

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

<sup>1</sup>Khin Khin Khant & <sup>2</sup>Wai Wai Than

## 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 in their social circle regardless of any cost or effort involved. Consequently, this leads to the presence of narcissistic personalities among the university population. 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, 519 females and 539 males from undergraduate classes. Rosenberg (1965) self-esteem scale, the Narcissistic Personality Inventory by Raskin and Terry (1988) and the aggression questionnaire by Buss and Warren (2000) were used. The results of the mediation analysis revealed that self-esteem has a direct negative effect on aggression and also an indirect positive effect on aggression through the mediation effect of narcissism. This clearly indicates the suppressor effect, competitive mediation, since the positive relationship between self-esteem and aggression is reversed when narcissism is mediated as a suppressor variable. As this suppressor effect is enticing for the researchers in the academic field of psychology, further studies should explore the moderating factors in the relationship between self-esteem, narcissism and aggression. It is anticipated that the current study will provide the basic information that can contribute to the development of a prevention program for narcissism and aggression in the higher education sectors with a strong emphasis on the self-esteem of university students.

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

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## About the authors:

<sup>1</sup>Corresponding author. Educator, Hearts Global Institute in Yangon. MEd Educational Guidance and Counselling. Email: [khinkhinkhant281@gmail.com](mailto:khinkhinkhant281@gmail.com)

<sup>2</sup>MEd Advanced Educational Guidance and Counselling. Former Lecturer, Department of Educational Psychology, Sagaing University of Education



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## Introduction

Narcissistic personality is characterized by clinical criteria, which include grandiose sense of self-importance or uniqueness, preoccupation with fantasies of unlimited success, power, brilliance, beauty, or ideal love, exhibitionism, inability to tolerate criticism, 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 (American Psychiatric Association, 1980). Narcissism is associated with 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). Therefore, 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).

## Methodology

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.

The target population for this study was university students in Sagaing in the Academic Year 2020-2021. Since this consisted of a large group of people, this study used

simple random sampling methods in order to ensure generalizability of the study. The selected sample included a total of 1049 university students from three universities in Sagaing. Data were collected in August 2020.

To study self-esteem, narcissism and aggression of university students from universities in Sagaing Township, three instruments were used: Rosenberg's Self-esteem Scale, the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI), the Aggression Questionnaire (AQ). 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 were highly reliable and valid.

In this study, quantitative research methodologies were used. In order to answer the research questions, quantitative data analysis techniques were utilized. A mediation analysis was conducted with the help of the Analysis of a Moment Structures version 23.0 (Amos 23.0). 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.

## **Findings**

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 intercorrelation among these three variables.

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.

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.

## **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.

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. 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. Future researchers should explore the relationship between self-esteem and narcissism, taking into account both the unconscious (implicit) and conscious (explicit) aspect of self-esteem. Moreover, this study was based on quantitative research design. If a mixed method approach had been used, the mechanisms that explain the relationship between self-esteem and narcissism would have been explored via interview or open-ended survey. To sum up, the result of this study

contributes new findings in this academic field and also provides valuable insights that can inform the development and implementation of aggression and narcissism prevention programs in the higher educational context in Myanmar, thereby fostering a conducive environment for students and mitigating the risk of narcissism.

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