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Narcissistic Consumers in Retail Settings

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Abstract

Purpose – This study investigates how narcissistic consumers perceive and respond to variations in price and store image in retail settings.

Design/methodology/approach – The data for this study were collected from a sample of 248 respondents who participated in an experiment with a $2 \times 2 \times 2$ between-subjects design.

Findings – The findings show that while narcissists and non-narcissists do not differ in their perceptions of product quality, they show completely different behavioral intentions. For instance, narcissistic consumers ascribe more importance to store image than to product price, whereas price is more critical in non-narcissists' decision making.

Research limitations/implications – Using a young sample and only one product category (i.e., clothing) may affect the generalization of the findings. The inherent drawback of experiments (i.e., gaining internal validity at the cost of external validity) is another limitation of this work.

Practical implications – The construct of narcissism plays a critical role in the way people evaluate products' symbolic value and ultimately decide to purchase goods from a store which has a certain type of image, including the expected price of the merchandise. Therefore, the findings of this study have significant managerial implications for critical areas of retail business such as segmentation using narcissism, store image management, and merchandise pricing.

Originality/value – Despite a long history in social and clinical psychology, few empirical studies have examined narcissism and its impact on consumer behavior. The present study is an attempt to address this gap in retail settings and provides insights into the joint effects of product price and store image on narcissists' purchase behavior.

Keywords

Narcissism, Image congruity, Store image, Price, Retailing

Article Classification

Research paper

1. Introduction

Deeply rooted in Greek mythology, narcissism has been investigated in the clinical and social psychology for more than half a century (e.g., Raskin & Hall, 1979; Rose, 2002; Vazire, Naumann, Rentfrow, & Gosling, 2008; Wink, 1991). Traditionally, narcissism has been defined as a dysfunctional form of overly high self-esteem and a grandiose view of self, and is treated as a psychological disorder (Campbell & Foster, 2007). However, in recent times, “narcissism is not just tolerated in our day and age, it is glorified. Many of our leaders and the public figures we admire flaunt their narcissistic proclivities, and we can’t wait to emulate their excesses” (Hotchkiss & Masterson, 2003; p. xv). In fact, some argue that such narcissism, often labeled as subclinical or normal narcissism, is a normal trait (Lubit, 2002; Sedikides, Rudich, Gregg, Kumashiro, & Rusbult, 2004) that is prevalent in the general population (Lasch, 1979). Further, there appears to be a trend that narcissism is becoming increasingly common among younger generations (Twenge, 2006; Twenge & Campbell, 2009).

Despite its prevalence, narcissism has only recently been linked to consumer research (e.g., Lee, Gregg, & Park, 2013; Naderi & Strutton, 2014; Sedikides, Gregg, Cisek, & Hart, 2007) and there is much about this trait that has yet to be investigated in this domain. Narcissism, as a multidimensional and complex construct (Campbell & Foster, 2007; Emmons, 1984; John & Robins, 1994; Raskin & Terry, 1988) could be associated with various aspects of consumption. This study focuses on the consumer behavior implications of narcissism in a retailing context. Specifically, this study investigates how narcissistic consumers perceive and respond to variations in product price and store image in a retail setting. A retail store is chosen as the research context because it provides a social exchange platform where shoppers not only buy goods and services, but also engage in enhancement and reinforcement of self-image through the

type of store they visit and the type of merchandise they buy, with price acting as image anchor for the merchandise.

The findings of this study have implications for various marketing decisions – segmentation, positioning, pricing, and retail store choice for a product. This study also adds to the existing literature on narcissism by investigating its ability to predict purchase intention in the presence of store image and product price. The rest of this paper is organized as follows. First, a discussion of the relevant literature is provided. Then, hypotheses are developed and tested using an experimental study. The paper concludes with discussion of the findings, implications, limitations and future research directions.

2. Background of the study

2.1. Narcissism

Narcissism is defined as a persistent pattern of grandiosity, self-focus, and self-importance (American Psychiatric Association, 1994). Narcissists are preoccupied with dreams of success, power, beauty, and brilliance. They display exhibitionistic behaviors and demand for attention and admiration, but respond to threats to self-esteem with feelings of rage, defiance, shame, and humiliation. Hotchkiss and Masterson (2003) identify seven follies of a narcissist – shamelessness, perfect image of self or magical thinking, arrogance, envy, entitlement, exploitative, and poor boundary recognition. However, a number of researchers (e.g., Crompton, 2008; Lubit, 2002; Määttä, Uusiautti, & Määttä, 2012; Maccoby, 2003; Sedikides et al., 2004) argue that some level of narcissism is healthy. Rose (2002) and Wink (1991) identify two levels of narcissism: (1) clinical, unhealthy, or pathological narcissism; and (2) subclinical, healthy, or normal narcissism. Conceptually, normal narcissism has been defined in terms of a self-centered, self-aggrandizing, dominant, and manipulative interpersonal orientation (Sedikides et al., 2007).

In a series of empirical studies, however, Sedikides et al. (2004) demonstrated that normal narcissism has a net-positive emotional consequence for the individual. This study focuses on the healthy aspect of narcissism (i.e., normal narcissism).

Normal narcissism has three basic ingredients: (1) *positive self* – the narcissistic self is positive, inflated, agentic, special, selfish, and oriented toward success (Campbell, Rudich, & Sedikides, 2002; Gabriel, Critelli, & Ee, 1994; John & Robins, 1994); (2) *lack of interest in warm and caring interpersonal relationships* – narcissism is negatively correlated to agreeableness, responsibility, empathy, gratitude, affiliation, concern for others, and need for intimacy, whereas it is positively correlated to exploitativeness, anger, hostility, and cynical mistrust of others (Campbell, Reeder, Sedikides, & Elliot, 2000; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001; Raskin & Terry, 1988); and (3) *self-regulatory strategies* – narcissists spend a good deal of effort to make themselves look and feel positive, special, successful, and important (cf. Campbell & Foster, 2007).

The self-regulatory tactics used by narcissists include efforts to be noticed, look good, surpass others, and defend the self against perceived threats. Attention seeking, showing off, and bragging are all standard narcissistic strategies (Campbell & Foster, 2007). Narcissists show higher public self-consciousness and a more other-directed self-monitoring style (Emmons, 1984) and are strongly motivated to make a good impression on their peers because of their constant need for admiration (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). As a result, displaying high-status material goods and associating themselves with high-status individuals are two common tactics employed by this group for looking good (Campbell & Foster, 2007). Purchasing and consumption of products, therefore, is an excellent opportunity for narcissists to elevate their self-positivity. Narcissists, for instance, are more likely to wear expensive, flashy, and neatly

kept clothing (Vazire et al., 2008). Research shows narcissists have a strong preference for scarce products that impart unique value (Lee & Seidle, 2012) and demonstrate greater interest in exclusive, customizable, and personalizable products (Lee, Gregg, & Park, 2013). Research also shows that higher exhibitionistic tendencies in narcissists could motivate them to use consumption as a means of signaling and showing-off to impress their audience (Naderi & Strutton, 2015). This prospect perhaps is also the case for where consumers shop. One could argue that narcissists would like to shop at a place that enhances their self-image.

2.2. Store image and image congruity

Store image is broadly defined as the complex aggregate of a customer's perceptions of a store on salient attributes (Houston & Nevin, 1981) and has been grouped into two distinct yet related categories: (1) functional and (2) symbolic store image (He & Mukherjee, 2007).

Functional store image refers to a consumer's perceptions of a store on attributes such as product, price, assortment, styling, location, atmosphere, and personnel (Houston & Nevin, 1981). On the other hand, symbolic store image is defined as a stereotypical image of users of a particular store (Sirgy, Grewal, & Mangleburg, 2000).

The store image, either functional or symbolic, is associated with self-image according to the self-congruity model (Sirgy, Grewal, Mangleburg, Park, Kye-Sung, Claiborne, & Berkman, 1997). Self-congruity model (Sirgy et al., 1997, p. 230) suggests that a consumer's behavior is determined, in part, by "the congruence resulting from a psychological comparison involving the product-user image and the consumer's self-concept." Previous research indicates that image congruity can affect consumers' product preferences and purchase intentions (Ericksen, 1997). Self-image congruity theory has also been tested across various product categories (e.g., shoes,

clothing, cars, cameras, soft drinks) as well as in the retail store context (Ericksen, 1997; O’Cass & Grace, 2008).

Image congruity in the context of retailing refers to the degree of match between the store image and a customer’s self-image and self-concept (Sirgy et al., 2000). Martineau (1958) was one of the first to suggest that consumers select the store that has a personality consistent with their self-image. Bellenger, Steinberg, and Stanto (1976) showed that the congruence of store image and self-image is related to store loyalty. Stern, Bush, and Hair (1977) also found that consumers select brands and stores that possess images that are similar to their self-images. In summary, the existence of a matching process between self-image and store image is confirmed in previous studies (O’Cass & Grace, 2008; Stern et al., 1977).

Existing literature suggests that both actual self- and ideal self-congruity have significant effects on consumer attitude, brand preference, and purchase intention (He & Mukherjee, 2007; Sirgy et al., 1997; Stern et al., 1977). For instance, Stern et al. (1977) reported that consumers patronize stores whose characteristics are congruent with their actual self-images rather than their ideal self-image. With respect to the differential importance of the actual or ideal self-image on purchase intentions, Landon (1974) suggested that this association may depend on factors such as personality of the individuals or the type of product being studied. In fact, a meta-analysis by Rao and Monroe (1989) suggests that for consumer products, the positive effect of store name on perceived quality is small and not statistically significant.

2.3. Price and perceived value

According to Monroe (1990), perceived value of products represents some trade-off between what the customer receives (e.g., quality, benefits, worth, utilities) and what he or she gives up to acquire and use a product (e.g., time, price). In the context of retail stores, as

suggested by O’Cass and Grace (2008), both price (of the products bought) and store image are conceivable contributors to perceived value. Using the terminology used by Zeithaml (1988), while store image is more relevant to the *get* side of the equation (i.e., benefit), price mainly contributes to the *give* side (i.e., sacrifice). However, considering the intrinsic status usually associated with higher prices (Chao & Schor, 1998), expensive products would deliver value (i.e., status) for individuals who want to show status-consumption, defined as acquisition and consumption of goods for the purpose of gaining status or relative position (O’Cass & Frost, 2002). Therefore, price may affect both benefits and costs simultaneously. In the following section, theoretical framework linking store image, product price, and the focal construct of narcissism is presented along with the testable hypotheses.

3. Theoretical framework

Existing literature suggests that consumers buy and use goods and services not only for their utility but also for what they represent (e.g., Dittmar, 1992; Levy, 1959; Leigh & Gabel, 1992). Accordingly, symbolic consumption refers to the consumers’ tendency to focus on meanings beyond the tangible, physical characteristics of material objects (Levy, 1959). Products, therefore, function as social tools, “serving as a means of communication between the individual and his [or her] significant references” (Grubb & Grathwohl, 1967, p. 24). For products, brands, and retail stores to serve as communication symbols, they must have social recognition, and the meanings associated with them must be clearly established, socially shared, and continuously produced and reproduced during social interactions (Dittmar, 1992; Grubb & Grathwohl, 1967). Dittmar (1992) further argues that symbolic meanings of material possessions can communicate some aspects of their owner’s identity not only to others, but also to themselves. Similarly, O’Shaughnessy and O’Shaughnessy (2002) note that positional goods are

purchased and used to demonstrate group membership, identify themselves, and mark their position in society.

This study focuses on two main facets of symbolic consumer behavior: (1) shopping (retail patronage) and (2) possession of material goods. Shopping is a social activity that can impact both the individual side and the social side of consumers' identity. Several researchers point out how consumers tend to develop positive attitudes toward retail stores that reflect their self-concept (Sirgy et al., 1997; Reed et al., 2012). This research focuses on the symbolic aspect of store image (i.e., store user imagery), which captures how shoppers perceive a retail store in terms of its typical clientele or patrons (Sirgy et al. 2000). Accordingly, the study focuses on two general types of retail stores with high and low symbolic images: (1) high-end stores (e.g., Nordstrom and Neiman Marcus) that cater to an exclusive, upper class clientele; and (2) low-end stores (e.g., T.J. Maxx and Ross) that mainly serve the middle and lower social classes.

The second aspect of symbolic consumption – possession of material goods – can be viewed from various vantage points. Symbolic value of a product could result from several factors such as brand image (e.g., Toms shoes), ingredients (made of recycled and/or recyclable materials; organic foods), production process (zero waste or fair trade), and performance (hybrid and electric cars). However, one important characteristic of a product that can signify its symbolic meanings and signal its symbolic value is price, considering the prestige that is inherently associated with higher prices. One can rightfully argue that price could also function as a signal of quality, beyond the utilitarian value of the product. Products that yield higher symbolic values may evoke significantly different cues of product quality compared to functional products. In fact, for comparable products (same product category), while a highly priced product is undoubtedly higher in symbolic value (e.g., luxury brands), it may or may not be

higher in utilitarian values (e.g., quality) when compared to a low-priced alternative. In other words, for luxury brands, premium prices do not necessarily translate into higher utilitarian quality (e.g., Louis Vuitton bags and Rolex watches). Therefore, we focus on two categories in this research: (1) high-priced products, presumably signaling high symbolic values; and (2) low-priced products, which do not suggest strong symbolic values.

3.1. Store prestige and overall quality expectations

Previous research shows that high-end retail stores overall create an expectation of higher prices (e.g., Baker, Parasuraman, Grewal, & Voss, 2002). Such an image can then be interpreted as higher prestige and higher quality expectations by consumers. On the other hand, for narcissists, symbolic values are of greater importance compared to utilitarian values (Sedikides et al., 2007). Therefore, as motivated reasoning theory (Kunda, 1990) predicts, such expectations may be stronger for narcissistic consumers compared to their non-narcissist counterparts. In fact, narcissists tend to associate themselves with high-status individuals (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001) and joining the exclusive clientele of a high-end retail store could be a great opportunity for them to serve such a tendency. Consequently, narcissists, who hold stronger favorable views toward high-end stores, may rationalize such views by interpreting the same information differently from non-narcissistic consumers, who may not have the same consumption motives (i.e., status) but rather hold more objective, less biased views toward a high-end retail store. Therefore, we hypothesize that:

H1: Narcissistic consumers, compared to non-narcissistic consumers, perceive a high-end retail store to be higher in (a) store prestige and (b) overall quality expectations.

In contrast, such predictions should hold in reverse directions for low-end retail stores. Narcissists, by default, tend to undervalue, and stay away from any situations that involve

products or places incompatible with their inflated, positive view of self. Therefore, consistent with motivated reasoning theory, when compared to their non-narcissist counterparts, narcissists are inclined to interpret the information in a manner consistent with their existing negative views about a low-end retail store. Thus, we hypothesize that:

H2: Narcissistic consumers, compared to non-narcissistic consumers, perceive low-end retail stores to be lower in (a) store prestige and (b) overall quality expectations.

3.2. Perceived product quality

As discussed, product price and retail store image are two distinct pieces of information that may influence perceptions of product quality. To get a clearer view on how store image and price interact, we investigate the following four possible conditions: (1) high-priced products at high-end retail stores; (2) high-priced products at low-end retail stores; (3) low-priced products at high-end retail stores; and (4) low-priced products at low-end retail stores.

Normally, price information matches store image information (Baker et al., 2002). That is, lower prices are expected at low-end retail stores whereas higher prices at high-end retail stores. Consequently, across the four conditions, one would expect highest perceptions of product quality in condition 1, where both factors are in harmony, indicating high product quality. In contrast, lowest perceptions of quality are expected to occur in condition 4, where both price and retail store image are indicatives of low quality products.

The complexity arises when there is a mismatch between those two pieces of information (high-priced items at low-end retail stores or low-priced items at high-end retail stores). For high-priced products sold at low-end retail stores, while price and store image entail conflicting information, we theorize that retail store image would be less influential in signaling quality because the price cue, due to its stronger attachment to the product, could supersede negative

inferences made from the low-status image of the retail store. Conversely, in the case of low-priced products at high-end retail stores, only the less dominant signal (retail store image) favors higher perceptions of product quality. Therefore, we propose the following hypotheses:

H3: For a high-priced product, consumers' perceptions of product quality are higher when the product is sold at a high-end retail store rather than a low-end retail store.

H4: Consumers' perceptions of product quality are higher for a high-priced product sold at a low-end retail store than a low-priced product sold at a high-end retail store.

H5: For a low-priced product, consumers' perceptions of product quality are higher when the product is sold at a high-end retail store rather than a low-end retail store.

We expect the hypotheses immediately above to hold for narcissistic and non-narcissistic consumers alike. In fact, retailers strive to occupy a clear and distinctive position in the consumer's mind and hope their positioning holds for all consumer types, whether narcissist or not. Also, both high- and low-end stores carry a wide range of priced products. In addition, it is reasonable to assume that consumers (narcissist or non-narcissist) are well aware of higher marked up prices at high-end retail stores compared to those at low-end retail stores. As a result, quality perceptions hold for narcissistic consumers as they do for their non-narcissistic counterparts.

3.3. Purchase intention

The last set of hypotheses concerns the behavioral responses (i.e., purchase intention) that are expected from narcissist and non-narcissist consumers. As discussed, narcissistic purchase behavior mostly stems from what the purchase signifies, based on symbolic value. Therefore, the extent to which quality perceptions play a role in the purchase of a product from a specific store is expected to be different for narcissists and non-narcissists. In the first condition, where a high-

priced product is sold at a high-end retail store, image congruity theory suggests that narcissistic consumers would indicate higher intentions to purchase the product compared to non-narcissistic consumers because both the retail store and product are associated with glory and high status, crucial in narcissists' decision making (Raskin, Novacek, & Hogan, 1991; Raskin & Terry, 1988). While higher prices and high-status store image would yield value (status) to narcissists (who are inclined to show status-consumption), non-narcissists would be less likely to seek out value from image-related factors (O'Cass & Grace, 2008) or make a purchase decision based on the status derived from store image or price. Therefore, we hypothesize:

H6: When a high-priced product is sold at a high-end retail store, narcissistic consumers show higher purchase intentions compared to non-narcissistic consumers.

In contrast to the first condition, in which both product price and retail store convey a high-status image, when a high-priced product is sold at a low-end retail store, there is a mismatch between the signals; that is, high price suggests a high-status image (favored by narcissists) whereas low-end retail store indicates a low-status image (undesirable for narcissists). In this situation, we expect narcissistic consumers to resist what they find undesirable (i.e., being part of a low-status clientele), and show less inclinations to purchase the product compared to their non-narcissistic counterparts, for whom store status is less essential. Therefore, we hypothesize:

H7: When a high-priced product is sold at a low-end retail store, narcissistic consumers show lower purchase intentions compared to non-narcissistic consumers.

The next condition concerns behavioral intentions when a low-priced product is sold at a high-end retail store. Similar to the previous condition, one signal (here, high-end store image) is desirable for a narcissist whereas the other factor (low price) is not. Therefore, narcissists would

be less likely to purchase a product only based on the store-related status because the low-status image resulting from product price is hard to conceal during the consumption phase. In other words, strong associations between product price and perceived status prevent narcissists from purchasing a low-priced product, even though it is sold at a high-end retail store. In contrast, non-narcissists, who are less concerned about status-related product attributes, would be willing to purchase a low-priced product from a high-end retail store. In fact, they may see it as a bargain. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H8: When a low-priced product is sold at a high-end retail store, narcissistic consumers show lower purchase intentions compared to non-narcissistic consumers.

The last condition deals with a low-priced product that is sold at a low-end retail store. In such a circumstance, narcissists and non-narcissists are expected to show similar behavioral intentions for completely different reasons. As noted, narcissistic decision making is primarily led by image-related criteria whereas non-narcissists are mainly concerned about functional (utilitarian) attributes. In this condition, both product price and retail store image signal low status and narcissistic consumers would not be motivated to purchase the product because it may harm their image. On the other hand, non-narcissistic consumers would not be inclined to buy the product because both product price and store image suggest lower quality expectations from the product. Therefore, it is hypothesized that:

H9: When a low-priced product is sold at a low-end retail store, purchase intentions do not differ for narcissistic and non-narcissistic consumers.

Insert Figure 1 Here

4. Method

The data for this research were collected from a sample of 256 undergraduate students enrolled at two Southwestern public universities in the United States. Eight participants were discarded due to their incomplete responses, resulting in a final sample of 248 participants. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 52 years ($M = 24.20$, $SD = 5.54$) and 75.4% were females. Further analysis showed that there were no significant differences across genders (all $ps > .374$).

Since the primary focus of the study was to isolate price- and store-related effects on narcissism, a 2 (narcissism: low vs. high) \times 2 (retail store symbolic image: low- vs. high-end) \times 2 (product price: low vs. high) between subjects, full factorial experimental design was conducted to avoid hypothesis guessing. In addition, a cover story was used to reduce potential suspicion and participants were told that they would be participating in two unrelated tasks: consumer decision making, and a personality test. Participants were then randomly assigned to one of the four experimental conditions designed to manipulate product price as well as retail store image: (1) a high-priced product at a high-end retail store; (2) a high-priced product at a low-end retail store; (3) a low-priced product at a high-end retail store; and (4) a low-priced product at a low-end retail store. Specifically, participants were asked to imagine they were shopping for a piece of clothing and saw one that was high-priced (low-priced) while passing by a high-end (low-end) retail store. In addition, in all the scenarios, they were told that they could afford the product.

Several considerations were taken into account in designing the scenarios. First, no specific retail store was mentioned to counter any potential confounding effects of familiarity, knowledge, and experience. In addition, since symbolic store image is manipulated, we wanted to eliminate any bias or presuppositions about typical users of a specific store and leave it entirely to participants' imagination on what they portray as a low- or high-end store. Hence, the

only descriptor used for the retail store was either *high-end* or *low-end*. Second, clothing was selected as the focal product because of its high public visibility and symbolic value (Michaelidou & Dibb, 2006; O’Cass, 2004) as well as its high relevance to the sampled population. Third, no specific price was mentioned in the scenarios in order to eliminate the potential confounding effects of differences in socio-economic status, price sensitivity, and possibly product involvement. Indeed, a pair of jeans priced at \$80 could be perceived high-priced or not for consumers with different socio-economic status. At the same time, participants were told that they could afford the product. Finally, symbolic store image (i.e., stereotypical users) rather than functional store image (e.g., assortment, styling, location, and atmosphere) was intended for manipulation. In order to reinforce the symbolic image manipulation, participants were told that they saw the product while *passing by*, rather than *being in* the store, controlling for functional image attributes that customers mostly encounter while in a store. Here, again, our goal was to let the respondents visualize low- or high-end store clientele entirely by their imagination.

To investigate the proposed hypotheses, participants were asked to indicate their *overall* expectations of quality and store prestige at a low-end (or high-end) clothing store, depending on the scenario to which they were assigned. Overall quality expectations were measured on eight, seven-point semantic differential items (Buchanan, Simmons, & Bickart, 1999; $\alpha = .98$). Store prestige – as a representation of patron status, store atmosphere, branding, and fashion combined – was measured on three, seven-point Likert-type items adopted from Kirmani, Sood, and Bridges (1999; $\alpha = .96$).

Dependent variables in this study are perceived quality and purchase intention. After reading the scenario, participants first indicated their perceptions of product quality, measured on

the same scale (Buchanan et al., 1999; $\alpha = .96$). Then, they were asked to indicate their intention to purchase the product from the store on three, seven-point Likert-type items ($\alpha = .92$) adapted from Sweeney, Soutar, and Johnson (1999). These measures capture a consumer's stated likelihood of purchasing a specified product from a particular store.

After completing the first task, which investigated consumer decision making, participants completed a battery of personality items which included the short version of the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI-16; Ames, Rose, & Anderson, 2006) to measure normal narcissism. We decided to use the shortened measure of NPI ($\alpha = .85$) to reduce respondent fatigue. Participants also responded to demographic questions. Finally, a hypothesis-guessing check revealed no evidence of respondents guessing the study objectives.

5. Analyses and results

The scale items for the constructs were averaged to form their composite scores. The procedure recommended by Aiken and West (1991) was then followed to test H1 and H2. Two separate regression models were run with the continuous measure of narcissism (mean-centered to reduce multicollinearity), retail store image (contrast-coded), and their two-way interaction as predictors of store prestige and overall quality expectations. The analyses revealed a marginally significant interaction effect in the first regression on store prestige ($b = .437, t(244) = 1.917, p = .056$), and a significant interaction effect in the second regression on overall quality expectations ($b = .514, t(244) = 2.676, p = .008$). To explicate the nature of these interactions, we ran separate correlational analyses in high-end and low-end image conditions. Supporting H1a and H1b, in the high-end store condition, narcissism was positively and significantly correlated with both store prestige ($r = .259, p = .003$) and overall quality expectations ($r = .303, p = .001$). In other words, for a high-end retail store, narcissists expected higher store prestige ($M = 5.54$ vs. 4.91)

and overall quality ($M = 6.15$ vs. 5.56) than non-narcissists did. However, contrary to our expectations, narcissism did not significantly correlate with store prestige and overall quality expectations in the low-end store image condition (store prestige: $M = 2.73$ vs. 2.75 ; overall quality expectations: $M = 3.09$ vs. 3.27 ; $ps > .10$). Therefore, H2 is not supported. These findings are shown in Figures 2 and 3.

Insert Figures 2 & 3 here

In order to test H3 through H5, we ran three independent samples t -tests and independently compared the two conditions discussed in each hypothesis. The first t -test revealed no significant differences in perceived product quality of a high-priced product whether it was sold at a high-end ($M = 4.35$) or at a low-end retail store ($M = 4.50$; $t(111) = .645$, $p > .10$). Therefore, H3 is not supported. The results of the second t -test supported H4; a high-priced product sold at a low-end retail store was perceived significantly higher in quality ($M = 4.50$) than a low-priced product sold at a high-end retail store ($M = 3.09$; $t(111) = 6.115$, $p < .001$). The final t -test comparing perceived quality of a low-priced product sold at a high-end ($M = 3.09$) versus a low-end retail store ($M = 3.08$) revealed no significant results ($t(133) = .018$, $p > .10$). Therefore, H5 is not supported. We further examined the data to investigate any potential differences between narcissists and non-narcissists in their perceptions of product quality. Across the four experimental conditions, no significant correlation was found between narcissism and perceived product quality (all $|r|s < .130$ and all $ps > .281$), which supports our expectations. These findings are shown in Figure 4.

Insert Figure 4 here

Finally, to investigate H6 through H9, the regression procedure recommended by Aiken and West (1991) was used with purchase intention as the focal dependent variable. The

multivariate regression model with narcissism (mean-centered to reduce multicollinearity), store image and price level (both contrast-coded), and all two- and three-way interactions as predictors of purchase intention was run. As reported in Table 1, the analysis revealed a marginally significant three-way interaction between narcissism, price, and store image ($b = .910$, $t(240) = 1.734$, $p = .084$). The two-way interaction between narcissism and store image was also significant in this model ($b = .971$, $t(240) = 3.702$, $p < .001$). Finally, the findings revealed a marginally significant two-way interaction between narcissism and product price ($b = -.459$, $t(240) = -1.750$, $p = .081$). No other effect in this model was significant (all $ps > .10$).

Insert Table 1 here

In order to explicate the interaction effects, simple slope analysis (Aiken & West, 1991) was conducted on two separate regression models after re-centering narcissism at one standard deviation above and below the mean. The analyses were then decomposed for the combinations of store image (low- vs. high-end) and product price (low- vs. high-priced) to test the remaining hypotheses.

The slope analysis for non-narcissistic consumers revealed a significant, negative effect for retail store image ($b = -.632$, $t(240) = -2.304$, $p = .022$) as well as a marginally significant, positive effect for product price ($b = .528$, $t(240) = 1.926$, $p = .055$). That is, non-narcissistic consumers reported higher purchase intentions when retail store image was low-end ($M = 4.69$) rather than high-end ($M = 4.05$) and when product price was high ($M = 4.64$) rather than low ($M = 4.11$). In contrast, the slope analysis for narcissists revealed that retail store image had a significant, but positive effect on purchase intention ($b = .823$, $t(240) = 2.935$, $p = .004$) whereas the effect of product price was insignificant ($b = -.159$, $t(240) = -.568$, $p > .10$). That is,

regardless of the product price, narcissistic consumers reported higher purchase intentions from a high-end ($M = 4.83$) than a low-end retail store ($M = 4.01$).

The data were further scrutinized using correlational analysis in order to elucidate the differences between the narcissist and the non-narcissist groups across the four experimental conditions. In the first condition, when a high-priced product was available at a high-end retail store, narcissism had a significant, positive correlation with purchase intention ($r = .290, p = .021$). That is, narcissistic consumers reported higher purchase intentions ($M = 4.91$) than non-narcissistic consumers ($M = 4.14$) when product price was high and the retail store had a high-status symbolic image, supporting H6. Further, in the second condition, when a high-priced product was available at a low-end retail store, correlation analysis revealed a significant, negative relationship between narcissism and purchase intention ($r = -.408, p = .003$). The results, supporting H7, showed that non-narcissistic consumers ($M = 5.14$), compared to narcissists ($M = 3.77$), were more inclined to purchase the high-priced product from a low-end retail store. In the third condition, when a low-priced product was available at a high-end retail store, contrary to our expectations, the analysis showed a significant, positive correlation between narcissism and purchase intention ($r = .264, p = .037$). That is, narcissists ($M = 4.75$), compared to non-narcissists ($M = 3.98$), indicated higher intentions to purchase the low-priced product from a high-end retail store. Therefore, H8 is not supported. Finally, in the fourth condition, when a low-priced product was available at a low-end retail store, as expected, no significant correlation was found between narcissism and purchase intention ($r = .001, p > .10$). That is, purchase intentions were same for narcissists ($M = 4.24$) and non-narcissists ($M = 4.24$) when the low-priced product was available at a low-end retail store, supporting H9. These findings, together, are shown in Figures 5 and 6.

Insert Figures 5 & 6 here

6. General discussion

Despite a long history in social and clinical psychology, few empirical studies have examined narcissism and its impact on consumer behavior. The present study is an attempt to address this gap in retail settings and provides insights into the joint effects of product price and store image on narcissists' purchase behavior. The findings of this study show that narcissistic consumers perceive high-end retail stores to be more prestigious and their overall quality expectations are higher compared to non-narcissists. As theorized, narcissists follow this strategy to rationalize their positive views towards high-end retail stores. However, for low-end retail stores, no difference was observed between narcissists and non-narcissists in their perceptions of store prestige and quality expectations. A plausible explanation could be that narcissists may simply stay away from being associated with low-end retail stores and their clientele without necessarily holding excessively unfavorable views toward them. Therefore, their perceptions and expectations from a low-end retail store are similar to those of non-narcissists.

The findings also show that product price is actually the dominant predictor of perceived product quality, prevailing over retail store image. These findings could be due to the fact that price, compared to retail store image, has a stronger attachment to the product. For instance, it is quite possible to find a product with the same price at retail stores with different images; and products in the same category with different prices at the same store. Therefore, it is reasonable to put more emphasis on price as a more dependable signal for product quality.

The findings of our study are even more interesting for purchase intention. Indeed, while both narcissistic and non-narcissistic consumers hold similar perceptions of product quality, their behavioral intentions are drastically different and somewhat counterintuitive. For non-narcissistic

consumers, retail store image is a negative predictor of purchase intention whereas product price positively influences their purchase intentions. For these consumers, price is the driving factor in their purchase decision making, acting as a simple and clear but strong signal for quality. In addition, non-narcissists are less concerned with image-related factors and thus are less willing to shop at a high-end retail store, perhaps because of higher markups that are normally expected from high-end retail stores, even for low-priced products.

In contrast, only store image positively contributes to purchase intentions for narcissistic consumers and the effect of price disappears for these consumers in the presence of store image cues. A plausible explanation is that narcissists may be interested in walking through a mall (or store) carrying a bag with the name of a high-end retailer on the outside so as to signal to all they pass by that they can afford to, and do, shop at high-end stores. This would be an excellent opportunity for them to impress their audience by bragging about their high-status shopping experience and association with an exclusive, high-status clientele (e.g., I usually shop at Nordstrom). In addition, narcissistic consumers may be totally in love with the idea of shopping at a high-end retail store, where they can become imaginative and associate the store elements such as aesthetics, design, and atmosphere to feelings of self-glorification. Thus, they are motivated to capitalize on every opportunity to visit, and shop at a high-end store, even if the product price is low. Therefore, the symbolic image attributed to a retail store plays a more significant role in narcissistic decision making compared to the price-related image for a particular product.

Further, confirming our expectations, the findings indicate that narcissists show higher purchase intentions than non-narcissists when a high-priced product is sold at a high-end retail store because both product price and store image deliver matching signals conveying high status,

which is integral to narcissistic decisions. Finally, in the case of a low-priced product sold at a low-end retail store, neither narcissists nor non-narcissists are inclined to purchase the product but for completely different reasons (i.e., low status for narcissists and low quality for non-narcissists).

Overall, the findings of this study lend credence to the notion of self-consistency (Swann, 1990). This study showed that actual image congruity directs consumer behavior in the context of retail stores. That is, simplistically stated, narcissists have a more positive and high-status view of the self, and therefore purchase more frequently from a high-end store. In contrast, non-narcissists, who have a more realistic view of the self, are less likely to capitalize on store image in order to enhance self-image. These findings are in line with those of He and Mukherjee's (2007) and indicate that consumers' store selection is mainly driven by self-consistency and shed greater light on the importance of congruity between self-image and store image.

6.1. Theoretical contributions

This study adds to the relatively small albeit growing literature on narcissism in the context of consumer behavior (e.g., Lee, Gregg, & Park, 2013; Naderi & Strutton, 2014; Sedikides, Gregg, Cisek, & Hart, 2007), and the findings contribute to marketing theory in several ways. First, to our best knowledge, our work is the first study in the consumer behavior domain that investigates the moderating role of narcissism on the effect of price and store image on purchase intentions as well as quality assessments. Second, we showed how narcissists as consumers process available information and make decisions to validate their excessively positive self-views. Specifically, we extended the scope of past research by showing how narcissists differ from non-narcissists when they are presented with symbolic information about the goods and stores that contradict one another. Third, our research showed that when

narcissists are presented with an exclusive, high-end retail store choice, they ascribe more importance to symbolic values than to other instrumental benefits of consumption such as product quality. These findings underscore the agentic basis of narcissistic self-regard (Campbell & Foster, 2007) but in a new context (i.e., retail stores). In fact, narcissists are interested in retail stores that enhance their positive distinctiveness, illustrating their acute concern with social status. We hope that this study provides an impetus for more research in the complex and multidimensional domain of narcissistic consumer behavior within the context of retailing.

6.2. Managerial implications

Retail stores are social gathering places, where people congregate, and apart from buying goods, also engage in impression management. The construct of narcissism plays a critical role in the way people evaluate products' symbolic value and ultimately decide to purchase goods from a store which has a certain type of image, including the expected price of the merchandise. Therefore, the findings of this study have significant managerial implications for critical areas of retail business such as segmentation using narcissism, store image management, and merchandise pricing.

Particularly, our research offers some guidelines pertaining to self-congruity for retailers (Sirgy et al., 2000). The findings suggest that individual differences exist whereby the signals of quality and status are more salient or discernible to some consumers than to others, and these in turn influence purchase intention. For example, narcissists, in comparison to non-narcissists, associate higher store prestige and expect higher quality from high end stores. However, for low end stores, both narcissist and non-narcissist consumers have similar expectations in terms of quality and store prestige. Part of the reason may be that almost everyone is able to shop at a low-end retail store, whereas only a select few people can make a purchase at a high-end retail

store. Retail store managers thus need to consider the harmony between their product assortment, store image, and their consumer characteristics.

Further, the results confirm that narcissists, relative to non-narcissists, are particularly susceptible to exclusivity appeals, because the symbolic values of the high-end retail store would complement their positive self-image. For both high and low price products, purchase intention is higher when these products are sold at a high-end store. A high price and low status store combination seems to result in lower purchase intention for narcissists than for non-narcissistic consumers. When targeting narcissistic individuals, marketers of high-status goods and high-end retail stores should use exclusivity claims that resonate with this group of customers, who need to validate their positive self-views through the approval and admiration of others (Lee & Seidle, 2012). Therefore, retail stores that mainly target narcissistic individuals should focus on communicating the positive symbolic attributes of the store and its high-status clientele rather than the utilitarian product-specific attributes. For example, use of prominent name/logo on shopping bags would be a necessity. Free promotional items that narcissists could display prominently would also drive up purchase intention. Finally, there could be rewards for frequent shoppers, such as products that display the store brand and could be used in public often (e.g., briefcases, purses, and backpacks).

In sum, the fact that narcissism seems to be on the rise (Twenge & Campbell, 2009) increases its relevance as a basis for segmentation, targeting, and enhancement in purchase predictions and retail store patronage. The knowledge of consumers' narcissism could noticeably enhance the ability of retailers to enhance the sale of high-status products and high-status retail store patronage, especially given the availability of shorter measurements for the construct (Ames et al., 2006). Marketers' access to shorter measures of narcissism could also make it

practically feasible to use this important construct as a segmentation variable particularly for luxury products and high-status retail stores.

6.3. Limitations and future research

The findings of this study are limited to one product category (i.e., clothing). Future research should extend the findings by examining other product categories. In addition, the innate limitation attached to experiments (i.e., gaining internal validity at the cost of external validity) may also be influential in this study as consumers may show different behaviors in real situations. One such limitation could arise from our simplistic approach to manipulate symbolic store image (low-end vs. high-end store) in this experiment. Although this manipulation was used to eliminate potential confounding effects such as familiarity and bias, future research could employ more realistic designs and manipulations to examine the robustness of the findings. Further, while symbolic store image and price were used as reflectors of product quality and self-image in this study, brand name could also serve the same purpose. Future studies should therefore investigate the role of product brand (high-status vs. low-status) in narcissistic consumption

Narcissism is a complex and multidimensional personality construct and we live in a culture and at a time that promotes greater narcissism among all members of Western societies (Campbell & Foster, 2007; Lasch, 1979; Twenge, 2006; Twenge & Campbell, 2009). Therefore, future research needs to address other aspects of this characteristic in retail settings. For example, how would functional store image distinguish between these two consumer groups? Or how would ideal vs. actual self-image differentiate how these two consumer types respond? Another interesting area for future research could be narcissism among business decision makers and its impact on business-to-business decision making (see for example Lubit, 2002). We hope that this study provides an impetus for more research in this domain.

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Figure 1
Theoretical Model of the Study

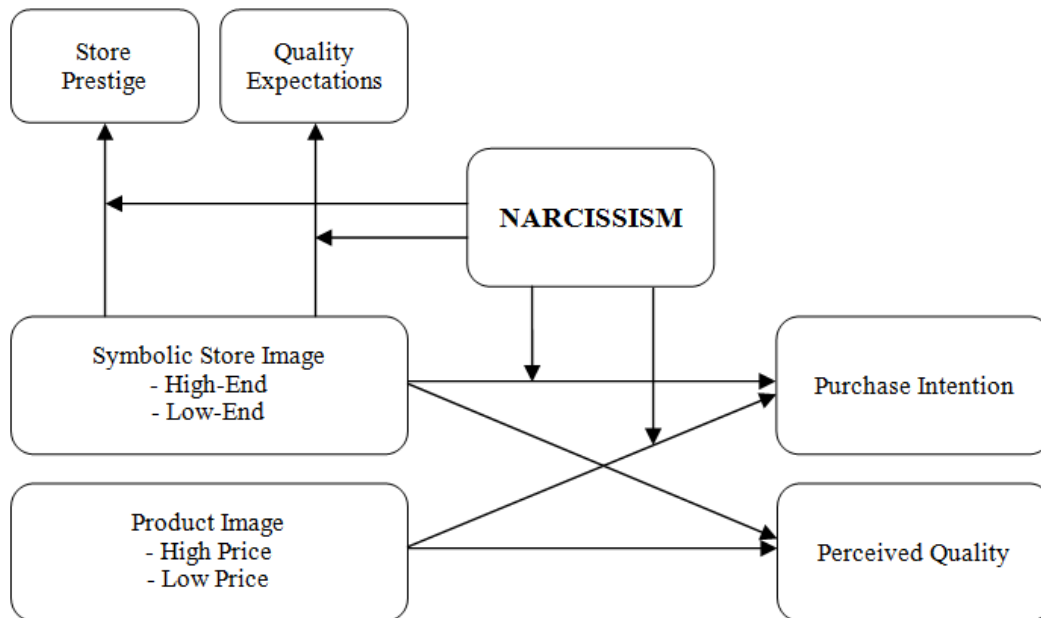


Figure 2
Narcissism and Symbolic Store Image Interaction on Retail Store Prestige

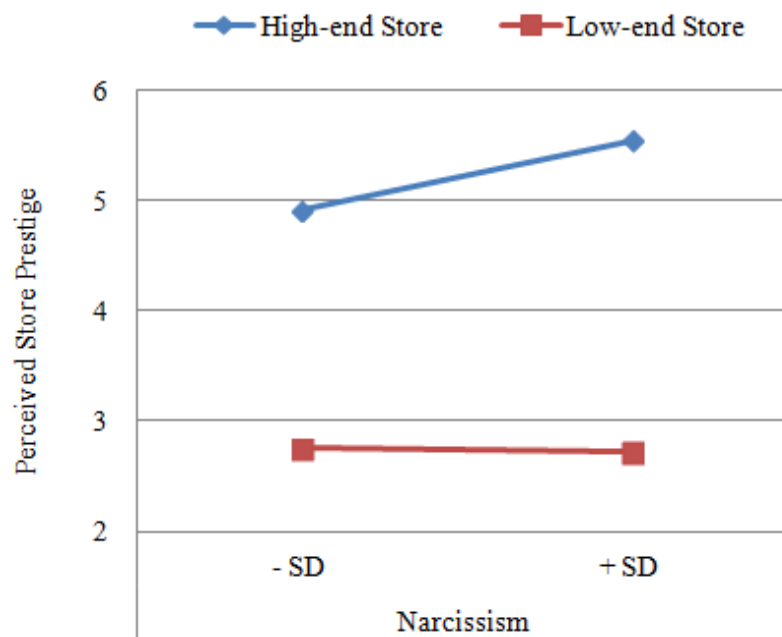
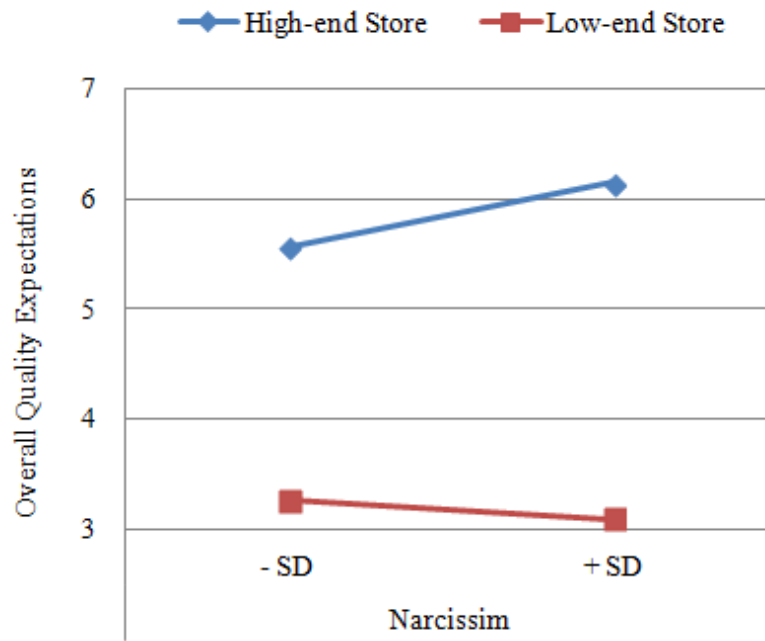


Figure 3

Narcissism and Symbolic Store Image Interaction on Overall Quality Expectations

**Figure 4**

Symbolic Store Image and Product Price Interaction on Perceived Product Quality

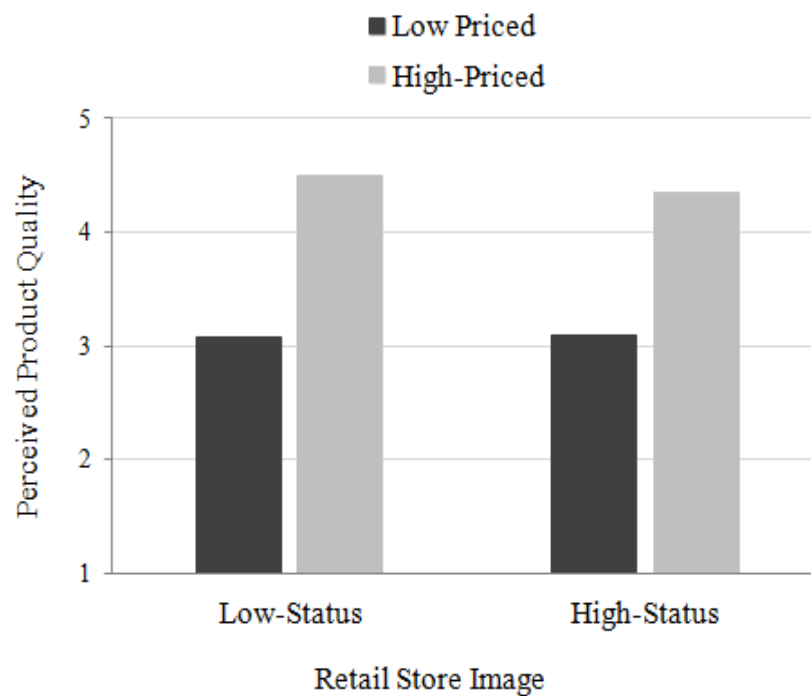
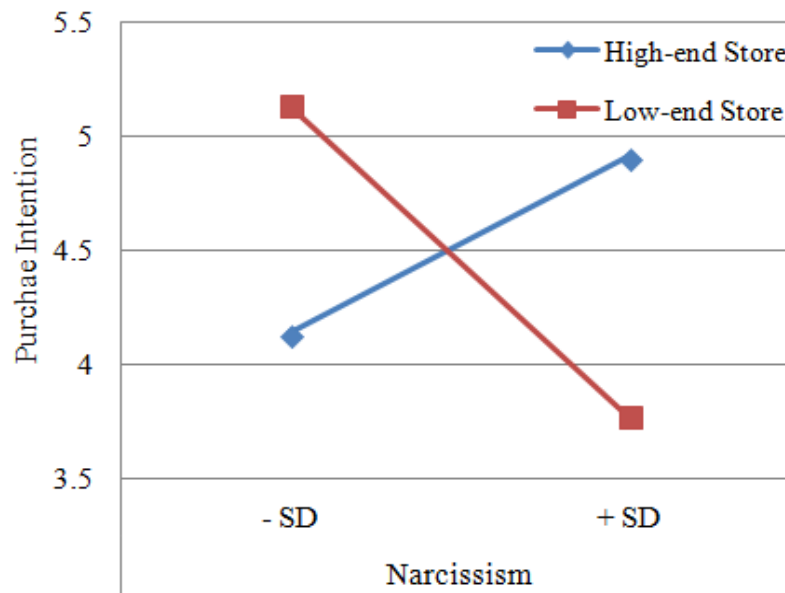


Figure 5

Narcissism and Symbolic Store Image Interaction on Purchase Intention
(High-Priced Product)

**Figure 6**

Narcissism and Symbolic Store Image Interaction on Purchase Intention
(Low-Priced Product)

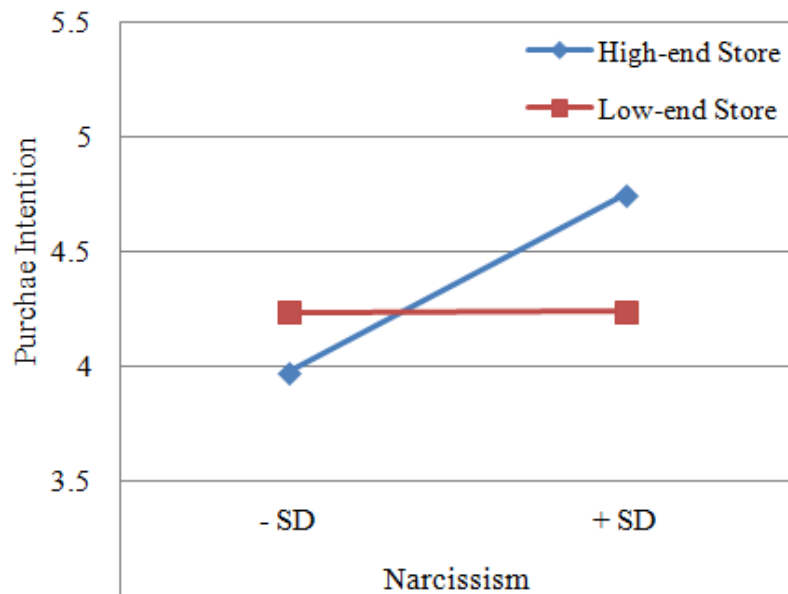


Table 1 Regression Analysis for Purchase Intention

	β	<i>S.E.</i>	<i>Standardized β</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>Sig</i>
(Constant)	4.394	.098	.098	44.875	.000
Narcissism	.031	.131	.131	.236	.814
Store Image	.096	.196	.196	.489	.625
Price	.185	.196	.196	.943	.347
Narcissism \times Store Image	.971	.262	.262	3.702	.000
Narcissism \times Price	-.459	.262	.262	-1.750	.081
Store Image \times Price	-.054	.392	.392	-.138	.890
Narcissism \times Store Image \times Price	.910	.525	.525	1.734	.084