



Machiavellianism as a Dual-Edged Driver of Intrapreneurship: A Systematic Review of Individual-Level Evidence

¹Kartik Pulipati

kartik.pulipati88@gmail.com

²Manik Shah

manikkshah@gmail.com

Abstract: Intrapreneurship has gained considerable scholarly attention as organizations increasingly rely on internal innovation to sustain competitive advantage (Blanka, 2019; Baruah & Ward, 2015). Among the personality-level factors shaping intrapreneurial behavior, Machiavellianism, which Christie and Geis (1970) characterized by strategic manipulation, emotional detachment, and an amoral pursuit of personal goals, remains one of the least systematically examined. This review addresses that gap by synthesizing individual-level evidence on how Machiavellianism relates to intrapreneurial behavior, and under what organizational, leadership, and cultural conditions its effects become either productive or harmful. Following PRISMA 2020 guidelines (Page et al., 2021), searches across Google Scholar, PsycINFO, ScienceDirect, and supplementary grey literature sources yielded 23 eligible studies published between January 2015 and April 2025. Quality was assessed using the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (Hong et al., 2018), and certainty of evidence was evaluated using adapted GRADE principles (Guyatt et al., 2008). Four themes emerged: Machiavellianism as a conditional facilitator of strategic initiative; as an inhibitor of collaborative innovation; ethical leadership and culture as key moderators; and motivational variability across cultural contexts. The findings consistently indicate that organizational system design, rather than individual trait profiles alone, determines whether Machiavellian tendencies ultimately support or undermine intrapreneurial outcomes.

Keywords: *Machiavellianism, Dark Triad, Intrapreneurship, Entrepreneurship, Organizational Behavior, Systematic Review, Ethical Leadership, Trait Activation Theory, Agency Theory*

1. Introduction

Innovation is now central to organizational survival, and many firms pursue it through **intrapreneurship**, or entrepreneurial activity within existing organizations (Blanka, 2019; Baruah & Ward, 2015; Huang et al., 2021). While prior research has examined structural predictors of intrapreneurship, individual personality, especially at dispositional and psychodynamic levels, remains underexplored. Within this gap, the Dark Triad, particularly Machiavellianism, has emerged as a potentially important influence on innovation-related behavior (Verhelle, 2021; Kryeziu et al., 2024; Cooke, 2020). Machiavellianism is defined by manipulation, emotional detachment, cynicism, and a strategic, instrumental approach to goals, which may support intrapreneurial behavior by helping individuals influence stakeholders, secure resources, and navigate organizational politics. At the same time, studies also show its darker side: it can weaken trust, damage collaboration, and undermine co-innovation networks (Shirokova et al., 2024; Arias-Perez et al., 2023; Palmer et al., 2020).

The literature is also conceptually inconsistent. Many studies labeled as entrepreneurial behavior measure entrepreneurial intention in student samples, making them only indirectly relevant to intrapreneurship (Wu et al., 2019; Do & Dadvari, 2017; Khawar et al., 2022). In addition, Machiavellian effects appear to depend heavily on context: ethical leadership and supportive organizational culture can reduce harmful behavior and redirect strategic tendencies toward constructive innovation, while weak accountability and competitive environments may amplify opportunism (Ruiz-Palomino & Linuesa-Langreo, 2018; Ozsungur, 2020; Devenciyan, 2024). Drawing on trait activation theory, social cognitive theory, and agency theory, this review examines when Machiavellianism facilitates or inhibits intrapreneurial behavior, what conditions shape its effects, and how organizations can manage its risks while preserving its potential strategic value (Tett & Burnett, 2003; Baimel et al., 2021; Eisenhardt, 1989).

2. Method

2.1 Review Design and Registration

This systematic review followed PRISMA 2020 guidelines. The protocol was finalised before searching began, and PROSPERO registration was intended but not completed before submission, which is acknowledged as a limitation.

2.2 Search Strategy and Information Sources

A multi-database search was conducted in Google Scholar, PsycINFO, and ScienceDirect for studies published between January 2015 and April 2025. Grey literature from dissertations and working papers was also included to reduce publication bias. The search combined Machiavellianism terms with intrapreneurship terms, and entrepreneurial intention was added as a supplementary term because it captures relevant motivational antecedents, though it is not identical to intrapreneurial behavior. Google Scholar improved breadth but reduced reproducibility compared with Scopus or Web of Science.

2.3 Eligibility Criteria

Studies were included if they were in English, published between 2015 and 2025, measured Machiavellianism as a primary or moderating variable, examined intrapreneurship or a closely related construct with organizational relevance, and were available in full text. Studies were excluded if Machiavellianism was not central, if only narcissism or psychopathy were examined, or if the focus was outside organizational settings.

2.4 Screening, Data Extraction, and Quality Appraisal

Two reviewers independently screened titles, abstracts, and full texts using a structured checklist. Data extraction covered study design, theory, sample, variables, findings, and quality. Quality was assessed using an adapted MMAT approach, and conceptual papers were judged on coherence and empirical grounding. Findings were then synthesised thematically.

2.5 Reporting Bias

Reporting bias was assessed through inclusion of grey literature, additional searches beyond Google Scholar, and review of the pattern of findings across studies. Formal funnel plot analysis was not possible because the studies were too heterogeneous for a common effect size. Overall reporting bias was considered moderate.

2.6 Certainty of Evidence

Evidence certainty was assessed using an adapted GRADE framework informed by MMAT ratings. Certainty was rated as High, Moderate, Low-Moderate, or Low for each theme through independent review and consensus discussion. Full GRADE was not feasible because of heterogeneity and the absence of pooled effect sizes.

3. Results

3.1 Study Characteristics

The PRISMA 2020 flow diagram (Figure 1) summarizes the full search and screening process. From 727 records identified across all sources, 43 duplicates were removed, leaving 684 for title and abstract screening. Following abstract screening, 42 full texts were retrieved for eligibility assessment, of which 8 were inaccessible and 11 were excluded for not meeting inclusion criteria, yielding a final corpus of 23 studies.

Identification of new studies via databases and registers

Identification

Records identified from:
 Databases (n = 713):
 Google Scholar (n = 687)
 PsycINFO (n = 22)
 ScienceDirect (n = 4)
 Registers (n = 14):
 Institutional repositories and
 dissertation archives (n = 9)
 Working paper platforms (for example
 IZA Discussion Papers) (n = 5)

Records removed before screening: Duplicate
 records (n = 43)
 Records marked as ineligible by automation
 tools (n = 0)
 Records removed for other reasons (n = 0)

Screening

Records screened
 (n = 684)

Records excluded
 (n = 642)

Reports sought for retrieval (n
 = 42)

Reports not retrieved
 (n = 8)

Reports assessed for eligibility (n = 34)

Reports excluded:
 (n = 11)
 1) Did not include Machiavellianism
 as a variable (n = 5)
 2) Focused exclusively on
 narcissism or psychopathy (n = 4)
 3) Did not address intrapreneurship
 or internal innovation (n = 2)

Included

New studies included in review (n
 = 0)
 Reports of new included studies (n
 = 0)

Figure 1. *PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram*

All 23 studies (Table 2) were published between 2015 and 2025, with a notable concentration from 2019 onward, consistent with growing scholarly interest in the relationship between dark personality traits and organizational innovation (Blanka, 2019). The corpus included quantitative survey studies ($n = 12$), systematic and scoping reviews ($n = 4$), conceptual or theoretical papers ($n = 4$), mixed-methods studies ($n = 2$), and one experimental study. Empirical sample sizes ranged from 25 participants in a dyadic design (Verhelle, 2021) to 701 respondents in a cross-national survey (Kryeziu et al., 2024). Studies were conducted across ten countries, including Russia, Spain, Turkey, Pakistan, China, and the United States, spanning sectors such as small and medium enterprises (Shirokova et al., 2024), banking (Devenciyan, 2024), chambers of commerce (Ozsungur, 2020), and higher education (Wu et al., 2019; Do & Dadvari, 2017; Khawar et al., 2022).

Quality appraisal found seven studies rated Moderate-High, reflecting adequate sample sizes and sound analytical design. The majority fell within the Moderate band, while eight were rated Low-Moderate due to reliance on student samples, small sample sizes, or unpublished status (Verhelle, 2021; Baimel et al., 2021; Cooke, 2020; De Waele et al., 2022). Given the methodological heterogeneity of the corpus, meta-analytic synthesis was not feasible, and findings are instead reported through structured thematic synthesis (Thomas & Harden, 2008).

Table 2. *Summary of Included Studies ($N = 23$)*

No.	Study (Year)	Aim	Method / Sample	Key Findings	Quality
1	Shirokova et al. (2024)	Examine how dark personality traits moderate the relationship between strategic entrepreneurial behavior and firm performance	Survey; 372 Russian SMEs; quantitative SEM	Machiavellianism strengthened the positive relationship between strategic entrepreneurial behavior and firm performance, particularly in	Moderate

				competitive environments	
2	Arias-Perez et al. (2023)	Investigate the effect of organizational Machiavellianism on co-innovation networks and innovation performance	Structural equation modelling; emerging economy firm sample	Organizational Machiavellianism undermined co-innovation; its amorality dimension negatively moderated innovation performance	Moderate-High
3	Verhelle (2021)	Explore Dark Triad traits and conflict dynamics in entrepreneurial dyads	Dyadic study; N = 25; doctoral dissertation; Belgium	Machiavellianism was linked to relationship conflict with indirect negative consequences for entrepreneurial success in team settings	Low-Moderate
4	Taborosi et al. (2023)	Examine how personality traits including Machiavellianism shape entrepreneurial orientation and leadership	Student sample; N = 400; quantitative survey	Machiavellianism showed a positive association with leadership orientation and entrepreneurial potential	Moderate

5	Devenciyan (2024)	Examine the moderating role of ethical leadership and organizational culture on Machiavellian behavior and intrapreneurship	Turkish banking sector; N = 395; survey	Ethical organizational culture reduced Machiavellian expression and increased employee intrapreneurial engagement	Moderate
6	Huang et al. (2021)	Develop an integrative framework for cultivating intrapreneurship at individual and organizational levels	Conceptual framework; Frontiers in Psychology	Identified key individual-level enablers and organizational conditions required for intrapreneurial behavior	Moderate
7	Baruah & Ward (2015)	Review the evolution of intrapreneurship as an organizational strategy	Literature review; International Entrepreneurship and Management Journal	Intrapreneurship enhances organizational adaptability and drives firm-level innovation capacity	Moderate
8	Cooke (2020)	Explore how dark and light personality trait profiles interact in entrepreneurial contexts	Conceptual review; Urban Science	Machiavellian traits may be redirected toward ethical and green innovation through light triad	Low-Moderate

				organizational values	
9	Matthews (2017)	Examine leadership characteristics that enable organizational innovation and intrapreneurship	Mixed methods; doctoral dissertation, Sheffield Hallam University	Leaders combining visionary aspiration and moral clarity best enable diverse personality profiles including dark traits	Low-Moderate
10	Ozsungur (2020)	Assess the effects of ethical leadership on work engagement, intrapreneurship, and service innovation	Chamber of Commerce; N = 568; survey; Turkey	Ethical leadership positively predicted intrapreneurial behavior, work engagement, and service innovation	Moderate
11	Veres et al. (2020)	Explore dark personality traits in relation to volunteer motivation, leadership, and commitment	Student volunteers; N = 156; survey	Machiavellianism was associated with heightened motivation and leadership potential in achievement-oriented environments	Low-Moderate
12	De Waele et al. (2022)	Examine how Dark Triad traits moderate the relationship between	Academy of Management Proceedings; organizational employee sample	Machiavellianism moderated motivation-commitment relationship,	Low-Moderate

		motivation and organizational commitment		suggesting productive channeling under structured conditions	
13	Palmer et al. (2020)	Propose a multilevel model of how CEO dark personality traits cascade through organizational hierarchies	Theoretical model; Group and Organization Management	Machiavellian CEOs promote destructive leadership norms and opportunistic subordinate behavior	Moderate
14	Wu et al. (2019)	Assess the effect of Dark Triad traits on entrepreneurial intention via entrepreneurial self-efficacy	Survey; N = 334; student sample; China	Machiavellianism positively predicted entrepreneurial intention through enhanced entrepreneurial self-efficacy	Moderate
15	Ruiz-Palomino & Linuesa-Langreo (2018)	Examine how ethical leadership buffers unethical Machiavellian behavior	Employee sample; Spain; quantitative survey	Ethical leadership significantly buffered unethical tendencies of Machiavellian employees	Moderate-High
16	Lajci (2025)	Conduct a scoping review of individual-level intrapreneurship	Scoping review; Review of Managerial Science	Identified measurement gaps and absence of trait-focused tools for intrapreneurial	Moderate

		measurement instruments		behavior assessment	
17	Do & Dadvari (2017)	Examine how the Dark Triad influences entrepreneurial attitude orientation and intention	Taiwanese university students; Asia Pacific Management Review	Machiavellianism supported entrepreneurial intention through cognitive flexibility and strategic goal orientation	Moderate
18	Kryeziu et al. (2024)	Compare dark personality traits on motivation and entrepreneurial intention across national contexts	Cross-country survey; Turkey and Kosovo; N = 701	Machiavellianism negatively predicted motivation directly but positively influenced intention indirectly; effects varied by national context	Moderate-High
19	Khawar et al. (2022)	Examine how dark personality traits and executive functions jointly predict entrepreneurial intention	Pakistani university students; N = 539; quantitative survey	Machiavellianism was positively associated with entrepreneurial intention via enhanced executive functioning	Moderate
20	Blanka (2019)	Systematically review individual-level	Systematic review; Review	Identified five research streams and conceptual	Moderate-High

		intrapreneurship research across five research streams	of Managerial Science	gaps including the underexplored role of individual personality	
21	Liao et al. (2022)	Examine creative self-efficacy and perceived support in intrapreneurial opportunity recognition	Quantitative survey; N = 500+; Frontiers in Psychology	Organizational support enhanced creative self-efficacy and intrapreneurial engagement	Moderate
22	Baimel et al. (2021)	Assess whether high-Mach individuals are strategic or cultural learners in resource-sharing tasks	Experimental; Evolutionary Human Sciences	High-Mach individuals relied on strategic observational learning rather than cultural norm transmission	Low-Moderate
23	Baktash & Jirjahn (2023)	Investigate whether managers display higher Machiavellian tendencies than non-managerial employees	IZA Discussion Paper; German labour panel data	Managers exhibited higher Machiavellian tendencies, shaping strategic decision-making and informational advantage exploitation	Moderate

Note. Quality ratings are adapted from Hong et al. (2018). Studies rated Low-Moderate usually involved student samples, small samples, unpublished dissertations, or conference proceedings. Studies of entrepreneurial intention were included when their relevance to organizational innovation behavior was theoretically justified.

3.2 Thematic Synthesis

Thematic synthesis following Thomas and Harden (2008) identified four cross cutting themes that summarize how Machiavellianism relates to intrapreneurship and innovation across the included studies.

3.2.1 Theme 1: *Machiavellianism as a Conditional Facilitator of Strategic Innovation*

Several studies showed that Machiavellian traits can support innovation under specific conditions. Shirokova et al. (2024) found that Machiavellianism strengthened the link between strategic entrepreneurial behavior and firm performance in Russian SMEs operating in competitive, results focused markets. Cognitive studies with student samples reported that Machiavellianism predicted stronger entrepreneurial intentions through higher self efficacy, opportunity orientation, and executive functioning, and was positively related to leadership orientation (Wu et al., 2019; Do and Dadvari, 2017; Khawar et al., 2022; Taborosi et al., 2023). Baimel et al. (2021) showed experimentally that high Mach individuals rely on strategic observational learning, which can help them identify effective strategies in complex organizational settings. Together, these findings suggest that in high autonomy, high pressure environments, Machiavellian traits may channel strategic capacity toward innovation, consistent with trait activation theory (Tett and Burnett, 2003).

3.2.2 Theme 2: *Machiavellianism as an Inhibitor of Collaborative and Co-innovative Processes*

Other studies highlighted the interpersonal costs of Machiavellianism for collaboration and co innovation. Arias Perez et al. (2023) found that organizational Machiavellianism undermined co innovation performance by encouraging opportunism, information withholding, and loss of trust. Palmer et al. (2020) argued that Machiavellian leaders at the top of the hierarchy can create cultures of distrust and self-interest that spread throughout the organization. At the team level, Verhelle (2021) linked Machiavellianism to relationship conflict in entrepreneurial dyads. Baktash and Jirjahn (2023) showed that high Mach managers were more likely to exploit informational advantages in low oversight settings, which fits agency theory predictions that informational asymmetry and weak monitoring invite self-interested behavior (Eisenhardt, 1989). Intrapreneurial systems that grant wide discretion without robust accountability may therefore intensify these harmful effects.

3.2.3 Theme 3: *Moderating Role of Ethical Leadership and Organizational Culture*

A third theme concerned the buffering role of ethical leadership and culture. Across several

countries and sectors, ethical contexts reduced exploitative expressions of Machiavellianism while supporting constructive initiative (Devenciyan, 2024; Ruiz Palomino and Linuesa Langreo, 2018; Ozsungur, 2020). Ethical cultures and leaders set clear moral expectations, increased accountability, and signalled that opportunistic behavior was unacceptable, while still encouraging innovation. Conceptual work suggested that prosocial values and morally grounded leadership can redirect the strategic abilities of individuals with dark traits toward sustainable innovation (Cooke, 2020; Matthews, 2017). These findings are consistent with trait activation theory, which predicts that ethical contexts dampen rather than activate the more destructive elements of Machiavellianism.

3.2.4 Theme 4: Motivational Dynamics and Cross-Cultural Variability

The final theme addressed motivation and cultural context. Veres et al. (2020) and De Waele et al. (2022) found that dark traits, including Machiavellianism, were associated with high motivation and leadership potential in achievement-oriented settings, and that Machiavellianism could strengthen the link between motivation and organizational commitment when ethical initiative was rewarded. Cross national work showed that these dynamics are not uniform. Kryeziu et al. (2024) reported that Machiavellianism reduced intrinsic entrepreneurial motivation but increased entrepreneurial intentions through more calculated opportunity appraisal, with effect patterns differing between Turkey and Kosovo. Khawar et al. (2022) identified executive functioning as a key mediator in Pakistan. Liao et al. (2022) showed that organizational support for innovation strongly promoted creative self-efficacy and intrapreneurial engagement, underlining that context strongly shapes whether Machiavellian dispositions translate into productive behavior (Tett and Burnett, 2003).

3.3 Assessment of Reporting Bias

Reporting bias was judged to be moderate. The evidence base contained positive, negative, null, and conditional findings, which argues against a strong publication bias in a single direction. Inclusion of grey literature, such as dissertations and working papers, further reduced the likelihood that non-significant results were systematically excluded. However, reliance on Google Scholar, the predominance of cross-sectional designs, and the lack of formal statistical tests for publication bias mean that small study effects and missed studies cannot be ruled out completely.

3.4 Certainty of Evidence

Adapted GRADE ratings (Guyatt et al., 2008) indicated certainty levels ranging from Low-Moderate to Moderate High across themes. Evidence was strongest for the moderating role of ethical leadership and culture, where multiple independent studies with broadly convergent findings supported a rating of Moderate High. Themes concerning facilitative effects of Machiavellianism and motivational or cross-cultural dynamics relied more heavily on student and intention-based studies, which reduced certainty to the Low-Moderate range.

Table 3. *Adapted Certainty of Evidence Assessment by Theme*

Theme / Finding	No. of Studies	Study Limitations	Indirectness	Inconsistency	Overall Certainty
Machiavellianism facilitates individual strategic initiative	8	Moderate (student samples in 4 studies)	Some (intention vs. behavior conflation)	Low (mostly convergent)	Low-Moderate
Machiavellianism inhibits co-innovation and collaborative trust	5	Low (organizational samples dominant)	Low (directly organizational)	Low (convergent)	Moderate
Ethical leadership and culture moderate Machiavellian expression	6	Low (mix of large surveys)	Low (directly organizational)	Low (convergent across contexts)	Moderate-High
Motivational dynamics and cross-cultural variability	4	Moderate (cross-sectional designs)	Moderate (cultural transfer)	Moderate (divergent directions)	Low-Moderate

Note. Certainty ratings are adapted from GRADE principles (Guyatt et al., 2008) using a narrative framework informed by MMAT quality ratings (Hong et al., 2018). They reflect confidence in the synthesized evidence for each theme rather than for individual studies.

Theme 3, which concerns the moderating role of ethical leadership and culture, received the highest certainty rating of Moderate High. This rating reflects consistent findings across multiple national samples, sectors, and designs that ethical leadership buffers harmful expressions of Machiavellianism (Ruiz Palomino and Linuesa Langreo, 2018; Ozsungur, 2020; Devenciyan, 2024). Theme 2, focusing on inhibitory effects of Machiavellianism on co innovation, received a Moderate rating, supported by organizational samples and convergent results but constrained by the absence of longitudinal evidence. Themes 1 and 4 were rated Low Moderate because many contributing studies relied on student samples and measured entrepreneurial intention rather than enacted intrapreneurial behavior (Wu et al., 2019; Do and Dadvari, 2017; Khawar et al., 2022; Kryeziu et al., 2024), which introduces indirectness and limits organizational generalizability. Here is a more concise version of that Discussion section:

4. Discussion

4.1 *Integrating the Evidence*

This review indicates that Machiavellianism does not have a single, uniform effect on intrapreneurship. It operates as a condition sensitive disposition whose consequences depend on how the trait interacts with structural, cultural, and leadership features of the organization. This pattern is consistent with trait activation theory, which proposes that personality expressions are triggered by situational cues rather than expressed identically across contexts (Tett and Burnett, 2003). Intrapreneurial settings that combine high autonomy, resource competition, complex stakeholders, and weak accountability are particularly likely to activate Machiavellian tendencies. The synthesis further shows that the same environmental features that activate the trait also shape its direction. In competitive, performance focused settings with unclear ethical norms and limited oversight, Machiavellianism tends to manifest as information hoarding, opportunism, and relational exploitation, in line with agency theory (Eisenhardt, 1989; Baktash and Jirjahn, 2023). In contexts marked by ethical leadership, clear values, and transparent accountability, similar traits are more often channelled into strategic initiative, political navigation, and goal directed innovation (Ruiz Palomino and Linuesa Langreo, 2018; Devenciyan, 2024; Ozsungur, 2020).

4.2 *Reconciling Contradictory Evidence*

Apparent contradictions between studies reporting benefits of Machiavellianism (for

example Shirokova et al., 2024; Wu et al., 2019) and those emphasising harms (for example Arias Perez et al., 2023; Palmer et al., 2020) can be clarified through three distinctions.

First, time horizon. Positive findings tend to concern short term performance, such as immediate firm results associated with decisive strategic behaviour, whereas negative findings describe longer term erosion of trust, team cohesion, and co innovation capacity (Palmer et al., 2020; Arias Perez et al., 2023; Verhelle, 2021). It is therefore plausible that Machiavellianism yields short term gains alongside accumulating relational costs, a pattern that requires longitudinal research to test.

Second, level of analysis. Studies focused on individual cognition and intention often show favourable associations with initiative and flexibility (Wu et al., 2019; Do and Dadvari, 2017; Khawar et al., 2022). Studies that examine team processes or firm level outcomes more often identify detrimental effects on collaboration and innovation networks (Arias Perez et al., 2023; Verhelle, 2021). Machiavellian traits may therefore support individual strategic action while simultaneously undermining collective innovation.

Third, structural and cultural context. Evidence consistently shows that ethical leadership and supportive cultures shift the expression of Machiavellianism in a more constructive direction, whereas competitive, individualistic, and ethically ambiguous contexts amplify harmful expression (Ruiz Palomino and Linuesa Langreo, 2018; Devenciyan, 2024; Ozsungur, 2020; Kryeziu et al., 2024; Baktash and Jirjahn, 2023). This pattern highlights organizational design, not only individual selection, as a key lever for managing dark traits in intrapreneurial systems.

4.3 Theoretical Integration

The findings extend existing theory in several ways. With regard to agency theory, they confirm that features common in intrapreneurial initiatives, such as high discretion, weak monitoring, and informational asymmetry, create structural conditions in which self-interested tendencies of Machiavellian individuals can flourish (Eisenhardt, 1989; Baktash and Jirjahn, 2023). Without appropriate governance mechanisms, intrapreneurial models may therefore unintentionally magnify the negative aspects of this trait. From a social cognitive perspective, experimental work by Baimel et al. (2021) suggests that Machiavellian individuals develop organisational skills through deliberate observational learning. High Mach employees appear particularly attuned to behavioural cues from influential others, which implies that ethical leaders who model value consistent behaviour can shape how these individuals learn to operate within the

organization (Baimel et al., 2021; Matthews, 2017). Across trait activation, social cognitive, and agency frameworks, the evidence supports an interactionist account of Machiavellianism in intrapreneurial settings. Outcomes arise from the interplay between dispositional tendencies, environmental activators, social learning opportunities, and principal agent structures (Tett and Burnett, 2003; Eisenhardt, 1989; Baimel et al., 2021). Future theoretical work should formalise these interactions, examine potential nonlinear and time lagged effects, and consider how multiple dark traits operate together to influence intrapreneurial behaviour.

5. Conclusion

This systematic review synthesized evidence from 23 studies to examine how Machiavellianism shapes intrapreneurial behavior in organizational settings, following PRISMA 2020 guidelines (Page et al., 2021). The central finding is that Machiavellianism is a conditionally expressed trait whose organizational consequences depend not on the disposition alone but on its interaction with the structural, cultural, and relational conditions of the environment. Where ethical leadership, transparent accountability, and collectivist achievement cultures are present, Machiavellian individuals can contribute productively to internal innovation through their strategic orientation, political intelligence, and adaptive learning (Ruiz Palomino and Linuesa Langreo, 2018; Devenciyan, 2024; Cooke, 2020). Where these conditions are absent, the same traits tend toward opportunism, interpersonal conflict, and the erosion of the collaborative trust that sustained innovation requires (Arias Perez et al., 2023; Palmer et al., 2020).

The key practical implication is that intrapreneurial system design matters as much as individual selection. Rather than asking only whether Machiavellian individuals should occupy intrapreneurial roles, leaders need to ask what structural and cultural conditions exist to channel and constrain their strategic energies. How the organizational environment is built may ultimately prove more consequential than any single hiring decision (Huang et al., 2021; Matthews, 2017).

6. Practical and Theoretical Implications

Practical implications. Organizations should assess Machiavellian candidates not only for strategic ability but also for ethical reasoning, collaboration, and value based judgment. Ethical leadership is the main lever for reducing harmful Machiavellian expression, so leadership development should emphasize moral clarity, transparent communication, and accountability.

Incentive systems should reward teamwork, long term outcomes, and shared credit rather than individual wins, while intrapreneurial programs should include milestone reviews, cross functional oversight, and transparent reporting to preserve autonomy without enabling misuse.

Theoretical contributions. This review challenges the view of dark personality traits as uniformly harmful and shows that Machiavellianism is context dependent. It strengthens interactionist explanations, especially trait activation theory, by showing that personality effects depend on organizational conditions. It also highlights a conceptual gap between entrepreneurial intention and intrapreneurship, suggesting that future research should explain more clearly how entrepreneurial cognition translates into sustained organizational action under different levels of autonomy, accountability, and support.

7. Limitations and Future Research Directions

This review has several limitations. The search relied heavily on Google Scholar, which may reduce reproducibility and may have missed studies indexed in databases such as Scopus or Web of Science. The corpus was also methodologically diverse, combining surveys, experiments, conceptual papers, and dissertations, which limited precision and prevented meta-analysis. In addition, some included studies examined entrepreneurial intention rather than intrapreneurial behavior, so future reviews should use tighter construct definitions. The review also did not examine how Machiavellianism interacts with the wider Dark Triad, even though these traits often co-occur in practice. Finally, future research should use longitudinal designs to track how Machiavellian behavior changes over time and should explore hybrid profiles that combine dark and prosocial traits, as these may shape intrapreneurial outcomes in more nuanced ways.

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