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## Review

# Narcissism and conspicuous consumption

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**Abstract**

Narcissists are prone to conspicuous consumption, that is, preference for luxury over mundane products. We analyze four reasons for their conspicuous consumption: positive distinctiveness (individuation and status), meaning in life, materialism, and sexual signaling. Empirical support for these reasons ranges from good to preliminary. We then discuss directions that this nascent literature could take. These include a consideration of different forms of narcissism (grandiose vs. vulnerable, agentic vs. communal, admiring vs. rivalrous), the value of experimentation in clarifying the causal flow from narcissism to conspicuous consumption and also from conspicuous consumption to state narcissism, as well as the (mostly negative) consequences of conspicuous consumption for narcissism and society.

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Narcissism, consumerism, conspicuous consumption, materialism, meaning in life.

**Introduction**

We link in this article narcissism and conspicuous consumption. We define narcissism and discuss mechanisms that explain narcissistic proneness to conspicuous consumption. We conclude with a consideration of unresolved issues.

**Narcissism and Consumer Products**

Narcissism, and in particular grandiose agentic narcissism, is characterized by egocentric exceptionalism (superiority, importance, and entitlement), social selfishness (self-serving and antagonistic orientation

towards others), extraversion, exhibitionism, and dominance [1]. Consumer products vary from luxury and symbolic to mundane or practical [2]. The former are more expensive, exclusive, flashy, personalized, and ornate (include multiple functions—necessary or not) than the latter [3].

**The Allure of Luxury Products**

Consumers may favor mundane products when guided by a cost-benefit analysis. Such products maximize utility and price: they are good value for money [4]. However, consumers are guided in their purchases not only by pragmatic concerns, but also by what the products signify [5]. Luxury goods have symbolic value, as they convey information above and beyond their tangible characteristics [6]. This information refers to the owner: who they are and what they aspire to be.

**Narcissistic Proclivity to Conspicuous Consumption**

Given their excessive pre-occupation with the self [1], narcissists are attracted to luxury goods, that is, to conspicuous consumption. In an illustrative study, participants viewed pictorial and descriptive examples of several product categories (e.g., sunglasses, MP3 players). Within each category, one example represented a luxury version, and another a mundane version. Subsequently, participants stated their purchase intentions. Those high (than low) on narcissism expressed a preference for luxury over mundane products [7]. This finding has been replicated directly [3,8,9] and conceptually. For instance, narcissists take better care of themselves [10] by wearing stylish clothes and over-grooming [11].

**Why Do Narcissists Engage in Conspicuous Consumption?**

We discuss four reasons why narcissists might prefer luxury over mundane goods: positive distinctiveness, meaning, materialism, and sexual signaling.

**Positive Distinctiveness**

Positive distinctiveness is an umbrella term for individuation (communicating one's uniqueness) and elevation (communicating one's social status). Narcissists are high on both individuation [12] and the pursuit or flaunting of status [13].

Individuation drives narcissistic conspicuous consumption. Narcissists (compared to their low narcissism counterparts) are eager to buy and pay more for goods that are unconventional, of limited edition, and personalized [14,15]. Elevation also drives narcissistic conspicuous consumption. Narcissists are more likely to purchase expensive (than affordable) products available at prestigious (than non-prestigious) retail stores [16]. In all, conspicuous consumption gives narcissists an opportunity to feel unique and signal status.

### Materialism

Belk [17] defined materialism as “The importance a consumer attaches to worldly possessions.” Narcissists are materialistic. They value financial success [18] and wealth acquisition [19]. They are also prone to impulsive buying [20] and compulsive consumption [21].

Narcissism and materialism are positively related [22], and so are materialism and conspicuous consumption [23,24]. Indeed, a cross-sectional study indicated that materialism mediated the relation between narcissism and preferences for luxury goods [25]. This pattern may be more pronounced among individuals high on socio-economic status (SES): High SES is positively associated both with narcissism [26] and materialism [27].

### Meaning

Materialism conduces to poor psychological health. It is associated with anxiety [28], depression [29], and a precipitous decline in overall wellbeing [30]. This literature would invite the conjecture that narcissists, being materialistic, suffer from psychological ill-being. Evidence, though, does not support this conjecture [31]. How do narcissists maintain their psychological health?

Meaning in life is a plausible candidate. Meaning (perceiving one’s existence is significant, purposeful, and coherent) [32] is positively linked to psychological health [33]. Narcissists derive meaning from materialism, and in particular the pursuit of extrinsic goals (e.g., financial success, high-end acquisitions, fame) [34], which are externally motivated and satisfy self-serving concerns such as acclaim or rewards. Extrinsic goals, then, align with narcissists’ high agency [35]. In a cross-sectional study [36], narcissism was positively associated with meaning assigned to extrinsic goals as opposed to intrinsic goals (which are internally motivated and satisfy personal fulfillment or other-serving concerns such as maintaining positive relationships and contributing to the community). In an experiment [36], following the assessment of narcissism, university students viewed information highlighting either the extrinsic (financial) or intrinsic (personal fulfillment) value of their education. Subsequently, they recorded the level of meaning in their lives. Narcissism was

positively related to meaning when the extrinsic (vs. intrinsic) rewards of university education were emphasized. Stated otherwise, the emphasis on extrinsic (vs. intrinsic) education rewards increased meaning among high (compared to low) narcissists.

### Sexual Signaling

Conspicuous consumption serves, in part, as a sexual signaling system involving the display of one’s economic resources and desirability as a mating partner. Men are more likely to evince conspicuous consumption when they adopt a short-term (than long-term) mating strategy [37], and conspicuous purchasing enhances men’s desirability as a short-term (but not long-term) mate [38]. Additionally, women perceive conspicuously consuming men as being interested in short-term than long-term mating [38]. Lastly, observers of a woman manifesting conspicuous (than mundane) consumption are more confident that she will succeed in mate attraction [39].

A reason why narcissists engage in conspicuous consumption might be their restricted socio-sexuality [40], that is, their proclivity toward short-term mating. There is suggestive evidence for this proposition [41]. Young adults responded to questions about gift-giving in their current romantic relationship. They described both an occasion in which they had given their partner a gift (listing the price) and a hypothetical occasion in which they would give their partner a gift (controlling for monthly salary). Subsequently, participants completed a gift-giving motivations scale. The motivations were intrinsic (e.g., “because I love my partner”), maintenance—reflecting the giver’s efforts to continue the relationship (e.g., “because I want to maintain a good relationship with my partner”), and power or the desire to exhibit it (e.g., “because I want to show off what I can afford”). Participants, then, indicated the extent to which they were or would be driven by each motivation. Controlling for sex, age, and self-esteem, narcissism was positively associated with maintenance motivation in the past, but maintenance and power motivation in the future. We assume here that power motivation is a proxy for desire for short-term mating, an assumption worthy of empirical scrutiny. More generally, follow-up work ought to test directly the idea that narcissists implicate conspicuous consumption as short-term mating strategy.

### Unresolved Issues

We consider three directions for future research: forms of narcissism, experimentation, and consequences of conspicuous consumption.

### Forms of Narcissism

Narcissism can be grandiose (agentic), but also vulnerable [1]. Vulnerable narcissism is characterized by egocentric exceptionalism and social selfishness (like

grandiose narcissism), but also by hypersensitivity to criticism, emotional reactivity, and shame. Vulnerable narcissists are driven to conspicuous consumption to the same extent as grandiose agentic narcissists [8,15,25]. However, they may do so, at least in part, in an attempt to compensate for their presumed inner fragility (i.e., insecurity, self-doubt, threat, inadequacy). Insecurity, induced via death cognition activation, increases materialism (i.e., greed, overconsumption in a forest-management game) [42]. Self-doubt, induced via memorization of synonymous (e.g., “doubtful”) versus control (e.g., “inside”) words, intensifies materialism [43]. Further, when threatened (vs. not), people become more eager to pay for unique or scarce products [44]. Moreover, individuals feeling inadequate on a self-aspect (e.g., tennis player) are particularly likely to engage in conspicuous consumption of objects that puff up that self-aspect (e.g., brand-name tennis clothing) [45]. Consistent with these findings, vulnerable narcissists strive for money and expensive products for fear of unfavorable appraisal by others [46]. However, inconsistent with these findings, approval-seeking does not mediate the association between vulnerable narcissism and conspicuous consumption [15]. Future work would do well to address this empirical discrepancy.

The construct of grandiose narcissism can also be divided into agentic and communal [47]. Although agentic narcissism involves self-aggrandizement on the agentic domain (e.g., intelligence, competence, achievement), communal narcissism involves self-aggrandizement on the communal domain. That is, high (vs. low) communal narcissists believe they are superior to other people on warmth, morality, and prosociality. Although communal narcissists claim to be moral paragons and pillars of society, their behavior does not match their claims [47,48]. However, compared to agentic, communal narcissists are liked better by others, in part because they make others feel liked by them [49]. As such, it is possible that communal (relative to agentic) narcissists refrain from conspicuous consumption, especially in the presence of others. The alternative is also plausible. Given that conspicuous consumption serves, in part, a social signaling function, it may be more pronounced among communal (than agentic) narcissists.

Lastly, the construct of grandiose agentic narcissism can be divided into admiring narcissism, guided by the self-enhancement motive, and rivalrous narcissism, guided by the self-protection motive [50]. Admiring narcissists may manifest a stronger inclination for conspicuous consumption (which is likely to enhance the self by garnering applause or status) compared to rivalrous narcissists. However, in a competitive setting, rivalrous narcissists may pursue more resolutely conspicuous consumption. It is also

possible that rivalrous narcissists engage in conspicuous consumption to harm others rather than directly benefit themselves.

### Experimentation

The evidence for narcissistic conspicuous consumption is correlational. In the typical study, narcissism is measured and preferences toward luxury versus mundane products are assessed. Experiments could clarify the assumed causal flow. Here, narcissism, like all traits, would be manipulated, and ensuing inclinations toward conspicuous consumption would be measured. In a relevant study, experimentally induced narcissism (“describe a specific and personally experienced occasion in which you felt you had impressed someone” vs. “describe a specific and personally experienced occasion in which you felt you were socially accepted and/or included”) led to higher perceived product uniqueness [51].

Experiments could also test the reverse causation. Does selection of luxury (vs. mundane) products increase state narcissism? In relevant research [52], participants were presented with nine choice sets (e.g., sunglasses, t-shirts, watches), each consisting of three consumer products. In the choice-present condition, they were informed that they could select any product they liked regardless of its price, whereas, in the choice-absent condition, they were instructed to select the option that was in grayscale. Consumer choices (vs. non-choices) elevated state narcissism. It would be interesting to examine if choice of luxury (vs. mundane) products also increases narcissism.

### Consequences of Conspicuous Consumption

Conspicuous consumption can have some unfavorable consequences for narcissists, who are known for their relatively weak brand loyalty [53]. As such, narcissists are likely to engage in dysfunctional post-purchase behavior, including feeling dissatisfied, regretful, or angry [54], spreading negative word of mouth [55], or proceeding to re-buy the brand or brand extension despite their initial reservations [56]. Also, although conspicuous consumption augments the narcissist’s social status, this might be beneficial or harmful depending on whether the audience values status or warmth [57]. Further, conspicuous consumption can affect adversely one’s financial status and culminate in financial debt [58], with downstream repercussions for well-being [59].

More importantly, conspicuous consumption can have societal consequences. Some of them are positive, as conspicuous consumption strengthens the economy. Many of them, though, are negative. A prime example concerns the environmental crisis of which conspicuous consumption is partially culpable [60]. Luxurious

products, wrapped in excessive packaging, are often made of highly polluting textiles such as leather goods or fur coats [61]. Similarly, the fashion industry produces 10% of global carbon emissions, polluting the water supply and the oceans with microplastics [62]. Overall, narcissism is related to looser environmental ethics, due to high levels of materialism [63].

Can narcissistic conspicuous consumption be curtailed? After reading a story that focused on eliciting a desire for status (vs. control), participants were more likely to purchase a pro-environmental product, especially when they shopped in public (than in private) and the product was expensive (than affordable) [64]. Narcissists make similar purchasing decisions as those participants who were primed with a desire for status in the above-mentioned work [65]. A pro-environmental product, then, that is positioned as high-status or expensive in a public setting might improve marketing success among narcissists [65,66]. In addition, preferences for luxury products are weakened following affirmation of one's important values or contemplating ownership of a high-status good [44,67]. Hence, these manipulations might tame narcissistic conspicuous consumption.

## Coda

“Luxury is no longer the embrace of the Kings and Queens of France but the mass marketing phenomenon of everyday life” [68]. Indeed, luxury consumption is on the rise. The global luxury goods market size was \$316.16 billion in 2019 and is projected to grow to \$352.84 billion in 2027 [69]. Narcissism may claim a small share of this market. Future research needs to deepen understanding of the motives, circumstances, and limiting conditions of narcissistic conspicuous consumption.

## Conflict of interest statement

Nothing declared.

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Illustrates that narcissistic conspicuous consumption can be advantageous or disadvantageous to the narcissism, depending on whether the audience values agency or warmth.

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