $p = .12$). As a result, the alternative hypothesis was rejected and the null hypothesis was accepted. This result implies that young adults' risk-taking behavior was not significantly related with Machiavellianism. The results could be explained by Machiavellian people's strategic and calculating character. Instead than acting impulsively or recklessly, these people frequently place a higher value on long-term planning, control, and deliberate decision-making. Similar findings from earlier research have shown that Machiavellianism is more closely linked to strategic thought and manipulation than to impulsive risk-taking.

Hypothesis 3:

The findings showed that psychopathy and risk-taking behavior had a moderately positive, statistically significant connection ($r = .48$, $p = .001$). As a result, the alternative hypothesis was accepted and the null hypothesis was rejected. According to this research, young adults who have higher levels of psychopathy are more likely to take risks. The results are in line with earlier studies showing a significant connection between impulsivity, sensation-seeking, fearlessness, and behavioral dysregulation and psychopathy. People with high levels of psychopathic tendencies may be less sensitive to consequences and may put short-term gains ahead of long-term results. They might therefore be more inclined to participate in dangerous and possibly damaging behaviors. The current findings confirm previous research by Crysel et al. (2013) and Sleep et al. (2019), who identified psychopathy as the biggest Dark Triad predictor of risky behavior.

Table 3 : Independent Sample t-test showing Gender Differences

Hypothesis	Variable	Male M (SD)	Female M (SD)
H4	Risk-Taking	113.72 (21.87)	100.05 (19.0)
H5	Narcissism	27.01 (3.90)	26.39 (4.9)
H6	Machiavellianism	29.78 (4.44)	27.37 (5.29)
H7	Psychopathy	23.44 (4.79)	19.37 (4.87)

Interpretation

Hypothesis 4:

The findings indicated a significant gender difference in risk-taking behavior ($t = 4.05, p = .001$). As a result, the alternative hypothesis was accepted whereas the null hypothesis was rejected. This finding suggests that male and female individuals differed significantly in terms of risk-taking behaviour. The findings are consistent with prior research indicating that males are more likely to engage in risky and sensation-seeking behaviors than girls. These disparities may be attributed to biological characteristics, socialization patterns, and cultural expectations that encourage males to be adventurous and competitive.

Hypothesis 5:

The findings found no significant gender differences in Narcissism ($t = 0.85, p = .39$). As a result, the alternate hypothesis was rejected, whereas the null hypothesis was accepted. This finding shows that male and female individuals had similar levels of narcissism. The absence of gender differences in Narcissism could be attributed to shifting social norms and increased encouragement of self-expression, confidence, and self-promotion among both men and women. Contemporary social situations and social media exposure may contribute to similar narcissistic tendencies in both genders.

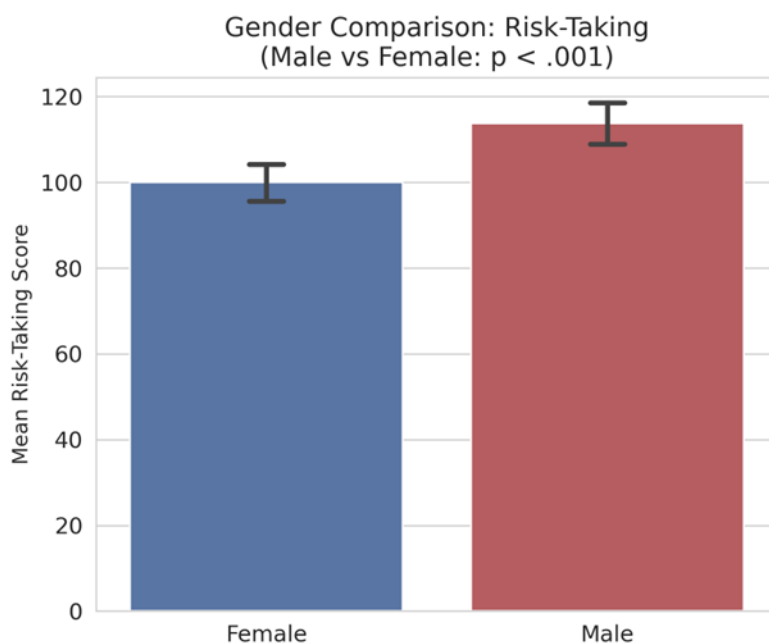
Hypothesis 6:

The findings indicated a significant gender difference in Machiavellianism. As a result, the alternative hypothesis was accepted whereas the null hypothesis was rejected. This research shows that male participants scored much higher on Machiavellianism than female participants. Previous study has shown that males exhibit more strategic manipulation, dominance, and emotionally detached interpersonal styles as a result of evolutionary and social pressures.

Hypothesis 7:

The findings showed a significant gender difference in Psychopathy. As a result, the alternative hypothesis was accepted whereas the null hypothesis was rejected. This research shows that male participants scored considerably higher on Psychopathy than female participants. The findings are consistent with previous research that found higher psychopathic traits in males, such as increased impulsivity, violence, fearlessness, and sensation-seeking behavior. These differences may be strengthened by social expectations that encourage masculine dominance and risk-taking.

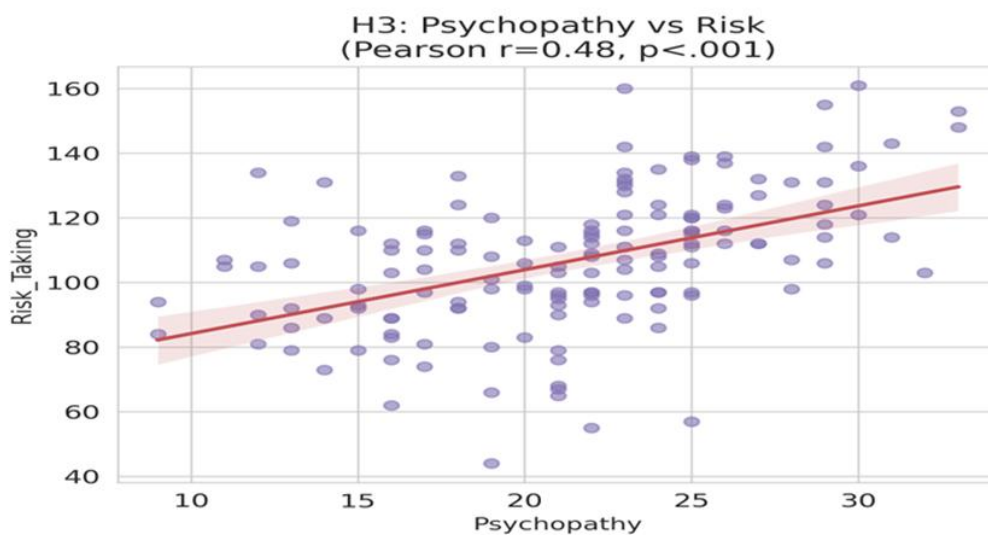
Figure 1: Bar Graph Showing Gender Differences in Risk-Taking Behaviour Among Young Adults



Interpretation

The bar graph shows that male participants scored higher on risk-taking behavior than female participants. This finding is consistent with the results of the independent samples t-test, which found a significant gender difference in risk-taking behavior. The findings match prior research demonstrating that males are more sensation-seeking, impulsive, and adventurous than females. According to evolutionary and sociocultural viewpoints, guys are frequently encouraged to engage in competitive and risky behaviors, which may contribute to increased levels of risk-taking among young adult males.

Figure 2: Scatter Plot Showing the Correlation Between Psychopathy and Risk-Taking Behavior



Interpretation

The scatter plot shows a positive relationship between psychopathy and risk-taking behavior among young people. As psychopathy scores increased, risk-taking behaviour also tended to increase. This study supports Pearson's correlation analysis, which demonstrated a significant moderate positive association between Psychopathy and Risk-Taking behavior ($r = .48, p < .001$). According to the findings, people with higher psychopathic tendencies may exhibit more impulsivity, fearlessness, emotional detachment, and sensation-seeking behavior, increasing their likelihood of engaging in risky behaviors. These findings are consistent with prior research, which identified psychopathy as the top Dark Triad predictor of behavioral risk-taking.

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