

Received: 15 March 2024, Accepted: 25 April 2024
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33282/rr.vx9i2.301>

EXPLORING NARCISSISM AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS: PREVALENCE AND ITS EFFECTS ON SELF-ESTEEM

¹Sanallah, ²Izaz Ali, ³Waqar Un Nisa Faizi,
⁴Muhammad Naeem Butt

1. PhD Scholar Institute of Education and Research,
University of Peshawar, Pakistan
2. Institute of Education and Research University of Peshawar, Pakistan
3. Department of Education, Islamia College Peshawar, Pakistan
Institute of Education and Research University of Peshawar, Pakistan
(Corresponding author) naeembutt@uop.edu.pk

Abstract

Narcissism is one of the personality traits characterized by a lack of empathy, a craving for admiration and a sense of superiority and entitlement. Self-esteem is the beliefs and perceptions an individual has about themselves or a reflective, overall judgment of all the personality aspects of a person can assess about him/herself. The current study aimed to analyze the prevalence of narcissism among university students and to assess its effects on university students' self-esteem. The study was quantitative in nature, following a descriptive research design. The population of the study comprised undergraduate students at the University of Peshawar and the Islamia College Peshawar. The population of the study included all the undergraduate students of these universities, totaling 10943 and 5030 students, respectively. Samples of 370 and 360 were selected from both the universities using multistage and stratified random sampling technique. To assess the prevalence of narcissism among students, the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI) was used, while the state self-esteem scale was used to evaluate students' self-esteem. However, the sample size was drawn using Krejci and Morgan sampling table. The data was analyzed using linear regression. The level of students' narcissism was measured, and data was tabulated. The study concluded that majority of students had an average level of narcissism, while a significant number of students showed high level of narcissism on NPI. In contrast, a small number of students had low levels of narcissism, the study further concluded that Narcissism affects students' self-esteem, and students with high narcissism are more vulnerable to negative comments and criticism.

Key Words: Narcissism, self-esteem, undergraduate students, NPI

Introduction

Personality is an inherent part of human nature comprising the sum total of the ways an individual interacts with others. Human beings have various personality features and characteristics, which in normal conditions help the individual remain calm and effective. However, when these personality characteristics become more extreme and abnormal, they manifest as personality disorders. Narcissism is one of the traits of human personality. In views of Spencer et al. (2007) Narcissism is a normal personality trait that all individuals have but differs among people. McCullough et al. (2003) views narcissism as a collection of characteristics driven by the desire to preserve and build an inflated self-image. Brummelman et al. (2016) defined Narcissism as a personality trait characterized by a desire of admiration and respect from others and a sense of superiority. Individuals with narcissistic personality have the feelings of superiority to others, considering themselves entitled to privileges, with crave for respect and admiration from others. They think themselves the best leaders and are of the opinion that the world would be better if they rule it.

Narcissism has its origin in Greek mythology that tells about a handsome and proud young man, who for the first time saw his reflection in water, got mesmerized and could not resist staring at himself. He remained there by the side of lake till he died (Ogrodniczuk, 2013). It is; therefore, concluded that any personality trait that exceeds its normal limits becomes a disorder and harms the individual and his/her personality. The increase of narcissistic attributes in one personality leads to an inflated sense of superiority. McCullough et al. (2003) characterized narcissism personality trait with grandiosity and self-importance, an egocentric approach towards the feelings and needs of others, crave for receiving admiration and gaining power and a persuasion of being special and unique, which could affect students' self-esteem.

Self-esteem, as defined by Bailey (2003) is the reflective overall judgment of all the personality aspects a person can assess about him/herself. In general self-esteem is one's own opinion and belief about oneself. Self-esteem besides, general personality attribute is one's own assessment of personal worthiness. Habib et al. (2016) describes Self-esteem as an inter-play of one's behavior as well as the pretensions one as well as others hold of him. Burns et al. (2016) defined

self-esteem as a value that has information within self–imagination of a person and it is formed by the person’s beliefs about all attributes, aspects and characteristics within him. Self-esteem is defined by Erol and Orth (2011) as an emotionally judgmental view of oneself, value and worth. It is taken to be as a self-directed experience based on genetics while in phases of personal and physical enhancements.

Is there any relationship between Narcissism and Self-esteem?

Narcissism and self-esteem, according to Hyatt et al. (2018) are two different concepts, as narcissism could be diagnosed and identified as a personality trait whereas self-esteem has strong association with individual mental health. Narcissism and high self-esteem as mentioned by Hudson (2012) are highly correlated, both indicating the person high and positive self-opinion. Individuals having high narcissism seeks admiration whereas individuals with high self-esteem seeks popularity. Individuals with narcissistic tendencies identifies themselves better than average of the individuals on traits of agentic orientations whereas not on those traits reflecting communal orientations; however, individuals having high self-esteem identifies themselves better than average on both agamic and communal traits (Campbell et al., 2002). Narcissistic tendencies may provide an individual of low self-esteem with an increased sense of inferiority and dependence whereas individuals with high self-esteem may provide an individual with an increase sense of superiority and independence, because both the narcissism and high self-esteem represents the inflated self of an individual (Anyanwu et al., 2022).

Narcissism refers to an excessive focus on oneself, characterized by an inflated sense of self-importance, a need for admiration, and a lack of empathy for others (Campbell & Foster, 2007). In contrast, self-esteem refers to a more general evaluation of one's self-worth, including both positive and negative aspects of the self (Baumeister et al., 2003).

According to this view, narcissists have a high opinion of themselves but are overly sensitive to criticism or negative feedback, leading to defensive responses and aggressive behaviors when their ego is threatened (Baumeister et al., 2003). Narcissists may also have an unstable sense of self-worth, which can lead to a reliance on external validation and the need for constant admiration (Campbell & Foster, 2007).

However, an alternative view is that narcissism and self-esteem are distinct constructs with different implications for psychological well-being (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). Research has shown that individuals high in narcissism tend to have greater levels of entitlement and aggression, while individuals with low self-esteem tend to experience more depression and anxiety (Zeigler-Hill, et al, 2008). Furthermore, while self-esteem is associated with a range of positive outcomes, including greater well-being and adaptive coping, narcissism is associated with more negative outcomes, such as interpersonal conflict and impaired relationships (Rhodewalt & Morf, 1998)

Self-esteem is the global evaluation of oneself (Rosenberg, 1989), and it has been shown to be related to narcissism (Ackerman et al., 2011; Brown et al., 2004; Kwan et al., 2009). New research has shown that self-esteem and narcissism are not the same thing. Narcissism is distinct from self-esteem in a number of ways, including its phenotype, consequences, development, and roots (Brummelman et al., 2016). Moreover, self-esteem and narcissism have distinct impacts on outcome measures (Donnellan et al., 2005; Paulhus et al., 2004; Orth & Luciano, 2015).

Narcissism and high self-esteem are both characterized by positive self-evaluations; however, narcissism goes beyond self-esteem with traits such as entitlement, exploitation, sense of superiority, and negative evaluation of others (Zeigler et al., 2013). There is a debate among researchers regarding the validity of the classical portrayal of Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD). Some studies suggest that narcissists with low self-esteem who feel threatened exhibit less anger than those with high self-esteem (Thomaes & Bushman, 2011).

This idea is supported by research that found that although narcissists may have high levels of self-esteem, they also have higher levels of self-doubt and insecurity than individuals with high self-esteem but low levels of narcissism (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001; Rhodewalt & Morf, 1995). Furthermore, narcissists may have an inflated sense of self-worth, but they are also more likely to be prone to negative emotions, such as shame and anger, when they receive negative feedback or fail to meet their high standards (Campbell et al., 2000; Rhodewalt & Morf, 1998). In contrast, individuals with high self-esteem tend to have a more stable sense of self-worth and are less affected by negative feedback (Baumeister et al., 2003; Leary & MacDonald, 2003).

Investigating self-esteem is a complicated matter, as it overlaps with narcissism, given their shared characteristic of positive self-evaluation. Despite efforts to distinguish between the two constructs, both conceptually and empirically, measurements of self-esteem and narcissism often show a moderate to large positive correlation (Ackerman et al., 2011).

Self-esteem and narcissism both involve positive self-evaluations and therefore have conceptual overlap. In fact, research has shown that measures of these constructs have shared variance and tend to correlate at medium to large effect sizes. For example, Brown and Zeigler-Hill (2004) found a correlation of .26 between self-esteem and narcissism, while Ackerman et al. (2011) found a correlation of .27. Paulhus et al. (2004) examined three samples and found correlations ranging from .32 to .50. It's worth noting that the observed correlations between self-esteem and narcissism are not as strong as they would be if the two constructs were the same thing. Furthermore, despite some overlap, self-esteem and narcissism can still be distinguished conceptually. Self-esteem does not include a sense of superiority and entitlement, whereas narcissism does. Narcissism also implies a negative view of others, with the individual feeling superior and entitled to exploit others, while high self-esteem can coexist with a positive, prosocial attitude towards others (Paulhus et al., 2004).

Studies have shown that while self-esteem is strongly correlated with authenticity, narcissism has only a small correlation with it (Tracy et al., 2009). When self-esteem and narcissism are mutually controlled for, their divergent effects become even clearer. For example, a study by Paulhus et al. (2004) found that when narcissism was not controlled for, the self-esteem effect on antisocial behavior was $\beta = -.04$. When narcissism was taken into account, however, the self-esteem effect grew to $=.23$. The effect size for narcissism alone was $=.33$, but when self-esteem was taken into account, it grew to $=.42$. Interestingly, in these studies, adding the complementary measure actually resulted in larger regression coefficients (in absolute size) for both self-esteem and narcissism (Donnellan et al., 2005; Tracy et al., 2009).

Hypotheses of the Study

Aforementioned literature on narcissism indicate that the connection between narcissism and self-esteem, especially within university environments, has not been thoroughly examined.

Building on these findings, the following Null hypotheses are developed:

1. There is no prevalence of Narcissism among university students
2. There is no effect of Narcissism on students' self-esteem in University of Peshawar (UoP) and Islamia College Peshawar (ICP)

Research Methodology

The current study aimed to examine the prevalence of narcissism among university students and its effects on students' self-esteem. The study is quantitative in nature, following survey research design, and collects data from the respondents using survey questionnaires that focus on various aspects of narcissism among university students.

Population and Sample of the Study

The population of the study comprises all the undergraduate students of the two Universities: University of Peshawar and Islamia College Peshawar. University of Peshawar and Islamia College Peshawar, have six and five teaching faculties, respectively, comprising 40 and 24 teaching departments (offering BS programs), respectively. The Total population from both universities consisted of all the enrolled undergraduate students (both male and female) i.e., 10943 and 5030. The sampling was carried out using multistage and stratified random sampling technique, allocating proportionate sampling to all the six and five faculties in University of Peshawar and Islamia College Peshawar, the students were selected from 2nd and 3rd years of the academic programs. The sample size was calculated as 370 and 360 respectively by following sampling calculators proposed by Krejcie and Morgan (1970) and Raosoft online sampling calculator (2014).

Tools of Data Collection

To find level of Narcissism among university students, a standardized questionnaire, Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI) (Raksin & Hall, 1979) comprised of forty paired statements with binary choices (A & B) was adopted having Cronbach's Alpha value 0.82. For collecting data regarding self-esteem, State Self-esteem scale (Heatherton and Polivy, 1991) was adopted, which is 20-point measuring scale that measures positive and negative feelings about self-worth with Cronbach's Alpha value 0.83. The items were answered using 5-point Likert scale.

Data Analysis

Prevalence of Narcissism among University students

Students' narcissism level was measured using standardized toll Narcissistic Personality inventory by Raksin and Hall (1970). NPI comprised of 40 pair statements that analyze the level of narcissism among individuals. The tool was administered both at the University of Peshawar and Islamia College Peshawar. The scores were tabulated, and results were compiled.

Table 1. Scores of Students' on NPI at University of Peshawar

S.No	Level of Narcissism	No of Students
1	High	107 (67 male, 40 female)
2	Average	235 (113 male, 122 female)
3	Low	28 (6 male, 22 female)
Total		370

Table 2. Scores of Students' on NPI at Islamia College Peshawar

S.No	Level of Narcissism	No of Students
1	High	111 (72 male, 39 female)
2	Average	226 (105 male, 121 female)
3	Low	24 (4 male, 20 female)
Total		361

According to the norms and values of the scale there are 3 levels of Narcissism, low (2 to 8), Average (9 to 21) and High (22 and above).

Table 3. Narcissism and Self-esteem (UOP)

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.144 ^a	.021	.018	10.59670

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	
	B	Std. Error	Beta			
1	(Constant)	63.061	1.919	32.859	.000	
	NPI	.286	.102	.144	2.800	.005

Table 3 shows the regression analysis for testing the hypothesis and the relationship between students' Narcissism and Self-esteem measured at .05. The significant value of **.005** shows a strong relationship between students' Narcissism and their self-esteem, at University of Peshawar with $R=0.144$, and $t=2.800$. Hence, the null hypothesis, "There is no effect of Narcissism on students' self-esteem in University of Peshawar" is hereby **rejected**.

Table 4. Narcissism and Self-Esteem (ICP)

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.144 ^a	.021	.018	10.92717

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	
	B	Std. Error	Beta			
1	(Constant)	64.388	2.013	31.990	.000	
	NPI	.289	.105	.144	2.759	.006

Table 4. shows the regression analysis for testing the hypothesis and the relationship between students' Narcissism and Self-Esteem measured at .05. The significant value of **.006** shows a strong relationship between students' Narcissism and their Self-Esteem, at Islamia College Peshawar with $R=0.144$, and $t=2.759$. Hence, the null hypothesis, "There is no effect of Narcissism on students' Self-Esteem in Islamia College Peshawar" is hereby **rejected**.

Results and Discussion

The results of the study show that at the University of Peshawar, a significant number of 107 (67 males, 40 females) had higher level of Narcissism, while majority of the students 235 (113 Males, 122 females) had average and a small number of 28 (6 males, 22 females) students had low level of Narcissism. Furthermore, it was found that at the Islamia College Peshawar, a significant number of 111 (72 males, 39 females) had higher level of Narcissism, while majority

of the students 226 (105 males, 121 females) had average and a small number of 24 (4 males, 20 females) students had low level of Narcissism. These results from the analysis suggest and conclude that there is prevalence of Narcissism among students at undergraduate level with varying level. While looking for the effect of narcissism on students' self-esteem the study found that Narcissism significantly affects students' self-esteem at university level. Study shows that individuals with narcissism often have high self-esteem but are vulnerable to criticism or negative feedback as found by Baumeister et al. (2003) in their study corresponding to the results of this study. Furthermore, Campbell and Foster (2007) argue that narcissists may also have an unstable sense of self-worth, which can lead to a reliance on external validation and the need for constant admiration. However, Anyanwu et al. (2022) found that narcissistic tendencies may provide an individual of low self-esteem with an increased sense of inferiority and dependence whereas individuals with high self-esteem may provide an individual with an increase sense of superiority and independence, because both the narcissism and high self-esteem represents the inflated self of an individual.

Conclusions

The study concluded that narcissism exists among students at university level, it was found that students have varying level of narcissism based on the NPI rating majority of the students were found having average level of narcissism, whereas a significant number of students were found with high level of narcissism; however, a small number of students of students had low levels of narcissism. Furthermore, it was concluded that students' narcissism level affect their personality traits, probably their self-esteem, students with high narcissism had high self-esteem but are vulnerable to criticism and negative comments. Students with narcissistic tendencies had a craving for admiration and a sense of superiority over others, and if these needs were not met, it affected their well-being and lead to frustration and anger issues. Therefore, it is concluded that narcissism and self-esteem are correlated with one another.

Recommendations

1. Narcissism at higher level affect overall personality of the individual making them egocentric. Therefore, seminars and workshops may be arranged by the teaching departments

to provide detail information to students about narcissism and its adverse effects on their personality.

2. People with high self-esteem may overestimate their abilities and underestimate the risks involved in certain activities or decisions, which can lead to poor decision-making and negative outcomes. Therefore, the students may be provided with the skills to practice their self-awareness, recognize their strengths and weaknesses, and accept themselves as who they are.
3. In extreme cases, high self-esteem can lead to narcissistic behavior, thus the students may be trained to be open to constructive feedback from others, avoid comparing their selves to others, and focus on your own personal growth and development rather than comparing yourself to others.

References

- Ackerman, R. A., Witt, E. A., Donnellan, M. B., Trzesniewski, K. H., Robins, R. W., & Kashy, D. A. (2011). What does the Narcissistic Personality Inventory really measure? *Assessment*, 18, 67-87.
- Anyanwu, A. N., Ezenwosu, N. E., Emesi, K. E., & Eleje, L. I. (2022). Narcissism and self-esteem correlates of secondary school students' mathematics academic achievement in Anambra state. *Open Journal of Educational Research*, 2(1), 13–22.
- Bailey, J. A. (2003). The foundation of self-esteem. *Journal of National Medical Association*, 95(5), 388–393.
- Baumeister, R. F., Campbell, J. D., Krueger, J. I., & Vohs, K. D. (2003). Does high self-esteem cause better performance, interpersonal success, happiness, or healthier lifestyles? *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 4(1), 1-44.
- Brown, R. P., & Zeigler-Hill, V. (2004). Narcissism and the non-equivalence of self-esteem measures: A matter of dominance? *Journal of Research in Personality*, 38(6), 585-592.

- Brummelman, E., Thomaes, S., & Sedikides, C. (2016). Separating narcissism from self-esteem. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 25(1), 8–13.
- Burns, K. M., Burns, N. R., & Ward, L. (2016). Confidence—more a personality or ability trait? it depends on how it is measured: A comparison of young and older adults. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 7, 518-532
- Campbell, W. K., & Foster, J. D. (2007). *The narcissistic self: Background, an extended agency model, and ongoing controversies*. In C. Sedikides & S. Spencer (Eds.), *The Self* (pp. 115–138). Psychology Press.
- Campbell, W. K., Reeder, G. D., Sedikides, C., & Elliot, A. J. (2000). Narcissism and comparative self-enhancement strategies. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 34(3), 329–347.
- Campbell, W. K., Rudich, E. A., & Sedikides, C. (2002). Narcissism, self-esteem, and the positivity of self-views: Two portraits of self-love. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 28(3), 358–368.
- Donnellan, M. B., Trzesniewski, K. H., Robins, R. W., Moffitt, T. E., & Caspi, A. (2005). Low self-esteem is related to aggression, antisocial behavior, and delinquency. *Psychological Science*, 16(4), 328-335.
- Habib, U., Habib, O., & Ansari, S. A. (2016). Correlational study of resilience, emotional competence and self-esteem. *International Journal of Current Research*, 8(11), 42371–42373.
- Heatherton, T. F. & Polivy, J. (1991). Development and validation of a scale for measuring state self-esteem. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 60(6), 895-910.
- Hudson, E. J. (2012). (thesis). *Understanding and exploring narcissism: Impact on students and college campuses*. CMC Senior Theses, Claremont, California. Retrieved May 19, 2022, from https://scholarship.claremont.edu/cmc_theses/381.

- Hyatt, C. S., Sleep, C. E., Lamkin, J., Maples-Keller, J. L., Sedikides, C., Campbell, W. K., & Miller, J. D. (2018). Narcissism and self-esteem: A Nomological network analysis. *PLOS ONE*, *13*(8).
- Kwan, V.S.Y., Kuang, L.L., & Hui N.H.H. (2009). Identifying the sources of self-esteem: The mixed medley of benevolence, merit, and bias. *Self and Identity*, *8*(2–3), 176–95.
- Leary, M. R., & MacDonald, G. (2003). *Individual differences in self-esteem: A review and theoretical integration*. In S. J. Spencer, S. Fein, & M. P. Zanna (Eds.), *Motivated social perception: The Ontario Symposium* (Vol. 9, pp. 1-56). Lawrence Erlbaum.
- McCullough, M. E., Emmons, R. A., Kilpatrick, S. D., & Mooney, C. N. (2003). Narcissists as “victims”: The role of narcissism in the perception of transgressions. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *29*(7), 885–893.
- Morf, C. C., & Rhodewalt, F. (2001). Unraveling the paradoxes of narcissism: A dynamic self-regulatory processing model. *Psychological Inquiry*, *12*(4), 177–196.
- Ogrodniczuk, J. S. (2013). *Understanding and treating pathological narcissism*. American Psychological Association
- Orth, U., & Luciano, E.C. (2015) Self-esteem, narcissism, and stressful life events: Testing for selection and socialization. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *109*(4), 707-721.
- Paulhus, D.L., Robins, R.W., Trzesniewski, K.H., & Tracy, J.L. (2004). Two replicable suppressor situations in personality research. *Multivariate Behavioral Research*, *39*(2), 303–328.
- Rhodewalt, F., & Morf, C. C. (1995). Self and interpersonal correlates of the Narcissistic Personality Inventory: A review and new findings. *Journal of Research in Personality*, *29*(1), 1-23.
- Rosenberg M. (1989). *Society and the adolescent self-image (rev. ed.)*. Middletown, CT, England: Wesleyan University Press.

Spencer, V. G., Garcia-Simpson, C., & Newland, S. (2007). *Narcissism the good, the bad, and the ugly*. Distributed by ERIC Clearinghouse.

Thomaes, S., & Bushman, B. J. (2011). Mirror Mirror on the Wall, Who's the Most Aggressive of Them All? Narcissism, Self-Esteem, and Aggression. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *101*(4), 885-902.

Tracy, J. L., Cheng, J. T., Robins, R. W., & Trzesniewski, K. H. (2009). Authentic and hubristic pride: The affective core of self-esteem and narcissism. *Self and Identity*, *8*(2-3), 196-213.