

The person inside the present: Narcissists buy to big themselves up

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Christmas is around the corner and many of us will be thinking of what to buy our loved ones (or ourselves) this festive holiday. But what is the psychology behind gift-giving?

Early results from research led by Dr Aiden Gregg from the University of Southampton, have shown that people with narcissistic tendencies want to purchase products, both for others and for themselves, that positively distinguish them - that is, that make them stand out from the crowd.

The study - conducted in collaboration with McGill University's Desautels Faculty of Management and Hanyang University in [South Korea](#) - investigated why narcissistic consumers chose certain products and how those products made them feel. Volunteers from both the universities in South Korea or Canada took part in one of four studies.

The first study, using online [questionnaires](#), asked participants about their consumer buying behaviour-for example, why they bought certain products and how doing so made them feel. Narcissism, rather than simple self-esteem, predicted dispositions to purchase products for the purpose of promoting personal uniqueness.

In the second study, participants were asked to imagine they had to replace their old MP3 player with an Apple iPod Touch. They had to choose one of the two free bonus options that came with it: either a special, limited edition, leather case, which could be personally

engraved, or a generic iTunes gift card.

The third study had three parts. In part one, participants were asked questions about a shirt that could be customized; in part two, they had to think of and describe three personal items they owned; and in part three, they were asked questions about a watch that was described either as exclusive or as run-of-the-mill.

Both the second and third studies found that narcissism predicted greater interest in exclusive, customizable, and personalizable products. The third study also found participants who were higher in narcissism regarded their prized possessions as less likely to be owned by others - that is, as more distinctive.

The final study focused on gifts being bought for another person. Participants were shown the same watch as in the previous study. [Narcissists](#) again tended to show more interest in the product when it was portrayed as exclusive. So it looks like narcissists want people around them to be as special as they are. Further analysis also suggested that a motive to manipulate others partly lay behind narcissists' gift-giving preferences.

Dr Aiden Gregg comments: "Narcissists seek to self-enhance. One way to do so is by buying products for symbolic as well as material reasons - for what they mean as well as what they do.

"Our early results show that narcissists' interest in consumer products, whether bought for themselves or for others, is strongly driven by the power of those products to positively distinguish them. Narcissists feel better about themselves because they think they have succeeded in individualising or elevating themselves."

Russell Seidle, of Desautels Faculty of Management, McGill University,

adds: "As expected, narcissistic consumers demonstrate a preference for scarce products that correspond with their views of themselves as unique individuals. Interestingly, these same consumers show a lower tendency to critically evaluate the actual characteristics of these goods. That is, scarcity in and of itself seems to be the main driver of their purchasing behaviour. These findings help to shed light on the importance of the symbolic value of purchasing decisions, which for these consumers seems to outweigh even the practical usefulness of the product being bought."

Provided by University of Southampton

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