



4th Global Conference on Psychology

21 - 23 August 2026

Oxford, United Kingdom

Judge a Book by Its Dark Cover: To What Extent Do Dark Triad Personality Traits Relate to Non-Natural Appearance Markers

Sander Palm, Maria Tims

VU Amsterdam, School of Business and Economics, Department of Management, Netherlands

Abstract

The idea that personality can be inferred from physical appearance markers has a long and controversial history. However, first impressions based on appearance markers continue to influence social judgments. Nowadays, appearance markers like tattoos, piercings, and to some degree body mass index (BMI) differ from the immutable physical traits that were used in the past to form social judgments as they reflect elective choices, self-expression, and social identity. We investigated whether such non-natural appearance markers can signal socially aversive personality traits, specifically the Dark Triad: Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy.

Drawing on signaling theory, we hypothesized that non-natural appearance markers function as a socially interpretable signal of underlying personality characteristics. A preregistered online survey of 538 Dutch participants assessed Dark Triad traits using the Short Dark Triad scale and measured tattoos, piercings, and BMI via self-report. Analyses revealed that tattoos have a positive association with psychopathy. Machiavellianism and narcissism did not show an association with the tested non-natural appearance markers. This finding advances signaling theory in personality psychology by demonstrating that an elective non-natural appearance marker can provide meaningful information about a socially aversive trait, but only when taken the right marker into account. The signaling of a non-natural appearance marker offers an unobtrusive complement to traditional self-report personality assessment.

Keywords: Dark Triad, personality assessment, tattoos, piercings, BMI