A Conceptual Paper of Dark Triad Personality and Cyberbullying Issues among University Students

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Abstract
Cyberbullying has become a growing issue alongside the rise of technology and social media. In Malaysia, the prevalence of cyberbullying is particularly concerning. University students are at heightened risk due to their extensive use of the internet for academic and social purposes. Therefore, this concept paper examines the relationship between Dark Triad personality traits (Narcissism, Psychopathy and Machiavellianism) and cyberbullying among university students and also discussing the concepts behind it and finding from previous research. The methodology involved using databases such as ScienceDirect, Scopus, PubMed, and Google Scholar to examine the relationship between Dark Triad personality traits and cyberbullying among university students including both international and local perspectives. Finding from international studies consistently demonstrate clear associations between Dark Triad personality traits and cyberbullying, However, in contrast finding from local studies reveal inconsistencies and appear less cohesive, with limited research exploring within Malaysian contexts, particularly among university students. These discrepancies underscore the need for further investigation to address the variation and provide a further understanding of how these personality traits influence cyberbullying behaviors.
Keywords: Cyberbullying, Dark Triad Personality, Narcissism, Psychopathy, Machiavellianism, University Students

Introduction
With the rise of digital technology and social media platforms, cyberbullying has become an increasingly prevalent issue. The existing of smartphone and social networking applications has facilitated the spread of harmful online behavior, particularly among the youth population

(Panatik et. al., 2022). Cyberbullying can be defined as an aggressive, intentional act carried out by an individual or group of individuals with the use of social media and other forms of electronic contact (Fanti et al., 2024). It is also characterized as deliberate use of digital media to convey false or embarrassing information about others (Alanzi and Alanzi, 2021). Cyberbullying activities include engaging in a short online argument with uses of malicious languages, harassing by spam.

This issue has become one of the concerns in Malaysia as this country was ranked second in problematic social media use in Asian countries (Alisha Nur, 2020). Shaikh et al. (2021) reported an increasing in cases of cyber harassment cases, with many attributed to incidents of cyberbullying among school and university students According to Mohd Hamizi (2023), youth are the primary users of social media in Malaysia which this may leads to cyberbullying among them. According to Panatik et al. (2022), cyberbullying among university students is critical as they are equally susceptible to the harm of cyberaggression as they have higher access to the internet for their studies.

Emerging evidence suggests that personality traits, particularly those encompassed in the Dark Triad Personality which consists of Narcissism, Psychopathy, and Machiavellianism play a critical role in cyberbullying (Moor and Anderson, 2019). According to Safaria et al. (2020), all these personality traits possess a tendency to be exploitative and aggressive due to lack of empathy and guilt when causing harm to others. Previous studies found that Dark Traits Personality traits is one of the predictive factors to cyberbullying as individuals high in these traits may exhibit behaviors that promote aggression or reduce empathy, which can increase the likelihood of engaging in cyberbullying (Safaria et al., 2020; Panatik et al., 2022).

Jones and Paulhus (2014) describe that the Dark Triad Personality as a set of three harmful personality traits and Lyons et al. (2019) explains that these traits are characterized by its self-centeredness, manipulation, and exploiting others. People with high levels of Narcissism often view themselves as superior, special, and unique which are often associated with an exaggerated sense of self-worth and lack of empathy (Wright, et al., 2022). While individuals with strong Machiavellianism traits tend to prioritize self-interest and use deception and often view others as tools to achieve their personal goals (Panatik et al., 2022). As mentioned by Paulhus and William (2002), these traits are more likely to engage in antisocial and aggressive behaviors due to their focus on self interest and personal goals, combined with manipulative tendencies. Psychopathy on the other hand is considered as the most harmful traits within the Dark Triad Personality, as it has shown to affect a broad range of self-report behavioral measures of antisocial behavior (Paulhus & William, 2002; Panatik et al., 2022).

Therefore, current studies clearly indicated a link between these traits and the act of bullying, specifically all these dark personality traits related to greater cyberbullying perpetration among young adults (Wright et al., 2020). They also may engage in cyberbullying as a coping mechanism to feel powerful or entertained due to all three personality traits are associated with values like power, manipulation, and pleasure-seeking (Kircaburun et al., 2018). By exploring the connections between these two variables, it can help in creating an effective strategy to demotivate and prevent cyberbullying behaviors as it can lead to various negative outcomes (Zhang et al., 2020; Panatik et al., 2022)

In conclusion, despite the clear connection between these variables, the interplay between Dark Triad traits and cyberbullying there is still limitations exist in the prior research regarding each of the traits. Some studies claimed that all traits were correlated with cyberbullying, but others have conflicting results. Furthermore, factors such as personality traits, especially those within the Dark Triad (Narcissism, Psychopathy, and Machiavellianism), have shown it can cause a person to engage in cyberbullying (Wright et al., 2020). Therefore, this study discussed a valuable insight into the relationship between Dark Triad Personality traits and cyberbullying among university students, both locally and internationally.

Methodology
This concept paper is developed through content analysis, which entails in-depth review of previous studies by reviewing articles and journals focused on dark triad personality and cyberbullying. The literature review was conducted using reputable databases such as Science Direct, Scopus, PubMed and Google Scholar to locate relevant studies. To streamline the search process, a variety of keywords were used, including "cyberbullying", "dark triad personality", and a specific traits of dark triad personality which are "Narcissism", "Psychopathy", and "Machiavellianism". This approach helped to gain a comprehensive insight of the connection between dark triad personality and cyberbullying.

Literature Review
Definition of Cyberbully
According to Martinez, et al. (2019) cyberbullying is deliberate harmful behavior performed by individuals or groups, occurring repeatedly over time in an online setting which targets victims who are incapable of defending themselves. Cyberbullying behaviors also involve participating in brief online disputes using offensive language, persistently sending derogatory messages, spreading harmful rumors, impersonating others with malicious intent, and deliberately excluding an individual from an online group (Willard, 2007). Cyberbullying behavior is not only limited to tarnishing someone's reputation or spreading rumors on social media platforms but also involves sending offensive and threatening messages or images to others (Shaikh et al., 2021).

According to Shaikh et al. (2021), cyberbullying is almost similar to traditional bullying. In traditional bullying, it takes various face-to-face forms, such as physical or relational victimization that typically occur in real-life setting but in contrast, cyberbullying happens through electronic or digital platforms (Wang et al., 2023). By closely linking traditional bullying behaviors with cyberbullying behaviors, Zhang (2022) identifies there are three elements of bullying which intent to cause harm, repetitive actions, and an imbalance of power that must be included in defining cyberbullying.

In conclusion, cyberbullying involves intentional and harmful actions aimed at causing distress to victims through digital platforms. These acts are repetitive and exploit the victim's inability to defend themselves which can lead to significant emotional and psychological impacts.

Types of Cyberbullying
Shaikh et al. (2020) identified nine categories of cyberbullying, which highlight various ways on how individuals use digital technology to harm or harass others.

1. **Flaming**: Involves in sending angry, harsh, or offensive messages during online interactions such as in chat rooms, emails, or on social media. These messages are often brief but can escalate into more severe online disputes, *such as a player in a gaming chat room, someone sends a message like, "You're so bad at this game; you're a waste of space!".*

2. **Harassment**: Refers to repeatedly sending insulting or malicious messages to an individual. This prolonged behavior aims to intimidate or demean the victim over time. *For instance, a person repeatedly sends message like, "You're worthless!" or "Everyone hates you," to an individual over a week on social media*.

3. **Denigration**: Involves in spreading false, damaging, or malicious information about someone online to tarnish their reputation. This can include uploading altered images, creating fake profiles, or publicly sharing private conversations. *For example, someone creates a fake Instagram account and posts edited, unflattering images of a classmate to mock their appearance.*

4. **Masquerade**: It occurs when someone impersonates another individual online to damage their reputation or relationship. The perpetrator may post offensive or harmful content using the victim's identity, *like hacking into a friend's email account and sending rude messages to others, making it look like the friend is at fault.*

5. **Exclusion**: Refers to deliberately isolating someone from online groups, chat rooms, or social activities, which can lead to the victim feeling excluded or marginalized, *such as a group of coworkers creating a private group chat and deliberately leaves out one member to gossip and plan activities without inviting them.*

6. **Cyberstalking**: A severe form of harassment where an individual uses digital tools to repeatedly track, intimidate, or threaten someone. This behavior often causes significant fear in the victim and may include threats of physical harm. *For example, an individual constantly sends threatening message like, "I know where you live" and tracks the victim's social media check-ins.*

7. **Trolling**: Refers to behavior intended to provoke, disturb, or elicit negative emotions in others, typically through insulting comments, sarcasm, or deliberate provocation. It is often done to gain attention, manipulate or create conflict, *such as posting inflammatory comments on a public forum like, "This article is garbage, and everyone who agrees with it is an idiot." Just to provoke arguments.*

8. **Outing**: Involves exposing someone's personal, secret, or embarrassing information without their consent on online platforms. This act is often intended to humiliate or degrade the victims in front of others. *For instance, sharing a screenshot of a private text conversation where a friend revealed a personal secret and posting it publicly on TikTok.*

9. **Frapping**: Refers to using someone else's social media account while pretending to be the rightful owner and posting inappropriate content. This is done to mislead others into believing the account owner is responsible for the offensive posts, *such as a sibling using their brother's Facebook account to post a status update like, "I quit my job and am moving to another country!" to confuse others.*

Definition of Dark Triad Personality
Personality traits are described as neuropsychic systems that enable functionally similar stimuli to elicit and promote consistent reactive and expressive behaviors (Allport, 1961). This indicates that personality traits do not ensure uniform reactions across all situations but rather incorporate an element of variability (Panatik et al., 2022). Personality also can be

described as consistent patterns in thoughts, emotions, and attitudes that reflect a tendency to respond in particular ways depending on the situation (Moor & Anderson, 2019).

According to Paulhus and Williams (2002), there are three kinds of bad characters which known as Dark Triad. Dark Triad Personality is a collection of three interconnected and harmful personality traits which consists of Narcissism, Psychopathy, and Machiavellianism (Vize et al., 2019). Jones and Paulhus (2010) describes all these personality traits exhibit the tendencies towards exploitation and aggression, with lack of guilt when inflicting harm on others.

Panatik el al., (2022) explains that although the dimensions of the Dark Triad originate from distinct backgrounds, but they share certain similar characteristics. This includes self-glorification, emotional detachment, and differing degrees of aggressive behavior, which are all rooted in fundamentally socially destructive personalities (Paulhus & William, 2002). Consequently, the characteristics of the Dark Triad Personality have been empirically linked in numerous negative outcomes, such as criminal activities, infidelity, aggressive behavior, hostility, dysfunctional in personal and professional relationships, and even cyberbully (Foley, 2020).

Personality Dark Triad Construct
As mentioned before, there are three constructs in Dark Triad Personality which are Narcissism, Psychopathy, and Machiavellianism. Paulhus and William (2002) noted that the trait of the Dark Triad Personality was not selected based on strict criteria but rather due to the shared similarities among the three dimensions (Rogoza & Cieciuh, 2020).

Narcissism is a personality trait which individuals view themselves as unique and special, often exaggerating their talents (Hu & Lan, 2022). They tend to exploit others, act arrogantly, and prioritize self-interest (Panatik et al., 2022). Despite their outward confidence, they often seek admiration and attention by fostering friendly relationships and showcasing positive emotions (Pilch, 2020; Elamrousy & Alshehri, 2024). However, beneath this facade lies fragile self-esteem, making them highly sensitive to criticism (Rogoza & Cieciuh, 2020). Negative feedback can evoke feelings of shame or anger, which leads to aggressive reactions toward perceived threats. Additionally, they are also prone to blaming others for their failures rather than addressing their weaknesses or learning from feedback (Hu & Lan, 2022).

Next, Machiavellianism refers to a personality trait characterized by manipulative tendencies, strategic deceit, and a focus on personal gain which is often at the expense of moral and social norms (Hu & Lan, 2022). In their foundational study on Machiavellianism-based personality measurement, Christie and Geis (1970) identified two key characteristics of this trait which are skepticism about others' willingness to cooperate and propensity to engage in unethical behaviors to achieve personal goals (Lyons, 2019). According to Mitchell (2024), individuals with dominant Machiavellian traits are less likely to exhibit aggression when provoked compared to other Dartk Triad traits. However, they are more inclined to engage in unproductive interpersonal workplace behaviors.

Paulhus and Williams (2002) describe Psychopathy as a personality trait characterized by high impulsivity, thrill-seeking behavior, and low levels of anxiety and empathy. It is also

recognized as a negative personality type marked by irresponsibility, impulsiveness, manipulation, and antisocial tendencies (Hu & Lan, 2022). Cleckley (1988), who first described this personality type, highlighted that individuals with psychopathic traits often engage in high-risk behaviors that most people would avoid (Bader et al., 2023). Although they may project an image of intelligence and dismissive of others' opinions, they tend to hold a negative view of themselves. According to Panatik et al. (2022), Psychopathy reflects a stable pattern of blatant disregard for others' rights, coupled with a strong tendency toward deceit manipulation. To improve the depiction of these personality types, Figure 1 illustrates the respective individuals, overlapping characteristics and shared attributes.
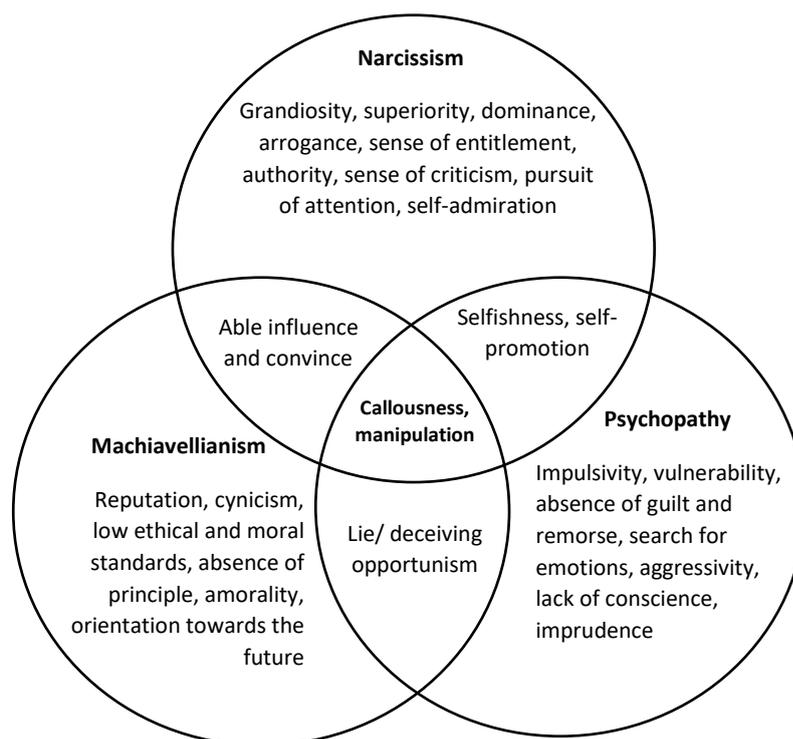

Figure 1: Characteristics of the Dark Triad personality traits (D'Souza et al., 2019)

Relationship between Dark Triad Personality Traits and Cyberbullying
Cyberbullying has become a pervasive issue in the digital age, fueled by the widespread adoption of social media and online platforms. It encompasses harmful behavior such as harassment, threats, and the dissemination of false information which often result in severe emotional and psychological consequences for victims. Over the years, a substantial body of research has been conducted on the relationship between Dark Triad personality traits and cyberbullying.

Quantitative research conducted by Safaria et al. (2020), on 2,407 adolescents aged 12 to 18 years from 11 cities in Indonesia, found that all three Dark Triad personality traits significantly correlated with cyberbullying behavior. Results show that the multiple regression analysis has identified Machiavellianism as the strongest predictor of cyberbullying, followed by Psychopathy and Narcissism.

Similarly, Wright et al. (2020) examined the relationship between the Dark Triad personality traits and cyberbullying among 1,637 adolescents aged 11 to 15 years from China, India, and

Japan. The results revealed that Psychopathy showed the strongest association with cyberbullying, attributed to its impulsivity and lack of moral empathy. The study also identified gender and cultural differences, noting that male adolescents with higher level of Psychopathy were more likely to engage in cyberbullying than their female counterparts. Cultural variation further influenced how these traits shaped cyberbullying.

Other than that, Gholami et al., (2025) investigated the relationship between Dark Triad personality traits and cyberbullying perpetration, with online moral disengagement serving as mediating factor, involving 359 Iranian university students. The study found a significant correlation between all Dark Triad traits and cyberbullying perpetration. Finding also shows that individuals with higher levels of Dark Triad personality traits were morel likely to engage in online moral disengagement, which increase the likelihood of cyberbullying behaviors.

A study by Gadja et al. (2023) explored the relationship between the Dark Tetrad traits (Narcissism, Machiavellianism, Psychopathy, and Sadism) and both cyberbullying and cybervictimization, with moral disengagement examined as a potential mediator. The research, involving 251 adults aged 18 to 60 years, shows positive associations between the Dark Tetrad personality traits and both cyberbullying and cybervictimization. Finding shows that Narcissism was found to be the only weakly correlated with cyberbullying and cybervictimization while others demonstrated stronger associations. Furthermore, moral disengagement did not mediate the relationship between the Dark Tetrad personality traits and both cyberbullying and cybervictimization.

Several local studies also have provided insight into the relationship between Dark Triad Personality traits and cyberbullying. For example, Panatik et al. (2022) conducted a study involving 400 undergraduate students in public university Malaysia and found that all three traits of the Dark Triad were significantly associated with cyberbullying behaviors. This suggests that individuals exhibiting these traits are more likely to engage in cyberbullying.

However, other local studies present different results. Li (2023) in a study of 120 undergraduate students in private university Malaysia, found a significant positive correlation between Narcissism and Psychopathy with cyberbullying behaviors. Interestingly, no significant relationship was identified between Machiavellianism and cyberbullying. Similarly, Elamrousy and Alshehri (2024) conducted research on 110 female undergraduate students in Malaysia and reported that Psychopathy was the only trait positively correlated with cyberbullying behaviors. Narcissism and Machiavellianism did not show any significant association with such behaviors.

Research Gap
Although previous studies have demonstrated the link between Dark Triad personality traits and cyberbullying, a research gaps still exists. Identifying these gaps is crucial in academic research as it highlights areas which knowledge is lacking or incomplete. By addressing these gaps, it ensures the research remains relevant and contributes meaningfully to the field (Ajemba & Arene, 2022).

Based on previous research, a substantial body of research has been conducted on relationship between Dark Triad personality traits and cyberbullying, particularly among

adolescents (Safaria et al., 2020; Wright et al., 2020). For instance, numerous studies have explored how traits such as Machiavellianism, Narcissism, and Psychopathy contribute to aggressive online behaviors, emphasizing factors like impulsivity, manipulativeness, and lack of empathy in adolescents. However, the influence of Dark Triad personality traits on cyberbullying is not limited to adolescent population. University students who frequently engage with digital platforms, also may engage in cyberbullying behavior (Panatik, 2022; Hamizi, 2023). According to Gholami et al. (2025), university students with high level of Dark Triad personality triad more likely to engage in cyberbullying, as these traits promote socially aggressive, narcissistic, and self-centered behaviors that take advantages of platforms to harm others.

Other than that, international studies have consistently demonstrated a strong association between Dark Triad personality traits and cyberbullying behaviors (Safaria et al., 2020; Wright et al., 2020; Gadja et al., 2023; Gholami et al., 2025). However, findings from local studies in Malaysia show notable inconsistencies and limited exploration, particularly in the context of university students (Panatik et al., 2022; Li, 2023; Elamrousy & Alshehri, 2024). These discrepancies may arise from variations in demographic and institutional contexts, such differences between public and private universities, gender, or cultural influences (Wright et al., 2020). This highlights the urgent need for more research in diverse socio-cultural and educational settings in Malaysia, particularly among university students.

Additionally, the use of small sample sizes in studies can significantly impact the reliability and generability of findings (Daem et al., 2020). For instance, Li (2023) and Elamrousy and Alshehri (2024) used samples of only 120 and 110 students respectively, which limited diversity and statistical power. In contrast, Panatik et al., (2020) employed a more robust sample of 400 university students, which likely enhanced the reliability and generalizability of the results. This discrepancy underscores the importance of employing adequately sized and representative samples in research to ensure the robustness and applicability of findings.

Furthermore, despite the growing body of research on cyberbullying, most existing frameworks only prioritize perpetrators particularly regarding the role of dark personality traits which is Dark Triad personality (Safaria et al., 2020; Wright et al., 2020; Panatik et al., 2022; Gholami et al., 2025). While these traits are often studied in relation to perpetration, little is known about how Machiavellianism, Narcissism, and Psychopathy might contribute to individuals becoming victims. According to Gadja et al, 2023) individuals with high levels of Machiavellianism and Psychopathy were more likely to experience cybervictimization. This suggests that engaging in antisocial online behavior increases the risk of becoming a target similar behavior, potentially triggering a cycle where victims subsequently engage in cyberbullying themselves.

In conclusion, while existing research establishes a foundational understanding of the relationship between Dark Triad personality traits and cyberbullying, there are still significant gaps that need to be addresses particularly in the context of victims and underexplored populations such as university students.

Conceptual Framework

Dependent Variable   Independent Variable

Dark Triad Personality
- Narcissistic
- Psychopathy
- Machiavellianism

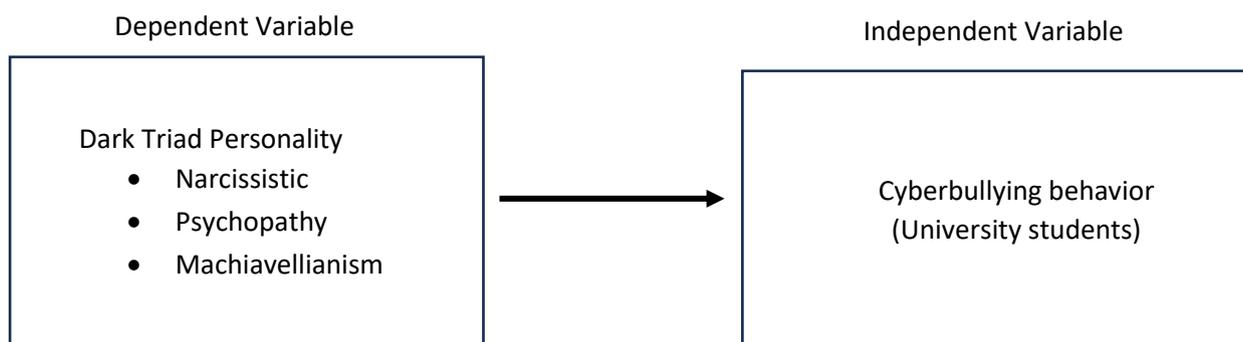Cyberbullying behavior
(University students)

Figure 2: Conceptual Framework of the study

Figure 2 illustrates a conceptual framework developed from a review of prior research. This model outlines the connection between Dark Triad personality traits and cyberbullying among university students. In this framework, cyberbullying is treated as the independent variable, while Dark Triad personality traits, Narcissism, Psychopathy, and Machiavellianism serve as the dependent variable.

Conclusion and Recommendation
Overall, this conceptual paper discussed the interplay between Dark Triad personality traits and cyberbullying behavior. Extensive research has established a clear link between Dark Triad personality traits (Machiavellianism, Narcissism, and Psychopathy) and cyberbullying, particularly among adolescents. The impulsivity, manipulativeness and lack of empathy drive an aggressive online behavior (Safaria eta l., 2020; Wright et al., 2020). However, this relationship also applies to university students, a group that actively uses digital platforms and shows comparable inclinations towards socially aggressive and self-centered behaviors (Panatik, 2022; Gholami et al., 2025). Despite the robust international evidence supporting this association, local studies in Malaysia reveal inconsistencies, particularly among university students due to variations in demographic and institutional factors. These discrepancies, compounded using small sample sizes in studies like Li (2023) and Elamrousy and Alshehri (2024), highlight the need for more comprehensive research to enhance the reliability and generalizability of findings in diverse socio-cultural contexts.

A significant research gap lies in the limited exploration of how Dark Triad traits contribute to cyber victimization. While most studies focus on preparators. Emerging evidence suggests that individuals with high levels of Machiavellianism and Psychopathy are more likely to become victims of cyberbullying, potentially due to their own antisocial online behaviors provoking retaliation (Gadja et al., 2023). This finding points to a possible cycle where victims with these traits may engage in cyberbullying by perpetuating harmful online interactions. The lack of attention to this victim-perpetrator dynamic, combined with methodological limitations such as small sample sizes, underscores the urgency of addressing these gaps to develop a more holistic understanding on the relationship between Dark Triad personality traits and cyberbullying behavior among university students.

In conclusion, this paper highlights the complex and multifaced correlation between Dark Triad personality traits (Narcissism, Psychopathy, and Machiavellianism) and cyberbullying

behaviors. With the growing prevalence of social media and the corresponding rise in cyberbullying, there is an urgent need to expand research specifically targeting university populations. By bridging these research gaps, we can gain a deeper understanding of the problem and design culturally tailored strategies to reduce cyberbullying while encouraging more positive and respectful online interactions.

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