



# Strategically out of control: A self-presentational conceptualization of narcissism and low self-control



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## ABSTRACT

Vazire and Funder (2006) suggested that narcissists struggle to control themselves and their characteristic narcissistic behaviors reflect this struggle. Here, we seek to propose a different perspective on narcissists' apparent struggle with low self-control. Because power is associated with freedom and autonomy and because narcissists have a heightened motivation to exude power, we suggest that they may *intend* to act in ways that imply they do *not* inhibit their urges (i.e., are low in "self-control"). In the present study, participants ( $N = 542$ ) completed an index of power motivation, their prizing of low-self-control characteristics (e.g., being "uninhibited"), their strategic displays of these characteristics, and trait indices of low self-control. A path model revealed that narcissism was positively associated with power motivation, which in turn, related to prizing low-self-control characteristics. This enhanced prizing of low self-control characteristics, in turn, predicted participants' strategic displays of these characteristics, which, in turn, related to scoring lower self-control trait measures. The evidence is in line with the view that narcissists' apparent battle with self-control is actually a strategy.

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## 1. Introduction

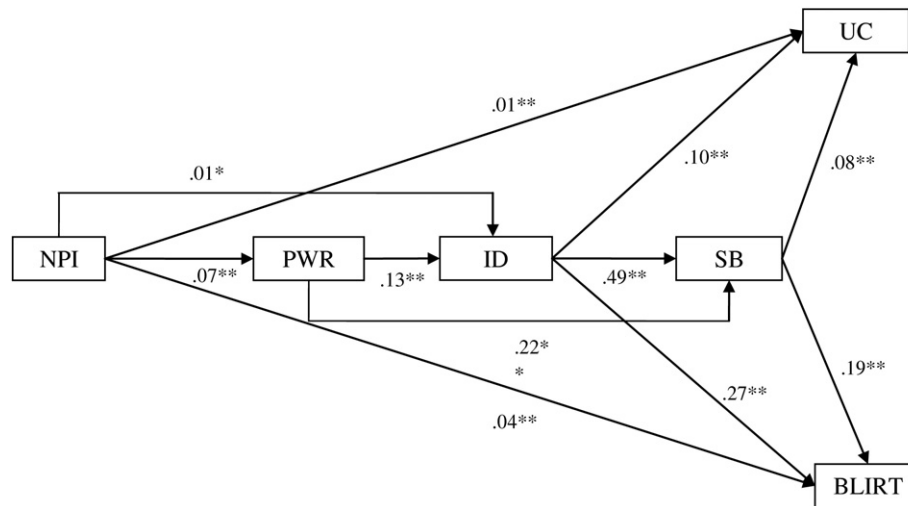
Vazire and Funder (2006) proposed that narcissists behave narcissistically because of their lack of self-control and impulsive nature. Their work largely conceptualized self-control as *ego control*, which refers to the ability to inhibit impulses and delay gratification (Block & Block, 1980; Kremen & Block, 1998; Roberts, Lejuez, Krueger, Richards, & Hill, 2014). Their meta-analysis reported a moderate-to-large relation (weighted mean  $r$  of 0.41) between narcissism and low self-control and reasoned that "there is no internal subjective logic to [narcissists'] behavior, they are simply overcome by impulses that they fail to contain" (p. 158). Their data and ideas are intriguing, in part, because they challenge conventional ideas that narcissists—at least non-pathological grandiose narcissists, as indicated by the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Terry, 1988)—are rational (Hart, Adams, Burton, & Tortoriello, 2017), well-adjusted (Sedikides, Rudich, Gregg, Kumashiro, & Rusbult, 2004), socially and financially successful, and gritty people (Hirschi & Jaensch, 2015; O'Reilly, Doerr, Caldwell, & Chatman, 2014; Wallace, Ready, Weitenhagen, 2009). Perhaps narcissists are good at compensating for their low self-control, or perhaps there is more to their low self-control than meets the eye. Here, we argue that Vazire and Funder's conceptualization of narcissists' low self-control is incomplete. Specifically, we suggest that narcissists

deliberately alter their behavior to *appear* low in self-control to project a desired identity.

This suggestion coheres with a model of narcissism inspired by broad theories of self-presentation (Schlenker, 1980, 2003). Self-presentation theory suggests that human behavior is often designed to project subjectively desired identity images to audiences. This theoretical tradition has re-conceptualized apparently irrational and self-defeating patterns of human behavior such as mental illness (e.g., schizophrenia; Braginsky, Braginsky, & Ring, 1969), gambling (Holtgraves, 1988), anti-social behavior (Tedeschi & Felson, 1994), and substance use (Leary, Tchividjian, & Kraxberger, 1994) as, in part, behavioral choices intended to project desired identities (Leary, 1995; Schlenker, 1980). In this tradition, the self-presentation model of narcissism was proposed to situate narcissists' supposed "irrational" or "self-defeating" behavior in light of their attempts to control self-relevant images to audiences (Hart, Adams, & Burton, 2016; Hart et al., 2017).

Operating within this framework, we suggest that narcissists' low self-control can be re-conceptualized as, at least in part, a self-presentation process that might follow from narcissists' ardent desire to appear powerful and their disagreeable nature. First, because power and privilege allow for freedom of expression and personal autonomy (French & Raven, 1959; Magee & Galinsky, 2008), behaviors indicative of low self-control (e.g., *not* inhibiting urges) can be strategically enacted at opportune times to project these desired images (Korda, 1975; Sturm & Antonakis, 2015). Indeed, previous research reveals that power-priming manipulations cause a variety of behaviors that map onto low-self-control behaviors such as selfishness, risk taking, self-indulgence, and quick

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**Fig. 1.** Path model. *Note.* Final model with unstandardized regression weights. NPI = Narcissistic Personality Inventory; PWR = power motivation; ID = image desirability; SB = strategic behavior; UC = Ego-undercontrol Scale; BLIRT = Brief Loquaciousness and Interpersonal Responsiveness Test.

and decisive action (Sturm & Antonakis, 2015). Second, because free expression and personal autonomy can sometimes result in being disliked, narcissists' reduced concerns for being liked (Martinez, Zeichner, Reidy, & Miller, 2008) should result in their perceiving a low self-control image as less undesirable. Basically, our idea suggests that effects of narcissism on indices of low self-control (e.g., Vazire & Funder, 2006) might reflect, in part, strategic attempts to control desired images (e.g., uninhibited) that convey a sense of power.

### 1.1. The present research

We asked participants to indicate the extent to which they (a) want to project various characteristics associated with low self-control ("image desirability;" e.g., how much does one wish to appear *uninhibited*?) and (b) will *strategically* alter their behavior to project these characteristics ("strategic behavior"). Image desirability and strategic behavior are related but distinct constructs in the tradition of impression management theory (Schlenker, 1980). Image desirability refers to a desire to project an image (Schlenker, 1980), and strategic behavior refers to actions intended to accomplish this desire. Strategic behavior is complex and influenced by image desirability, the self-concept, social reputations, and social roles (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). Participants also completed the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (indexing narcissism; NPI; Raskin & Terry, 1988) and two measures of trait low self-control that have already been linked to narcissism: the Ego-undercontrol Scale (UC, an index of ego control ( $r$ ); Letzring, Block, & Funder, 2005) and the Brief Loquaciousness and Interpersonal Responsiveness Test (BLIRT, an index of low verbal self-control; Swann & Rentfrow, 2001). Participants also completed a measure of power motivation and psychological entitlement. We theorized that narcissists' enhanced power striving should enhance their desire to project low-self-control traits, which should create tendencies to strategically alter their behavior to convey these traits; such strategic tendencies should relate to claiming a low self-control identity on trait measures. Indeed, people who strategically convey a trait later rate the self as higher on the trait (e.g., Schlenker, Dlugolecki, & Doherty, 1994).

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants and design

542 residents of the US (326 females) were recruited from Amazon's Mechanical Turk and paid \$0.40. The average age was 36.6 years ( $SD =$

12.5). The sample was 77.7% Caucasian (8.7% African American; 7% Hispanic; 3.3% Asian).

### 2.2. Procedure and materials

Prior to providing demographic information and being debriefed, participants completed the following measures in the following order.<sup>1</sup>

#### 2.2.1. Image desirability and strategic behavior

Participants' desire to be regarded as low in self-control and their strategic behavior to appear low in self-control were assessed separately. First, participants rated the extent to which they wanted to be regarded as possessing 8 traits or trait descriptors associated with low self-control (e.g., "unpredictable," "uninhibited," "do exactly what I want," "say exactly how I feel," "act on my gut") and four traits or trait descriptors associated with high self-control (e.g., "always needing a plan;" "worried about mistakes") using a 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much*) scale (for similar procedures, Hart et al., 2016). These traits and trait descriptors were motivated by Letzring et al.'s (2005) work correlating scores from their UC scale with ratings of trait characteristics provided by clinician-interviewers, acquaintances, and the self. To ensure we were assessing identity images that were highly relevant to ego control, we selected the trait characteristics that had the strongest positive and negative correlations with people's scores on the UC scale. The choice to use high and low self-control traits is critical because ego control is presumed to contain elements of both "under-control" and "over-control" (Letzring et al., 2005). Hence, we averaged the high and low control items to create a single index of low-self-control image desirability, which we labeled "image desirability" ( $\alpha = 0.75$ ,  $M = 3.38$ ,  $SD = 0.55$ ). To measure the extent to which people engaged in strategic low-self-control behavior, they were presented the same 12 descriptors and asked to consider the extent to which they strategically monitor their behavior to appear

<sup>1</sup> A pilot study within our main study assessed the extent to which participants associated power with low restraint. We assumed people perceived a negative relation between power and restraint, but were unaware of research that directly examined this assumption. Participants imagined an interaction between a person with high power and low power and responded to six questions regarding the likelihood of either person engaging in restraint (e.g., "Who is more likely to stop themselves from doing what they want?") using a  $-3$  (*The person with LOW POWER is definitely more likely to do this*) to  $3$  (*The person with HIGH POWER is definitely more likely to do this*) scale. 392 participants' responses were recorded. Responses were averaged into a single index of participants' perception of the power-restraint relationship in which negative scores represent the belief that high power is negatively related to restraint ( $\alpha = 0.85$ ). The mean of the variable ( $M = -1.78$ ,  $SD = 1.16$ ) dramatically differed from zero,  $d = -1.54$ , suggesting that people anticipate a substantial negative relation between power and restraint.

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