

NARCISSISTIC ATTITUDES AMONG MANAGERS BUILDING A PERSONAL BRAND

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Purpose: The purpose of this article is to increase knowledge of managers' evaluation of the phenomenon of narcissism in contemporary organisations and their identification of both narcissistic manifestations among individuals managing organisations and personal branding activities of narcissistic nature.

Design/methodology/approach: The study was of a partial, ad hoc nature, and it was conducted in the form of a diagnostic poll, based on a self-constructed survey questionnaire.

Findings: The vast majority of managers surveyed agree that the internet and new media have reinforced the narcissistic traits of many individuals, inducing an eruption of egocentric behaviour in society, and that the human personality has become a commodity with a certain market value. More than 40 per cent felt that in companies, managers surround themselves with uncritical or dependent 'claqueurs' who uphold their idealised self-image, and that it is mainly those who are "glamorous" yet not necessarily effective in achieving business goals who get promoted. The most questionable statement for them was that in the company there is an organisational culture being shaped that emphasises norms and values which eliminate narcissistic attitudes and behaviours among employees. The main manifestations of narcissistic attitudes of organisational managers included striving to dominate others and devaluing others, thus indicating narcissistic competition. In their view, self-indulgence, inconsistency and distortion of reality, excessive social media presence, boasting and focusing attention solely on oneself are all narcissistic actions used when building a personal brand. More than half of them create themselves as they want to be perceived by others, and one in five respondents admitted that they focus on constantly monitoring themselves and their image, trying to guess "what others think of me".

Research limitations/implications: The empirical study was conducted using the purposive sampling method and the target group was managers - graduates of the postgraduate course "Manager's Academy". Due to the small research sample (68 responses), it is not possible to generalise the findings to the entire population. The findings obtained relate to the perception, subjective evaluation of the managers surveyed and are not based on methods known in the clinical field for measuring narcissism, which may be a certain limitation of this study.

Practical implications: The findings obtained from the study may be useful for business owners and managers of various levels interested in conscious and consistent personal branding and who want to know what manifestations of narcissistic attitudes of individuals managing organisations are and which personal branding activities bear the hallmarks of narcissism. The findings may also be of interest to human resource professionals responsible for shaping an organisational culture that emphasises norms and values that eliminate narcissistic attitudes and behaviours among employees.

Social implications: Raising awareness of narcissistic attitudes of managers who are building a personal brand as well as highlighting the phenomenon of narcissism in contemporary organisations.

Originality/value: The article is of cognitive value for the development of knowledge in management and quality sciences, in the area of human resource management.

Keywords: narcissism, personal branding, personal brand, manager, management, human resource management, organisation, work environment, organisational behaviour.

Category of the paper: Research paper.

1. Introduction

Personal branding is most often presented in the context of a career development tool (Dzieńdziora, Grzesiak, Wróbel, 2020), employability (Muszyńska, Fryczyńska, 2021), the CEO brand management process (Górska, 2021), diversity of methods (Wojtaszczyk, Maszewski, 2014), the relationship with employer-branding (Sidor-Rządkowska, 2016, 2019), comparative analyses (Grzesiak, 2015, 2017). In turn, the problem of narcissism is discussed in the context of employee relations, organisational behaviour, work environment, organisational culture, leadership, hypercompetitiveness and management dysfunction (see Braun, Aydin, Frey, Peus, 2018, pp. 725-741; Erkutlu, Chafra, 2017, pp. 146-162; Ingersoll, Glass, Cook, Olsen, 2019, pp. 893-907; Buchholz, Lopatta, Maas, 2020, pp. 663-686; Swid, Ragab, 2018, pp. 31-39; Erdal, Budak, 2021, pp. 139-155; Ali, Johl, 2020, pp. 1-18; Paltu, Brouwers, 2020, pp. 1-11; Saleem, Malik, Malik, 2021, pp. 1-16; Khan, Nazir, Shafi, 2021, pp. 87-110; Uppal, 2021, pp. 99-113; Yang, Chang, Li, Zhou, Tian, Zhang, 2021, pp. 137-154; Yao, Zhang, Liu, Zhang, Luo, 2020, pp. 543-563; Cote, 2018, pp. 42-65; Fehn, Schütz, 2021, pp. 549-566; Khan, Imran, Anwar, 2019, pp. 135-144; Latta, Withely, 2019, pp. 63-80; Choi, 2019, pp. 1-12; Lyons, Moorman, Mercado, 2019, pp. 369-380; Matherne, Credo, Gresch, Lanier, 2019, pp. 31-39; Harrison, Summers, Mennecke, 2018, pp. 53-77; Blair, Helland, Walton, 2017, pp. 333-346).

A systematic review of the management science literature and meta-analysis has shown that there is a lack of empirical research conducted among managers building a personal brand in order to diagnose the perception of their narcissistic attitudes (cf. Winnicka-Wejs, 2022). A systematic review of the literature has shown, for example, that narcissistic tendencies hold the potential to positively influence the success of a start-up in the early stages of the entrepreneurial journey, but that after a certain period of time the impact of narcissism on

success becomes mostly negative (see Burger, Kanbach, Kraus, 2022, pp. 1750-6204). In management science, it is emphasised that narcissism and hubris are unfavourable traits attributed to managers in the context of their strategic myopia (Czakoń, 2020, p. 15). Issues related to managers' personality disorders affect intra-organisational and stakeholder relationships (Kutzner, Marcinkowski, 2020, pp. 147-161). There are specific difficulties in building relationships with a narcissistic person in the work environment (Dreżewska, Michniak-Szladerba, 2019, pp. 9-18), and narcissistic managers shape organisational cultures with a toxic work environment (see Stawiarska-Lietzau, Luzniak-Piecha, 2014, pp. 11-30).

Culturally and socially, the values currently promoted foster a selfish attitude and shape specific behaviours in social relations in work settings, resulting in an increased need for individualism, uniqueness and care for one's social and media image (Gawda, 2018, p. 70). It is important to note that narcissism can be regarded not only as a name for a personality disorder, but also as an attitude or a set of behaviours observed in healthy people who are dominated by an overly strong desire to become relevant, pushy self-promotion going hand in hand with a lack of capacity for critical self-reflection. Narcissistic attitudes of managers can be a source of dysfunction in organisational management (Moczydłowska, 2016, p. 259).

There is a scarcity of studies in the literature on the subject that link the topic of personal branding with narcissism. In the era of the 'narcissism epidemic', research on the links between this personality syndrome and various aspects of human functioning (also in organisations, in the workplace) seems not only justified, but also very desirable (cf. Łojan, 2021, pp. 20-29), especially when we realise that narcissism is a social and cultural phenomenon (Lasch, 2015, p. 62).

In view of the above, the following research questions were formulated:

1. Is the phenomenon of narcissism acknowledged in contemporary organisations by managers, and if so, to what extent?
2. What are the manifestations of narcissistic attitudes of individuals managing organisations?
3. Which personal branding activities are narcissistic in the opinion of the managers surveyed?

For the purpose of this article, an analysis of the literature on the subject and a survey among managers were conducted.

2. Description of the research methodology and characteristics of the managers surveyed

The aim of the empirical study was to survey managers (graduates of the postgraduate course 'Manager's Academy' - www 1) about the narcissistic manifestations of individuals managing organisations and personal branding activities of a narcissistic nature.

For the purposes of the study and on the basis of the analysed literature on the subject, a survey questionnaire was devised, consisting of 12 questions (6 - factual, 6 - metric). The questions were closed-ended, both single-choice and multiple-choice, and one question was open-ended, allowing the respondent to leave a comment. A link to the survey was made available via a Google form.

The survey was conducted using the purposive sampling method. The target group consisted of managers - graduates of the post-graduate course "Manager's Academy" at the University of Economics in Katowice, who form a closed Facebook group. The study was of a partial, ad hoc nature, conducted in the form of a diagnostic poll.

The pilot study, which aimed, among other things, to improve the tool in terms of content and technical aspects was carried out from 26.06.2023 to 30.06.2023. The survey proper took place between 01.07.2023 and 08.07.2023. A total of 68 persons took part in the survey. The questionnaires were completed correctly and all questions were answered, as a result of which no questionnaire had to be rejected. The structure of the survey respondents who took part in the survey is summarised in Table 1.

Table 1.

Structure of the managers surveyed by gender, year of birth, management level, length of service, company size, industry

Metric category		Distribution of responses
Gender	Female	47
	Male	21
Year of birth	1946-1964	1
	1965-1979	9
	1980-1989	39
	1990 and later	19
Management level	Lower	19
	Middle (director head of unit, department, for...)	44
	Top (president, director, owner, deputy)	5
Length of service	Less than 5 years	2
	5-10 years	26
	11-20 years	28
	Over 20 years	12
Company size	Sole trader	2
	Micro (up to 9 persons)	2
	Small (10-50 persons)	5
	Medium (51-250 persons)	15
	Large (more than 250 persons)	44

Cont. table 1.

Industry according to Polish Classification of Activities (PKD)	Agriculture, forestry, hunting and fishing	0
	Mining and quarrying	1
	Manufacturing	13
	Electricity, gas, steam and air conditioning supply	1
	Water supply; sewerage, waste management and remediation activities	3
	Construction	1
	Wholesale and retail trade; repair of motor vehicles and motorbikes	3
	Transport and storage	3
	Accommodation and food service activities	0
	Information and communication	2
	Financial and insurance activities	12
	Real estate activities	0
	Professional, scientific and technical activities	3
	Administrative services and support activities	2
	Public administration and defence; compulsory social security	8
	Education	2
	Human health and social work activities	5
	Arts, entertainment and recreation activities	1
	Other service activities	8
	Activities of households as employers; undifferentiated goods- and services-producing activities of households for own use	0
Extraterritorial organisations and bodies.	0	

Source: own study based on own empirical survey.

Analysing the data in Table 1, it can be observed that 69.1% of women and 30.9% of men completed the questionnaire. More than half of the responses (57.4%) are from Generation Y (born 1980-1989), followed by Generation Z (born 1990 and later) with 27.9%. 13.2% of the respondents represent generation X (1965-1979). From the Baby Boomers generation, only one person completed the questionnaire.

Respondents are characterised by varying length of service: 41.2% ticked 11-20 years, 38.2% 5-10 years, 17.6% more than 20 years, 2.9% less than 5 years. Among the respondents, mid-level managers (67.4%) and the lower-level managers (27.9%) predominate. 7.4% were persons from top-level management (presidents, directors, owners).

Most of the surveyed managers work in large companies (64.7%) and medium-sized companies (22.1%). Most responses came from the following industries: manufacturing (19.1%), financial and insurance activities (17.6%), public administration and defence; compulsory social security (11.8%), other service activities (11.8%).

3. Findings of the empirical study and conclusions

The majority of respondents agreed with the statement that the human personality has become a commodity with a certain market value (cf. Table 2).

Table 2.

Structure of answers to the question "Do you agree with the statement that nowadays human personality has become a commodity with a certain market value? Please choose one answer."

Range of responses	Number of responses
Agree	32
Somewhat agree	27
Neither agree nor disagree	6
Somewhat disagree	1
Disagree	2

Source: own study based on own empirical survey.

The vast majority agreed with the quote that 'the internet and new media have reinforced the narcissistic traits of many individuals, inducing an eruption of egocentric behaviour in society' (Szpunar, 2016, p.12) (cf. Table 3).

Table 3.

Structure of responses to the question "Do you agree that 'the internet and new media have reinforced the narcissistic traits of many individuals, inducing an eruption of egocentric behaviour in society'? (Szpunar, 2016, p.12) Please choose one answer"

Range of responses	Number of responses
Agree	40
Somewhat agree	25
Neither agree nor disagree	2
Somewhat disagree	1
Disagree	0

Source: own study based on own empirical survey.

In their work to date, respondents have encountered specific manifestations of narcissistic attitudes among individuals managing organisations, mainly in the form of 'dominating others', 'devaluing others' and 'grandiose fantasies'. Table 4 shows the detailed distribution of responses.

Table 4.

Structure of responses to the question "Which manifestations of narcissistic attitudes of organisational managers have you encountered in your work so far? Please select the appropriate answers"

Range of responses	Number of responses
Striving for uniqueness	16
Grandiose fantasies	34
Devaluing others	37
Striving to dominate others	46
Other	6

Source: own study based on own empirical survey.

Other responses (cf. Table 4) included: "Social media addiction", "Maintaining a relationship of dependence, infantilising subordinates, Parent-Child relationship according to transactional analysis", "Crediting oneself with significant achievements that have not occurred", "Intimidation of subordinates by virtue of the empowering position held", "I am the only person who is right", "A sense of uniqueness, depreciating the achievements of other members of the organisation".

In the next question, the surveyed managers were asked to respond to statements that referred to their organisation and organisational culture being conducive to narcissism (cf. Table 5).

Table 5.
Respondent managers' attitudes towards specific statements

Statements	Number of responses				
	Agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Disagree
In the company where I work, self-promotion, creating a buzz around oneself, the ability to attract attention is valued more than finding one's place in the team.	6	21	16	20	5
In the company, it is "stardom" that is rewarded rather than cooperation and friendliness.	8	13	10	23	14
Within the company, it is mainly those who are 'glamorous', yet not necessarily effective in achieving business goals, that are promoted.	10	18	11	19	11
In the company there is an organisational culture being shaped that emphasises norms and values which eliminate narcissistic attitudes and behaviours among employees.	7	21	25	11	4
An exuberant self-centredness is promoted in the company to justify the subjective, instrumental treatment of employees.	3	7	19	20	21
Within the company, managers surround themselves with uncritical or dependent 'claqueurs' who uphold an idealised self-image.	12	17	14	13	12
One's position in my industry is mainly determined by how a manager takes care of his or her own image.	3	22	16	17	13

Source: own study based on own empirical survey.

Table 5 shows that the surveyed managers are not unanimous in their opinion on narcissism in the company. 60% of them believe that exuberant egocentrism is not promoted in their companies to justify the subjective, instrumental treatment of employees. More than half of the respondents felt that their companies do not reward "stardom" instead of cooperation and friendliness. However, 37% of them are not sure whether in their companies there is an organisational culture that emphasises norms and values that eliminate narcissistic attitudes and behaviour of employees. With this statement, there were the highest number of 'neither agree not disagree' responses (25 indications).

The most positive responses (agree, somewhat agree) were given to the statements: "In the company, managers surround themselves with uncritical or dependent "claqueurs" who maintain an idealised self-image" (agree - 12 responses, somewhat agree - 17 responses), "in the company, it is mainly those who are 'glamorous', yet not necessarily effective in achieving business goals that are promoted (agree - 10 responses, somewhat agree - 18 responses), "in the company where I work , self-promotion, creating a buzz around oneself, the ability to attract attention is valued more than finding one's place in the team." (agree - 6 responses, somewhat agree - 21 responses). It should be noted that with these statements the number of 'disagree', "somewhat disagree" responses was close to the positive ones.

The next question was a multiple-choice item - respondents were asked to identify actions that apply to them. Table 6 captures the structure of the responses.

Table 6.

A selection of personal branding activities that relate to the managers surveyed

Activities	Number of responses
I have a penchant for embellishments, fashionable hairstyles and clothes that attract attention.	10
I focus on constantly monitoring myself and my image, trying to guess "what others think of me".	13
I have a compulsive need to please, to draw attention to myself, to impress others and myself with attributes such as prestige, power, possessions.	4
Being accepted by others and affirming myself is a kind of compulsion that organises my existence.	8
I have a compulsive need to leave behind a lot of information online, to search for information about myself.	1
On social media, I obsessively inform others about myself, uninhibitedly exposing myself in various situations.	0
I create myself as I want to be perceived by others.	37
Other.	18

Source: own study based on own empirical survey.

Table 6 shows that more than half of them create themselves as they want to be perceived by others, which may be related to individuals functioning in a culture of narcissism (cf. Szpunar, 2016, p. 160). The 18 'Other' responses included sentences that were grouped thematically:

- No action: "None of the above - I am myself, I don't need to 'create' myself as 'someone important'; " None of the above; "None of the above"; "None of the above applies to me"; "I like to be the centre of attention and I love the company of other people, but I don't think any of the above applies to me";
- Being authentic/myself: "I don't create anything, I am myself"; "I am just myself"; "None of the above, I rely on authenticity"; "I am myself. I like to look good/well-groomed and fashionable, I don't like large trinkets, I don't like to be photographed, I don't publish photos etc., I shy away from commenting on portals"; "I take care of my image, neat and clean clothes but I don't care about the opinion of others";

- Own personal branding strategies: "I selectively share information about myself on social media and like to show 'unique', 'prestigious' situations"; "I care primarily about my personal development and taking on continuous substantive challenges"; "I always try to follow my intuition, respecting others, but I also set a limit"; "I have a need to be accepted and perceived by both employees and employers as competent and good-looking"; "I value privacy and time spent with my family. I do not flaunt my personal life on social media and I like my workplace"; "Withholding information about my achievements undertaken individually".

The final open-ended question: 'Please give your comments. What can be considered a manifestation of narcissism in personal branding? Which personal branding activities are narcissistic in your opinion? How do you distinguish between conscious personal branding to shape authenticity, good reputation and visibility and the creation of a false self-image and typical 'self-promotion'?' was answered by 42 respondents.

The majority of the comments were attributed to the thematically separated threads on narcissistic actions in personal branding (cf. Table 7), the remaining comments referred to professional personal branding.

Table 7.

Narcissistic personal branding activities in the opinion of managers surveyed

Action category	Number of responses	Selected comments
Being better than others	13	"The relentless pursuit of being the best"; "Self-indulgence. Only me and nobody or nothing counts"; "Putting oneself on a pedestal and ignoring the others"; "Every day braggig to each new person 'what they have done in their life, where they have worked and who they have had an opportunity to deal with'. - Such ego-boosting"; "It is quite visible to the naked eye if someone has an exuberant ego and exalts themselves over others".
Lack of consistency	7	"Lack of consistency - among other things, behaviour 'on the forum' being completely different from private behaviour"; "Creating one's image as a competent, experienced, authoritative person - without delivering the tasks, without reflecting what he communicates in his daily management. Something like: 'Great talkers are little doers'"; "Pretending to be someone else", "Distorting reality and colouring it"; "Creating an image of oneself that has nothing to do with the truth. Overcolouring of all qualities, skills in order to get a job, get a partner, etc.".
Social media - too many posts and time spent	5	"Exaggerating the exposure of one's life on social media"; "Spending more time on social media than with real people"; "Posting a great deal of testimonials and photos online".
Bragging	4	"Citing past work-life experiences always in the form of boasting, statements that go on for a long time, do not contribute anything. For example, "In the Seychelles it is done like this", "In Saudi Arabia something like this is looked at differently, I had a situation like this (...); "Reporting only one's successes, blurring any data about any weaknesses, showing glamour"; "Exaggerated praising of one's person, promoting oneself, without visible involvement of other people who confirm these achievements" .
Focusing on oneself	2	"Focusing more attention on oneself than on the company/organisation"; "Over-focusing attention on oneself. Ignoring others".

Source: own study based on own empirical survey.

Eleven respondents gave more emphasis to personal branding than narcissism in their comments, focusing on the characteristics of a conscious way to build your brand. They noted that "there is a fine line between conscious personal branding and narcissism", however:

- "personal branding is a tool that is used to build your brand and a consistent perception of yourself along with your knowledge, experience and personality";
- "by taking care of your personal brand, being a coherent person without wearing masks";
- "conscious personal branding is nothing more than being oneself without flaunting it";
- "the basis is the compatibility of the created image with everyday professional and private activity. If they are not cohesive, they will not be authentic";
- "conscious self-branding is a long-lasting development process, a great deal of work put into building up trust in our person, our competences and values in qualitative terms. Narcissism is building a facade, a blow-up, it's taking shortcuts, it doesn't matter what they say, as long as they talk a lot and loudly, it has nothing to do with authenticity or coherence, it's only creation and play, and for me it is inextricably linked to the moral spine....in narcissists it seems to be either disappearing or completely absent... and maybe norms have loosened up and analogues should be placed in the archives?"

They stressed that 'a good reputation and personal branding is based on professionalism, expertise and the ability to collaborate. So-called self-promotion is taking all the credit. Conscious branding is performing one's duties (whatever they may be) conscientiously and reliably and making quick decisions based on facts, not emotions (rumours or myths)".

To conclude, it is worth quoting two extended comments on the manifestations of narcissism in personal branding:

- "The question is so complex that it is difficult to give a clear answer. The mechanisms for promoting content on social media balance on a fine line between showing life, private achievements and professional success. In the same way, the abbreviated, iconic nature of electronic communication, in my opinion, flattens the possibility of providing reliable information/making an impact on most followers. More often than not, they only take a cursory glance at a post and react (by 'like' button) or scroll on. Success is probably only guaranteed by consciously built content based on one's own backyard (e.g. a website) with a system of social media notifications, engagements that lead to 'our backyard'. What seems narcissistic in all of this is building an image based solely on success, showing 'Myself' rather than, for that matter, 'Ourselves' or the team of people who lasered in on a particular challenge".
- "The deluge of content on the subject of self promotion is now a massive phenomenon; in the current situation, I believe that a person who does not have adequate information regarding a particular industry is not able to properly and clearly identify and evaluate the content that appears there".

From the comments quoted above, it can be inferred that narcissistic actions during the process of personal branding involve self-indulgence, inconsistency and distortion of reality, excessive social media activity, boasting and focusing attention solely on oneself.

4. Conclusion

The phenomenon of narcissism is acknowledged in modern organisations. Almost all managers surveyed (95% of respondents) agreed that "the Internet and new media have reinforced the narcissistic traits of many individuals, inducing an eruption of egocentric behaviour in society", and 87% of them confirmed that nowadays human personality has become a commodity with a certain market value.

When it comes to assessing actions taken within the organisation, they are no longer so unanimous. More than 40 per cent of them felt that in companies, managers surround themselves with uncritical or dependent 'claqueurs' who uphold their idealised self-image and that they promote mainly those who are 'glamorous' yet not necessarily effective in achieving business goals, which may entail certain negative consequences 'short-term gains but long-term losses' (cf. Black, in: Fiejdasz-Kaczyńska, 2019).

With the statement "In the company there is an organisational culture being shaped which emphasises norms and values that eliminate narcissistic attitudes and behaviours of employees", there was the highest number of vague 'neither agree nor disagree' responses. Although 60% felt that their companies did not promote exuberant egocentrism to justify the subjective, instrumental treatment of employees, they did identify the desire to dominate and devalue others among the manifestations of narcissistic attitudes of individuals managing the organisation.

This implies the subordination of everything and everyone to oneself, which is associated with narcissistic competition (see Rogoza, Rogota, Wszyńska, 2016, pp. 440-444). A propensity to dominate, exploitative tendencies may be associated with overt rather than covert type of narcissism (see Sanecka, 2020, p. 37). These traits may be closer to the characteristics of one of the five narcissist characters (Lowen, 1995), namely psychopathic personality, with its contempt for people and sense of superiority and lack of interaction with others (see Olchanowski, Sieradzan, 2011, pp. 18-19). It should be emphasised, however, that the findings obtained concern the perception, the subjective assessment of the managers surveyed and are not based on methods known in the clinical field for measuring narcissism (see Hyla, 2021, pp. 14-15), which may represent some limitation of this empirical study.

More than half of the managers surveyed create themselves as they want to be perceived by others, which may be related to individuals operating in a culture of narcissism (Szpunar, 2016, p. 160). Only one in five people surveyed admitted that they focus on constantly monitoring themselves and their image, trying to guess 'what others think of me'.

In personal branding, the main manifestations of narcissism are such actions which are not supported by facts and are forms of overt or covert self-promotion. The essence of narcissism is preoccupation with oneself, a sense of self-importance, uniqueness, being superior, a sense of entitlement, arrogance and an instrumental attitude towards people used to maintain an unrealistic self-image (more in Pilch, 2014, pp. 165-181). Such manifestations of narcissism were also indicated by the managers surveyed in the area of personal branding. In particular, the belief in being superior and the inconsistency between what one does and what one creates and projects around oneself were highlighted. What distinguishes conscious personal branding from narcissistic shaping is authenticity and consistency in action.

The present empirical study among managers was exploratory in nature. Due to the small research sample and it not being representative, the obtained findings of the study cannot be generalised. However, the article may inspire further in-depth research into the following interconnections: narcissism - personal branding, organisational culture - narcissism of managers.

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