



Portrait of a narcissist: Manifestations of narcissism in physical appearance [☆]

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ABSTRACT

Narcissism is characterized in part by an acute concern for one's appearance. Despite this fundamental aspect of narcissism, little is known about whether narcissism is manifested in features of physical appearance. Can you tell if someone is narcissistic just by looking at them? Our results indicate that snap judgments of narcissism based on full-body photographs are at least as accurate as snap judgments of any of the big five personality traits. Narcissists are more likely to wear expensive, flashy clothing, have an organized, neat appearance requiring a lot of preparation, and (in females) wear makeup and show cleavage. Furthermore, observers' judgments correlate with the presence of these cues, suggesting that they are drawing on the correct information when making their judgments. Finally, observers' judgments are associated with three of the four facets of narcissism and capture the unique constellation of personality traits typical of narcissists (i.e., high extraversion and low agreeableness). These findings suggest that physical appearance reflects narcissists' personality, preoccupation with good looks, and desire to be the center of attention, and serves as a vehicle with which to promote their status.

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1. Introduction

It is no accident that the myth from which narcissism gets its name has its crucial turning point when the central character Narcissus catches sight of himself reflected in a pool of water. So mesmerized was Narcissus by his own unattainable reflection that he exclaimed "then let me look at you and feed my wretched frenzy on your image" (Ovid, 2004, book III, lines 621–622). This acute concern about one's appearance is a fundamental aspect of sub-clinical narcissism¹ (Raskin & Terry, 1988; Sedikides, Gregg, Cisek, & Hart, 2007) but has received no empirical attention. The psychological portrait of narcissists has been well described (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001; Vazire & Funder, 2006) but there is strong reason to believe that narcissism also has a distinct physical signature. Indeed, there is good theoretical reason to suppose that of all traits, narcissism will be manifested in the domain of appearance. What are the visible cues that betray narcissism and do observers pick up on them?

Research on the accuracy of snap judgments, or "zero-acquaintance" judgments, has shown that some traits can be accurately perceived from minimal information. For example, targets' extraversion and conscientiousness can be perceived accu-

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¹ Throughout the paper, we use the term "narcissism" to refer to sub-clinical narcissism.

rately after a very brief interaction (Kenny, 1994; Watson, 1989), intelligence can be perceived accurately after watching a videotape of the targets reading a weather report (Borkenau & Liebler, 1993), and openness to experience can be perceived accurately after seeing the targets' bedrooms or websites, or hearing their top-10 favorite songs (Gosling, Ko, Mannarelli, & Morris, 2002; Rentfrow & Gosling, 2006; Vazire & Gosling, 2004). However, we know very little about how narcissism—the trait most explicitly connected to appearance—is manifested and perceived in everyday life.

1.1. Manifestations of narcissism

Why should narcissism, in particular, be associated with a distinct physical appearance? Several aspects of narcissism are directly related to physical appearance, and in each case these aspects are referred to in the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI, Raskin & Terry, 1988), the most widely used instrument designed to assess sub-clinical narcissism. First, narcissists are characterized in part by their high levels of vanity and interest in their own appearance. Several items on the NPI directly address this tendency (e.g., “I like looking at myself in the mirror,” “I like to start new fads and fashions”). Thus, narcissists may pay special attention to their appearance, leading to observable manifestations such as matching, fashionable clothes, and a tidy, organized appearance.

Another characteristic of narcissists that might affect their physical appearance is their desire to be the center of attention. NPI items such as “I really like to be the center of attention,” “I like to display my body,” and “I am apt to show off if I get the chance” tap into this facet of narcissism. Narcissists' exhibitionist tendencies might lead them to dress and adorn themselves in provocative, attention-grabbing ways. For example, narcissists may try to attract attention by wearing flashy or revealing clothing or by adorning themselves (e.g., with makeup).

Finally, narcissists' concern with status could also influence their physical appearance. Indeed, researchers have hypothesized that narcissists are especially likely to use clothes to enhance their status. For example, Sedikides et al. (2007) proposed that narcissists should be more likely than non-narcissists to buy brand-name, expensive, and stylish clothes, and to wear them as signals to their actual or desired status. Several items on the NPI tap into this facet of narcissism, such as “I like having authority over people,” “I insist upon getting the respect that is due me,” and “I want to amount to something in the eyes of the world.”

Despite these theoretical links between narcissism and physical appearance, there is no research on the physical manifestations of narcissism or perceivers' use of appearance cues in forming impressions of narcissism. Does narcissism have reliable physical cues? If so, can you tell if someone is a narcissist just by looking at them? The present study examines these questions.

1.2. Present study

The aim of the present study was to examine whether, and how, narcissism is manifested in physical appearance. We tested three research questions related to this issue.

Question 1: How accurate are snap judgments of narcissism? As stated above, there are many reasons to think that narcissism would be easy to spot. Narcissists care about fashion, they like to be the center of attention, and they like to be respected and praised. It is therefore reasonable to suppose that people with such characteristics would alter their appearance to stand out. However, it would be surprising if a trait as psychologically complex as narcissism could be easily detected from just a glance. For example, previous research has shown that the level of accuracy achieved with snap judgments from physical appearance is usually low to moderate (Naumann, Vazire, Rentfrow, & Gosling, 2008). Thus, we did not expect high levels of accuracy; even moderate levels of accuracy would be impressive in this context.

What, then, is a practically significant degree of accuracy? To gauge this, we will compare the accuracy of snap judgments of narcissism based on physical appearance to the accuracy of judgments of narcissism made by well-acquainted informants (i.e., close friends). This provides an important benchmark because the degree of accuracy achieved by those who know a person well represents a reasonable maximum threshold for the level of accuracy possible among strangers. We also compare the degree of accuracy obtained for narcissism to the well-established accuracy correlation obtained for extraversion judged at zero-acquaintance (i.e., from silent video clips). We chose extraversion because it is the most observable of the traits that have been examined (John & Robins, 1993) and also the most accurately-judged (Borkenau & Liebler, 1993), thus providing a high benchmark. We chose silent video clips as the comparison stimulus because several zero-acquaintance studies have examined accuracy using this stimulus and because silent video clips closely mirror our photographic stimulus in that they eliminate information from speech patterns and vocal content. In spite of this, silent video clips are still an especially strict benchmark to meet because these stimuli afford observers other sources of information (e.g., nonverbal behavior) that might improve accuracy, but that are absent from a static photograph.

Question 2: Which components of narcissism are manifested in physical appearance? Narcissism is typically conceived of as a constellation of narrower traits, which combine to produce a unique personality construct. It is possible that some facets of narcissism are better manifested in physical appearance than others. Thus, our second aim was to decompose narcissism into its component parts and examine which aspects can be detected from physical appearance alone.

What are the traits that make up narcissism? These have been conceptualized in several ways: within the framework of the Big Five personality traits (Paulhus & Williams, 2002) and as facets that can be captured by creating subscales of the NPI. The Big Five substrates of narcissism are high levels of agentic traits, especially extraversion, and low levels of communal

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