

The influence of dark triad-specific personality traits (Machiavellianism, narcissism, psychopathy) on parenting styles, and parental competence in raising and educating children

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to determine the existence of an association between the Dark Triad personality traits, parental competence, and parental styles. The parents' personality traits, particularly those of the Dark Triad, may serve as predictors of the child's level of development, educational path choices, academic outcomes, well-being, and overall development. It is of utmost importance to identify these traits to better understand the parents' behaviour and the potential harm the parent's strategies may inflict on the child. The Dark Triad-specific personality traits can lead to authoritarian, selfish, lacking empathy, and even manipulative behaviors that can significantly and negatively impact a child's life. The research sample includes 609 respondents who fulfil the role of parent. The results revealed that parents' Machiavellian personality traits may be associated with an authoritarian or permissive parenting style, but not with a democratic parenting style. Also, the level of parental competence varies depending on the background of the parents and may be influenced by their psychopathic personality traits.

Keywords: Child-Rearing, Dark Triad, Education, Parental competence, Parenting styles, Parental strategies, Parenting.

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Highlights of this paper

- Dark Triad represent a psychological construct that influences people's behaviour.
- Parental strategies and practices are influenced by the Dark Triad personality traits.
- Children's education and development is determined by the way parents approach the parent-child relationship.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Dark Triad

The Dark Triad is a psychological construct comprising three primary personality traits: Machiavellianism, Narcissism, and Psychopathy. These traits are often interconnected and share a common characteristic: disregarding ethical, moral, and social perspectives (Jones & Paulhus, 2014).

The "Dark Triad" concept refers to these traits at a subclinical level, meaning they are not considered pathological (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). The Dark Triad personality traits represent predictors for negative outcomes, antisocial behaviour, poor personal relationships, and difficulty in adhering to moral rules. The Dark Triad can influence parenting practices, which seek to balance the control of autonomy and emotional support the parent provides (Li, Yao, Chen, & Liu, 2020). *Machiavellianism*, for instance, is a personality trait specific to individuals who tend to manipulate interpersonal relationships and exhibit cynical attitudes and utilitarian morality (Christie, 1970). This psychological construct is unique to people who seek control, are driven by their own needs and interests, and are willing to take unethical actions, all of which can influence parenting styles (Massey-Abernathy, 2022).

Parents who developed Dark Triad personality traits were, in turn, very tightly controlled and difficult to accept by their own parents, which hindered their harmonious development. As children, they did not have an environment that allowed themselves to express and integrate their emotional experiences, which led to their emotional unpredictability in adulthood. In turn, children of these parents may experience intermittent emotional connections and live with the uncertainty of when their parents become available again (Gibson, 2012). *Narcissism* is a personality trait that indicates the perspective on one's person as being superior and grandiose (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). People with narcissistic personality traits are characterized by an inability to rely on themselves and those around them to maintain self-esteem and positive views of themselves. However, maintaining this maladaptive view can become difficult (Kacel, Ennis, & Pereira, 2017). *Psychopathy* is a personality construct that is characterized by emotional detachment, irresponsibility, antisocial behaviours, and poor impulse control (Hare & Neumann, 2008). Psychopathic disorder has its roots in early childhood. A complex suite of affective, interpersonal, and behavioural psychopathic characteristics can be identified from the early phase of development (Maneiro, López-Romero, Gomez-Fragulea, Cutrin, & Romero, 2019).

1.2. Parenting Styles

Parental style is a psychological construct defined as the totality of strategies adopted by parents, including warmth, overprotection, and rejection, in the process of raising and educating a child (Wang et al., 2024). *Authoritarian parents* show an increased level of parental control, and expect a certain maturity level from the child that is not yet developed appropriately. It is an adult-centered parenting style. The type of communication they adopt is one-sided; the parents give directions and expect obedience from the child, punishing him if he or her if he or she tries to intervene (Amani, Nazifi, & Sorkhabi, 2020). *The democratic parenting style* is specifically child-centered and is distinguished by rules and clear expectations. Democratic/authoritative parents combine demandingness with responsiveness, encouraging communication and conveying trust and acceptance (Checa & Abundis-Gutierrez, 2018). *A permissive parenting style* is characteristic of parents who intend to be nonpunitive and avoid confrontation with the child, tolerating their undesirable impulses and behaviors (Baumrind, 1991).

Parental style is a decisive factor in determining the family environment and atmosphere. It influences the developing children's resilience to fulfil educational tasks. Therefore, according to the social theory of learning developed by Bandura and Walters, the weight of observational learning, and the parents' influence and their shaping role in developing the child's education and behaviour are highlighted (Shengyao et al., 2024).

1.3. Parental Competence

Gomez and Contreras defined parenting skills (Gomez & Contreras, 2019) as a set of "parenting knowledge, attitudes and practices that are learned and updated over several generations" that allow parents to better organize their parenting behaviours and experiences in order to ensure the positive development of children, their well-being and the exercise of human rights." (Jiménez-Luque, Benavente-Fernández, Ruiz-González, Lubián-López, & Sánchez-Sandoval, 2024). Establishing firm rules and drawing certain boundaries presupposes applying strategies that combine cognitive and affective aspects. They aim to help the child form a strong personality, to become capable of perceiving what love is, and of understanding and following the rules. All this falls under the responsibility of the parents, who in turn take over the model of growth and relationship with the child according to their childhood experiences (Pânișoară, 2011). A high level of parental competence is associated with achieving desired academic performance. This is important for social life, career, and even quality of life. People who have achieved academic performance are usually more productive and thus better paid (Bodur & Aktan, 2021).

1.4. Current Study Objectives and Research Questions

This study aims to identify the influence of personality traits specific to the Dark Triad, parenting styles, and parental competence on how children are raised and educated.

1.5. Research Questions and Hypotheses

To investigate the objectives mentioned above, the following research questions were formulated:

RQ1: Does parental competence significantly differ depending on the parents' background?

RQ2: Do Machiavellian personality traits determine an authoritarian parenting style?

RQ3: Do parents with Machiavellian personality traits adopt a permissive parenting style?

RQ4: Is the level of increasing parental competence determined by the level of narcissism?

RQ5: Is the level of increasing parental competence determined by the level of psychopathy?

RQ6: Is the parents' age a moderator for the level of Machiavellian personality traits and authoritarian parenting style?

This study aims to verify the hypotheses:

H₁: *There is a significant difference in parental competence depending on the parents' background.*

H₂: *Parents with Machiavellian personality traits adopt an authoritarian parenting style.*

H₃: *Parents with Machiavellian personality traits adopt a permissive parenting style.*

H₄: *There is an association between the level of parental competence and the level of parental narcissism.*

H₅: *There is an association between the level of parental competence and the level of parental psychopathy.*

H₆: *As the parent ages, the relationship between Machiavellianism and the Authoritarian Parenting Style intensifies.*

2. MATERIAL AND METHODS

2.1. Sample

The research sample includes 609 respondents. The demographics of the respondents ranged from 20 to 65 years old and were classified into the following age ranges: 24 respondents are between 21 and 30 years old (4%), 250 respondents (41%) fall into the 31-40 age range years (41%), 272 respondents (45%) are between 41-50 years old, and 63 respondents (10%) are over 50 years old.

2.2. Data Collection Procedure

For this study, the data were collected online between April and May 2023 by disseminating the questionnaires created on the Google Forms platform on online social networking groups.

To participate in this study, respondents had to meet the condition of being a parent. Participants were asked to consent to participate and were informed that participation was voluntary and that they would not receive rewards. They were also informed that they could withdraw from the study without any consequences.

The collected data was processed using the Excel database and then statistically using the statistical program Jamovi 2.2.14. Descriptive statistics, sample T-tests, correlational analysis, and moderation were used to answer research questions.

The present study received ethical approval from the Research Ethics Commission of the University of Bucharest (76/05.10.2022).

2.3. Instruments

The study was composed of a set of questionnaires that quantified the variables used.

Mach IV scale – Machiavellianism measures a person's level of Machiavellianism and reflects a person's way of thinking and views about life and the world (Christie, 1970). The questionnaire contains 20 items: 10 indicate a high score for Machiavellianism, and the other 10 indicate the opposite.

The Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NP16) is a tool used to determine the existence of specific narcissistic personality traits (Ames, Rose, & Anderson, 2006). This questionnaire contains 16 items, and each item consists of dual statements. For the narcissistic trait, the answer is evaluated with 1 marked with bold-variant and for the other with 0.

The LSRP-Levenson Psychopathy – The Levenson Self-Report Psychopathy Scale is a tool used to determine the level of personality traits specific to psychopathy (Levenson, Kiehl, & Fitzpatrick, 1995). This instrument consists of two scales and 26 items. The two subscales refer to Primary Psychopathy, LSRP1, and Primary Psychopathy, or LSRP2.

PSDQ—Parenting Styles & Dimension Questionnaire is used to identify the dominant parenting style. It was developed by Robinson, Mandleco, Olsen, and Hart (2001). PSDQ has 32 items. These items are specific to parenting styles, which simultaneously represent the questionnaire's factors: democratic, authoritarian, and permissive. Each parenting style is divided into dimensions or subfactors.

McMaster Family Assessment Device is a questionnaire for assessing parental competence (Epstein, Bishop, & Levin, 2007). This tool contains 53 items and takes into account the way a family functions and the function it has in the evolution of risk behaviours for the child's mental and physical health, how it relates to school requirements, and the possibility of initiating delinquent behaviours (Gutman, Sameroff, & Eccles, 2002).

3. RESULTS

The purpose of this study is to investigate the statistical association between the three concepts presented above: Dark Triad, Parenting Styles, and Parental Competence.

The research variables were represented by the Dark Triad specific personality traits (Machiavellianism, Narcissism, and Psychopathy), parenting styles (authoritarian, democratic, permissive), and parental competence. For each variable, answers were collected in a form created on the Google Forms platform. The responses were processed in an Excel database and transferred to the Jamovi 2.4.14 statistical program. Data analysis involved performing several statistical operations, such as descriptive analysis, correlational analysis, linear regression, and moderation.

For testing the hypothesis “*There is a significant difference in parental competence depending on the parents' background.*” we performed a T-Test for the parental competence score variable and the categorical variable of the respondents' background.

Table 1. Group descriptives.

Types of scores	Group	N	Mean	Median	SD	SE
Parental competency score	Rural	79	124	126	14.8	1.67
	Urban	491	128	129	9.61	0.434
Independent samples T-test						

Table 2. Independent sample T-test.

Parental competency score	Statistic	df	p	Mean difference	SE difference	95% confidence interval	
						Lower	Upper
Student's t	-3.68 ^a	568	< 0.001	-4.68	1.27	-7.17	-2.18

Note: $H_0: \mu_{rural} = \mu_{urban}$

^aLevene's test is significant ($p < 0.05$), suggesting a violation of the assumption of equal variances.

From Table 1, a significant difference can be observed regarding the average of the respondents from the urban environment - 128 and those from the rural environment - 124. From Table 2, we can see that the value of the T-Test is - .36, $p < .01$, $d = -4.68$, 95% CI [-7.17; -2.18], which indicates that there is a statistically significant difference between the level of parental competence depending on the parents' background. Urban parents may be more involved in raising and educating children because they can identify more possibilities supporting parental task realization. The data shows that the hypothesis “*There is a significant difference in parental competence depending on the parents' background.*” is supported by the data.

For testing the hypothesis “*Parents with Machiavellian personality traits adopt an authoritarian parenting style.*” a correlational analysis was carried out between the dependent authoritarian parenting style and the independent variable – Machiavellianism- to determine how the Machiavellian personality trait influences adopting the authoritarian parenting style.

Table 3. Correlation matrix.

Type of score	Authoritarian style score	Machiavellianism score
Authoritarian style score	Pearson's r	—
Coefficient	p-value	—
Machiavellianism score	Pearson's r	0.198
Coefficient	p-value	< 0.001

Table 4. Model fit measures

Model	R	R ²
1	0.198	0.039

Table 5. Authoritarian style score coefficient model

Predictor	Estimate	SE	t	p
Intercept	10.65	1.84	5.76	< 0.001
Machiavellianism score	0.11	0.02	4.98	< 0.001

Following the correlational analysis between the two variables, a very weak correlation was obtained $r = .198$, but statistically significant $p < .001$ (Table 3). Following this analysis, it was found that, as the Machiavellian trait is more pronounced, the parent adopts an authoritarian parenting style. Following the regression analysis, a regression coefficient R is equal to .198 ($R = .198$) was obtained. The value of the coefficient $R^2 = .04$ demonstrates that 4% of the level of authoritarian parenting style fluctuates according to the level of the Machiavellian personality trait (Table 4). The model from Table 5 suggests that Machiavellianism is a significant predictor of authoritarian style, the effect is $\beta = 0.11$, but high significance $p < 0.001$. The parents with Machiavellian personality traits may be much more rigid about the rules and emotionally distant.

For a more conclusive test, we considered both statistical analyses between the variables Machiavellianism and the authoritarian style, as well as between Machiavellianism and the democratic style, to be able to compare the two associations. To determine how the Machiavellian personality trait influences the approach the democratic parenting style, a correlational analysis was carried out between the dependent variable, the democratic parenting style, and the independent variable – Machiavellianism. The correlation analysis between the two variables, no correlation was obtained $r = .05$, $p = .17$, $p > .005$ (Table 6). This result may be obtained because parents who adopt a democratic parenting style show more openness towards the child's wishes and do not feel the need to influence them.

Table 6. Correlation matrix.

Machiavellianism score	Pearson's r	—	—
Degrees of freedom	df	—	—
Coefficient	p-value	—	—
Democratic style score	Pearson's r	0.05	—
Degrees of freedom	df	606	—
Coefficient	p-value	0.17	—

Based on the analyzed data, the hypothesis that "Parents with Machiavellian personality traits adopt an authoritarian parenting style." is confirmed by the statistics collected for this sample.

For testing the hypothesis "Parents with Machiavellian personality traits adopt a permissive parenting style." a correlational the analysis was calculated based on the dependent variable, the permissive parenting style, and the independent variable – Machiavellianism. Following the correlation analysis between the two variables, a very weak correlation was obtained $r = .142$, but statistically significant $p < .001$ (Table 8). Following this analysis, it was found that, as the Machiavellian trait is more pronounced, the parent adopts a permissive parenting style.

The regression coefficient R with the value .142 ($R = .142$) and the value of the coefficient $R^2 = .020$ proves that 2% of the level of the permissive parenting style varies according to the level of the Machiavellian personality trait (Table 9). Table 8 indicates a statistically significant association between the two variables ($p < .001$). The model from Table 10 suggests that Machiavellianism is a significant predictor of permissive style scores, although the effect is relatively small 0.039 per unit of Machiavellianism, but high significance $p < 0.001$. A parent with a Machiavellian personality trait may adopt a behaviour in which he transforms the parent-child relationship into a friendship and does not consistently follow the rules or apply punishments.

Table 7 presents the frequency of the permissive parenting style. Thus, of the 608 respondents, 333 (54.8%) were at a low level of permissive parenting style, while 275 (45.2%) were at a high level of permissive parenting style.

Table 7. Frequencies of permissive style levels.

Level of permissive style	Counts	% of Total	Cumulative %
Low level	333	54.8 %	54.8 %
High level	275	45.2 %	100.0 %

Table 8. Correlation matrix.

Types of scores	Permissive style score	Machiavellianism score	
Permissive style score	Pearson's r	—	—
Coefficient	p-value	—	—
Machiavellianism score	Pearson's r	0.142	—
Coefficient	p-value	< 0.001	—

Table 9. Model model fit measures.

Model	R	R ²
1	0.14	0.02

Table 10. Permissive style score coefficient model.

Predictor	Estimate	SE	t	p
Intercept	8.33	0.91	9.06	< 0.001
Machiavellianism score	0.03	0.01	3.53	< 0.001

Based on the obtained data, the hypothesis that "Parents with Machiavellian personality traits adopt a permissive parenting style." is confirmed by the data collected for this sample.

For testing the hypothesis, "There is an association between the level of parenting competence and the level of parental narcissism.", we performed a correlational analysis between parental competence, the dependent variable, and narcissism, the independent variable -. Following the analysis, a negative correlation was obtained $r = -.073$, but statistically insignificant $p = .072$, $p < .05$ (Table 11).

Table 11. Correlation matrix.

Types of scores	Parental competency scores	Narcissism score
Parental competency score	Pearson's r	—
Coefficient	p-value	—
Narcissism score	Pearson's r	-0.073
Coefficient	p-value	0.072

Following the obtained data, it is concluded that the hypothesis "There is an association between the level of parenting competence and the level of parental narcissism." is not supported by the data collected for this sample. For testing the hypothesis „There is an association between the level of parenting competence and the level of parental psychopathy.“, we performed a correlational analysis between the dependent variable, parental competence, and the independent variable – psychopathy. Following the analysis, a negative correlation was obtained $r = -.36$, $p < .001$, statistically significant (Table 12). The regression coefficient R with the value of .36 ($R = .36$), and the value of the coefficient $R^2 = .13$ indicates that the parental competence variable demonstrates that 13% varies according to psychopathic personality traits (Table 13). Table 14 indicates that psychopathy influences the level of parental competence, but in a negative way ($\phi = -.28$), but it is statistically significant $p < 0.001$. It is possible that parents who have a lower level of psychopathic personality traits may be more competent in the parenting role. There is the possibility that a low level of psychopathic traits allows parents to show gestures of affection towards their children and provide the emotional support they need to positively influence the level of parental competence.

Table 12. Correlation matrix.

Types of scores	Parental competency score	Psychopathy score
Parental competency score	Pearson's r	—
Coefficient	p-value	—
Psychopathy score	Pearson's r	-0.366
Coefficient	p-value	< 0.001

Table 13. Model fit measures.

Model	R	R ²
1	0.36	0.13

Table 14. Parental competency score coefficient model

Predictor	Estimate	SE	t	p
Intercept	142.64	1.61	88.34	< 0.001
Psychopathy score	-0.28	0.02	-9.67	< 0.001

Based on the obtained data, it is concluded that the hypothesis "As the level of parental competence increases, the level of psychopathy decreases." is supported by the statistics. For testing the hypothesis, "As the parent ages, the relationship between Machiavellianism and the Authoritarian Parenting Style intensifies.", the model in which respondents' age moderates the effect of Machiavellianism on authoritarian parenting style was studied. Individually, the level of Machiavellianism of the parents predicts the authoritarian style approached by them, $p < .001$, $d = .10$, 95% CI $[-.05; .14]$ (Table 15). Parental age is not a statistically significant moderator for the relationship between Machiavellianism and the authoritarian style, $p = .14$, $p < .05$, $d = -.60$, 95% CI $[-1.40; .20]$ (Table 15). Although respondent age is not a statistically significant moderator of the relationship between Machiavellianism and authoritarian parenting style, it does statistically significantly moderate the relationship between Machiavellianism and authoritarian style, $p = .03$, $p < .05$, $d = -.06$, 95% CI $[-.11; -.00]$ (Table 15). Simple slope analysis demonstrated that, in the case of parents whose age is in the middle range (31-40 years), the level of Machiavellianism predicts the adoption of the authoritarian parenting style $p < .001$, $d = .101$, 95% CI $[-.06; .14]$ (Table 16). At the same time, in the case of respondents whose age is in a low range (21-30 years), the level of Machiavellianism predicts the adopted authoritarian style $p < .001$, $d = .14$, 95% CI $[-.08; .20]$ (Table 16). In the case of respondents whose age is in a high range (over 50 years), the level of Machiavellianism does not predict the adoption of an authoritarian parenting style, $.08$, $p > .05$, $d = .05$, 95% CI $[-.01; .12]$ (Table 16). Figure 1 illustrates the moderating effect of Machiavellianism on the authoritarian parenting style under the influence of the parents' average age variable (the age range between 21-30 - low average, respectively the range of 31-40 years - middle average), and for respondents who exceed 50 years, Machiavellianism does not determine the adoption of authoritarian parenting style.

Table 15. Estimated values of the moderator represented by respondents' age on the relationship between Machiavellianism and the authoritarian style.

95% confidence interval						
Score and age references	Estimate	SE	Lower	Upper	Z	p
Machiavellianism score	0.10	0.02	0.05	0.14	4.53	< 0.001
Age range	-0.60	0.40	-1.40	0.20	- 1.47	0.141
Machiavellianism score * Age range	-0.06	0.02	-0.11	-0.00	- 2.11	0.035

Table 16. Estimated values of the moderator represented by respondents' age on the relationship between Machiavellianism and the authoritarian style.

95% confidence interval						
Level	Estimate	SE	Lower	Upper	Z	p
Average	0.10	0.02	0.05	0.14	4.52	< 0.001
Low (-1SD)	0.14	0.02	0.08	0.20	5.08	< 0.001
High (+1SD)	0.05	0.03	-0.00	0.12	1.71	0.087

Note: Shows the effect of the predictor (Machiavellianism score) on the dependent variable (Authoritarian style score) at different levels of the moderator (Age range).

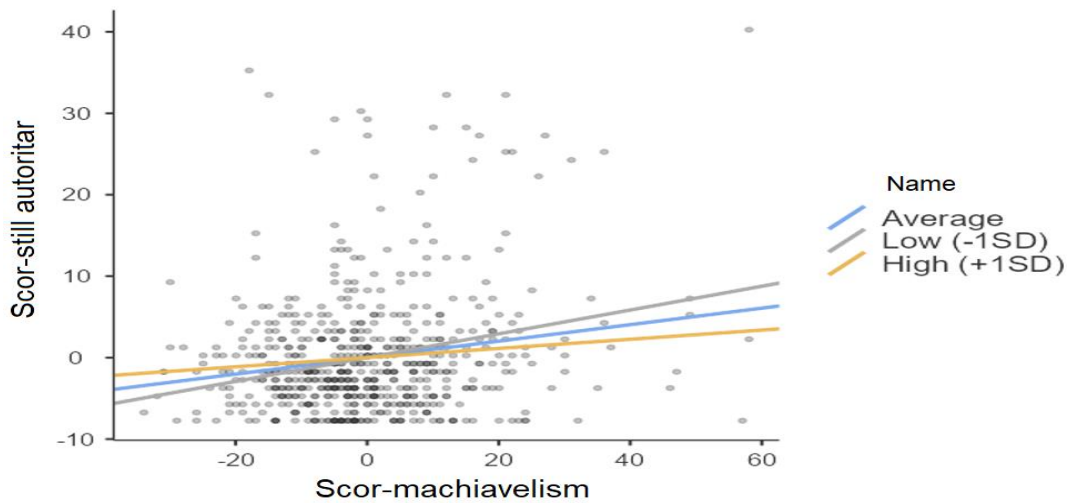


Figure 1. Moderation of the effect of Machiavellianism on the authoritarian style by the variable age of respondents.

Based on the obtained data, it is concluded that the hypothesis, “As the parent ages, the relationship between Machiavellianism and the Authoritarian Parenting Style intensifies.” is partially confirmed.

4. DISCUSSIONS

The aim of this study is to analyze the relationship between the Dark Triad, parenting styles, and parental competence and the influence of these variables on parenting strategies and behaviours in the parent-child relationship to raise and educate the child. Specialized literature indicates a connection between the personality traits specific to the Dark Triad and the child-parent relationship, specifically, how they translate into parenting behaviors by influencing the level of parental behaviours and determining the adopted parenting style within the family (Coelho et al., 2024). The results obtained from the first hypothesis test indicate that the parents' environment of origin can be an important factor in determining the chosen parenting strategies, their attitude towards the education of children, their adopted behaviours, and the resources and opportunities they can identify and value as resources for the harmonious growth of the child. Analyzing the results obtained by testing how Machiavellianism determines the choice of a parenting style, we found that this personality trait was positively associated with the self-tortured and permissive parenting styles but negatively with the democratic ones (Raju & Prusty, 2023). Also, parent psychopathic personality traits can predict authoritarian parenting behaviours, a narcissistic style of interpersonal relationships, and ruthless attitudes and behaviours characterized by high control in the parent-child relationship and low levels of parental warmth (Coelho et al., 2024).

5. CONCLUSION

In this research, we intended to check whether there was a link between Dark Triad personality traits, parental styles, and parental competence. Parental personality is reflected in the adopted parenting style, behaviours, parenting strategies, and the level of parental competence in the relationship with the child. Parents who have personality traits specific to the Dark Triad tend to adopt authoritarian behaviours, show a low level of parental warmth, and adopt manipulative and egotistical strategies that can affect the child's social skill development and negatively influence his or her educational path and his or her level of self-esteem. The absence of a proportional number of participants is a

limitation of this study: the number of female respondents is higher than the number of male respondents. For future directions, the aim is to expand the research sample and consider the testing of some sociodemographic variables to provide a better overview.

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