STUDIA DOCTORALIA
PSYCHOLOGY AND EDUCATIONAL SCIENCE
UNIVERSITY OF BUCHAREST
VIRTUTE ET SAPIENTIA

Histrionic Traits in Mothers and their Influence on Children's Personality and Emotional Reactions

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 10-July-2024
Accepted 12-September-2024
Available online 14-November-2024

This article should be cited as: Enciu, I., Ene, C. (2024). Histrionic traits in mothers and their influence on children's personality and emotional reactions. *Studia Doctoralia. Psychology and Educational Science, 15*(2), 73-80. https://doi.org/10.47040/sdpsych.v15i2.175

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates maternal histrionic traits and their influence on children's personality and emotional reactions. The research conducted a sample of 209 participants of whom 81.8% are female and 18.2% male. They were recruited online by filling in a questionnaire, the answers being anonymous. Results from statistical analysis indicated that adults who perceived their mother as having histrionic traits had high scores of psychopathy and narcissism and showed emotional regulation difficulties: non-acceptance of emotional responses, difficulties with impulse control and difficulties engaging in goal-directed behaviors. The significant findings of this study highlight the importance of understanding the dynamics in families in which the mother exhibits histrionic traits and their impact on the children. Hence, further research is needed paving the way for more informed interventions and support systems.

Keywords: histrionic traits, mother-child relationshi, personality, emotional regulation difficulties

1. INTRODUCTION

Histrionic personality structure

Histrionic personality disorder exhibits a consistent pattern of seeking attention and displaying exaggerated emotional responses (French et al., 2024). Individuals with histrionic traits feel major discomfort when they are not the center of attention and engage in theatrical behaviors to attract

attention (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Initially, they impress with enthusiasm and flirtatiousness, but these qualities quickly become unappreciated due to the constant need to be in the spotlight. Their behavior is often inappropriate with seductive tendencies, manifesting in all types of relationships (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Their emotions tend to be shallow and volatile, with rapid changes. These individuals pay excessive attention to their physical appearance, constantly seeking validation and reacting negatively to criticism (French et al., 2024). Their verbal communication is meant to impress, but often lacks substance. They are also characterized by a dramatic and theatrical style, often putting others around them in embarrassing situations (Sperry, 2016). Their expression of emotions appear superficial, with rapid shifts from one emotion to another. They have high suggestibility, are easily influenced by others and often overestimate the intimacy of their relationships (Ferguson et al., 2014)

Emotional strategies

Emotional reactions can manifest themselves through different systems and can vary in intensity and duration in different individuals (Shapero et al., 2015). To find out an individual's capacity for emotional regulation and individual differences in the use of emotion regulation strategies, we use reappraisal and suppression (Gross & John, 2003). Reappraisal involves reframing the meaning of a situation to modify its emotional impact, whereas suppression involves inhibiting the outward expression of one's emotions (Gross & John, 2003). In the process, difficulties in emotional regulation may also occur. The individual's emotional regulation difficulties capture challenges on several dimensions: (a) recognizing and understanding emotions; (b) accepting emotions; (c) the ability to maintain goal focus and resist impulsive actions during negative emotional states; and (d) the availability of perceived effective strategies for emotion regulation (Gratz & Roemer, 2004). In the first dimension, difficulties in recognizing and understanding emotions can affect how a person interacts with others and how they handle emotional situations. For example, a lack of skills in these areas can lead to difficulties in communication, interpersonal relationships and conflict resolution (Gratz & Roemer, 2004). In the second dimension, difficulties in accepting emotions can occur when someone tries to suppress or ignore emotions that are considered unpleasant, such as sadness, anger or fear (Gratz & Roemer, 2004). In the third dimension, difficulties in maintaining focus on goals and resisting impulsive actions during negative emotional states can lead to problems in managing tasks and personal relationships during intense emotional states. This can lead to negative consequences such as the accumulation of emotional tension and chronic stress (Gratz & Roemer, 2004).The last dimension aims to assess the adaptive application of appropriate strategies for regulating emotional responses to different situations (Gratz & Roemer, 2004).

Maternal histrionic traits and children's personality

When histrionic traits are present in mothers, they can influence various aspects of their children's personality development through both genetic and environmental mechanisms. First of all, personality traits have a heritable component. The results of a twin investigation using structured interviews in a clinical cohort indicate considerable heritability estimates for borderline, histrionic and narcissistic personality disorders of 69%, 63% and 77% respectively (Reichborn-Kjennerud, 2010). No perceptible shared environmental influences or sex effects were observed (Reichborn-Kjennerud, 2010). This implies that, in many cases, children may inherit certain predispositions towards personality traits from their parents, especially their mothers. Thus, as early as adolescence, they may be predisposed to have a constant need for attention, sexually inappropriate behavior, egocentrism, and a tendency to believe that relationships are more intimate than they really are.

Beyond genetics, children's personality development is strongly influenced by their environment, in particular early interactions with their caregivers. In this context, mothers are their primary caregivers and play a crucial role in raising children. Growing up in an environment marked by emotional intensity and a strong emphasis on appearances and validation can shape children's perceptions of themselves and their relationships (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). They may learn to prioritize seeking attention and validation from others, which can lead to fluctuations in self-esteem. Self-esteem plays a critical role in shaping personality processes (Robins et al., 2001). Children's beliefs about themselves impact their behavior in specific situations, the goals they pursue in life, their emotional responses to life events and relationships, and their strategies for adapting to and coping with new environments (Robins et al, 2001). If a mother exhibits histrionic traits, such as dramatic behavior, her children may internalize these behaviors and incorporate them into their own personality (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

In addition to genetic and environmental factors, parenting style is also relevant. The way in which mothers parent their children has an impact on self-efficacy, self-esteem,

and identity development, all of which are related to personality traits (Brown & Iyengar, 2008). Mothers with histrionic traits may exhibit an authoritarian parenting style as they have a fundamental lack of empathy and their basic motivation is to gain total control over their children using manipulative and dramatic tactics (Sperry, 2016). This might create an unstable environment for the child, affecting their ability to develop secure attachments and a stable sense of self (Coie & Dodge, 1998), leading to emotional instability, neurotic behaviors, and feelings of inadequacy and worthlessness. For instance, the focus on external validation, common in histrionic behavior, can impair the development of intrinsic motivation, fostering traits like low conscientiousness or an overreliance on external affirmation in childrens personality (Harwood et al., 2008). Moreover, the emphasis on external validation, characteristic of histrionic behavior, can impair the development of intrinsic motivation and foster resignation in the face of challenges, promoting traits such as low conscientiousness or an excessive reliance on external affirmation in the child's personality (Harwood et al., 2008). Additionally, the experience of being raised by controlling mothers who are unable to emotionally connect provides little space for the child to develop their own identity or goals and to learn empathetic behaviors (Kochanska et al., 2009; Tajmirriyahi et al., 2021).

Moreover, mother's need for attention could lead to either enmeshment or neglect, depending on how her emotional needs interact with the child's behavior. Children subjected to enmeshment may internalize a heightened sense of responsibility for others emotions, potentially leading to traits like low agreeableness or heightened anxiety (Maccoby & Martin, 1983) or dark triad traits (Tajmirriyahi et al., 2021). On the other hand, neglect due to the mother's self-focus might contribute to difficulties in trust, manifesting as narcissistic or psychopathic tendencies in adulthood (Sperry, 2016). Overall, the influence of a histrionic parenting style extends beyond childhood, shaping the adult child's personality through disruptions in emotional stability, self-worth, and interpersonal functioning.

Maternal histrionic traits and children's emotional reactions

From an early age, infants demonstrate the ability to regulate their emotions (Braet et al., 2014). In the initial stages of development, the responsibility for the infant's emotional regulation gradually shifts from the primary caregiver (the mother in most cases) to the caregiver-child dyad and, eventually, to the infant him/herself (Enlow et al., 2011). A history of responsive caregiving in infancy, evidenced by a secure attachment bond, correlates with more adaptive self-regulatory abilities and better stress management in later development (Kochanska et al., 2009; Oosterman et al., 2010).

Because early emotion regulation difficulties tend to persist into later developmental stages, disruptions in emotional regulation in the first year of life can have significant and long-lasting effects on child functioning (Eisenberg et al, 2010). Specifically, children who use ineffective emotion regulation strategies often experience peer rejection (Kim & Cicchetti, 2010), symptoms of depression (Silk et al., 2003), anxiety (Carthy et al., 2010; Hannesdóttir & Ollendick, 2007), and behavior problems (Zeman et al., 2002).

Thus, mothers with histrionic traits, who exhibit high energy, autonomic reactivity, and emotional reactivity (Sperry, 2016), have the potential to have a significant negative impact on their child's emotional regulation. They may exhibit high reactivity, lacking the ability to self-soothe when faced with moderately stimulating situations, having strong feelings of fear and caution (Sperry, 2016). This emotional dysregulation may play a role in promoting maladaptive behavioral tendencies, potentially exposing children to risks associated with internalizing and/or externalizing problems (Cole et al., 1994). In addition, mothers with histrionic traits exhibit impulsive behavior without regard for consequences, seeking immediate gratification and manipulative behavior to control others or get what they want (Cole et al., 1994). In addition, studies involving children aged 7 to 12 years showed that these dominant negative emotions exhibited by mothers were inversely associated with their child's ability to cope with stress (Valiente et al., 2004). Therefore, we can infer that mothers with histrionic traits, who exhibit excessive emotionality and attention-seeking, impulsivity and manipulative behaviors, have the potential to have a significant negative impact on children's emotional reactions and regulation, through the difficulties children experience in recognizing, understanding and accepting their own emotions.

The present study

The aim of this research is to identify specific aspects of histrionic traits in mothers and assess how these characteristics influence various emotional and personality dimensions of their adult children. The research will involve the use of quantitative methods to provide a detailed understanding of this dynamic and its implications for children's psychological and developmental outcomes.

H1: *We expect mother's histrionism to predict high openness to experience, extraversion, and neuroticism in adult children.*

H2: *We expect mother's histrionism to predict low conscientiousness and agreeableness in adult children.*

H3: *We expect mother's histrionism to predict high narcissism, machiavellianism and psychopathy in adult children*.

H4: *We expect mother's histrionism to predict high reappraisal and suppression in adult children*.

H5: *We expect mother's histrionism to predict high non-acceptance of emotional responses, difficulties engaging in goal-directed behaviors, difficulties with impulse control, lack of emotional awareness, limited access to emotion regulation strategies and lack of emotional clarity in adult children.*

2. METHOD

Participants and procedure

The sample included in this study comprised a total of 209 participants of which 81.8% were female and 18.2% were male. In terms of background, 86.1% were from urban and 13.9% from rural areas. The mean age of the respondents was M=34.16 and standard deviation SD=13.91. The sample distribution on the educational level of the participants shows that 40.2% have high school as their last educational level, 1.9% have post-secondary education, 31.1% have undergraduate studies, 23% have master's studies and 3.8% have doctoral studies. Participants were recruited online by completing an anonymous questionnaire. Inclusion criteria were (a) age 18 years or older, (b) willingness to provide informed consent.

Instruments

Brief Histrionic Personality Personality Scale (BHPS; Ferguson & Negy, 2014) - A 36-item scale designed to assess symptoms of histrionic personality disorder according to DSM-5 criteria. Participants responded by relating to their mothers and how they observed them. An example of item is "Mom likes to be the center of attention". Participants will be asked to rate the frequency and intensity of each symptom on a Likert scale from 1 = never true to 4 = always true. The internal consistency coefficient on the group of participants was α = .84.

The Big Five Inventory (BFI; John et al., 1991) - A 44-item assessment instrument designed to assess an individual's characteristics within the Big Five personality dimensions. An example of item is "I am a sociable person who likes to go out". Participants will be asked to rate their level of agreement with each item on a Likert scale from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. The coefficient of internal consistency obtained on the group of participants was for the scale targeting extraversion α = .79, the scale targeting agreeableness α = .72, the scale targeting conscientiousness α = .80, the scale targeting neuroticism α = .76 and the scale targeting openness to experiences α = .84.

The Short Dark Triad (SD-3; Jones & Paulhus, 2013) - A 27-item assessment instrument that captures subclinical versions of narcissism, machiavellianism and psychopathy. An example of item is "It is not wise to reveal your secrets". Participants will be asked to rate their level of agreement with each item on a Likert scale from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. The internal consistency coefficient for the group of participants was α = .78 for the machiavellianism scale, α = .68 for the narcissism scale, and α = .68 for the psychopathy scale.

Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ; Gross, 2003) - A 10-item scale designed to assess individuals' propensity to manage their emotions by two distinct methods: (1) cognitive reappraisal and (2) expressive Suppression. An example of item is "I keep my emotions to myself". Participants will be asked to rate their level of agreement with each item on a Likert scale from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. The internal consistency coefficient α = .73 for the cognitive reappraisal scale α = .73 and α = .79 for the expressive suppression scale α = .79.

Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale-Short Form (DERS-SF; Gouveia et al., 2022) - A scale consisting of 18 items used to identify problems with emotional regulation in adults: failure to accept emotional responses, difficulties engaging in goal-directed behaviors, difficulties with impulse control, lack of emotional awareness, limited access to emotion regulation strategies, lack of emotional clarity. An example of item is "When I am angry, I lose control". Participants will be asked to rate their level of agreement with each item on a Likert scale from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. The resulting internal consistency coefficient on the group of participants was for the strategy-targeting scale α = .78, the non-acceptance-targeting scale α = .81, the impulse-targeting scale α = .91, the goal-targeting scale α = .90, the awareness-targeting scale α = .55 and the clarity-targeting scale α = .89.

Design and data analysis

The study used a cross-sectional design to examine the relationship between maternal histrionic traits and children's personality, as well as the relationship between maternal histrionic traits and children's emotional reactions. All data were collected at a single time point.

Pearson correlation analysis was used to assess descriptive statistics and correlations between the research variables. Linear regression analysis was used to test the relationship between predictor and criterion, i.e. mother's histrionic traits on children's personality and emotional reactions. Statistical analyses were performed in the IBM.SPSS.24 statistical analysis program (IBM Corp, 2016).

3. RESULTS

Table 1 shows the distribution shape indicators, Skewness and Kurtosis.

Table 2 shows the means and standard deviations for the research variables, as well as the indicators referring to the shape of the distribution. The correlations between the research variables are also reported. A statistically significant positive association was observed between maternal histrionism and psychopathy (r = .40, p<.01). A statistically significant positive association was observed between maternal histrionism and narcissism (r = .18, p<.05). A statistically significant negative association was observed between maternal histrionism and agreeableness (r = -.23, p<.01). A statistically significant negative association was observed between maternal histrionism and conscientiousness (r = -.23, p<.01).

Table 1

Descriptive statistics, distribution shape indices

Variable	Skewness	Kurtosis
1.Extraversion	.13	-.56
2.Agreeableness	-.38	-.08
3.Conscientiousness	-.35	-.21
4.Neuroticism	.04	-.22
5.Openness to experience	-.37	.11
6.Machiavellianism	.28	.22
7.Narcissism	-.12	-.59
8.Psychopathy	.75	-.14
9.Mother histrionism	1.20	2.21
10.Reevaluation	.02	-.03
11.Suppression	-.61	1.07
12.Strategies	.30	-.77
13.Non-acceptance	.42	-.85
14.Impulses	.40	-.80
15.Goals	-.47	-.63
16.Awareness	.46	-.39
17.Clarity	.47	-.72

Table 2

Descriptive statistics and Pearson correlations between histrionism and adult child personality

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	M(SD)
1.Mother histrionism	-								65.71(12.24)
2.Extraversion	-.07	-							25.81(5.53)
3.Agreeableness	-.23**	.41**							34.42(5.12)
4.Conscientiousness	-.23**	.35**	.40**						34.19(6.13)
5.Neuroticism	.12	-.37**	-.37**	-.38**					22.50(6.33)
6.Openness to experience	.09	.21**	.25**	.08	-.16*				36.62(6.31)
7.Machiavellianism	.10	-.20**	-.24**	-.08	.10	-.07			19.11(5.04)
8.Narcissism	.18*	.33**	.02	.19**	-.23**	.28**	.36**		24.56(5.47)
9.Psychopathy	.40**	-.15*	-.48**	-.32**	.28**	.01	.44**	.28**	15.65(5.22)

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

Table 3 shows the means and standard deviations for the research variables, as well as the indicators referring to the shape of the distribution. The correlations between the research variables are also reported. A statistically significant positive association was observed between maternal histrionism and failure to accept emotional responses (r = .26, p<.01). A statistically significant positive association was observed between maternal histrionism and difficulties with impulse control (r = .19, p<.01). A statistically significant positive association was observed between maternal histrionism and difficulties engaging in goal-directed behaviors (r = .18, p<.05). A statistically significant negative association was observed between maternal histrionism and limited access to emotion regulation strategies (r = -.18, p<.05).

Table 3

Descriptive statistics and Pearson correlations between histrionism and adult children's emotional regulation strategies

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	M(SD)
1.Mother histrionism	-								65.71(12.24)
2.Reevaluation	-.11	-							18.89(4.11)
3.Suppression	-.12	.55**							13.89(2.87)
4.Strategies	-.18*	.07	-.14*						7.86(3.19)
5.Non-acceptance	.26**	.20**	.01	.62**					7.27(3.30)
6.Impulses	.19**	.02	-.15*	.61**	.53**				7.36(3.38)
7.Goals	.18*	-.02	-.07	.65**	.44**	.59**			10.21(3.43)
8.Awareness	.01	.02	-.20**	-.04	.07	-.04	-.09		5.95(2.11)
9.Clarity	.09	.21**	-.08	.50**	.49**	.38**	.38**	.14*	7.41(3.46)

** p < .05; ** p < .01*

Table 4 shows the results of the linear regression analysis. Histrionism was entered as a predictor for agreeableness. With respect to the prediction of agreeableness, the model is statistically significant F(1, 207)=11.63, p<.01, predicting 5% of the variance. Therefore, agreeableness is statistically significantly negatively predicted by histrionism (β= -.23, p<.01). Histrionism was entered as a predictor for conscientiousness. With respect to the prediction of conscientiousness, the model is statistically significant F(1, 207)=12.06, p<.01, predicting 6% of the variance. Therefore, conscientiousness is statistically significantly negatively negatively predicted by histrionism (β= -.24, p<.01). Histrionism was entered as a predictor for narcissism. With respect to the prediction of narcissism, the model is statistically significant F(1, 207)=6.583, p<.05, predicting 3% of the variance. Therefore, narcissism is statistically predicted by histrionism (β= .18, p<.05). Histrionism was entered as a predictor for psychopathy. With respect to the prediction of psychopathy, the model is statistically significant F(1, 207)=39.92, p<.01, predicting 16% of the variance. Therefore, psychopathy is statistically predicted by histrionism (β= .40, p<.01).

Table 4

Linear regression results between histrionism and adult children's personality traits and emotional regulation strategies

Independent variable	Dependent variable	β	R^2
Mother histrionism	Agreeableness	-.23**	.05
	Conscientiousness	-.24**	.06
	Narcissism	.18*	.03
	Psychopathy	.40**	.16
	Non-acceptance	.26**	.07
	Impulses	.19**	.04
	Goals	.18*	.03

** p < .05; ** p < .01*

Histrionism was entered as a predictor for non-acceptance of emotional responses. Regarding the prediction of non-acceptance of emotional responses, the model is statistically significant F(1, 207)=15.22, p<.01, predicting 7% of the variance. Therefore, non-acceptance of emotional responses is statistically predicted by histrionism (β= .26,

p<.01). Histrionism was entered as a predictor for impulse control difficulties. With respect to the prediction of impulse control difficulties, the model is statistically significant F(1, 207)=7.582, p<.01, predicting 4% of the variance. Therefore, impulse control difficulties are statistically predicted by histrionism (β= .19, p<.01). Histrionism was entered as a predictor for difficulties engaging in goal-directed behaviors. Regarding the prediction of difficulties in engaging in goal-directed behaviors, the model is statistically significant F(1, 207)=6.615, p<.01, predicting 3% of the variance. Therefore, difficulties engaging in goal-directed behaviors are statistically predicted by histrionism (β= .18, p<.01).

4. DISCUSSIONS

The current research investigated the influence of histrionic traits in mothers on the personality development and emotional reactions of their children. Thus, it aimed to identify the specific characteristics associated with histrionic traits in mothers and how these behaviors may affect children by modeling exaggerated emotional behaviors and influencing the formation of different aspects of their personality. The study started from the hypothesis that although previous research has summarized the traits of a person with histrionic personality disorder, very little of it has focused on the link between histrionic traits in mothers and their influence on children's personality and emotional reactions.

Because mothers with histrionic traits display a lack of emotional stability and emotional depth. The child grows up in an atmosphere of emotional instability, which leads to difficulties in developing a sense of security and self-confidence (Laulik et al., 2013). These difficulties may foster the emergence of narcissistic traits, such as the need for constant validation and lack of empathy. Mothers with histrionic traits also grant the child an apparent trustworthiness that is accompanied by a hidden, disrespectful motivation aimed at forcibly obtaining the desired care and affection from the child (Sperry, 2016). Constant exposure to such behaviors teaches the child that manipulation and deception are acceptable ways to interact with others. As a result, the hypotheses that there is a significantly positive relationship between maternal histrionics and the adult child's psychopathy and narcissism are accepted.

Regarding emotional regulation difficulties, a relationship between maternal histrionic traits and emotional regulation difficulties has been observed. Mothers with histrionic traits, characterized by high energy and emotional reactivity (Sperry, 2016), can negatively affect the child's emotional regulation through the unstable emotional atmosphere created, lack of consistency in discipline, and lack of adequate emotional support. Mothers' emotional unpredictability and unavailability can cause confusion and anxiety in children, impairing their ability to control their own impulses and leading to maladaptive behaviors and difficulty in assuming goal-directed behaviors (Cole et al., 1994). Therefore, the hypotheses that there is a significantly positive relationship between maternal histrionic traits and nonacceptance of emotional responses, impulse control difficulties, and difficulties engaging in goal-directed behaviors in the adult child are accepted.

The findings of our study fit very well with other research. According to Kochanska et al. (1997) mothers' personality traits were significantly associated with their power-based and less nurturant parenting orientations and with important consequences for children's development. Maternal negative emotionality has been linked to harmful consequences for children, such as anxiety, anger, deviance, behavior problems, and insecure attachment (Kochanska, 1997). Mothers with high levels of negative emotionality, associated with excessive self-focus, may hinder their ability to engage in responsive parenting (Dix, 1991), consequently affecting emotional development in children. Furthermore, in contrast to the previous findings of Xing et al. (2018), where children's neuroticism, extraversion, and openness to experience were directly related to maternal traits, Prinzie et al. (2004), similar to our study, showed a negative association between maternal traits and their children's agreeableness and conscientiousness. Children with low conscientiousness scores who experienced authoritative maternal behaviour exhibited increased levels of externalizing behaviour: aggressiveness towards others, rule-breaking behaviors, impulsivity, hyperactivity (Prinzie et al., 2004).

Theoretical and practical implications

The present study contributes to a new and deeper understanding of how maternal histrionic traits can shape the psychological functioning of adult children in terms of personality and emotional reactions. By investigating the role of maternal traits within a theoretical framework of personality development, the study provides a sound theoretical basis for understanding the mechanisms underlying the observed effects. The present study also provides essential information for professionals in the field in developing appropriate psychoeducational and counseling programs to support children from families with parents who display histrionic traits, emphasizing the importance of identifying and addressing

maternal histrionic traits in interventions aimed at promoting healthy child psychological development and harmonious parent-child relationships.

Limitations

Establishing a causal relationship between maternal histrionic traits and children's personality and emotional reactions is difficult. The mere observation of a correlation does not indicate causality, as various factors such as genetic predisposition, environmental influences and parenting may influence outcomes. Also, socioeconomic status and the difference between the number of female (81.8%) and male (18.2%) participants could influence the relationships, limiting the generalizability of the findings to adult children.

Future directions

To address these limitations and to bridge the scientific gap, it is essential to engage in interdisciplinary collaboration, use sound research methodologies and continue studies on this topic, understanding more precisely the complex interactions between parental characteristics and child development. It is also recommended to form a sample of participants equally distributed in terms of gender in order to remove any uncertainty about the veracity of the responses.

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