

Avoiding or ignoring: How do grandiose and vulnerable narcissists differ in responding to cognitive dissonance and brand avoidance?

Ruizhi Yuan

University of Nottingham Ningbo China

ZI WANG

University of Nottingham

Martin Liu

University of Nottingham Ningbo China

Jun Luo

University of Nottingham Ningbo China

Acknowledgements:

This article was supported by National Natural Science Foundation of China (No. 71804149 & 71972112).

Cite as:

Yuan Ruizhi, WANG ZI, Liu Martin, Luo Jun (2021), Avoiding or ignoring: How do grandiose and vulnerable narcissists differ in responding to cognitive dissonance and brand avoidance?. *Proceedings of the European Marketing Academy*, 50th, (94491)

Paper from the 50th Annual EMAC Conference, Madrid, May 25-28, 2021



Avoiding or ignoring: How do grandiose and vulnerable narcissists differ in responding to cognitive dissonance and brand avoidance?

Abstract

'Narcissism' has recently been a topic of interest and curiosity in marketing research. Although research in psychology has identified two types of narcissism, known as grandiose (or overt) and vulnerable (or covert) narcissism, little is known about how these forms of narcissism vary and respond to self-discrepancy and dissonance. Built upon the theory of cognitive dissonance and theory of 'narcissism', this research aims to find out if dissonance triggered by self-discrepancy could lead to avoiding tendency of a brand and whether two types of narcissism (grandiose vs vulnerable) makes a difference in the process. And if brand avoidance can be used as a strategy especially for narcissists to cope with self-discrepancies, eliminate or reduce dissonance. Our study highlights the need for marketers to understand narcissistic targets more clearly in order to develop successful branding strategies.

Track: consumer behavior

Key words: self-discrepancy, cognitive dissonance, grandiose/vulnerable narcissism

1.Introduction

Narcissism, known as super self-absorbed and haughty (Wink, 1991), are good at endorsing positive illusions about themselves while minimizing information which challenges their positive self-images (Pincus & Lukowitsky, 2010). Krizan and Herlache (2018) suggested there are two different forms of narcissism: grandiose vs vulnerable. The key feature of both is an unjustifiable pretentiousness indicating an excessive tendency for self-enhancement and motivations of protecting the positivity towards oneself (Lee et al., 2013; Sedikides & Gregg, 2001). In social psychology, narcissists manipulate or emotionally abuse others by creating cognitive dissonance which triggered by holding conflicting cognitions and generated confusion, shame, guilt, or simply second-guessing of oneself. While doing so, they hold grandiose self-views and are less conscious of self-doubts or self-recrimination (Brown & Bosson, 2001). If narcissists are considered as possessing ‘an iron tower self’ with excessive self-confidence who are clever at deflecting undesirable messages (Sedikides & Gregg, 2001, p. 238), will they ever have the feeling of dissonance or conflicts within themselves? Another stream of research holds the opposite views which interpret narcissism as grandiosity masking vulnerability, which is a kind of grandiosity to boost or increase a rather fragile self-esteem. Under such condition, how would narcissists react to the conflicts of self-views and dissonant feelings encountered, and should the different nature of two forms (grandiose vs vulnerable) be discussed?

Originally defined as a psychological uncomfortable state caused by the inconsistency between two or more cognitive elements, cognitive dissonance has been served as a corner stone in social psychology. One of the most identified antecedents that results dissonance is self-discrepancy (Higgins, 1987). Self-discrepancy theory asserts a comparison mental process concerning the actual self and a reference value (e.g., ideal self, ought self) where the mismatch could cause an experienced feeling of discrepancy (Higgins, 1989) and consequently lead to cognitive dissonance. Higgins (1984) indicated three dimensions of self, which are actual self, ideal self, and should self. Each dimension represents a series of attributes that individuals believe he/she actually hold, want to have, or ought to have (Carver

et al,1999). However, previous study has not clarified how specific discrepancy influences dissonance magnitude and corresponding coping strategy. In this study, we will look into if ideal actual self-discrepancy and ought actual self-discrepancy in particular to study cognitive dissonance. To date, there is only one study employed self-discrepancy to narcissism (Barnett & Womack, 2015). It finds that pathological narcissism is highly associated with undesired self-concepts and provides evidence of incremental validity for self-discrepancies in measuring narcissism. Nevertheless, what we focus here is nonpathological narcissism, a personality trait rather than a disorder trait from a marketing perspective.

Since dissonance can cause significant consequences in consumer behavior (e.g., consumer dissatisfaction, (Keng & Liao, 2009); negative WOM, (Hunt, 1970); strong complaint intention, (Soutar & Sweeney, 2003), Appeared as a psychological discomfort, cognitive dissonance internally drives individuals to alleviate its tension. In order to reduce dissonance, individuals may adopt either cognitive (e.g., trivialization or change of cognitions, Reilly et al, 2020; devaluation of foregone opportunities, Arkes et al, 2016) or behavioral strategies (e.g., product return, Keng & Liao, 2009; maintenance of brand loyalty, Choi et al, 2019). But dissonance research in marketing area has long ignored consumer differences in terms of their grandiose VS vulnerability traits to psychological discomfort, considered as dissonance. For one reason, we aim to address the significant relevance of narcissism in our paper. In particular, how would narcissism deal with dissonance (e.g., actively or passively)? Do different types of narcissists make a difference? For another, narcissists are recognized as the attractive targets for brand consumption considering their preference of conspicuous lifestyles and materialistic behavioral tendencies for the enhancement of self-importance, uniqueness (Pilch & Górnik-Durose, 2017). There has been increasing research interests of how two forms of narcissism impacts consumer behavior such as brand loyalty (Fastoso et al 2018; Neave, Tzemou & Fastoso, 2020). Nevertheless, if the value claimed in the study above could bring joy, entitlement and motivations to maintain the loyalty, what would happen when dissonance occur, will they actively avoid a brand instead or they just do not care? Will different forms of narcissism make a difference? This arouses another interesting research question in brand consumption, which is brand avoidance. Specifically, is brand avoidance a

passive coping strategy for dissonance reduction and how would narcissism influence it?

In sum, despite initial research of narcissist's consumption behavior, it is unclear how the two forms of narcissism react differently on self-discrepancy, dissonance coping and brand consumption. This research addresses these gaps in the literature by proposing a theoretical framework linking all the points mentioned above. At the heart of our conceptual paper, we introduce and provide theoretical hypothesis how two forms of narcissists (grandiose vs vulnerable) influence the relationships between self-discrepancies (ideal actual self-discrepancy vs ought self-discrepancy), cognitive dissonance. We next demonstrate the evidence of whether brand avoidance could be utilized as a dissonance coping strategy for narcissists especially and how grandiose and vulnerable narcissists may differ. Finally, we discuss future research direction. Ultimately, this research aims to contribute to the theory of cognitive dissonance implying the distinctive attributes and influence of the narcissists on brand consumption.

2.Literature review and hypothesis development

2.1 Theory of cognitive dissonance, self-discrepancy and brand avoidance

The original theory of cognitive dissonance suggests that cognitive discrepancy between two or more elements (e.g., a person's belief, attitudes, behavior) could lead to a psychological uncomfortable state (Festinger, 1957), associated with emotions of anxiety, insecurity or doubt (Montgomery & Barnes, 1993) as synonymous with feelings of regret or remorse (Insko & Schopler, 1972). It can easily lead to negative WOM (Gistri et al, 2019), complaint intention (Kansal & Goel, 2019), negative repurchase intention (Stroud, 2017). When dissonance occurs, individuals are motivated to diminish such negative intrapersonal state by reducing or relieving psychological tensions, which enables them to restore psychological balance (Brehm, 1956; Festinger, 1957) through changing behavioral or cognitive elements (e.g. attitudes, behaviour or beliefs), environmental elements by avoiding heterogeneous information; adding new cognitions. Ong (2018) suggest that cognitive inconsistency can be

eliminated via situation-focused modification that contains actual behavioural enactment(s) to alter the experienced conflict(s) or cognition-focused modification that includes only belief and/or perceptual alterations of the experienced conflict (s). For example, they may try to recall the inconsistent behavior by returning or switching their loyalty to another brand. In this study, we specifically look at self-discrepancy as one kind of cognitive discrepancy to see whether it makes a difference to the theory.

Higgins (1987) suggests that self-discrepancy involves a comparison mental process of actual self and a reference value, and the valence of discrepancy is determined by the level of mismatch in between. For example, seeing the actual self as discrepant from a desirable reference might lead to cognitive dissonance. Higgins (1989) asserts that there are three dimensions for self, including the actual self, the ideal self, and the ought self.

And each dimension contains a series of features that the individual believes he/she actually have, want to possess, or should have (Carver et al, 1999) so that people have the motivation to achieve a goal that actual self matches with ideal and ought self. In specific, the match between actual and ideal self relates to promotion orientation while the match between actual and ought is associated with a prevention orientation (Pham & Avnet, 2004). Such self-discrepancy can occur in areas such as one's intelligence, self-image, or uniqueness even belongingness of a social group (Boldero & Francis, 2002). Mandel and his colleagues' review (2017) consider brand consumption as a way to regulate self-discrepancy in this sense since brands are significantly associated with consumers' self-concepts and they symbolically represent consumer's actual and ideal identity (Chaplin & John, 2005). Belk (1988)'s work also introduced the idea of brand as extended self, where brand influences one's judgment and behavior (McConnell, 2011). Therefore, only a brand that provides corresponding symbolic value could close the gap between different self domains. And we believe consumers may actively avoid a brand which is inconsistent with one's ideal self or ought self and triggers self-discrepancy. Hence, we propose that,

H1 Ideal actual self-discrepancy is positively associated with cognitive dissonance.

H2 Ought actual self-discrepancy is positively associated with cognitive dissonance.

H3 Cognitive dissonance is positively associated with brand avoidance.

2.2 Different forms of narcissism and moderating effect

Rooted in Greek mythology, narcissism refers to a grandiose self-identity and an excessive fantasy involving personal achievements, uniqueness, arrogance, desirability of envy and entitlement with little empathy towards others (Campbell & Foster, 2007, p. 116), which can either be a personality disorder or a personality trait (Sedikides et al., 2007). Krizan and Herlache (2018)'s narcissism spectrum model indicates two different forms of narcissism that vary in severity and their presentation which are grandiosity vs vulnerability narcissism. A key unifying characteristic of grandiose and vulnerable narcissists is the extreme concern of self-views and a significant motivation of self enhancement (Twenge & Campbell, 2009). However, they have distinct attributes. Grandiose narcissists, recognized as grandiose 'fighters,' showing hyper self-esteem, conceitedness, eager desire for success, while vulnerable narcissists, identified as 'worriers,' demonstrate chronic low inferiority, anxiety and strong sense of insecurity (Rhodewalt & Eddings, 2002). When facing negative psychological states, narcissists have been found to show more ability in self-regulation than non-narcissists in general (Jordan et al, 2003). They apply self-regulatory tactics concerning self-enhancement rather than on costs (Krizan & Herlache, 2018) through being hyper functional autistics, socioemotionally dull, arrogant and careless to the activities going on around them (Sedikides & Gregg, 2001). Nevertheless, findings have been rather inconsistent, the psychodynamic 'mask' model which suggests that narcissism may actually serve as a facet to hide underlying sensory of insecurity and inferiority (Bosson et al., 2007). Hence, it is necessary for us to distinguish the different features and influence for the two types of narcissism.

Research indicates that grandiose narcissists demonstrate extreme dominance, overconfidence, and positive affect when their self-views are conflicting (Krizan and Herlache, 2018; Kaufman et al., 2020). By contrast, vulnerable narcissists are more likely to detect and fight with conflicts or discrepancies because of the lower self-esteem and self-

importance, stronger feelings of anxiety, depression and nervousness (Kaufman et al., 2020). In addition, when examining the association between grandiose vs vulnerable narcissism and their self-regulating difficulties. Zhang et al. (2015) found that vulnerable narcissists have general emotional regulation difficulties, zero acceptance of affective responses, control issues and an absence of affective clarity, while grandiose narcissists are more emotionally conscious and cleared (Loeffler et al, 2020). And because grandiose narcissists care less about the discrepancies and conflicts, the dissonant feelings can be overridden by the sense of entitlement (Howell et al, 2011). In addition, grandiose narcissists tend to show aggressive tactic to maintain the positivity of self-views (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998), which is to bring it out on external environment rather than internalize it (Lobbestael et al., 2014), therefore they may feel less dissonance whereas vulnerable narcissism are more likely to prompt less aggressive activities when their emotional states are primed. Since dissonance is acknowledged as a discomfortable psychological state triggered by discrepancies, associated with negative affect (e.g., shame, guilt, anxiety), we propose that,

H4: Grandiose narcissism negatively moderates the relationships between self-discrepancy and cognitive dissonance.

H5: Vulnerable narcissism positively moderates the relationships between self-discrepancy and cognitive dissonance.

Previous studies have identified narcissism as an important indicator of self-defensive mechanism due to their overly favorable self-perceptions, therefore showing higher level of defensiveness when holding discrepant self-views (Lee et al., 2013). It is indicated that the fundamental difference between the two types of narcissism is that grandiose narcissists tend to regulate negative psychological state through overt strategies (e.g., self-aggrandizement, devaluation of conflicts or threats, Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001), while given the insecure nature, vulnerable narcissists are more likely to rely on the external approval and social acceptance (Zeigler-Hill et al, 2006). According to the theory of approach-avoidance motivation (Neaves et al, 2020), narcissists ego-defense mechanism could transfer into either approach or

avoidance behavioral orientation (Foster & Trimm, 2008).

Approach and avoidance orientations drive consumer behavior in different levels, approach orientation motivate individuals to get desired or positive results whereas avoidance orientation motive them to prevent negative or undesired results (Elliot, 1999). Approach–avoidance motivations could be associated with self-enhancement and self-protection motive of narcissists (Foster & Trimm, 2008). Specifically, the strong intention of positivity and self-enhancement for grandiose narcissists is associated with approach motivation, whereas the concern of reducing negativity and self-protection is positively linked to avoidance motivation (Sedikides & Gregg, 2001). Driven by such mechanism, grandiose narcissists tend to maintain the connection with brands which represents the glorified self, communicate wealth or prestige (Han et al, 2010; Kang & Park (2016). Meanwhile, vulnerable narcissists should avoid brands that potentially cause dissonance since avoidance orientation motivates them to protect from being further destabilized (Sedikides et al., 2011). In addition, Foster and Trimm (2008) also finds that grandiose narcissists may have a rather insensitive avoidance reaction system to threats of self-views while vulnerable are hypersensitive, which suggests that grandiose are not motivated to address discrepancy and minimize the potential conflicts via their defensive system, hence are more likely to provide justifications for threats or challenges to alleviate anticipated dissonance instead of taking behavioral actions like avoiding certain brands (Campbell et al, 2000; Kernis & Sun, 1994). Therefore, we propose that,

H6: Grandiose narcissism positively moderates the relationships between cognitive dissonance and brand avoidance.

H7: Vulnerable narcissism positively moderates the relationships between cognitive dissonance and brand avoidance.

3.Future research direction

This conceptual paper aims to provide initial evidence of how different types of (grandiose vs

vulnerable) narcissism react to self-discrepancy and cognitive dissonance, as well as whether brand avoidance can be taken as a dissonance reduction strategy especially for narcissists. Apart from empirically testing the proposed hypothesis, we have to take further considerations in order to answer research questions. For example, the nature of narcissism is complex, the underlying psychological needs for vulnerable narcissists are more relevant to social approval while grandiose narcissists are more self-oriented (Foster & Trimm, 2008), which is relevant to self-congruity theory (Sirgy, 1982) when studying brand consumption. We will explore more on that part to further clarify what is going on for narcissism to either avoid a brand or maintain brand loyalty. There are also other concerns, for instance, Hart and his colleagues (2017) fail to demonstrate the tendency for both types of narcissists to present themselves to gain social benefits, the rationale they gave is that identity is constructed by social reputations and self-concepts. In this way, social factor is another factor we will look at for future study. By doing so, we aim to provide both theoretical and managerial implications for marketers to understand more about how narcissism influences consumer psychology and behavioral tendency in brand consumption, especially in dissonance domain.

Reference

- Barnett, M. D., & Womack, P. M. (2015). Fearing, not loving, the reflection: Narcissism, self-esteem, and self-discrepancy theory. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 74, 280-284.
- Boldero, J., & Francis, J. (2002). Goals, standards, and the self: Reference values serving different functions. *Personality and social psychology review*, 6(3), 232-241.
- Carver, C. S., & Scheier, M. F. (1999). Themes and issues in the self-regulation of behavior. *Advances in social cognition*, 12(1), 1.
- Higgins, E. T. (1987). Self-discrepancy: a theory relating self and affect. *Psychological review*, 94(3), 319.
- Fastoso, F., Bartikowski, B., & Wang, S. (2018). The “little emperor” and the luxury brand: How overt and covert narcissism affect brand loyalty and proneness to buy counterfeits. *Psychology & Marketing*, 35(7), 522-532.
- Foster, J. D., & Trimm IV, R. F. (2008). On being eager and uninhibited: Narcissism and approach–avoidance motivation. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 34(7), 1004-1017.
- Foster, J. D., & Campbell, W. K. (2007). Are there such things as “narcissists” in social psychology? A taxometric analysis of the Narcissistic Personality Inventory. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 43(6), 1321-1332.
- Festinger, L. (1957). *A theory of cognitive dissonance* (Vol. 2). Stanford university press.
- Gistri, G., Corciolani, M., & Pace, S. (2019). Does the perception of incongruence hurt more? Customers’ responses to CSR crises affecting the main reputation dimension of a company. *Journal of*

Marketing Management, 35(7-8), 605-633.

Krizan, Z., & Herlache, A. D. (2018). The narcissism spectrum model: A synthetic view of narcissistic personality. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 22(1), 3-31.

Kaufman, S. B., Weiss, B., Miller, J. D., & Campbell, W. K. (2020). Clinical correlates of vulnerable and grandiose narcissism: a personality perspective. *Journal of Personality Disorders*, 34(1), 107-130.

Keng, C. J., & Liao, T. H. (2009). Consequences of postpurchase dissonance: The mediating role of an external information search. *Social Behavior and Personality: an international journal*, 37(10), 1327-1339.

Krizan, Z., & Herlache, A. D. (2018). The narcissism spectrum model: A synthetic view of narcissistic personality. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 22(1), 3-31.

Loeffler, L. A., Huebner, A. K., Radke, S., Habel, U., & Derntl, B. (2020). The Association Between Vulnerable/Grandiose Narcissism and Emotion Regulation. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11, 2732.

Lee, S. Y., Gregg, A. P., & Park, S. H. (2013). The person in the purchase: Narcissistic consumers prefer products that positively distinguish them. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 105(2), 335.

Mandel, N., Rucker, D. D., Levav, J., & Galinsky, A. D. (2017), "The Compensatory Consumer Behavior Model: How Self-Discrepancies Drive Consumer Behavior," *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 27(1), 133-46

Montgomery, C., & Barnes, J. H. (1993). POSTDIS: A short rating scale for measuring post purchase dissonance. *Journal of Consumer Satisfaction, Dissatisfaction and Complaining Behavior*, 6(1), 204-216.

Neave, L., Tzemou, E., & Fastoso, F. (2020). Seeking attention versus seeking approval: How conspicuous consumption differs between grandiose and vulnerable narcissists. *Psychology & Marketing*, 37(3), 418-427.

Ong, A. S. J. (2018). Cognitive dissonance in food and nutrition: the development and initial efficacy test of the food cognition dissonance framework (Doctoral dissertation, Newcastle University).

Pincus, A. L., & Lukowitsky, M. R. (2010). Pathological narcissism and narcissistic personality disorder. *Annual review of clinical psychology*, 6, 421-446.

Pilch, I., & Górnik-Durose, M. E. (2017). Grandiose and vulnerable narcissism, materialism, money attitudes, and consumption preferences. *The Journal of psychology*, 151(2), 185-206.

Rhodewalt, F., & Eddings, S. K. (2002). Narcissus reflects: Memory distortion in response to ego-relevant feedback among high-and low-narcissistic men. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 36(2), 97-116.

Sedikides, C., & Gregg, A. P. (2001). Narcissists and feedback: Motivational surfeits and motivational deficits. *Psychological Inquiry*, 12(4), 237-239.

Soutar, G. N., & Sweeney, J. C. (2003). Are there cognitive dissonance segments?. *Australian Journal of Management*, 28(3), 227-249.

Sedikides, C., Cisek, S., & Hart, C. M. (2011). Narcissism and brand name consumerism. *The handbook of narcissism and narcissistic personality disorder: Theoretical approaches, empirical findings, and treatments*, 382-392.

Stroud, N. J. (2017). Selective exposure theories. In *The Oxford handbook of political communication*.

Zhang, H., Wang, Z., You, X., Lü, W., & Luo, Y. (2015). Associations between narcissism and emotion regulation difficulties: Respiratory sinus arrhythmia reactivity as a moderator. *Biological Psychology*, 110, 1-11.