

# The mediating role of Narcissism in the relationship between self-esteem and aggression of university students in Sagaing Township, Myanmar

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## Abstract

The world is competitive in every possible way, especially in the education sector, so university students tend to seek success in their academic field and try to get attention within their social circle often at any cost or effort. This leads to the presence of narcissistic personalities among the university population, stemming from underlying low self-esteem and contributing to aggression. This study aimed to investigate the mediating role of narcissism in the relationship between self-esteem and aggression among university students in Sagaing. The sample comprised 1058 undergraduate students with 519 females and 539 males from undergraduate classes. Rosenberg (1965)'s self-esteem scale, the Narcissistic Personality Inventory by Raskin and Terry (1988) and the aggression questionnaire by Buss and Warren (2000) were used as the data gathering instruments. The findings revealed that self-esteem exhibits both a direct negative effect on aggression and an indirect positive effect mediated by narcissism. Interestingly, while high self-esteem typically acts as a deterrent to aggression, its mediation by narcissism can increase aggressive tendencies. This suggests a suppressor effect, termed competitive mediation, where the positive relationship between self-esteem and aggression is reversed when narcissism serves as a suppressor variable. As this suppressor effect is enticing for the researchers, further studies should explore the moderating factors in the relationship between self-esteem, narcissism and aggression. The study's findings are expected to provide the foundational insights for the education policy makers to develop prevention programs for narcissism and aggression, promote professional development of educators, integrate curriculum components that address self-esteem, and implement counselling programs in educational settings.

**Keywords:** *self-esteem, narcissism, aggression, university students*

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## 1. Introduction

According to Mahatma Gandhi, “*there is a sufficiency in the world for man’s need but not for man’s greed*” (as cited in Wiersbe, 2007). Man’s greed never stops; people are constantly hungry. They are eager to satisfy more and more of their physical needs; more food, more clothes, more buildings, more technology, and more luxuries. As for psychological needs, they want more respect, more love, more success, more power, and more attention. In today’s competitive world, it is becoming increasingly difficult for people to fulfil all of these needs and, as a consequence, they become more selfish.

In psychology, selfishness is viewed as a characteristic of narcissism, involving a sense of entitlement, a lack of empathy and a need for admiration, as a personality type. In their study on the associations between self-photography, narcissism, and self-esteem, Barry et al. (2017) found that selfie-taking behaviour has a significant connection with narcissism. People take selfies and tend to post them on websites such as Facebook, YouTube, Myspace, Tiktok and Twitter. Moreover, these sites create spaces for individuals to show themselves to the rest of the country and world (Twenge et al., 2008). According to the 2019 survey of May M.T.K. conducted in Myanmar, smartphone usage is very popular among university students and 89.3% use the smartphone on social media, for example, Facebook, Twitter, Gtalk and Chatting. It is estimated that the popularity of smartphone usage may create narcissistic behaviour in Myanmar. With an increasing awareness of the ill effects of narcissism, it is becoming a problem that requires immediate attention among the researchers around the world. In spite of this, there is little research on narcissism in Myanmar. Even though narcissistic personality disorder is very rare, narcissism may be an inherent part of today’s Myanmar youth.

Narcissistic personality is characterized by a grandiose sense of self-importance or uniqueness, a preoccupation with fantasies of unlimited success, power, brilliance, beauty, or ideal love, exhibitionism, an inability to tolerate criticism, the indifference of others, or defeat, entitlement or the expectation of special favors without assuming reciprocal responsibilities, interpersonal exploitativeness, and a lack of empathy (American Psychiatric Association, 1980). On the other hand, Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) is “a pervasive pattern of grandiosity, a need for admiration, and a lack of empathy, beginning by early adulthood and present in a variety of contexts” (American Psychiatric Association,

2013). The narcissists can be characterized by highly inflated evaluations of the self, an elevated sense of entitlement, a need for admiration, and low empathy toward others, as they seek to maintain, protect, and promote an impossibly high self-standard (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). Since the personality features of narcissism range from mild to extreme (Miller & Campbell, 2008), narcissism is often considered a personality trait, rather than a personality disorder (Sedikides et al., 2004). Thus, the present study aims to investigate the narcissistic personality rather than the narcissistic personality disorder.

Numerous studies have been conducted on the construct of 'narcissism' in general settings and among university students. In the study by Stinson et al. (2008), it was found that 6.2% of people (about 6 times the prevalence in the 2007 result) were likely to be narcissists. Similarly, the overall prevalence of narcissistic personality disorder in the general population ranged from 0.8 to 6.2 % (Cailhol et al., 2018). The findings of Twenge, the leading psychologist in the study of narcissism in the university students in the American population, showed that the rates of narcissism among the university population are on the rise (Twenge & Campbell, 2008; Twenge & Foster, 2010). In the meta-analysis study conducted by Twenge et al. (2008), it was found that on average, contemporary college students are at least somewhat more narcissistic. Therefore, as with university students in other countries, the prevalence of narcissistic personality characteristics may be increasing among Myanmar university students. If university students have a higher level of narcissism, this may later threaten the future development of the country. Because of all these possibilities, the present study has chosen university students as the focus group.

Narcissism may, in some ways, be adaptive and beneficial to both the individual and society, though it is highly debated. Though narcissism, to a limited degree, can be adaptive and beneficial, narcissism on a larger scale is very disadvantageous for both individuals and society. Among various destructive properties of narcissistic personality traits, narcissistic abuse is one of the prominent impacts of narcissism in this century. With the awareness of this dangerous issue, World Narcissistic Abuse Awareness Day is celebrated every June 1<sup>st</sup> every year since 2016. This is a global movement about narcissism.

In another context, aggression, a harmful behavior which violates social conventions and which may include deliberate intent to harm or injure another person or object (Bandura, 1973), is highly associated to narcissism. Previous studies on the relationship between narcissism and aggression found that personality traits such as those characterizing

narcissism (e.g., grandiosity, entitlement, low empathy) have been associated with aggression (Bushman & Baumeister 1998; Twenge & Campbell, 2003). Likewise, Bushman et al. (2000), Mithen et al. (2023), Harper (2020), and Anello (2020) also supported the idea presented by Bushman and Baumeister (1998) that individuals who have narcissistic traits or who wish to think positively about themselves are more likely to act aggressively when their ego is being threatened. A study of Locke (2009) and a meta-analysis study of Rasmussen (2015) also indicated that narcissism is correlated with aggression. Hence, the present study aims to investigate the impact of narcissism on the aggression level of university students. However, narcissism is not the only factor that can predict aggression. Interestingly, self-esteem plays an important role in aggression. Previous scholarly works also indicated that there is a relationship between self-esteem and aggression. While Baumeister et al. (1996) and Bushman et al. (2009) stated a positive relationship, Donnellan et al. (2005) found a negative pattern. Given these controversial findings, this study also aims to investigate the relationship between self-esteem and aggression.

Moreover, self-esteem is also associated with narcissism. This relationship is best explained by the object- relation approach of Kernberg (1975); the inability to differentiate between the ideal self, the real self and the ideal object lead to narcissism. Moreover, Kohut (1972) characterized narcissism as an exaggerated form of self-esteem. Individuals seek to have a very strong shield in regard to their sense of self. It is no secret that they view themselves very positively (Campbell & Sedikides, 2002). There is a consistent finding of a modest to moderate connection between these two constructs in the nomological network analysis conducted by Hyatt et al. (2017). Moreover, according to Pilch and Hyla (2017), positive correlations between self-esteem and narcissism were found in both non-clinical and clinical samples. Thus, this study aims to investigate the relationship between self-esteem and narcissism.

Self-esteem is associated with both narcissism and aggression. Moreover, narcissism is also related to aggression. This is an interesting and somewhat surprising connection that self-esteem directly affects narcissism and, in turn, narcissism directly affects aggression whereas self-esteem also directly affects aggression. These intriguing findings have contributed to further investigation in this study on whether there is an indirect effect of self-esteem on aggression through narcissism; in other words, whether narcissism can explain the relationship between self-esteem and aggression. These relationships are clearly observed in

the threatened egotism theory of Kohut (1972), which implies that individuals who depend on others to maintain their self-esteem will be more likely to respond with shame or narcissistic rage (narcissistic aggression) if they receive an injury themselves (i.e. a narcissistic injury). Kernberg (1975)'s concept of narcissism also explained how narcissists cannot separate the real self from the ideal self, which tends to breed aggression. According to previous findings, high self-esteem is associated with higher narcissism and this in turn is associated with higher aggression (Anwar et al., 2016; Locke, 2008). However, a different pattern was found by Barnett and Powell (2005) wherein narcissism is positively associated with aggression and negatively associated with self-esteem, while low self-esteem is linked to specific forms of aggression, including physical and verbal aggression. This finding aligns with the psychodynamic Mask Model, which posits that narcissistic individuals adopt an unrealistic sense of self to conceal their underlying low self-esteem (Zeigler-Hill & Besser, 2013). Based on these contradictory findings, the main aim of this study is to explore the mediating role of narcissism in the relationship between self-esteem and aggression of university students in Sagaing. Accordingly, the following research hypotheses were formulated:

**Hypothesis 1:** Self-esteem directly predicts aggression (Bushman et al., 2009; Donnellan et al., 2005).

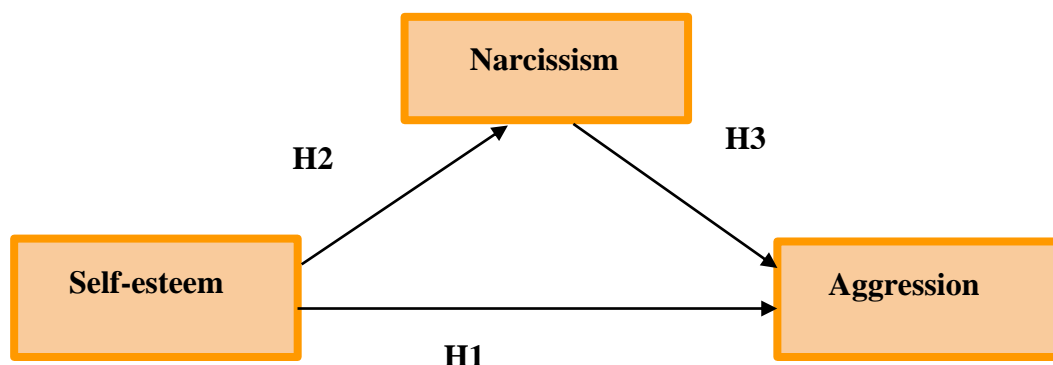
**Hypothesis 2:** Self-esteem directly predicts narcissism (Pilch & Hyla, 2017).

**Hypothesis 3:** Narcissism directly predicts aggression (Locke, 2009; Rasmussen, 2015).

The proposed conceptual model of the mediating role of narcissism in the relationship between self-esteem and aggression is shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 1**

*The proposed conceptual model of mediation analysis*



## 2. Literature review

Narcissism poses a significant threat to the academic success and well-being of university students since it stems from inflated self-esteem. A thorough understanding of narcissism has become a necessity to fortify the students against aggression, the detrimental consequences of narcissism. This literature review endeavors to scrutinize existing research and scholarly works on self-esteem, narcissism, and aggression. This literature review also aims to analyze the underlying cause of narcissism and the destructive effect which it has

### *2.1 Narcissism*

Since narcissism is an important part of this study, the following section will focus on defining narcissism from different perspectives before the Kernberg's Theory of Narcissism. This starts with Freud, accompanied by the definitions of narcissism based on the Diagnostic Statistical Manual (DSM III, DSM IV and DSM V by American Psychiatric Association), and proceeds to newer perspectives: two modes of expression (overt and covert), two phenotypes (grandiosity and vulnerability) and two natures (normal and pathological). Despite the various aspects of narcissism, this study aims to apply the criteria of DSM III as the working definition of narcissism because the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI) was based on these criteria.

Freud's (1914) theory of narcissism proposed two types: primary narcissism and secondary narcissism. He defined primary narcissism as "the type of narcissism that refers to the libido that is invested in the ego of an individual prior to differentiating the ego from external objects." Here, the libido refers to the basic instinct to survive and cooperate with others. Freud considered primary narcissism as the normal type of narcissism which can be found in every individual because of their instinct desire to preserve 'self'. In contrast to primary narcissism, he defined secondary narcissism as "reinvestment of the libido into the self after it was invested in others". He considered secondary narcissism as pathological. It has a detrimental effect since the libido is channeled to others rather than the self.

After narcissism had been proposed as maladaptive by Freud, it continued to be regarded as pathological: indeed, in 1980, the third edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III) by the American Psychiatric Association defined NPD by the following clinical criteria: a grandiose sense of self-importance or uniqueness; a preoccupation with fantasies of unlimited success, power, brilliance, beauty, or ideal love; exhibitionism; an inability to tolerate criticism, the indifference of others or defeat;

entitlement or the expectation of special favors without assuming reciprocal responsibilities; interpersonal exploitativeness, relationships that alternate between extremes of over idealization and devaluation; and lack of empathy.

According to DSM-IV, narcissism is characterized by “an exaggerated sense of self-importance and uniqueness, an unreasonable sense of entitlement, a craving for admiration, exploitative tendencies toward others, deficient empathy, and arrogance” (APA, 2000). When compared to DSM- III, the other criteria are identical but criteria number two and three are omitted in DSM-IV. According to DSM-V, NPD is “a pervasive pattern of grandiosity (in fantasy and behavior), a need for admiration, and a lack of empathy, beginning by early adulthood and present in a variety of contexts (APA, 2013)”. In comparison with DSM- III, only criteria number one, three and seven are involved and others are omitted. Moreover, according to Pincus and Lukowitsky (2010), narcissism is commonly described as having two natures (normal and pathological), two phenotypes (grandiosity and vulnerability), and two modes of expression (overt and covert). Normal narcissism (adaptive) is analogous to Freud’s primary narcissism and pathological narcissism with secondary narcissism (maladaptive). Narcissistic grandiosity and vulnerability are interrelated (Cain et al., 2008). The grandiosity aspect includes the characteristics of showing off, being egoistic assertive, authority, low emotional distress, and high self-esteem and overconfidence, exhibitionism, publicity, and exploitativeness (Miller & Campbell, 2008; Pincus & Lukowitsky, 2010; Wink, 1991). In contrast, these studies stated that the vulnerability aspect contains characteristics of being argumentative, bitter, self-protective, high emotional distress and low self-esteem and self-interest, defensiveness, uncertainty, and resentment. Originally used by Cooper (1981), overt narcissism tends to be extroverted whereas covert, more introverted.

***Kernberg’s (1975) Theory of Narcissism.*** Otto Kernberg (1975) wrote extensively on narcissistic disorders, believing that they were a subtype of borderline personality disorders. In his definition of narcissism, he observes that narcissists have an unusual degree of self-reference in their interactions with other people, a superficial emotional life, little empathy, envious feeling of others. Many elements of this definition were later used to help create the diagnostic criteria for narcissistic personality disorder in the DSM-III.

Following Freud’s path, his view on narcissism was based on the id, ego, and superego. He believed that narcissism was a dysfunctional development of the self and pathological narcissism was a result of unintegrated grandiose or devalued self and object

representations. He suggested that if one's ego could not differentiate between the actual and ideal self or object, it is denoted as the grandiose self of narcissists where only their good and positive senses are preserved. The grandiose self is constructed from leftover positive aspects of the child from early experiences (the real self), the imaginary version of the self - developed to compensate for frustration and protect against the rage-filled bad (the ideal self), and the imaginary version of accepting and loving parents (the ideal object) (Kernberg, 1970). A key element in his thinking was the idea that unacceptable or negative aspects of the self are split off from the main self but nonetheless influence the functioning of the self. Thus, in his view, the narcissistic self is pathological.

Another key part of his view of narcissism is that, while self-love and self-esteem appear to be a normal aspect of the individual, narcissism is not instinctually present in everyone. He stated that for healthy self-esteem development, individuals need positive reinforcement and opportunities for achievement from their environment. They also require a balanced internal moral compass that is not overly critical and realistic, motivating personal aspirations. Support and nurture of caregivers further contribute to a stable and positive sense of self-worth. He employed a continuum (or spectrum) of narcissism to explain the scope of narcissism. This extends from pathological narcissism (intense conflicts around both aggression and love), through malignant and destructive narcissism, to the narcissism present in psychopathic personality disorder (Kernberg, 1975).

Despite the fact that later research was influenced by the notion that narcissism was a continuous dimension, which on the extreme end was pathological, Kernberg himself rejected this view, preferring to see pathological narcissism as intrinsically different from normal adult narcissism and normal infantile narcissism. He defined normal adult narcissism as the libidinal investment of the self. Normal narcissism involves an integration of good and bad self-images into a realistic self-concept in contrast to the highly unrealistic perfect self-image of pathological narcissists.

In 1976, he adopted an object-relation method as the cause of narcissism, which means that the influence of the parent-child relationship is crucial in the development of narcissism. When children are brought up in families where those caring for them are cold and lacking compassion, they see themselves as unlovable and deprived during their early stage of development with the result that they become aggressive. The child, faced with severe frustration, disappointment, deprivation or loss feels overwhelming rage and hate



which in turn evokes fear and anxiety that the anger will cause the destruction of the loved persons or loving relationship. The child projects his anger onto the parents while defensively investing in some aspect of the self that his parents' value. Then fearing that the anger will lead to the destruction of the parents, the child projects his aggression from the internal world onto the external world, using two main defenses, splitting and projection, to protect the self from the bad world. Splitting can be seen as a reaction to negative events and perceptions.

### ***2.2 Self-esteem***

Rosenberg (1965) refers self-esteem to an individual overall positive or negative evaluation to the self. In his view, all "self" studies have "an evaluative dimension" that produces "self-estimation". He used the term self-estimation to indicate how the individual actually rates himself with regard to a particular characteristic. Every individual has many 'self-estimates' of differing importance.

According to Rosenberg, high self-esteem does not necessarily reflect feelings of high competence or efficacy. The individual with high self-esteem simply respects himself and sees himself a worthy personality in his community. In contrast, low self-esteem implies self-rejection, low self-satisfaction and self-contempt. The individual lacks respect for "the self". Rosenberg considers low self-esteem to be mainly motivated by fear of failure and fear of interpersonal criticism, fears that are often self-fulfilling.

### ***2.3 Aggression***

From the behaviorist view, Buss (1961) simply characterized aggression as the infliction of harm on others or noxious stimuli delivered to another organism. In his study, a general working definition was that aggression is goal-oriented behaviour directed at other organisms with the aim of injuring them.

***Five aspects of aggression.*** Buss and Perry (1992) gave four factors: physical aggression, verbal aggression, anger and hostility. Physical aggression refers to the act of lashing out bodily with the intention of harming others, who are motivated to avoid the harm. Verbal aggression refers to insults or warning of such action. Verbal aggression includes shouting, arguing, cursing and sarcasm (Ahsan, 2015). Anger is an affective sub-type of trait aggression that is central to aggressive behavior, often serving as the motivational precursor to it. Hostility is a cognitive sub-type of trait aggression and refers to an antagonistic mindset in which the world is perceived to be an unjust place. Buss and Warren (2000) added indirect aggression to the existing four factors, indirect aggression involves social manipulation by

the perpetrator, where the aggressive act is delivered more indirectly, such that there is no direct contact in the social interaction between the two parties. Indirect aggression usually occurs in those individuals who are socially inhibited (Richardson & Green, 2003).

***The effect of self-esteem and narcissism on aggression.*** The potential link between self-esteem and aggression has been controversial. Currently, there appear to be two competing hypotheses, each suggesting that people at different levels of the self-esteem continuum are vulnerable to aggression. It was indicated that high self-esteem is associated with aggression (Baumeister et al., 1996; Bushman et al., 2009). In contrast, several studies appeared to show evidence that low self-esteem is associated with aggression (Donnellan et al., 2005). In support, as described by Anwar et al. (2016), Rosenberg (1965) observed that low self-esteem weakens the connectivity of people with their society.

The relationship between narcissism and aggression was explained by Freud. He assumed that self-preoccupied people are aggressive towards others. Kohut (1972) also felt that individuals with narcissistic characteristics are likely to produce the same fight or flight reaction when presented with a narcissistic injury, a traumatic experience when narcissists have been criticized, rejected or ignored. If individuals have the flight reaction, they are likely to react with shame. However, if they have the fight response, they will react with narcissistic rage. This is supported by the results of the studies by Locke (2009) and Rasmussen (2015) showing that narcissism is positively related to aggression.

Narcissistic individuals have unstable and unrealistic self-esteem. They have self-esteem that appears confident but hides deep insecurities and a fragile sense of self-worth (Kuchynka & Bosson, 2018). They also stated that in the psychodynamic mask model of narcissism, narcissistic individuals tend to wear metaphorical “masks” to hide their true feelings and thoughts. These masks protect their self-esteem by helping them cope with internal conflicts. Underneath these masks are deeper, often unconscious rather than conscious emotions that influence their behaviour and interactions. In the study of Barnett and Powell (2005), it was found that narcissistic people tend to have low self-esteem. As described in Kernberg (1975)'s theory of narcissism, a narcissist tends to have unstable self-esteem. He suggested that this is related to a lack of differentiation among an individual's self-representations (real-self) and ideal self-representations, and ideal object representations. Empirical support for this relationship can be found in the study of Pilch and Hyla (2017), which indicates positive correlations between self-esteem and narcissism in both non-clinical

and clinical samples. While some researchers indicated that high self-esteem is associated with a range of mental health indicators, others proved that high self-esteem is associated with narcissism which can cause more interpersonal difficulties, as well as anger and aggression (Hook, 2007). Similarly, Anwar et al. (2016) and Locke (2008) found that high self-esteem is associated with higher narcissism and this in turn is associated with higher aggression. These findings are in line with Kernberg's concept of narcissism, namely that narcissists' grandiose self, inability to separate the real self from the ideal self, can spark aggression. However, this contradicts the finding of Barnett and Powell who assert that narcissism is associated with low self-esteem. This may reflect the nature of self-esteem in narcissistic individuals as previously described.

The relationship between these three variables is revealed in threatened egotism theory, in which high self-esteem can become a liability rather than a benefit. This theory suggests that aggression can be the result of such individuals in cases where the view of 'self' is challenged. This is particularly liable to happen if the view of 'self' is too positive, which happens with narcissistic individuals. Baumeister et al. (1996) examined the relationship between aggressive behavior and self-esteem and found that the most likely result of a threat to the ego of an individual with very high self-esteem was aggression, where the individual rejects 'the esteem-threatening evaluations' of others: there was no such relationship in cases of low self-esteem.

More specifically, the 'theory of threatened egotism' proposes that the source of the feedback becomes the focus of the anger when such feedback threatens the ego. Indeed, it has been confirmed in a number of studies that narcissistic individuals receiving negative feedback tend to react angrily towards others: in contrast, those at the other end of the narcissistic scale tend to become depressed or show similar negative reactions towards the self (Stucke, 2003). As for those individuals with high but unstable self-esteem, it was noted by Kernis et al. (1993) that, when the ego is threatened, the threat is externalized and attacked, or efforts are made to devalue its legitimacy. Such individuals are also prompted to greater anger depending on how justified the threat was, higher levels of anger being prompted by threats perceived to be unjustified (Kernis et al., 1989). This theory has been proved by the results of research, which show that elevated self-esteem correlates with increased narcissism, which subsequently links to heightened levels of aggression (Anwar et al., 2016; Locke 2008).

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Research design

In order to execute the research objectives quantitatively, this study focuses mainly on quantitative research approaches by means of survey design. This survey study was conducted by correlational design.

#### 3.2 Population and sample

The target population for this study was undergraduate students in Sagaing Region, Myanmar. In order to provide a fair and unbiased way to select samples, this study utilized a simple random sampling method. With a total of 1049 university students from three universities in Sagaing in the Academic Year 2019-2020, the selection process provided every individual with an equal opportunity of being selected, avoiding any potential biases and ultimately enhancing external validity. By employing a simple random sampling technique, the study aimed to enhance the generalizability of the findings to the broader Sagaing Region in Myanmar. The obtained sample includes 519 male and 540 female undergraduate students, as shown in table 1.

**Table 1**

*Distribution of students by gender*

University	Male	Female	Total
Sagaing University	207	205	412
Cooperative University	143	173	315
Sagaing University of Education	169	162	331
<b>Total</b>	<b>519</b>	<b>540</b>	<b>1049</b>

#### 3.3 Instrumentation

To study self-esteem, narcissism and aggression of university students from universities in Sagaing Township, three instruments were used. The first one, Rosenberg's Self-esteem Scale was used to measure the self-esteem of university students. It was developed in 1965 and is a unidimensional scale. The total number of items used in this study was 10 and all are 4-point Likert types (1= Strongly agree, 2= Agree, 3= Disagree, 4= Strongly disagree). Among the 10 items, 5 items (2, 5, 6, 8, and 9) were negatively stated and they were scored reversely.

The second instrument, the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI), developed by Raskin and Terry (1988), was used to measure the narcissistic personality. There are seven subscales: 8 items for authority, 6 items for self-sufficiency, 5 items for superiority, 7 items for exhibitionism, 5 items for exploitativeness, 3 items for vanity, and 6 items for entitlement. The total number of items used in this study was 40 examined by forced choice dichotomous type. High scores on the scale are an indication of high narcissistic personality and low scores are an indication of low narcissistic personality.

The third instrument, the Aggression Questionnaire (AQ) developed by Buss and Warren (2000), was used to measure the aggression of university students in Sagaing Township. There are five subscales: 7 items for physical aggression, 5 items for verbal aggression, 7 items for anger, 8 items for hostility and 6 items for indirect aggression. The total number of items used in this study is 34 and all are 5-point Likert type (1= Not at all like me, 2= A little like me, 3= Somewhat like me, 4= Very much like me, and 5= Completely like me). Among the 34 items, item number 19 was negatively stated and it was scored reversely.

After translating these items from English into a Myanmar version, a review was conducted for face and content validity by experts in the field of Educational Psychology from Sagaing University Education (SUOE). Changes were made as necessary according to their suggestions. Then pilot testing was conducted with 91 university students in Sagaing University of Education (SUOE) in order to determine the reliability of the instruments. Cronbach's alpha values 0.816 for RSES (Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale), 0.706 for NPI and 0.890 for AQ showed the high internal consistency of all the instruments. Therefore, it was concluded that all the instruments in this study are highly reliable and valid.

### ***3.4 Statistical analysis***

In this study, quantitative research methodologies were used. In order to answer the research questions, quantitative data analysis techniques were utilized. The quantitative data were analyzed by descriptive statistics and correlation analysis with the help of the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences version 21.0 (SPSS 21.0) and mediation analysis was conducted with the help of the Analysis of a Moment Structures version 23.0 (Amos 23.0).

By descriptive analysis, the mean, standard deviation, maximum and minimum scores for students' self-esteem, narcissism and aggression were examined. Next, correlation

analysis was done to discover if there was a relationship between variables and to investigate how strong this relationship might be.

For the proposed mediation model, a mediation analysis was done to investigate the mediating role of narcissism in the relationship between self-esteem and aggression.

## 4. Findings and Discussion

This study explored self-esteem, narcissism and aggression, especially the relationship patterns between these three variables. Descriptive statistics were used to study these variables, and a mediation analysis is used to investigate the inter-correlation among these three variables.

### 4.1 Inter-correlations between self-esteem, narcissism and aggression

**Table 2**

*Means, standard deviations and inter-correlations for aggression and predictor variables*

Variables	Mean	SD	Self-esteem	Narcissism
Aggression	78.93	19.525	-.087**	.219**
<b>Predictor Variables</b>				
Self-esteem	26.26	3.161	1	0.283**
Narcissism	14.43	5.424	-	1

Note: \*\*p<0.01

As shown in table 2, the mean and standard deviation of self-esteem were 26.26 and 3.161, those of narcissism were 14.43 and 5.424, and those of aggression were 78.93 and 19.525. The mean score for self-esteem of university students was 26.26. So, it can be concluded that the self-esteem of university students in Sagaing Township was low. The mean score for narcissism of university students was 14.43. Thus, it can be concluded that the narcissism of university students in Sagaing Township was within normal levels. The mean score for aggression of university students was 78.93. So, it can be concluded that the aggression of university students in Sagaing Township was low.

According to the result, the correlation between self-esteem and narcissism was ( $r = .283, p < .01$ ). This supported the interpretation that university students with high self-esteem tend not to show low levels of narcissism. Moreover, it was found that the correlation of aggression and self-esteem ( $r = -.087, p < .01$ ), and that of aggression and narcissism ( $r = .219, p < .01$ ) would be considered small to medium as compared to the typical effect size,

according to Cohen (1988). This indicates that university students with low levels of self-esteem tend to exhibit more aggression. Moreover, highly narcissistic university students are likely to be more aggressive. Therefore, it can be seen that all these variables were significantly correlated with aggression.

#### ***4.2 The mediating role of narcissism in the relationship between self-esteem and aggression***

A simple mediation path analysis was used to explain the underlying mechanisms of the relationship between **self-esteem** (DV) and **aggression** (IV) through **narcissism** (Mediator).

##### ***Hypotheses for mediation analysis***

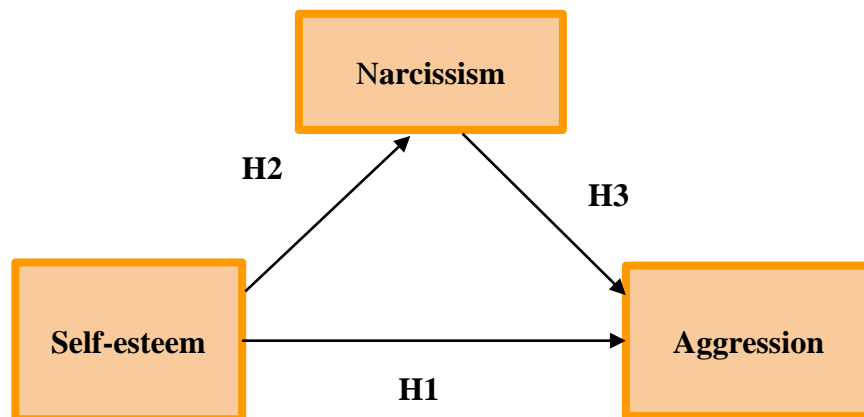
Hypothesis 1: Self-esteem directly predicts aggression (Bushman et al., 2009; Donnellan et al., 2005).

Hypothesis 2: Self-esteem directly predicts narcissism (Pilch & Hyla, 2017).

Hypothesis 3: Narcissism directly predicts aggression (Locke, 2009; Rasmussen, 2015).

**Figure 2**

*Proposed model for predicting aggression from self-esteem and narcissism*



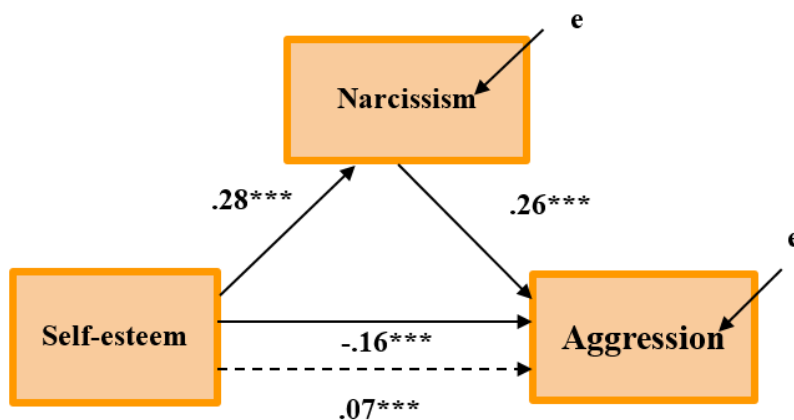
The direct and indirect effects between variables are presented in table 3.

**Table 3***Summary of causal effects for the mediation model (self-esteem)*

Outcomes	Determinant	Causal Effects		
		Direct	Indirect	Total
Narcissism ( $R^2=.08$ )	Self-esteem	.28***	–	.28***
	Narcissism	–	.07***	.07***
Aggression ( $R^2=.07$ )	Self-esteem	-.16***	–	-.16***
	Narcissism	.26***	–	.26***

*Note.* \*\*\* denotes significant paths t at  $p < .001$ .

In the initial analysis, Model 1 revealed a significant regression with an R-squared value of 0.8, indicating that the model accounted for approximately 8% of the variance in narcissism. Despite the relatively low percentage, it was observed that self-esteem significantly predicted narcissism, suggesting that higher self-esteem was associated with greater narcissism. Subsequently, Model 2 demonstrated another significant regression with an R-squared value of 0.7, signifying that the model explained 7% of the variance in aggression. The primary pathway indicated that narcissism positively predicted aggression, suggesting higher narcissism leads to higher aggression. Conversely, self-esteem negatively predicted aggression, implying that higher self-esteem was associated with lower aggression. The indirect effect of self-esteem on aggression demonstrated inconsistent partial mediation, as higher self-esteem led to increased narcissism, which, in turn, was associated with heightened aggression. This inconsistency contradicted the direct effect observed in the aggression pathway, resulting in the mediator acting as a suppressor.

**Figure 3***The mediation model for predicting aggression from self-esteem and narcissism*



This result also indicated that self-esteem has a negative influence on aggression, however this effect could be suppressed by narcissism because self-esteem leads to greater narcissism, and this variable has a positive effect on aggression. An inconsistent partial mediation model was found. Therefore, it is concluded that although self-esteem only can prevent aggression, it, mediated by narcissism, can contribute to aggression.

## 5. Conclusion

This research studied self-esteem, narcissism and aggression, especially the mediating effect of narcissism on the relationship between self-esteem and aggression of university students in Sagaing by using mediation analysis. According to the result of the descriptive analysis, the majority of university students in Sagaing revealed low self-esteem, a normal level of narcissism, and a low level of aggression. The main purpose of this study is to examine the mediating effect of narcissism on the relationship between self-esteem and aggression. An inconsistent partial mediation model was found. Self-esteem had a significant direct effect on aggression, and also a significant indirect effect on aggression through a mediator (suppressor), narcissism.

Assessment of **H1** showed that the higher the level of self-esteem, the lower the level of aggression. This may be by virtue of the nature of self-esteem that the individuals who really respect themselves, are satisfied with their own qualities and possess an optimistic view of themselves are less likely to engage in argumentative manners, destroy others with the aim of protecting themselves and more likely to control their anger and anger-related behaviors. Rosenberg (1965) also stated that low self-esteem weakens the connectivity of people with their society. According to the social-bonding theory, low self-esteem decreases conformity with societal norms which leads to delinquency (Anwar et al., 2016). This is congruent with the results of previous studies (Baumeister et al., 2003; Donnellan et al., 2005; Trzesniewski et al., 2006).

Assessment of **H2** showed that high self-esteem had a positive effect on narcissism. Therefore, it can be concluded that higher self-esteem leads to higher narcissism. This may be because of the fact that individuals with high self-esteem see themselves as possessing so many qualities and this may direct them to the desire to be a leader, evoking a drive to acquire power and authority, one of the narcissistic features. Moreover, this characteristic of high self-esteem was related to other narcissistic features such as self-sufficiency (they need

not learn anymore), superiority (see themselves as extraordinary and special ones) and like their appearance (vanity). Additionally, narcissism is an exaggerated form of self-esteem (Kohut, 1972). So, individuals with high self-esteem exhibit a higher level of narcissism. This finding is consistent with the results of studies such as those of Campbell et al. (2002), Raskin and Terry (1988), and Raskin et al. (1991).

Assessment of **H3** showed that a high level of narcissism contributes to a high level of aggression. The examination of the subscales of each questionnaire indicates that exploitativeness is related to indirect aggression, exhibitionism to hostility and anger, and superiority to physical aggression and indirect aggression. One of the characteristics of narcissistic people is that they tend to exploit others for their own benefit. This can lead to spreading gossip about people they don't like (indirect aggression) and showing more physical aggression. In line with the nature of exhibitionism, highly narcissistic people get upset when other people don't notice how they look when they go out in public: they tend to demand others' attention and they are hypersensitive to others' evaluations. When these people cannot get the desired attention and are negatively evaluated, they protect themselves against feelings of inferiority and shame by externalizing blame for their failures, which leads to feelings of hostility (they do not trust others) and anger (they get very angry for no apparent reason). In addition, superiority also leads to physical aggression (they resort to violence to protect their rights) and indirect aggression (giving the silent treatment to others). Baumeister et al. (1996) established that people who have inflated, or unjustified favorable views of self are more likely to be aggressive, and intolerant. All in all, a higher level of narcissism contributes to the higher level of aggression. This is congruent with the findings of Anwar et al. (2016), Locke (2009), Ostrowsky (2010), Rasmussen (2015), and Rhodewalt and Morf (1995).

Since H1, H2 and H3 are accepted, there is the partial mediation effect of narcissism on the relationship between self-esteem and aggression. It was found that self-esteem has a direct negative effect on aggression and also an indirect positive effect on aggression through the mediation effect of narcissism. Here, narcissism is denoted as a suppressor since the direct negative effect of self-esteem on aggression has changed to a positive effect when mediated by narcissism. This finding is consistent with the studies conducted by Anwar et al. (2016) and Locke (2008).

In this study, a small inconsistent partial mediation was found. Analysing the present result contributes to an interesting idea about how narcissism appears from high self-esteem. The nature of self-esteem tested in this study comes from conscious thinking. However, there is another aspect of human thought that is more concerned with previous experience and it is unconscious. According to Epstein's cognitive experiential self-theory, the former is called explicit self-esteem and the latter implicit self-esteem, while both contain schemas about the self. Even though the role of real self and ideal self in creating narcissism has been described in the literature section, this study could not explore the role of implicit self-esteem. Hence, this research fails to adequately explain the connection between self-esteem and narcissism. This is the limitation of mediation analysis called omitted variable bias where the estimated effects of the mediator or outcome variable are confounded by unmeasured variables. The presence of unmeasured confounders affecting both the mediator and outcome variables can bias estimates of the indirect effect. Future researchers should explore the relationship between self-esteem and narcissism by controlling confounding variables such as implicit self-esteem and other related variables, including demographic variables, researchers can address this limitation through statistical adjustment or matching techniques. Moreover, this study was based on quantitative research design. If a mixed method approach had been used, other factors that influence the relationship between self-esteem and narcissism would have been explored via interviews or open-ended surveys.

Despite the limitations, the result of this study contributes new findings to this academic field and also provides valuable insights that can inform the development and implementation of aggression and narcissism prevention programs, promote the professional development of educators, integrate curriculum components that address self-esteem, and implement counselling programs in educational settings, thereby fostering inclusive learning environment for students and mitigating the risk of narcissism.

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