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Understanding the Relationship between Grandiose Fantasy in Pathological Narcissism and Anger: A Moderated Serial Mediation Model

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This study examined the mechanisms linking grandiose fantasy in pathological narcissism to anger, proposing that hostile attribution bias and humiliation mediate this relationship. A total of 152 adults completed a grandiose fantasy questionnaire before being randomly assigned to a social rejection ($n = 76$) or non-rejection ($n = 76$) condition. After the experimental manipulation, participants reported their levels of hostile attribution bias, humiliation, and anger. Results indicated a significant serial mediation effect–grandiose fantasy led to anger through hostile attribution bias and humiliation, but only in the social rejection condition. No such effect emerged in the non-rejection condition. These findings suggest that individuals with heightened grandiose fantasies are more prone to interpreting rejection as hostile, experiencing humiliation, and responding with anger. This study provides new insights into the cognitive and emotional processes underlying narcissistic anger, emphasizing the role of social rejection and its implications for psychological interventions.

Keywords: pathological narcissism, grandiose fantasy, hostile attribution bias, humiliation, anger, social rejection

Psychologists have long sought to link personality traits to anger and aggression, recognizing them as significant indicators of psychopathology (Cain et al., 2008; Li et al., 2016). Despite this, the relationship between these emotions and underlying personality traits remains unclear due to their complexity. Studies have shown that anger and aggression are closely linked to pathological narcissism (Bettencourt et al., 2006; Stuck & Sporer, 2002), suggesting narcissism plays a key role in these behaviors. Pathological narcissism encompasses traits like entitlement, exploitative actions, and lack of empathy, along with emotional components like helplessness and shame (Wright & Edershile, 2018). These diverse characteristics may explain inconsistencies in aggression research (Campbell & Foster, 2007). This study focuses on grandiose fantasy, a central feature of narcissism, and its relationship with anger. We hypothesize that hostile attribution bias and humiliation mediate this relationship, with higher narcissism leading to increased perceptions of hostility and humiliation (cf. Li et al., 2016). Additionally, we propose that social rejection moderates this path, intensifying the link between grandiose fantasy and anger through hostile attribution bias and humiliation.

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Pathological Narcissism, Grandiose Fantasy and Anger

Pathological narcissism differs from healthy narcissism, which re-

lies on self-regulation to maintain a positive self-image. Pathological narcissists, driven by grandiose fantasies, seek admiration and power while devaluing others to bolster their inflated self-worth (Li et al., 2016). While valuing one's uniqueness is normal, excessive demands for recognition can lead to maladaptive anger or aggression in social situations (Ronningstam, 2010).

Pathological narcissism is often categorized into overt and covert forms (Pincus et al., 2014). Overt narcissists display inflated self-evaluations with little fear of judgment but frequently experience anger and resentment. Covert narcissists, in contrast, have fragile self-esteem, fear criticism, and exhibit depressive tendencies alongside heightened sensitivity to rejection. Rather than being distinct types, these traits often coexist within individuals (Pincus et al., 2009). Both forms are characterized by grandiose fantasies, entitlement, and emotional instability, which contribute to heightened aggression and anger in response to perceived ego threats (Cain et al., 2008; Campbell et al., 2000).

Empirical research supports a strong link between pathological narcissism and anger. Individuals with exaggerated yet unstable self-views struggle with negative evaluations, often displaying hostility or aggression in response (Bettencourt et al., 2006; Kjaervik & Bushman, 2021; Lambe et al., 2016; Locke, 2009; Yang & Kwon, 2016). Narcissistic anger is particularly pronounced following perceived failure or rejection, as these experiences contradict their grandiose self-image (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Steiner et al., 2021; Stuck & Sporer, 2002). This response can manifest as either internalized frustration and withdrawal or externalized hostility toward others, particularly when negative feedback is perceived as a personal attack (Witte et al., 2002). The DSM-5-TR's alternative model for personality disorders identifies grandiosity as a core feature of narcissistic personality disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). Given the central role of grandiose fantasy in both overt and covert narcissism, this study examines its relationship with anger in the context of social rejection.

The Serial Indirect Pathways: The Roles of Hostile Attribution Bias and Humiliation

Hostile attribution bias (HAB) refers to the tendency to assume that others have hostile intentions, leading to defensive or aggressive reactions (Tuente et al., 2019). Individuals with high HAB are more likely to perceive neutral or ambiguous social cues as deliberate slights, which can escalate into anger and retaliatory behaviors (Li et al., 2016). Pathological narcissists, who expect admiration and special treatment, are particularly prone to hostile attributions when faced with rejection or negative evaluations (Edwards & Bond, 2012; Rhodewalt & Morf, 1998; Twenge & Campbell, 2003). Even constructive criticism or minor social slights can be misinterpreted as personal attacks, triggering defensive hostility. This is consistent with research showing that narcissists frequently externalize blame for negative experiences, attributing failures to the perceived hostility or incompetence of others rather than their own shortcomings (Wu et al., 2014). Prior findings suggest that HAB plays a mediating role in the link between pathological narcissism and aggression (Moon & Lee, 2021), reinforcing its relevance in explaining narcissists' anger responses.

Humiliation, a self-conscious emotion that arises when individuals perceive themselves as being coerced into degrading positions or having their authority undermined in social interactions (Fernánde et al., 2015; Leidner et al., 2012; Otten & Jonas, 2014; Torres & Bergner, 2012), is a key factor in narcissistic anger. Unlike shame, which stems from internalized failure, humiliation results from external devaluation and is more likely to occur within unequal power dynamics (Hartling & Luchetta, 1999; Leidner et al., 2012; Walker & Knauer, 2011). Because pathological narcissists derive their self-worth from external validation, they are particularly prone to feelings of humiliation when admiration is withheld or when they interpret others' actions as undermining their status. Research has linked humiliation to a range of negative psychological outcomes, including hostility and aggression (Besser & Zeigler-Hill, 2010; Leidner et al., 2012; Torres & Bergner, 2012).

HAB and humiliation are closely interconnected, particularly in individuals with pathological narcissism. Research suggests that individuals high in HAB tend to misinterpret others' actions as deliberate attempts to undermine them, increasing their susceptibility to feelings of humiliation (Edwards & Bond, 2012; Twenge & Campbell, 2003). Pathological narcissists, driven by grandiose fantasies, are especially prone to HAB, interpreting even neutral or minor negative feedback as intentional slights (Locke, 2009). This distorted perception fuels feelings of humiliation, as they perceive their status or self-worth as being dimin-

ished by others (Hartling & Luchetta, 1999; Lee & Shin, 2018). Given that humiliation often triggers anger and retaliatory aggression (Fernández et al., 2018; Leidner et al., 2012), this suggests a serial indirect effect: pathological narcissism intensifies HAB, which heightens humiliation, ultimately leading to anger.

The Moderating Role of Social Rejection and the Proposed Research Model

Social rejection disrupts an individual's sense of belonging and self-worth, often eliciting anxiety, fear, and anger (Twenge & Campbell, 2003; Leary, 2010). It encompasses a range of behaviors, from ignoring someone to complete exclusion, and exists along a continuum of relational evaluation (Leary et al., 2006). Rejected individuals tend to exhibit higher aggression than those in control groups (Twenge et al., 2001), and narcissists, in particular, show heightened anger in response to rejection. This supports the theory of threatened egotism, which links ego threats to aggressive behaviors (Barry et al., 2006; Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Twenge & Campbell, 2003). For those with pathological narcissism, rejection threatens their grandiose self-image, activating hostile attribution bias and triggering anger or aggression as a means of self-protection (Besser & Zeigler-Hill, 2010; Edwards & Bond, 2012; Li et al., 2016). In contrast, when accepted, narcissists are less likely to exhibit such negative emotions (Bettencourt et al., 2006). A meta-analysis (Kjaervik & Bushman, 2021) confirms that while narcissism is linked to aggression, this relationship is particularly strong in contexts of social rejection.

Building on previous research (e.g., Collazzoni et al., 2014; Leidner et al., 2012; Li et al., 2016; Twenge & Campbell, 2003), this study hypothesizes that grandiose fantasies, a core feature of pathological narcissism, lead to anger through hostile attribution bias and humiliation. This serial indirect effect is expected to be most pronounced in the context of social rejection, as narcissists exhibit less aggression when socially accepted (Bettencourt et al., 2006). Thus, we predict that the effect will be significant only under the social rejection condition. Figure 1 illustrates the proposed research model.

Methods

Participants and Design

Participants were recruited through the Research Participant Pool at the first author's university. They received either extra course credit or a small financial incentive. Of 161 initial volunteers, four withdrew due to concerns about video recording, leaving 157 participants in a controlled lab setting. Participants were randomly assigned to either the social rejection condition or the non-rejection condition. Five participants were excluded from analysis—two due to prior knowledge of the experiment and three for responding unfaithfully—resulting in a final sample of 152 (social rejection: $n = 76$, Women = 49, $M_{age} = 20.71$, $SD_{age} = 2.73$; non-rejection: $n = 76$, Women = 54, $M_{age} = 20.66$, $SD_{age} = 1.98$). Gender and age did not significantly differ between conditions, $\chi^2(1) = .753$, $p = .386$; $t(150) = -.136$, $p = .892$, confirming a balanced distribution across conditions. Data, measures (both English and Korean versions), and supplemental materials for the present study are available at the following link: https://osf.io/9bctx/?view_only=9b3dfa791b194633aef4209a104263d6

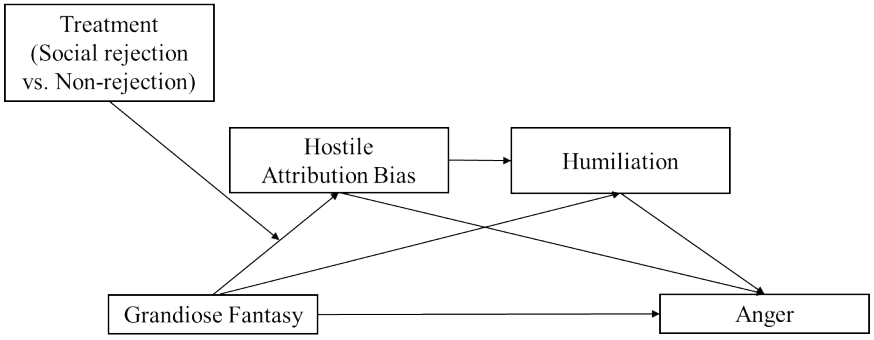

Figure 1. *Conceptual model illustrating the moderating role of experimental condition (social rejection vs. non-rejection) in the serial indirect effect of hostile attribution bias and humiliation on the relationship between grandiose fantasy and anger.*

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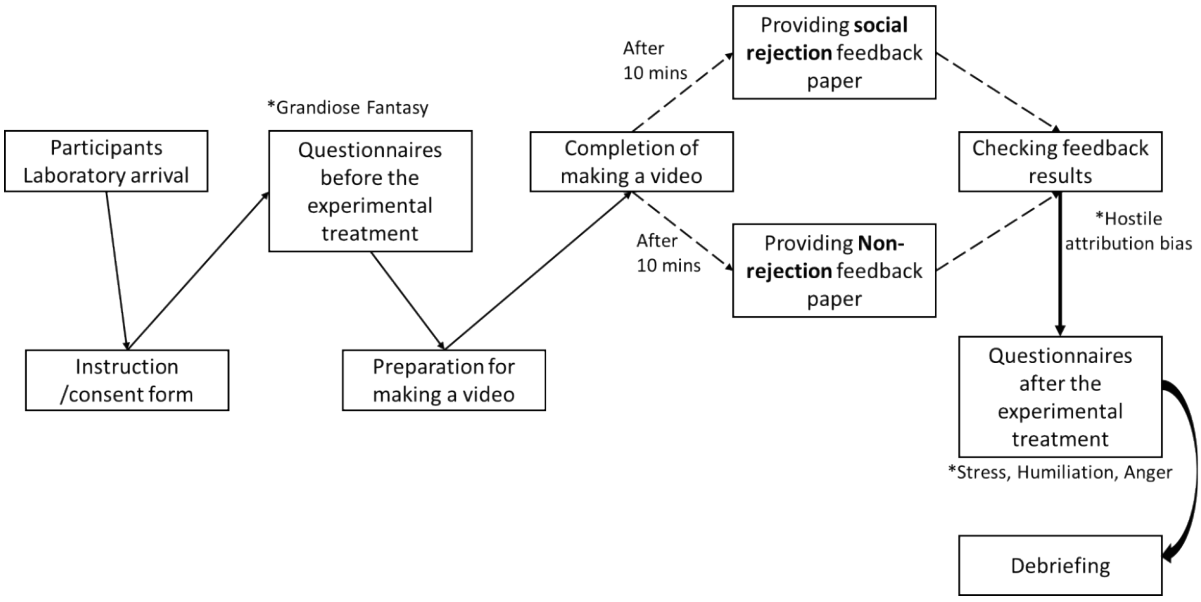

Figure 2. *Experimental procedure: Social rejection vs. Non-rejection Treatment.*

Experimental Procedure

This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the first author's institution (IRB No. 040198-184014-HR-024-02). Participants individually visited the laboratory, where they received an overview of the study and provided informed consent. They first completed a questionnaire on grandiose fantasy before engaging in a first-impression video recording task.

Participants were led to believe their recorded introductions were being evaluated by others in a separate lab. After a brief waiting period, they received pre-prepared feedback, either social rejection or non-rejection, which they believed came from external evaluators. They then completed measures of hostile attribution bias, humiliation, and anger, under the guise of a general study on student experiences.

To minimize bias, the evaluation feedback was delivered by a different researcher, ensuring participants perceived the experimenter as unaware of their results. Finally, participants were debriefed, signed a confidentiality agreement, and received compensation. Figure 2 illustrates the full experimental procedure. A more detailed description of the experimental procedure, including its rationale and methodological considerations, is provided in the supplementary material.

Measures

Grandiose Fantasy

Seven items from Pincus et al.'s (2009) Pathological Narcissism Inventory (PNI), which was validated in Korean (Yang & Kwon, 2016), were used to measure participants' level of grandiose fantasy (e.g., "I want to be a person who captures the world's attention"). The items were answered on 7-point scales (1 = Not at all like me, 7 = Very much like me; $\alpha = .85$). Higher scores indicate higher levels of grandiose fantasy.

Hostile Attribution Bias

Hostile Attribution Bias. We adapted four items from the Social Information Processing-Attribution and Emotional Response Questionnaire (SIP-AEQ; Coccaro et al., 2009) to assess direct and indirect hostile intent in the social rejection/non-rejection paradigm. An example item for direct hostile intent is, 'Because the evaluators ignored me', and for indirect hostile intent, 'Because the evaluators looked at me positively'. Responses were given on a 7-point scale (1 = not at all like that, 7 = very much like that), with higher scores indicating greater hostile attribution bias (Cronbach's $\alpha = .84$).

Humiliation

Humiliation was measured using the validated Korean version of

Humiliation Inventory (K-HI; Lee & Shin, 2018), adapted from Hartling and Lucetta's (1999) original scale. Whilst K-HI include three subscales–cumulative humiliation (10 items), fear of humiliation (10 items), and humiliation of incompetence (2 items)–this study adapted 12 items into a single-factor structure to measure state humiliation in response to experimental conditions (social rejection vs. non-rejection). Sample items include: 'I feel hurt because I was laughed at, and 'I feel hurt because I was belittled.' To minimize response bias, six positive filler items (e.g., "I feel good because I was recognized") were included but excluded from data analysis. Responses were rated on a 7-point scale (1 = not at all, 7 = very much), with higher scores indicating greater humiliation (α = .91).

Anger

We measured participants' anger using the state anger subscale from the validated Korean version of the State-Trait Anger Expression Inventory (STAXI-K; Han et al., 1997). The 10-item scale assesses anger at the moment (e.g., 'I feel irritated') on a 7-point scale (1 = not at all like that, 7 = very much like that). Five positive items (e.g., 'I feel cheerful') were included but not analyzed. Higher scores indicate greater anger (α = .90).

Results

Descriptive statistics including the correlations between variables, means and standard deviations are presented separately for each experimental treatment (social rejection vs. non-rejection) in Table 1.

Table 1. *Intercorrelations, means, standard deviations, and range for study variables separately for each experimental condition*

Measure		1	2	3	4
1. Grandiose Fantasy		-	.25*	.19	.16
2. Hostile Attribution Bias		-.10	-	.39**	.26*
3. Humiliation		.28*	.20	-	.63**
4. Anger		.25*	-.04	.44**	-
Social rejection	*M*	25.03	10.33	16.39	11.00
treatment	*SD*	7.19	2.27	5.51	2.33
	Range	10-46	6-15	12-40	10-21
Non-rejection					
treatment	*M*	28.88	18.86	32.74	15.89
	SD	8.72	2.46	13.07	7.15
	Range	13-49	13-24	12-67	10-40

Correlations between study variables for non-rejection condition (n = 76) are presented below the diagonal, and correlations for social rejection condition (n = 76) are presented above the diagonal.
***p < .001, *p < .05.*

Table 2. *Summary of the regression analyses*

Dependent variable	Predictor variable	*b*	*SE*	*t*	*p*	LLCI	ULCI	*F*	R^2
Hostile Attribution	Grandiose fantasy (A)	-.03	.04	-.82	.41	-.11	.04	129.60	.78
Bias	Social rejection (B)	5.54	1.35	4.11	< .001	2.88	8.21		
	(A) × (B)	.11	.05	2.24	.03	.01	.21		
	Gender	.57	.41	1.40	.17	-.24	1.39		
Humiliation	Grandiose fantasy	.21	.10	2.12	.04	.01	.40	44.49	.47
	HAB	1.69	.16	10.38	< .001	1.37	2.02		
	Gender	-1.14	1.67	-.68	.50	-4.43	2.15		
Anger	Grandiose fantasy	.03	.05	.62	.53	-.06	.12	33.72	.48
	HAB	-.05	.10	-.50	.62	-.24	.14		
	Humiliation	.32	.04	8.58	< .001	.25	.39		
	Gender	-.16	.75	-.22	.83	-1.65	1.32		

Social rejection (n = 76) is coded with "1" and non-rejection (n = 76) is coded with "0". HAB = Hostile Attribution Bias.

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Table 3. *Summary of the indirect effects*

Experimental conditions	*b*	*SE*	LLCI	ULCI
	Path1: Grandiose Fantasy → Hostile Attribution Bias → Anger			
Non-rejection	.002	.005	-.006	.014
Social rejection	-.004	.008	-.022	.012
	Path2: Grandiose Fantasy → Hostile Attribution Bias → Humiliation → Anger			
Non-rejection	-.017	.019	-.057	.020
Social rejection	.042	.022	.004	.090

95% percentile bootstrap confidence intervals were generated using 10,000 bootstrap samples.

The Conditional Indirect Effects of Social Rejection on Anger

We predicted that the path grandiose fantasy to anger should be sequentially mediated by HAB and humiliation and this should apply only when the participants who received social rejection. To test our hypothesis, we performed a *moderated serial multiple mediation* analysis following the procedure outlined in Hayes (2022, Model 83 as described in PROCESS). We generated percentile bootstrap confidence intervals using 10,000 bootstrap samples. Gender was used as a covariate. Table 2 showed the summary of regression results.

The results of our moderated serial multiple mediation (conditional indirect effects) are displayed in Table 3. The total effect of grandiose fantasy on anger was found to be significant ($b = .173$, $SE = .056$, $t = 3.072$, $p = .003$, $CI_{95\%}$ [.062, .285]), but the direct effect without the effect of mediators was found to be non-significant ($b = .028$, $SE = .045$, $t = .624$, $p = .534$, $CI_{95\%}$ [-.061, .117]). The first indirect path from grandiose fantasy to anger via HAB was not significant in both non-rejection conditions ($b = .002$, $SE = .005$, $CI_{95\%}$ [-.006, .014]) and social rejection ($b = -.004$, $SE = .008$, $CI_{95\%}$ [-.022, .012]), respectively (the confidence interval of the index of moderated mediation included the value 0, $b = -.005$, $SE = .01$, $CI_{95\%}$ [-.031, .016]). As expected, the third serial indirect path from grandiose fantasy to anger, mediated by HAB (mediator 1) and humiliation (mediator 2), was found to be significant in the social rejection condition ($b = .042$, $SE = .022$, $CI_{95\%}$ [.004, .090]). However, it was not significant in the non-rejection condition ($b = -.017$, $SE = .019$, $CI_{95\%}$ [-.057, .020]). The confidence interval of the index of moderated mediation did not include the value 0, $b = .059$, $SE = .030$, $CI_{95\%}$ [.006, .123]), providing support for our conditional serial indirect effect hypothesis that the higher grandiose fantasy, the greater level of anger, through the sequential influence of hostile attribution bias and humiliation. This effect was observed only in participants who received the social rejection treatment.[1]

Discussion

Summary of Results and Implications

This study sought to explain anger as a function of both personality characteristics (grandiose fantasy in pathological narcissism) and situational factors (social rejection). Pathological narcissists, characterized by grandiose fantasy, maintain an exaggerated self-image that compels others to meet their unrealistic demands for admiration (Pincus et al., 2009). When faced with rejection, their inflated self-view is threatened (Besser & Zeigler-Hill, 2010), leading to hostile attribution bias, where they interpret others' actions negatively (Li et al., 2016). This hostile perception, in turn, can elicit humiliation when narcissists feel devalued (Fernández et al., 2018), which ultimately escalates into anger (Leidner et al., 2012).

Building on previous findings that pathological narcissists do not exhibit aggression when socially accepted (Bettencourt et al., 2006), this study hypothesized that hostile attribution bias and humiliation would act as serial mediators between grandiose fantasy and anger, but only under social rejection. The results confirmed this hypothesis, demonstrating that social rejection moderates the indirect effect of grandiose fantasy on anger through

1) The reversed serial indirect path from grandiose fantasy to anger via humiliation (mediator 2) and hostile attribution bias (mediator 1) was not significant in both the social rejection condition, $b = -.003$, $SE = .008$, $CI_{95\%}$ [-.022, .011], and the non-rejection condition, $b = -.003$, $SE = .006$, $CI_{95\%}$ [-.017, .006].

hostile attribution bias and humiliation. Specifically, the serial mediating effect emerged only under rejection, while the direct effect of grandiose fantasy on anger was not significant. Furthermore, reversing the order of mediators disrupted the effect, supporting the notion that grandiose fantasy first fosters hostile attribution bias, which then fuels humiliation, leading to anger. These findings align with prior research indicating that narcissistic individuals react to rejection with increased hostility and aggression (Twenge et al., 2001).

Beyond its theoretical contributions, this study has important practical implications. It provides experimental evidence that grandiose fantasy in pathological narcissism drives anger through cognitive-emotional mechanisms, emphasizing the need for clinical interventions targeting these processes. Specifically, cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) could help individuals with pathological narcissism manage anger by addressing cognitive distortions like hostile attribution bias and maladaptive responses to humiliation (Behary & Davis, 2015). Given the challenges of treating pathological narcissism, focusing on these mechanisms may enhance self-image, improve emotional regulation, and reduce aggression (Behary & Davis, 2015; Pincus et al., 2009).

Additionally, this study is the first to empirically validate humiliation as a key mediator between grandiose fantasy and anger in a South Korean sample, highlighting its distinct role in narcissistic maladjustment. Future research should explore how humiliation shapes narcissistic aggression in interpersonal contexts (cf. Hartling & Luchetta, 1999). Moreover, the study's experimental paradigm, which differentiates between rejection and non-rejection conditions, offers a valuable framework for investigating narcissistic responses to social rejection. Researchers can refine this approach to examine how narcissists react in diverse social settings, furthering our understanding of their maladaptive behaviors.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

While the present study provides valuable insights, there are several limitations to consider. First, pathological narcissism is a heterogeneous construct, and the study focused only on one facet—grandiose fantasy. Pathological narcissism includes various characteristics, such as vulnerability and entitlement (Pincus et al., 2009), and future research could benefit from examining how these other attributes contribute to anger and aggression.

Second, pathological narcissists often conceal vulnerability behind a grandiose facade (Pincus et al., 2009), and their anger may vary based on the status or relationship of the rejecting individual (Hart et al., 2018). Examining how narcissists respond to rejection from people of different social standings could provide deeper insights into their maladaptive behaviors.

Third, while this study focused on anger, future research should investigate whether narcissistic anger translates into actual aggression, using behavioral measures to strengthen theoretical frameworks (Kalat & Shiota, 2007). Identifying interventions to help narcissists regulate anger could have clinical benefits, particularly for reducing interpersonal aggression.

Fourth, factors such as social anxiety, known to heighten sensitivity to rejection and negative emotional responses (Leary et al., 2006), were not controlled. Future studies should account for these variables to isolate narcissism's unique role in anger. Additionally, as narcissistic personality disorder is more prevalent in males, examining gender differences could enhance understanding of how narcissism, anger, and aggression interact.

Fifth, reliance on self-report measures introduces potential bias. Integrating behavioral or physiological assessments, as well as qualitative approaches like interviews, could offer a more comprehensive perspective on narcissistic anger and aggression.

Six, the unidirectional nature of the interaction within the experimental paradigm may have impacted the credibility of the 'first impressions' cover story and the ecological validity of the rejection experience. Because participants did not engage in reciprocal evaluation, the social context of rejection may have felt somewhat artificial. Future research should consider incorporating mutual evaluation tasks to enhance the believability of the experimental setting and improve the ecological validity. Furthermore, given the relatively small correlation coefficients observed, caution should be exercised in interpreting the magnitude of the reported effects.

Finally, the sample consisted of college students, who may not exhibit extreme narcissistic traits. Future research should include clinical populations, such as individuals diagnosed with narcissistic personality disorder, to enhance the study's clinical relevance.

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Conclusion

This study demonstrated that grandiose fantasy, a central feature of pathological narcissism, leads to anger through a serial mediating process involving hostile attribution bias and humiliation, particularly under conditions of social rejection. These findings provide important insights into the emotional mechanisms that drive narcissistic anger and highlight potential intervention points for clinical treatment. Future research should continue to explore the complex relationship between pathological narcissism, anger, and aggression, incorporating diverse samples, experimental designs, and therapeutic interventions to further our understanding of these phenomena.

Author contributions statement

SL and HKS conceptualized the study. SL and CM analyzed data; SL drafted the manuscript, and CM and HKS revised it. All authors were involved in discussions at every stage and approved the final version for submission.

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