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Why do Narcissists Disregard Social-etiquette Norms? A Test of Two Explanations for why Narcissism Relates to Offensive-language Use

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Why do narcissists disregard social-etiquette norms? A test of two explanations for why narcissism relates to offensive-language use

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ABSTRACT

Narcissists often fail to abide by norms for polite social conduct, but why? The current study addressed this issue by exploring reasons why narcissists use more offensive language (i.e., profanity) than non-narcissists. In this study, 602 participants completed a survey in which they responded on a measure of trait narcissism, rated several offensive words on the degree to which the words were attention-grabbing and offensive, and then indicated how frequently they used the words. Consistent with the idea that narcissists use offensive language to gain attention, narcissists were incrementally more likely to use offensive language if they perceived such language to be highly attention-grabbing, and they were also more likely to perceive offensive language as attention-grabbing. Consistent with the idea that narcissists use more offensive language because they are less sensitive to the offensiveness of the language, an additional mediation analysis showed that narcissists perceived offensive language as less offensive than non-narcissists, a perception that, in turn, enhanced use of offensive language. Thus, this study provides evidence for two mechanisms that underlie narcissists' frequent use of offensive language, and broadly contributes to the understudied issue of *why* narcissists violate social-etiquette norms.

1. Introduction

Narcissists seem to disregard social-etiquette norms. For example, narcissists are more likely to brag (Buss & Chiodo, 1991), behave aggressively toward others (Barry, Chaplin, & Grafeman, 2006; Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Stucke & Sporer, 2002; Twenge & Campbell, 2003), and use offensive language (DeWall, Buffardi, Bonser, & Campbell, 2011; Holtzman, Vazire, & Mehl, 2010). Although it is well-known that narcissists are prone to break social-etiquette norms, the underlying causes for this tendency remain largely unclear. One possibility is that narcissists break social-etiquette norms as a means of grabbing people's attention (the "attention-seeking" hypothesis; Buss & Chiodo, 1991; DeWall et al., 2011). An additional possibility is that narcissists, for various reasons, simply perceive such norm violations as less offensive than non-narcissists (the "insensitivity" hypothesis; Collins & Stukas, 2008). The present paper seeks to add some clarity to this issue in the context of the link between narcissism and offensive-language use (DeWall et al., 2011; Holtzman et al., 2010). Specifically, we explore the following two, non-competing explanations for why narcissists (vs. non-narcissists) are more likely to use offensive language: (a) narcissists use offensive language more often because offensive language represents a means for narcissists to satisfy their goal to be the center of attention (e.g., "Everyone, look at me!"); and (b) narcissists use offensive language more frequently because they are less aware that such language is offensive (e.g., "No one is really too offended by swearing.").

To date, two studies have directly investigated the link between narcissism and offensive-language use. In one exploratory study (Holtzman et al., 2010), participants carried a device that intermittently recorded segments of naturalistic speech for four days, and then they responded on a series of personality questionnaires. Among other things, the researchers found that narcissists used offensive words more frequently than non-narcissists. Nevertheless, this study did not posit a theoretical explanation for this finding. A follow-up study examined whether narcissists use offensive language more frequently as a means of attracting attention to themselves (DeWall et al., 2011). In this study, participants responded on a narcissism questionnaire, and then they wrote three essays about themselves. DeWall and colleagues (2011) hypothesized that narcissists tend to use either offensive language or first-person singular pronouns as a means of grabbing attention. The data conformed to this hypothesis: in cases where narcissists used relatively few first-person singular pronouns, they used relatively more offensive language. The authors concluded that narcissists tend to use offensive language as a means of grabbing attention. Although this "attention-seeking" explanation seems

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plausible, it is also plausible that heightened self-awareness (as indexed by the use of singular pronouns; Davis & Brock, 1975) reduced narcissists' antisocial orientation (e.g., Prentice-Dunn & Rogers, 1982; Scheier, Fenigstein, & Buss, 1974; Zimbardo, 1970) and, in turn, reduced narcissists' use of offensive language. With this alternative interpretation in play, there is a need for additional testing of the attention-seeking hypothesis. One goal of the present research is to provide some novel tests of this hypothesis.

An additional possibility is that narcissists use offensive language more frequently because they perceive the words as less offensive (the "insensitivity" hypothesis). For example, because narcissism is negatively correlated with empathy and perspective-taking (Watson, Grisham, Trotter, & Biderman, 1984; Watson & Morris, 1991), it is possible that narcissists are less aware of people's offended reactions and therefore underestimate the offensiveness of offensive language. In addition, some researchers (Collins & Stukas, 2008; Sedikides, Campbell, Reeder, Elliot, & Gregg, 2002) have suggested that narcissists may become insensitive and underplay the offensiveness of their actions because such insensitivity can act to facilitate their aggressive pursuit for admiration. To address the insensitivity explanation for the narcissism-profanity link, the present research explored the hypothesis that narcissists use offensive language more frequently because they are insensitive to its offensiveness.

In this study, participants responded on the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Terry, 1988), and then they rated several words (offensive words and "control" words) on each of three dimensions: *frequency-of-use*, *attention-grabbing* and *offensiveness* (for relations between these dimensions, see Table 1). This design allowed us to assess some predictions generated from the attention-seeking and insensitivity hypotheses. In line with the attention-seeking hypothesis (DeWall et al., 2011), we predicted that narcissists (vs. non-narcissists) would indicate that offensive language was more attention-grabbing. For example, because narcissists place greater emphasis on attention-seeking goals (Buss & Chiodo, 1991; DeWall et al., 2011), and because goals increase recognition of opportunities to fulfill the goal (e.g., Atkinson & Birch, 1970; Lewin, 1926; Shah, 2003), narcissists should be particularly likely to recognize offensive-language use as a means for getting attention. Furthermore – also in line with the attention-seeking hypothesis – we predicted that narcissists (vs. non-narcissists) would indicate using offensive words more frequently than non-narcissists, but that this relation would become less pronounced when individuals viewed offensive words as less attention-grabbing. Because goals enhance the production of *only* those behaviors that are effective for satisfying the goals (Atkinson & Birch, 1970; Greenwald, 1982; McClelland, 1985), it follows that when offensive-word use is perceived as an ineffective means to get attention, the effect of narcissism would be reduced. In line with the insensitivity hypothesis (e.g., Collins & Stukas, 2008; Sedikides et al., 2002), we examined whether narcissists would rate offensive words as less offensive and whether this lowered sensitivity would mediate the relationship between narcissism and frequency of offensive-word use.

Table 1
Intercorrelations among variables.

	1	2	3
1. Frequency-of-use			
2. Narcissism	0.35**		
3. Attention-grabbing	0.36**	0.11**	
4. Offensiveness	−0.25**	−0.20**	0.21**

** $p < .01$.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Six hundred and two undergraduate students (465 women) at Eastern Kentucky University, in the year 2012, were recruited to participate in an online survey on personality and offensive language. Specifically, these participants were offered a link to the study on a website that offers research-participation opportunities to psychology students. Participants completed the study in exchange for partial course credit in their Introductory Psychology course. Mean age was 20.77 (SD = 5.47). The sample consisted of 322 Freshman, 145 Sophomores, 81 Juniors, and 51 Seniors (three participants did not specify their academic year).

2.2. Design

The study utilized a correlational design. To address our hypotheses, the study included the following measures: (1) a measure of dispositional narcissism; (2) participants' ratings of "attention-grabbing" for various offensive (and non-offensive) words; (3) participants' ratings of offensiveness for a variety of offensive (and non-offensive) words; (4) participants' frequency of use for a variety of offensive (and non-offensive) words. These measures are described in more detail in Section 1.4.

2.3. Procedure

Participants completed the study online. After reading the participant information sheet, each participant responded to a measure of dispositional narcissism. Next, participants rated 25 offensive words and 10 "control" words on frequency-of-use, attention-grabbing, and offensiveness. All items in this second section were counter-balanced. Finally, participants responded to some demographic questions, and then they were debriefed.

2.4. Materials

2.4.1. Offensive word selection and ratings

To determine which offensive words to use, and to determine how participants should be asked to rate these words, we followed methods from Janschewitz's (2008) article on offensive language. In the appendix of this article, there are lists of which offensive words ranked highest on a variety of dimensions (e.g., use, offensiveness, etc.). In the current study, we used 20 words from these lists, and we added five more based on our intuition. In continuing to follow this prior research, participants were asked to rate these 25 offensive words (e.g., buttfuck, cunt, shit head) and 10 "control" words (e.g., teacher, nun, medicine) on a 9-point scale to measure *frequency-of-use* (*How often do you use the word?*), *attention-grabbing* (*How exciting is the word? Consider how much the word grabs your attention.*), and *offensiveness* (*How offensive is this word to you?*).

Prior to data analysis, as a validity check on our offensive words, we measured whether participants rated offensive words as more offensive than control words. To do this, first, we computed a control-word-offensiveness mean score, which was the average offensiveness rating for the control words ($\alpha = .88$). Next, we conducted paired-samples *t*-tests comparing the offensiveness ratings of the control-word-offensiveness mean score to the mean offensiveness rating of each of the 25 individual offensive words. Out of our original 25 offensive words, participants rated 24 offensive words as significantly more offensive than the average of the control words ($ps < .001$). Participants rated the remaining offensive word (*Randy*) as significantly *less* offensive than the average control

word (p = .039). Because this word was rated as less offensive than the average control word, we excluded it from all data analyses. The remaining 24 offensive words were averaged onto indices of offensive-word frequency-of-use (α = .93), attention-grabbing (α = .95), and offensiveness (α = .91). For the control words, similar indices were computed for control-word frequency-of-use (α = .82), attention-grabbing (α = .87), and offensiveness (α = .87). Finally, we created offensive-word relative scores for frequency-of-use, attention-grabbing, and offensiveness by subtracting each control-word mean score from its corresponding offensive-word mean score. For example, to create the relative offensive-word offensiveness score, we subtracted the control-word offensiveness mean from the offensive-word offensiveness mean. Hence, high scores on these relative ratings indicate higher frequency-of-use, attention-grabbing, and offensiveness for offensive words (relative to control words). We used these relative scores (for frequency-of-use, attention-grabbing, and offensiveness) in all data analyses.

2.4.2. Narcissism

To measure individual differences in narcissism, participants completed the 40-item forced-choice Narcissism Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Terry, 1988). This scale was originally adopted from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III) criteria for Narcissistic Personality Disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 1980). As a personality trait, narcissism can constitute a mental disorder, but Raskin and Terry (1988) developed the NPI as a means of measuring this trait in non-clinical populations. The NPI is a 40-item self-report measure of narcissism in which participants decide whether to endorse statements that reflect narcissism (e.g., *I know I'm a good person because everyone keeps telling me so*). After reverse coding the appropriate items, responses to all 40 items were summed to yield an index of narcissism (α = .83; M = 14.58; SD = 6.49). Importantly, much prior research demonstrates that the NPI has satisfactory reliability and attests that the instrument is a valid measure (Twenge, Konrath, Foster, Campbell, & Bushman, 2008).

3. Results

3.1. Attention-grabbing hypothesis

First, we examined the effect of narcissism on offensive-word attention-grabbing. As anticipated, narcissism was positively related to the perceived attention-grabbing quality of offensive words, $r(602)$ = .11, p = .01. Next, we examined whether the effect of narcissism on offensive-word frequency-of-use would be moderated by perceptions of how attention-grabbing the offensive words were perceived to be. To do this, a hierarchical regression was run with narcissism (block 1), offensive-word attention-grabbing (block 1), and the narcissism × attention-grabbing interaction (block 2) predicting offensive-word frequency-of-use. This analysis (summarized in Table 2) revealed a main effect of narcissism

Table 2
Hierarchical regression of offensive-word frequency-of-use on narcissism and offensive-word attention-grabbing.

Variable	B	SE(B)	β	ΔR^2
Step 1				.23***
Narcissism	0.56	0.06	0.32***	
Attention-grabbing	0.59	0.06	0.33***	
Step 1				.01**
Narcissism	0.55	0.06	0.31***	
Attention-grabbing	0.57	0.06	0.32***	
Narcissism × attention-grabbing	0.19	0.06	0.11**	

*** p < .001.
** p < .01.

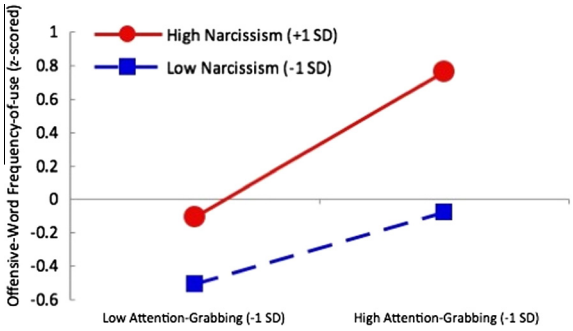

Fig. 1. The interaction of narcissism and offensive-word attention-grabbing on offensive-word frequency-of-use (z-scored).

(β = .32, t = 8.86, p < .001) and also a main effect of attention-grabbing on frequency-of-use (β = .33, t = 9.23, p < .001). Of central importance, the narcissism × attention-grabbing interaction effect was also significant (β = .11, t = 3.03, p = .003; see Fig. 1). To decompose this interaction (using procedures described by Aiken & West, 1991), we examined the simple effect of narcissism on offensive-word frequency-of-use among participants who rated offensive language as low in attention-grabbing (1 SD below the mean) and also among participants who rated offensive language as high in attention-grabbing (1 SD above the mean). Consistent with the attention-seeking hypothesis, the regression weight for effect of narcissism on use of offensive words was more than twice as large when attention-grabbing was high (β = .42, t = 8.55, p < .001) rather than low (β = .20, t = 3.89, p < .001).

3.2. Insensitivity hypothesis

Is the relationship between narcissism and offensive-language use mediated by narcissists' insensitivity to the offensive nature of such language? To examine this question, we first correlated narcissism with offensive-word offensiveness. This analysis revealed a negative relationship between these two variables, $r(602) = -0.20$, p < .001, which suggests that narcissists are less sensitive to the offensiveness of offensive words. Next, we correlated offensive-word offensiveness with offensive-word frequency-of-use. Consistent with the mediation idea, this analysis revealed a significant negative relationship between these two variables, $r(602) = -0.35$, p < .001, indicating that people use more offensive language if they are less sensitive to its offensiveness.[1]

In light of these relationships, we explored whether offensive-word offensiveness might mediate the relationship between narcissism and offensive-word frequency-of-use. To assess mediation, we estimated the indirect effect of narcissism on offensive-word frequency-of-use through offensive-word offensiveness for 5000 bootstrap samples (Preacher & Hayes, 2004).[2]

For this test, the standard deviation of the indirect effect of narcissism, via offensive-word offensiveness, on offensive-word frequency-of-use for 5000 bootstrapped samples was estimated.

[1] Notably, narcissism failed to moderate the relationship between offensive-word offensiveness and offensive-word frequency-of-use (β = .06, t = 1.69, p = .09). This finding implies that narcissists and non-narcissists alike will use profanity less frequently to the extent they perceive the language as offensive. Narcissists differ from non-narcissists, however, because they view profanity as less offensive generally.

[2] Bootstrapping provides a nonparametric approach to testing the significance of a mediation effect. The bootstrapping approach to assessing mediation has benefits over the more traditional Sobel test. First, the Sobel test assumes that the distribution of mediation effects is normal, an assumption that is often violated (Preacher & Hayes, 2004). The bootstrapping method does not make this dubious assumption about the distribution of mediation effects and consequently provides a more powerful and appropriate test for mediation (Preacher & Hayes, 2004).

According to this analysis, the aforementioned indirect effect was estimated to lie between 0.011 and 0.075 with 99% confidence ($b = 0.037$, SE = 0.013). Because zero is not contained in this interval, these data suggest that the effect of narcissism on offensive-word frequency-of-use was mediated by offensive-word offensiveness. As a demonstration of the robustness of the indirect effect, a Sobel (1982) test of mediation also yielded evidence for a significant indirect effect ($z = 3.54$, $p < .001$).

4. Discussion

Numerous studies have demonstrated the narcissistic tendency to disregard social-etiquette norms (e.g., Barry et al., 2006; Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Buss & Chiodo, 1991; Stucke & Sporer, 2002; Twenge & Campbell, 2003), but few have proposed or tested a functional explanation for this narcissistic tendency. The present research sought to shed light on this issue in the context of the link between narcissism and offensive-language use. Although multiple prior studies have reported that narcissists tend to use offensive language more frequently than non-narcissists (DeWall et al., 2011; Holtzman et al., 2010), empirical evidence for *why* this phenomenon occurs has been lacking or otherwise incomplete. The current research provides evidence for two reasons why narcissists use offensive language more often than non-narcissists. First, in support of the attention-seeking hypothesis (DeWall et al., 2011), the current research provides evidence that narcissists use offensive language as a means of attracting attention, as the relationship between narcissism and offensive-language frequency-of-use was more than twice as large among participants who perceived offensive language to be more (vs. less) attention-grabbing. Additionally, narcissistic participants were more likely to view offensive language as attention-grabbing, presumably because narcissists' goal to get attention facilitated the recognition of offensive-language-use as a means to this goal. Second, participants were more likely to use offensive language if they were insensitive to the offensiveness of such language, and narcissistic (vs. non-narcissistic) participants were found to be particularly insensitive to the offensiveness of offensive language. Furthermore, the relationship between narcissism and offensive-language use was mediated by narcissists' insensitivity to the offensiveness of offensive language. Thus, the current research suggests two reasons why narcissists might use more offensive language than non-narcissists.

In future research, it might be fruitful to further explore the "insensitivity" mechanism as a means of explaining past narcissism effects and developing a better understanding of the narcissism construct. In terms of explaining past effects, insensitivity might explain why narcissism is related to greater self-forgiveness (Strelan, 2007): it is easier to forgive oneself if one is insensitive to the full extent of one's infractions. Also, if narcissists are largely insensitive to the negative consequences of their behaviors, this might explain why they recall primarily positive behaviors and attributes about themselves (Gosling, John, Craik, & Robins, 1998; Horvath & Morf, 2010): it is difficult to recall a negative behavior if one is insensitive to the negativity of the behavior. In terms of better understanding the narcissism construct, it would be interesting to explore the causes of narcissists' insensitivity. For example, insensitivity may result from strategic ego-maintenance maneuvers designed to avoid confronting offensive behavior and loss of admiration (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). Alternatively, as is suggested by Collins and Stukas (2008), narcissists might *become* insensitive to the negative reactions caused by their behavior because, for certain ego-enhancing behaviors, they habituate to such reactions and no longer notice them.

As is the case with most studies, the current study was limited in ways that might encourage future research on this topic. First, as the present research was performed with college students, it remains unclear whether the present findings might generalize to other populations. For example, because contemporary college students are significantly more narcissistic than other generations (Twenge et al., 2008), the present sample was presumably more homogenous (and narcissistic) than the general population. If so, we may have underestimated the effect of narcissism on the frequency of use of offensive language. Second, the current study used a correlational design, so it is inappropriate to infer causality from the results. Future research might seek to establish causal evidence for the attention-seeking hypothesis by, for example, manipulating perceptions of the attention-grabbing utility of offensive language. Third, the present research focused on explanations for the relation between narcissism and offensive-language use, but future research might address whether these explanations shed light on why narcissists break other social-etiquette norms. For example, narcissists might brag (Buss & Chiodo, 1991) or engage in aggressive acts (Barry et al., 2006; Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Stucke & Sporer, 2002) because they expect such acts will get them attention and perceive such acts to be inoffensive. Fourth, because psychological phenomena are complex and multi-determined, we do not presume that only two mechanisms (i.e., attention-seeking and insensitivity) must underlie the effects we observed. A full deconstruction of the relationship between narcissism and offensive-language use could account for additional factors that we did not address. As one example, the reduced inhibitory control of narcissists may help explain why they use offensive language more often. Indeed, narcissism is related to less inhibitory control (Foster, Shenesey, & Goff, 2009; Foster & Trimm, 2008) and it would be reasonable to presume that less inhibitory control relates to increased offensive-language use.

As offensive language (e.g., gay slurs) can be hurtful, future research should consider ways to decrease offensive-language use among narcissists. Given that narcissism is sometimes characterized by unstable self-esteem (Rhodewalt, Madrian, & Cheney, 1998; Zuckerman & O'Loughlin, 2009) and a voracious thirst for the approval of others (Baumeister & Vohs, 2001), it seems like narcissists would probably reduce their use of offensive language if they were made to focus on the negative evaluations that tend to follow from such language use (e.g., loss of admiration). This awareness would make them focus on the fact that their counter-normative behavior tends to beget *negative* attention, and it would also heighten their awareness of the offensive nature of their counter-normative behavior (i.e., reduce insensitivity). Future research should explore whether narcissists' tendency to engage in offensive, counter-normative behavior decreases after exposure to an educational intervention. Such research would offer a stepping-stone toward a more tranquil society for narcissists and non-narcissists alike.

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