

# The I That Buys: Narcissists as Consumers

Constantine Sedikides and Aiden P. Gregg

*University of Southampton, U.K.*

Sylvia Cisek

*Wroclaw University of Technology, Poland*

Claire M. Hart

*University of Southampton, U.K.*

Which people are most swayed by self-image motives and hence most likely to make consumer choices in line with those motives? This article contends that the answer is *narcissists*—individuals who see themselves, and who want others to see them, as special, superior, and entitled and who are prone to exhibitionism and vanity. This work hypothesizes that narcissists will, to validate their excessively positive self-views, strive to purchase the high-prestige products (i.e., expensive, exclusive, new, and flashy). In so doing, they will regulate their own esteem by increasing their apparent status and consequently earning others' admiration and envy. This article also hypothesizes that narcissists will show greater interest in the symbolic than utilitarian value of products and will exhibit, even controlling for self-esteem, more pronounced self-enhancement phenomena such as endowment and self-signaling effects.

In his thoughtful and provocative lead article, Dunning (2007) made four key points. First, people have sacrosanct self-beliefs: They view themselves as competent, moral, lovable, and worthy of positive outcomes in life. Second, people are motivated to sustain or further increase the positivity of their self-beliefs. Third, the self-beliefs act as social motives: They influence social perceptions, decisions, and consumer choices. Finally, the self-beliefs are relatively fixed and immovable; as such, people will change their social perceptions, decisions, and consumer choices to align them with their self-beliefs.

While pondering future research questions, Dunning (2007) wondered about the role of self-esteem in moderating the influence of self-image motives on consumer behavior. In this article, we focus not on self-esteem *per se*, but rather on a related, but more specific, individual difference. This variable is normal or subclinical *narcissism*. We hypothesize that narcissism will be even more central to moderating the influence of self-image motives on consumer behavior than self-esteem will: Whereas self-esteem concerns the adequacy of self-

views (Rosenberg, 1965), narcissism concerns their exceptional positivity (Raskin & Hall, 1981).

## DEFINING NARCISSISM

The conceptual definition of narcissists depicts them as self-centered, self-aggrandizing, dominant, and manipulative (Emmons, 1987; Sedikides, Campbell, Reeder, Elliot, & Gregg, 2002). Operationally, narcissists are defined as high scorers on the Narcissistic Personality Inventory, consisting of seven subscales: authority, entitlement, exhibitionism, exploitation, self-sufficiency, superiority, and vanity (Raskin & Hall, 1981; Raskin & Terry, 1988). Narcissism correlates moderately and positively with self-esteem (Campbell, Rudich, & Sedikides, 2002), and any psychological benefits associated seem to be mediated by that relation (Sedikides, Rudich, Gregg, Kumashiro, & Rusbult, 2004).

Dunning (2007) raised the issue of whether people seek to change their social perceptions, decisions, and consumer choices to affirm their general or specific self-beliefs. A related issue is whether people engage in consumer behavior to bolster one or another type of specific self-belief. Of particular relevance are self-beliefs related to the dimension of agency (e.g., intelligence, uniqueness, status, power)

---

We thankfully acknowledge British Academy Award (LRG-45472).

Correspondence should be addressed to Constantine Sedikides, Center for Research on Self and Identity, School of Psychology, University of Southampton, Southampton, England SO17 1BJ. E-mail: cs2@soton.ac.uk



versus the dimension of communion (e.g., social harmony, affiliation, warmth, morality). There is both correlational and experimental evidence that the former dimension is relatively important, whereas the latter is relatively unimportant, to narcissists.

### THE IMPORTANCE OF AGENTIC SELF-BELIEFS IN NARCISSISTS

Narcissists harbor strong agentic self-beliefs. Narcissism is positively related to dominance strivings (Bradlee & Emmons, 1992), perceptions of uniqueness (Emmons, 1984), feelings of entitlement (Campbell, Bonacci, Shelton, Exline, & Bushman, 2004), fantasies of glory (Raskin & Novacek, 1991), and needs for power and achievement (Carroll, 1987). Experimental research also shows that narcissists behave in an agentic manner. They use the first-person singular (Emmons, 1987), rate themselves as better-than-average on agentic traits (Campbell et al., 2002), feel that they have practically reached their ideal self standards (Rhodewalt & Morf, 1995), predominantly recall their positive behaviors (Gosling, John, Craik, & Robins, 1998), overestimate their intelligence relative to objective criteria (Farwell & Wohlwend-Lloyd, 1998), and regard themselves more influential than their peers do (John & Robins, 1994).

At the same time, narcissists do *not* harbor strong communal self-beliefs. Narcissism is unrelated or negatively related to agreeableness and gratitude (Bradlee & Emmons, 1992; Raskin, Novacek, & Hogan, 1991) as well as the need for intimacy (Carroll, 1987). Experimental research shows that narcissists do not behave genially; if anything, they behave abrasively in interpersonal situations. In particular, they do not rate themselves as better-than-average on communal traits (Campbell et al., 2002). They also exceptionally continue to display the self-serving bias (i.e., taking credit for the dyadic success but displacing blame for the dyadic failure) even when collaborating with close others (Sedikides, Campbell, Reeder, & Elliot, 2002). In addition, they seek status in social settings (Vangelisti, Knapp, & Daly, 1990), find antagonism to be intrinsically motivating (Morf, Weir, & Davidov, 2000), resort to liquidating common goods to gain supremacy over rivals (Campbell, Bush, Brunell, & Shelton, 2005), derogate or punish those who outperform or criticize them (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Stucke & Sporer, 2002), and select admiring over caring partners (Campbell, 1999).

### NARCISSISTIC CONSUMPTION AS AN ATTEMPT TO VALIDATE AGENTIC SELF-BELIEFS

We argue that consumer choices fall in the domain of agency. Such choices will often represent individualistic

decisions and serve individualistic needs. True, consumer choices can also represent communal concerns (e.g., buying a present for a romantic partner). Either way, we maintain that narcissism can drive such consumer behavior because such behavior potentially serves as a means of validating excessively positive self-views. Maintaining an excessively positive self-view is, of course, no small task. To adopt a dual-process analogy (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981), if one's talents are modest, then taking the "central" route to self-aggrandizement—by being as great as one thinks one is and actually achieving a great deal—may be difficult and often impossible. Hence, it may often be more convenient to take the "peripheral" route—by adopting the external trappings of greatness, of which consumer products are one key source in capitalistic society.

So, basically, narcissists are liable to perceive the purchasing of consumer goods as an opportunity to sustain and elevate their self-positivity. It may not even be particularly relevant whether the consumer product will serve their own practical needs or those of an associate or partner. That is to say, for narcissists, the *utilitarian* value of a product, for either themselves or close associates, will be of lesser importance, whereas its *symbolic* value of greater importance. To what extent can the product make the narcissist feel good and look good personally (when purchasing for themselves) or by implication (when purchasing for close associates)? To what extent can a product cast the narcissist, both privately and publicly, in the most favorable light? For example, one would predict that a narcissist would prefer to purchase (for themselves or their partner) a plush car with a patchy maintenance record than a modest car with a sterling maintenance record.

The existing literature on self-processes is congruent with the proposal that people often sacrifice utilitarian needs at the altar of symbolic ones. For example, to self-present positively, people will engage in potentially health-damaging behavior such as tanning to look sexy or smoking to look cool (Leary, Tchividjian, & Kraxberger, 1994). We hypothesize that in narcissists this proclivity will be particularly pronounced. Indeed, the existing literature on narcissism is congruent with the proposal. For example, narcissists seek attention, show off, boast, and talk a lot about themselves (Buss & Chiodo, 1991; Raskin & Shaw, 1988). The prospect of impressing others galvanizes them to superior performance when in competition with others (Wallace & Baumeister, 2002). Relatedly, narcissists may be particularly likely to take on colorful personalities (Hogan & Hogan, 2001), and thus be appealing and entertaining to others (e.g., the life of the party).

How then, would the narcissistic thirst for attention, bragging, and exhibitionism be satisfied by consumer spending? A number of "usual suspects" can be identified. For example, we predict that narcissists will be on a constant lookout for the latest and greatest products, thus wasting plenty of time (e.g., on the Internet) in researching the relevant market. In addition, narcissists will be more



susceptible to advertising by celebrities than common mortals, given the narcissists' status-seeking, glory-seeking, and tendency to identify with high-status persons. Also, narcissists may be especially prone to join or strive to join exclusive clubs, restaurants, hotels, or guest lists.

More important, narcissists may be more likely than their non-narcissistic counterparts (of the same socioeconomic status) to favor prestigious products such as designer clothes, top-range cars, or rare antiques. It is interesting to note that the same psychological function is likely to be served when the purchases are made on behalf of another person such as a romantic partner. Designer clothing or expensive jewelry adds to the partner's value as a trophy companion either in the eyes of the narcissists or at social gatherings. Thus, if the Devil wears Prada, then her husband or wife may have to follow suit.

The self-serving nature of the narcissistic consumer spending pattern may have various repercussions for narcissists and others. For example, narcissists may be at risk of sacrificing necessities at the expense of luxuries, or be more likely to run up their credit bill. This would be in line with previous research on vanity, a component of narcissism. This research has shown that individuals motivated by vanity also demonstrate poor spending and saving habits (Netemeyer, Burton, & Lichtenstein, 1995). Moreover, given their addiction to self-esteem and their need to satisfy its voracious appetite (Baumeister & Vohs, 2001), they may need to keep changing cars and clothes because, given the vicissitudes of fashion, the symbolic value of these purchases may fade faster than their utilitarian value.

In a related vein, narcissists, keen as ever to impress, may realize that their previous persona is now yesterday's news and that the envy of others is evaporating. Thus, they will try to reinvent themselves, but with the help of novel and expensive accessories or activities: a C-Class Mercedes-Benz luxury car, a 18 carat diamond cut chunky grains bracelet, flying first class, or a private audience with a high-ranking politician. Such symbolically motivated spending may lead to financial strain for them and for their immediate others (e.g., family). It would be interesting to test whether narcissism abounds among those borrowers who habitually take out loans or file for personal bankruptcy.

#### ADDITIONAL IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Our discussion raises two additional sets of implications for future research. One set is concerned with questions that would fine tune the testing of the speculative proposals we put forward. We consider four questions. First, what are the consequences for the level and stability of narcissistic state self-esteem as a function of consumer spending? State self-esteem may peek immediately following a purchase but dip soon thereafter, or be stable in times of plenty but variable

in times of want. Second, does the type of self-presentation audience make a difference in terms of both narcissistic spending and intrapsychic processes? Narcissists may spend more lavishly than non-narcissists regardless of self-presentation audience, but this tendency may be exacerbated when (a) the audience is other people rather than just the self, and (b) the audience consists of high- rather than low-status others. Third, how do other people evaluate narcissistic consumer spending? Past research has indicated that narcissists are liked initially but then become progressively disliked as others get to know them (Paulhus, 1998). The social evaluation of narcissistic consumer spending may follow a similar time course. Initially, others will perceive narcissists as desirable companions. With repeated exposure to them, however, others will begin to suspect the true motives underlying narcissistic consumer behavior and conclude they are conceited, shallow, show-offs. Finally, does hypothesized self-serving and relentless narcissistic consumer spending result in decreased enjoyment of consumer goods? It is possible that, due to linking directly their purchases to their self-esteem, narcissists are unable to fully enjoy the intrinsic benefits that those products provide. In their pursuit of social favor, narcissists may forget to stop and savor.

In addition, our discussion has implications for some of the empirical work that Dunning (2007) has reviewed. Take the case of self-signaling. It may be the span of time that narcissists are "able" to hold their arm in a bath of icy water (Quattrone & Tversky, 1984) depends on whether that span of time is diagnostic of (even if it cannot causally affect) future agentic achievements, as opposed to communal contributions. It may also be that narcissists will be particularly likely to hang on zealously to a coffee mug that is designated theirs (Kahneman, Knetsch, & Thaler, 1991); although interestingly, there is some paradoxical evidence that the name-letter effect is inversely correlated with narcissism, perhaps indicating ego fragility (Gregg & Sedikides, 2007; Jordan, Spencer, Zanna, Hoshino-Browne, & Correll, 2003). We look forward to research that will put our tentative predictions to the empirical test.

#### REFERENCES

- Baumeister, R. F., & Vohs, K. D. (2001). Narcissism as addiction to esteem. *Psychological Inquiry*, 12, 206-210.
- Bradlee, P. M., & Emmons, R. A. (1992). Locating narcissism within the interpersonal circumplex and the five-factor model. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 13, 821-830.
- Bushman, B. J., & Baumeister, R. F. (1998). Threatened egotism, narcissism, self-esteem, and direct and displaced aggression: Does self-love or self-hate lead to violence? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 75, 219-229.
- Buss, D. M., & Chiodo, L. M. (1991). Narcissistic acts in everyday life. *Journal of Personality*, 59, 179-215.
- Campbell, W. K. (1999). Narcissism and romantic attraction. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 77, 1254-1270.



- Campbell, W. K., Bonacci, A. M., Shelton, J., Exline, J. J., & Bushman, B. J. (2004). Psychological entitlement: Interpersonal consequences and validation of a new self-report measure. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 83, 29-45.
- Campbell, W. K., Bush, C. P., Brunell, A. B., & Shelton, J. (2005). Understanding the social costs of narcissism: The case of tragedy of the commons. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 31, 1358-1368.
- Campbell, W. K., Rudich, E., & Sedikides, C. (2002). Narcissism, self-esteem, and the positivity of self-views: Two portraits of self-love. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 28, 358-368.
- Carroll, L. (1987). A study of narcissism, affiliation, intimacy, and power motives among students in business administration. *Psychological Reports*, 61, 355-358.
- Dunning, D. (2007). Self-image motives and consumer behavior: How sacrosanct self-beliefs sway preferences in the marketplace. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 17, 237-249.
- Emmons, R. A. (1984). Factor analysis and construct validity of the Narcissistic Personality Inventory. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 48, 291-300.
- Emmons, R. A. (1987). Narcissism: Theory and measurement. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 52, 11-17.
- Farwell, L., & Wohlwend-Lloyd, R. (1998). Narcissistic processes: Optimistic expectations, favorable self-evaluations, and self-enhancing attributions. *Journal of Personality*, 66, 65-83.
- Gosling, S. D., John, O. P., Craik, K. H., & Robins, R. W. (1998). Do people know how they behave?: Self-reported act frequencies compared with on-line codings by observers. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 74, 1337-1349.
- Gregg, A. P., & Sedikides, C. (2007). *Narcissism and implicit self-esteem: Rethinking the link*. Unpublished manuscript, University of Southampton, U.K.
- Hogan, R., & Hogan, J. (2001). Assessing leadership: A view from the dark side. *International Journal of Selection and Assessment*, 9, 40-51.
- John, O. P., & Robins, R. W. (1994). Accuracy and bias in self-perception: Individual differences in self-enhancement and the role of narcissism. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 66, 206-219.
- Jordan, C., Spencer, S. J., Zanna, M. P., Hoshino-Browne, E., & Correll, J. (2003). Implicit self-esteem, explicit self-esteem and defensiveness. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 85, 969-978.
- Kahneman, D., Knetsch, J. L., & Thaler, R. H. (1991). The endowment effect, loss aversion, and status quo bias: Anomalies. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 5, 193-206.
- Leary, M. R., Tchividjian, L. R., & Kraxberger, B. E. (1994). Self-presentation can be hazardous to your health: Impression management and health risk. *Health Psychology*, 13, 461-470.
- Morf, C. C., Weir, C. R., & Davidov, M. (2000). Narcissism and intrinsic motivation: The role of goal congruence. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 36, 424-438.
- Netemeyer, R. G., Burton, S., & Lichtenstein, D. R. (1995). Trait aspects of vanity: Measurement and relevance to consumer behavior. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 12, 612-626.
- Paulhus, D. L. (1998). Interpersonal and intrapsychic adaptiveness of trait self-enhancement: A mixed blessing? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 74, 1197-1208.
- Petty, R. E., & Cacioppo, J. T. (1981). *Attitudes and persuasion: Classic and contemporary approaches*. Dubuque, IA: Brown.
- Quattrone, G. A., & Tversky, A. (1984). Causal versus diagnostic contingencies: On self-deception and on the voter's illusion. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 46, 237-248.
- Raskin, R., & Hall, C. S. (1981). The narcissistic personality inventory: Alternate form reliability and further evidence of construct validity. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 45, 159-162.
- Raskin, R., & Novacek, J. (1991). Narcissism and the use of fantasy. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 47, 490-499.
- Raskin, R., Novacek, J., & Hogan, R. (1991). Narcissistic self-esteem management. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 60, 911-918.
- Raskin, R. N., & Shaw, R. (1988). Narcissism and the use of personal pronouns. *Journal of Personality*, 56, 393-404.
- Raskin, R., & Terry, H. (1988). A principle components analysis of the Narcissistic Personality Inventory and further evidence of its construct validity. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 54, 890-902.
- Rhodewalt, F., & Morf, C. C. (1995). Self and interpersonal correlates of the Narcissistic Personality Inventory. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 29, 1-23.
- Rosenberg, M. (1965). *Society and the adolescent self-image*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Sedikides, C., Campbell, W. K., Reeder, G., & Elliot, A. J. (2002). The self in relationships: Whether, how, and when close others put the self "in its place." In W. Stroebe & M. Hewstone (Eds.), *European review of social psychology* (Vol. 12, pp. 237-265). Chichester, U.K.: John Wiley & Sons.
- Sedikides, C., Campbell, W. K., Reeder, G., Elliot, A. J., & Gregg, A. P. (2002). Do others bring out the worst in narcissists?: The "Others Exist for Me" illusion. In Y. Kashima, M. Foddy, & M. Platow (Eds.), *Self and identity: Personal, social, and symbolic* (pp. 103-123). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.
- Sedikides, C., Rudich, E. A., Gregg, A. P., Kumashiro, M., & Rusbul, C. (2004). Are normal narcissists psychologically healthy?: Self-esteem matters. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 87, 400-416.
- Stucke, T. S., & Sporer, S. L. (2002). When a grandiose self-image is threatened: Narcissism and self-concept clarity as predictors of negative emotions and aggression toward ego threat. *Journal of Personality*, 70, 509-532.
- Vangelisti, A., Knapp, M. L., & Daly, J. A. (1990). Conversational narcissism. *Communication Monographs*, 57, 251-274.
- Wallace, H. M., & Baumeister, R. F. (2002). The performance of narcissists rises and falls with perceived opportunity for glory. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 82, 819-834.