

Prevalence and Interpersonal Implications of Narcissistic Traits Among University Students in Bangladesh: An Explanatory Sequential Mixed-Methods Study

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Abstract

Background

Narcissistic personality disorder (NPD) is a multifaceted mental disorder that has consequences for people's self-efficacy, interaction with others, and social behavior. NPD exists along a continuum within the general population and can influence interpersonal functioning even at subclinical levels. Emerging adulthood represents a critical developmental period during which personality characteristics interact with evolving social roles and relationships. Although narcissistic traits have been widely studied in Western contexts, limited research has examined their prevalence and interpersonal implications among university students in South Asian societies such as Bangladesh, where collectivist norms and kinship-based social structures remain influential. This study examined the prevalence of narcissistic traits among Bangladeshi university students and explored how elevated narcissistic traits influence interpersonal relationships.

Methods

We conducted an explanatory sequential mixed-methods study to investigate narcissistic traits among undergraduate and postgraduate students at Comilla University, Bangladesh. A cross-sectional survey of 249 students assessed narcissistic tendencies via an adapted Likert-scale version of the Narcissistic Personality Inventory-16 (NPI-16). Descriptive statistics and subgroup comparisons were used to examine variation across demographic characteristics. In the qualitative phase, 15 students with relatively high narcissistic scores were purposively selected for in-depth semistructured interviews to explore how narcissistic traits influence friendships, family relationships, and communication patterns. Qualitative data were analyzed via thematic analysis.

Results

Narcissistic trait scores were moderately distributed across the sample, with minimal variation by gender, age group, or previous mental health history, although rural students reported slightly higher average scores than urban students did. The qualitative analysis identified five interconnected themes: friendship as reciprocal exchange, selective association and control, emotional distance in communication, defensiveness and fragility in relationships, and conditional family connectedness. The participants commonly described relationships as instrumental and self-protective, characterized by limited emotional disclosure, heightened sensitivity to criticism, and selective emotional investment.

Conclusions

Narcissistic traits are relatively common among the university students we studied and can influence interpersonal relationships in both peer and family contexts. Addressing relational competencies such as empathy, communication, and conflict management within university support programs may help promote healthier interpersonal environments and improve student well-being.

Introduction

Narcissistic personality disorder (NPD) is characterized by a pervasive pattern of grandiosity, a persistent need for admiration, and a lack of empathy, all of which significantly impair social and occupational functioning [1]. These characteristics are not confined to clinical diagnoses; rather, they exist on a dimensional continuum and can be observed across the general population [2]. Even at subclinical levels, traits such as entitlement, excessive self-focus, and sensitivity to criticism can disrupt friendships, romantic relationships, and family dynamics [3, 4]. NPD commonly co-occurs with other mental health conditions, including depression and anxiety, which can further intensify the challenges faced by affected individuals [5]. The American Psychiatric Association officially recognized narcissistic personality disorder in 1980 with the publication of the third edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders [6].

Globally, NPD exhibits considerable cultural variation in both its prevalence and expression. An extensive epidemiological study involving nearly 34,000 persons in the United States revealed a lifetime prevalence of 6.2% for narcissistic personality disorder (NPD), suggesting that clinically severe narcissism is relatively rare yet not insignificant within the community [7]. Understanding how narcissistic traits manifest in young adults, particularly among university students, is therefore an important public health and educational concern, as interpersonal communication and relationship building are essential components of academic collaboration, social integration, and future professional development [8].

Emerging adulthood, spanning from the late teens to the middle twenties, is a critical developmental stage for examining narcissistic tendencies. During this period, individuals consolidate their identities, establish new social networks, and negotiate increasing independence [9]. Narcissistic tendencies typically peak in early adulthood and decline with age, making university students an especially relevant population for empirical investigation [10]. In recent years, research has increasingly moved beyond Western-centric perspectives to assess cultural variability in narcissism [11]. Although the foundational literature has largely originated from North America and Europe, recent cross-cultural studies indicate that sociocultural norms significantly shape both the expression of narcissistic traits and their interpersonal consequences [12]. For example, individualistic cultures may reward assertiveness and self-promotion, whereas collectivist societies tend to emphasize group harmony, potentially altering how narcissism is perceived and enacted [13]. These cultural distinctions are particularly salient in South Asian contexts, such as Bangladesh, where family networks, kinship obligations, and community expectations remain central to social identity formation [14].

The increasing prevalence of narcissistic traits among university students has become a growing concern in recent years, as elevated narcissistic tendencies may influence both students' academic adjustment and their psychological well-being [15, 16]. Preliminary evidence from Bangladesh suggests that university students do exhibit measurable levels of narcissistic traits [17, 18], yet detailed analyses of how these traits affect students' day-to-day interpersonal interactions remain scarce. Without such knowledge, it is difficult for universities and mental health professionals to design culturally appropriate strategies to support students whose interpersonal relationships may be strained by elevated narcissistic tendencies. Enhancing public awareness and strengthening mental health literacy are also consistent with the global agenda of Sustainable Development Goal 3 (SDG-3), which emphasizes the promotion of mental health and well-being under target 3.4. However, the university setting, with its emphasis on achievement and social comparison, can amplify self-enhancing behaviors and expose tensions between personal ambition and the ability to sustain supportive relationships [19].

Narcissistic traits can influence academic and professional development, as they are frequently associated with interpersonal conflict, resistance to feedback, and reduced collaborative engagement [20, 21]. Evidence from other university populations suggests that narcissism may show measurable associations with academic outcomes, although the direction and magnitude of these relationships can vary depending on the specific dimension of narcissism examined [22]. In professional environments, higher levels of narcissism have also been associated with workplace risk behaviors, including counterproductive work behavior, particularly when antagonistic or exploitative features of narcissism are pronounced [12]. Research on early career behavior further suggests that elevated narcissism may be linked with self-presentational distortion during job search processes, which has implications for professional integrity and organizational fit [23].

Despite growing international interest in narcissism's interpersonal impact, linking grandiose traits to conflict and aggression, and vulnerable traits to psychological distress [2, 24], the higher education context in Bangladesh remains comparatively underexplored. Few studies have systematically quantified the distribution of narcissistic traits within this population or investigated how these traits shape relationships with peers and family members. Addressing this gap is essential to understanding the psychosocial dynamics of Bangladeshi university students and to inform educational and mental health initiatives that support the development of socially competent future professionals and leaders.

The present study addresses this research gap by examining the prevalence and distribution patterns of narcissistic traits, along with their interpersonal correlates, among undergraduate and postgraduate students at Comilla University, Cumilla, Bangladesh. Additionally, the study explores how students with elevated narcissistic traits interpret and describe their experiences within close social relationships, particularly friendships and family interactions, in their everyday environments. By identifying both the extent of narcissistic tendencies and their relational implications, we clarify how personality traits intersect with cultural expectations of kinship, reciprocity, and social belonging among young adults in a South Asian context. Understanding these dynamics is crucial, as disruptions in interpersonal

functioning during early adulthood may ultimately influence students' capacity to develop the collaborative and ethical competencies required for professional life.

Methods

Research Design

The study followed an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, in which quantitative findings informed and guided a subsequent qualitative phase [25, 26]. In the first phase, a cross-sectional survey was used to assess narcissistic traits via the Narcissistic Personality Inventory-16 (NPI-16). The second phase used purposive sampling to select students with comparatively high NPI-16 scores for in-depth semistructured interviews aimed at exploring how elevated narcissistic traits shape interpersonal relationships with friends and family members. This design was particularly appropriate for the study's objectives because the breadth of a large-scale survey could be complemented by the depth of qualitative insights, which allowed interview narratives to contextualize and explain the statistical patterns identified in the quantitative phase. The sequential integration of both phases strengthened the interpretive validity of the findings and enabled a more comprehensive understanding of narcissistic traits within the university's sociocultural environment [27].

Study population and sample size

Data for this study were collected between September and November 2023 among undergraduate and postgraduate students at Comilla University, Bangladesh, a public university with a student population representing diverse socioeconomic and geographic backgrounds across the country. The total study population at the time of data collection was approximately 7,055 students. Using a 92% confidence level, a 5% margin of error, and a z score of 1.75, the required survey sample size was calculated via the finite population correction formula described by Bashalkhanov and colleagues [28]. The final survey sample consisted of 249 participants, which was considered sufficient to capture variation in narcissistic trait distribution while maintaining reasonable representativeness of the university population.

From the survey respondents, 15 students with comparatively high NPI-16 scores were purposively selected for the qualitative interviews to obtain detailed narrative accounts of how elevated narcissistic traits shaped their interpersonal relationships with peers and family members.

Instruments and Measures

Survey data were collected using a researcher-adapted 16-item narcissism questionnaire developed from the conceptual domain of the Narcissistic Personality Inventory-16 (NPI-16) [29]. Rather than using the original forced-choice response format, the questionnaire consisted of 16 declarative statements representing core narcissistic characteristics, adapted to the socio-cultural context of Bangladeshi

university students. Participants rated each statement on a five-point Likert scale ranging from “Highly Disagree” to “Highly Agree”. Responses were coded on a scale from 0 to 4 and summed to produce total scores ranging from 0 to 64, with higher scores indicating greater endorsement of narcissistic traits. The adapted scoring approach was intended to assess narcissistic traits within a nonclinical student population, which enabled a more nuanced assessment of relative levels of narcissistic traits rather than attempting to identify clinical diagnoses of NPD. The NPI-16 has demonstrated acceptable internal consistency (typically $\alpha \approx .70-.85$) and good convergent validity with longer narcissism scales in previous studies [30]. To facilitate comparison with studies using the conventional NPI-16 scoring system, a rescaled score was generated by dividing the 0–64 total score by 4, yielding a 0–16 equivalent metric consistent with standard NPI-16 reporting practices.

For the qualitative phase, a semistructured interview guide was developed based on preliminary survey findings and the study's broader objectives. The interview guidelines focused on participants' experiences of friendship, family relationships, and communication patterns in their everyday social environments to capture the interpersonal implications of elevated narcissistic traits. Two faculty experts reviewed the interview guide to ensure content validity, and the instrument was pilot tested with a small number of students to assess clarity, coherence, and interview flow before the final data collection stage.

Data analysis

The survey data were analyzed via descriptive statistical techniques. Total NPI scores were summarized using means, standard deviations, medians, and observed score ranges. A grouped frequency distribution was generated via 10-point class intervals to illustrate the pattern of narcissistic trait scores across the sample. Participant characteristics (i.e., sex, age group, place of residence, and history of mental health problems) were summarized using frequencies and percentages. The mean NPI scores were compared across these demographic categories via independent-samples *t* tests for two-group comparisons (e.g., gender, residence, mental health history) and one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) for comparisons across age groups.

Where relevant, standard deviations were reported to illustrate variability within each subgroup. All analyses were conducted using two-tailed significance tests with an alpha level of 0.05, consistent with conventional statistical reporting standards in social science research.

Data from in-depth semistructured interviews with 15 participants who scored relatively high on the NPI-16 (to ensure diversity in gender, age, place of residence, and previous health conditions) were analyzed via thematic analysis [31]. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' informed consent and transcribed verbatim. The analysis followed six iterative stages: (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generation of initial codes, (3) identification of potential themes, (4) review and refinement of themes, (5) definition and naming of themes, and (6) production of the final analytical narrative. We conducted manual coding, with repeated readings of transcripts to ensure that emerging themes accurately

captured participants' experiences of how narcissistic traits influenced their friendships, family relationships, and broader interpersonal interactions. This analytical strategy provides a flexible yet systematic approach to interpreting rich qualitative data, which enables a deeper understanding of the relational dynamics and social meanings associated with elevated narcissistic traits within the cultural context of Bangladeshi university life [32].

Results

Narcissism Patterns and Traits

To provide an overview of how narcissistic traits were distributed across the sample, Supplementary Table 1 summarizes all survey results, including score ranges, demographic characteristics, mean narcissism scores across subgroups, and the proportion of participants who scored above the sample mean. Across all subgroup analyses, the observed differences reflected variation in narcissistic trait endorsement rather than indications of clinically diagnosable narcissistic personality disorder. A total of 249 undergraduate and postgraduate students completed the narcissism questionnaire. Among these, 174 were male (69.9%), and 75 were female (30.1%). The participants were grouped into three age categories: 18–21 years ($n = 76$, 30.5%), 22–25 years ($n = 148$, 59.4%), and 26–28 years ($n = 25$, 10.0%). Residence was almost evenly split between rural and urban areas. A total of 121 students (48.6%) reported a rural residence, and 128 (51.4%) reported an urban residence. With respect to mental health history, 148 students (59.4%) reported no history of mental health issues, 63 (25.3%) reported at least one prior mental health concern, and 38 (15.3%) did not respond to this question.

Distribution of Narcissistic Trait Scores

The survey questionnaire section produced total scores ranging from 0 to 58. A mean score of 35, on a scale with a theoretical maximum of 64, indicates that participants endorsed several narcissistic traits but did not show a pattern of extreme or pervasive narcissism. Our analysis suggests a moderate level of narcissistic trait expression within the sample. Most students scored in the middle range, indicating characteristics such as self-focus, a desire for recognition, or confidence in personal abilities, without reaching levels typically associated with severe interpersonal dysfunction or clinical concern. The largest group fell between 31 and 40 points ($n = 103$), followed by 41–50 points ($n = 62$) and 21–30 points ($n = 59$). Only a small number of students were at the very low end (0–10) or the very high end (51–60). Overall, the scores clustered around the central portion of the scale, with relatively few extreme values. When rescaled to the conventional 0–16 metric used in standard NPI-16 studies, the sample mean corresponds to approximately 8.75, which falls within the moderate range commonly reported in international university student samples.

Narcissism by gender and age

The mean narcissistic trait scores were similar for male and female students. Higher scorers were defined as participants whose total narcissistic trait score exceeded the sample mean. Male participants ($n = 174$) had a mean score of 35.70 ($SD = 9.35$), whereas female participants ($n = 75$) had a mean score of 35.65 ($SD = 7.40$), indicating that the average level of narcissistic trait endorsement was almost identical across genders in this sample. The analysis also identified a subset of “higher scorers”^[1] on the narcissism scale. Within the male group, 81 students fell into this higher-scoring category, corresponding to 46.6% of all male participants. Within the female group, 29 students (38.7%) were classified as higher scorers, suggesting a slightly greater proportion of higher scorers among male students, although the overall mean scores remained almost the same for both groups. Across age groups, scores were also similar, ranging from 34.84 among 18–21-year-olds to 36.84 among 26–28-year-olds. Although the oldest age group displayed slightly greater score variability, the mean differences between age groups were modest.

Narcissism by Residence

Residence showed somewhat clearer differences in narcissistic trait scores. Rural students ($n = 121$) had a mean narcissistic score of 36.69 ($SD = 8.73$), whereas urban students ($n = 128$) had a mean score of 34.34 ($SD = 8.83$). Among the higher scorers, 68 rural students (56.2% of the rural group) were placed in the higher-score category, whereas 48 urban students (39.1% of the urban group) were in the lower-score category. The pattern indicates a somewhat higher concentration of elevated narcissistic trait scores among rural students, although there was substantial overlap between the two groups and similar levels of score variability.

Narcissistic Traits by Previous Mental Health History

Finally, we examined narcissistic scores in relation to previous mental health problems on the basis of the 211 students who responded to this question. The students who reported no history of mental health issues ($n = 148$) had a mean narcissistic score of 35.59 ($SD = 9.03$). The students who reported at least one previous mental health problem ($n = 63$) had a mean score of 35.30 ($SD = 10.47$). In the higher-score category, 84 students without a mental health history (56.8% of that group) and 34 students with previous mental health problems (54.0% of that group) were included. These findings suggest that self-reported mental health history was not associated with a substantial difference in narcissistic trait levels within this sample.

Narcissistic Traits and Interpersonal Relationships

The interviews explored how students with elevated narcissistic traits described their interpersonal relationships with friends and family members. Thematic analysis of the interviews revealed five interconnected themes: (1) friendship as exchange and self-extension, (2) selective association and control, (3) emotional distance and superficial communication, (4) fragility and defensiveness in relationships, and (5) conditional family connectedness. Themes mainly illustrated how participants’ relationship practices were shaped by self-oriented motivations, sensitivity to evaluation, and a

preference for maintaining personal autonomy within social interactions. Figure 1 summarizes the core findings from the interviews.

Friendship as Exchange and Self-Extension

Participants commonly viewed friendship as a practical arrangement built on reciprocity rather than on emotional attachment. Relationships were valued for what they offered—assistance with studies, shared activities, or social convenience—rather than for companionship itself. Several respondents spoke about the idea of “give and take,” which reflects a relational logic grounded in reciprocal exchange rather than emotional intimacy.

“Friendship is made through give and take. He helps me, I help him. That’s what keeps it going.” (Male, 25)

This utilitarian understanding of friendship emphasizes balanced contributions and mutual benefits, which align with anthropological notions of reciprocal exchange in social relationships. When this exchange was absent, relationships were seen as unnecessary or temporary. Emotional reciprocity, such as listening or empathizing, was rarely mentioned spontaneously. Instead, the participants emphasized observable forms of support, such as providing advice, resources, or time.

“A good friend is someone who stands by me when I need it. If he can’t help, then what’s the meaning?” (Female, 21)

Friendship was thus treated as an extension of personal identity and social positioning, in which relationships were maintained so long as they reinforced personal goals or social standing.

Selective Association and Control

The participants demonstrated a selective approach to choosing friends. Many preferred individuals who shared their outlook, interests, or ambitions, and many explicitly avoided those whose views differed. Similarity is considered essential for maintaining comfort and trust. Several respondents explained that they would not associate with peers who “thought differently” or had “opposite personalities.” One stated,

“I always choose people who think like me. If someone’s attitude does not match mine, I cannot stay close.” (Male, 22)

Friend selection appeared to function as a form of social control. By surrounding themselves with like-minded individuals, participants could avoid conflict and maintain their self-perception of being “unique” or “different from others.” This selectivity reflected a desire to preserve authority in relationships. The participants often observed and assessed potential friends before developing closeness, gauging whether the person “valued” them or could rely on them. Differences in values, attention, or respect were seen as sufficient reasons to distance oneself.

Emotional Distance and Superficial Communication

Across interviews, participants displayed a consistent pattern of limited communication and avoidance of emotional disclosure. Contact occurred mainly during specific occasions, such as academic events or religious festivals. Routine or spontaneous communication was rare, and many described not feeling the need to “stay in touch” unless there was something important to discuss, as a participant coined:

“I do not talk much unless it is something important. Mostly we meet on Eid or when there’s a program.”
(Male, 25)

Face-to-face interactions are often replaced by short digital messages on social media platforms. The participants perceived this as sufficient to sustain their relationships, which suggests a preference for emotional distance. Many reported feeling uncomfortable discussing personal matters or emotions, viewing such openness as risky or unnecessary. They often described themselves as “not talkative” or “not expressive” about feelings. The participants also expressed unease with emotional openness, often regarding personal sharing as risky.

One participant explained, *“I don’t tell anyone about my personal or emotional life”. “If they tell me something, I just listen - I don’t give advice.”* (Female, 22).

Fragility and Defensiveness in Relationships

A recurrent theme in the interviews was the fragility of participants’ relationships. Several acknowledged that friendships could end suddenly due to misunderstandings or perceived disrespect. When conflicts arose, the participants often withdrew rather than attempting to resolve them. Some admitted that they would “stop talking” after being offended and rarely apologized, even when they were aware of their own mistake. The tendency to avoid reconciliation and the reluctance to admit faults were notable. One stated,

“If someone hurts me, I just stop talking. Even if I was wrong, I would not say sorry.” (Male, 23)

Sensitivity to criticism was a central feature of these narratives. The participants described negative comments or gossip as emotionally painful and difficult to forget. Criticism from close friends was often experienced as a form of betrayal, leading to avoidance or termination of contact.

One student said, *“Hearing bad things about myself makes me feel terrible”* (Female, 23). *“I can’t stand it when close people talk behind me”* (Female, 23). Another added, *“I hate criticism. It bothers me so much that sometimes I think of ending the friendship”* (Female, 24).

A small number of participants reflected on moments when they tried to reconcile:

“If I realize I did something wrong, I try to fix it. I say sorry and promise not to repeat it.” (Male, 22).

However, these accounts were exceptions. For most, protecting pride and self-image took precedence over repairing strained relationships.

Conditional Family Connectedness

The participants' family interactions mirrored their friendship dynamics. Relationships with parents were described as respectful but largely functional. Many parents communicated infrequently, mainly when practical needs arose, such as seeking financial support or sharing updates about their studies. Regular conversations were uncommon, and several noted that their parents "usually call first." One even mentioned:

"I call my parents once or twice a month when I need money." (Male, 25)

Interactions with siblings selectively ranged from distant to close. Some respondents described caring relationships with younger siblings, yet the tone was often protective rather than mutually intimate. *"My brother and I do not talk much—only when I need something. However, with my sister, I share more; she understands me." (Female, 21).*

The extended family ties were weak. Communication typically occurs online, with limited in-person contact. One participant noted, *"I don't visit relatives much." "Sometimes we chat in the family Messenger group, that's all" (Female, 22).*

Although several respondents acknowledged that they *"should talk more"* with their families, most justified their distance as necessary for independence. As one participant explained, *"I don't like being too close - it feels like they don't understand me" (Male, 24).*

Discussion

This mixed-methods study examined both the prevalence of narcissistic traits among university students and the interpersonal implications of elevated scores in one of the public universities in Bangladesh. Considering the location and the students' sociocultural context, the university is very similar to other universities in Bangladesh. We found that narcissistic tendencies were moderately expressed within this student population, with relatively limited variation across most demographic groups. Additionally, students with higher narcissistic trait scores described friendships and family relationships characterized by emotional distance, selective association, and relational fragility. These traits may also impact future social and professional relationships, as well as individual communication and networks.

Very low narcissistic trait scores were uncommon in the study sample, as most participants exhibited at least some narcissistic tendencies, which reflect typical personality variation rather than clinical severity. This pattern aligns with current personality research, which suggests that narcissism is best understood as a dimensional trait rather than a strictly clinical category [2]. Thus, the results indicate that narcissistic traits among participants were likely shaped by developmental, social, and academic factors common in emerging adulthood. However, because the narcissism measure used a Likert-scale adaptation of the NPI-16, the findings should be interpreted as reflecting relative variation in narcissistic trait expression rather than diagnostic indicators of narcissistic personality disorder. Nevertheless, the study contributes to global research by situating these patterns within a South Asian cultural context where collectivism, kinship obligations, and relational interdependence traditionally structure social life.

Students across gender, age groups, and mental health history reported broadly similar levels of narcissistic traits, with only modest differences by residence among our study population. This relatively even distribution suggests that narcissistic tendencies are not confined to specific demographic groups within the university environment. Similar trends have been observed in studies of young adults in other Asian societies undergoing rapid educational expansion and socioeconomic transformation [33–35]. Several studies in China, India, and Pakistan suggest that structural pressures, such as academic competition, increased educational mobility, and a growing emphasis on individual achievement, may encourage greater self-focus among youth, even in cultures traditionally characterized by collectivist values [36–38]. These study findings appear to reflect a comparable pattern in Bangladesh, where higher education increasingly serves as a space for negotiating individual aspirations, competition, and social mobility.

The finding that rural students reported somewhat higher narcissistic scores than urban students did is noteworthy and contrasts with research in China and India, where urban youth often report higher levels of agentic narcissism [39, 40]. One possible explanation concerns patterns of educational mobility in Bangladesh, where rural students who gain entry to public universities frequently face strong expectations to demonstrate independence, competence, and upward mobility. These pressures may encourage self-enhancing attitudes as adaptive strategies for navigating competitive academic environments. However, without longitudinal or socioeconomic data, this interpretation remains tentative. We observed that participants with more narcissistic traits frequently framed friendships as instrumental or transactional relationships structured around reciprocity, usefulness, and personal benefit rather than emotional intimacy. Research in the past has suggested that individuals high in narcissism often prioritize agentic goals such as achievement, visibility, and self-advancement over communal goals such as empathy and emotional closeness [11, 41].

From an anthropological perspective, an instrumental understanding of friendship can also be interpreted through a lens of reciprocal exchange and relational utility, in which social ties are maintained primarily when they contribute to personal status or practical needs. This relational framing contrasts with traditional South Asian expectations of friendship, which often emphasize emotional support and long-term social obligation. Our findings, therefore, indicate that Bangladeshi students may be caught between culturally embedded relational expectations and emerging norms of individual self-promotion and autonomy in competitive educational environments. Similar dynamics have been reported in studies of youth relationships across South Asia, where young adults increasingly balance traditional obligations with personal aspirations [42–44]. The instability of friendships described in this study, such as heightened sensitivity to criticism and reluctance to reconcile, also reflects the interpersonal vulnerability associated with narcissistic traits [45, 46]. Although narcissism is often associated with outward confidence, these narratives reveal underlying concerns with reputation, dignity, and perceived respect within peer relationships. In collectivist cultural settings such as Bangladesh, where long-term relationship maintenance and social harmony are strongly valued, such patterns may create greater interpersonal strain, particularly when individuals prioritize self-protection or pride over reconciliation.

The participants' reluctance to apologize for or resolve conflicts reflects defensive relational strategies aimed at preserving personal status within social networks.

Our participants also described family relationships that were respectful but emotionally distant. Communication with parents was often limited to practical matters, such as financial support or academic updates, whereas ties to extended families were relatively weak. This is particularly noteworthy in the cultural context of the study location, where kinship systems traditionally emphasize close intergenerational bonds, frequent communication, and strong obligations toward extended relatives [47, 48]. These accounts may reflect broader transformations in kinship practices associated with urbanization, educational migration, and the gradual shift toward nuclear-family arrangements [49]. Within this changing social landscape, narcissistic traits may further contribute to a narrowing of relational investment, in which individuals maintain only those family connections that reinforce personal identity or emotional validation. Additionally, the pattern of selective closeness with siblings, particularly younger siblings, aligns with previous studies, further indicating that individuals with elevated narcissistic traits tend to invest preferentially in relationships that support their self-concept or reinforce perceived competence and authority [13, 50]. However, while Western scholarship often frames narcissism primarily as a byproduct of individualistic cultural environments, the present findings demonstrate that narcissistic tendencies can also emerge and shape interpersonal relationships in collectivist societies. The students' emphasis on autonomy, selective closeness, and sensitivity to evaluation suggests that narcissistic traits interact with local cultural norms.

Importantly, the study also illustrates that subclinical narcissistic traits, rather than clinically diagnosable narcissistic personality disorders, can meaningfully influence everyday relationship practices. The combination of quantitative distribution patterns and qualitative narratives indicates that narcissistic tendencies among our studied population are not rare anomalies but rather socially embedded dimensions of identity formation during emerging adulthood. Here, we discuss the scope for implications for university mental health services and student support programs. The emotional distance and fragility of relationships observed in the current study may contribute to social isolation, interpersonal conflict, and limited help-seeking behavior among students. Similar barriers to emotional disclosure and support seeking have been documented among young adults with elevated narcissistic traits in other similar contexts [35, 51].

Narcissistic traits can sometimes support assertiveness, leadership aspirations, and personal ambition. However, maladaptive expressions, such as defensiveness, reduced empathy, or difficulty accepting criticism, may undermine teamwork, ethical decision-making, and constructive feedback processes, which are essential competencies across professional settings [52]. Given the relatively high prevalence of moderate narcissistic traits observed in our study, universities may benefit from incorporating psychoeducational initiatives focused on emotional regulation and conflict-management skills into student wellness programs. Peer-support initiatives that encourage collaborative learning and reciprocal communication may also help counteract the competitive social dynamics that sometimes reinforce narcissistic tendencies.

Study limitations and future research directions

The sample was drawn from a single public university in Bangladesh, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to students from private universities, other public institutions, or different regional contexts within the country. As self-report measures, the NPI-16 may also be influenced by social desirability bias. Some participants may have underreported or moderated their responses when evaluating narcissistic tendencies. The purposively selected qualitative sample may limit the diversity of interpersonal experiences and perspectives represented in the interview narratives. The adapted NPI-based measure captured narcissistic traits within a nonclinical student population and therefore should not be interpreted as a diagnostic instrument for NPD. The findings should instead be understood as reflecting variation in personality characteristics within a developmental and sociocultural context.

Future research could expand this line of inquiry to examine narcissistic traits across multiple universities and institutional settings, including both public and private higher education institutions. Socioeconomic background, family structure, and patterns of educational mobility may also provide deeper insight into how narcissistic tendencies interact with broader social environments, serving as additional contextual variables. Longitudinal research designs would be particularly valuable for understanding how narcissistic traits evolve during emerging adulthood and how they influence students' interpersonal development throughout their university years and early careers.

Conclusions

Understanding narcissistic traits among young adults is particularly important in societies that are experiencing rapid social, educational, and cultural transformation. Universities in Bangladesh serve a large and increasingly diverse population and provide a critical context for examining how personality characteristics interact with evolving expectations of independence, achievement, and social belonging. This study highlights the importance of recognizing narcissism not only as a clinical category but also as a relational and behavioral orientation that can shape how students form connections, negotiate social hierarchies, and respond to interpersonal challenges within academic environments. In a context where collectivist values, interdependence, and family cohesion traditionally play central roles in social life, the growing prominence of self-focused attitudes and emotionally distant relationship practices among students raises important questions about changing interpersonal norms among contemporary Bangladeshi youth. Students may face greater risks of interpersonal strain, reduced peer support, and diminished resilience during periods of academic or emotional stress. These dynamics may ultimately influence not only students' mental health but also their future professional effectiveness, leadership capacity, and ability to collaborate in complex organizational settings.

Sustainable development goal 3 (i.e., good health and well-being) emphasizes promoting mental health and creating supportive environments for young people. We tried to draw attention to the interpersonal patterns associated with narcissistic traits to highlight the importance of preventive and developmental approaches to student well-being rather than solely crisis-oriented interventions. Programs that promote

constructive communication may help students develop healthier social networks and reduce tendencies toward conflict-driven withdrawal. Integrating relational skill-building into university orientation programs, counseling services, and peer mentoring initiatives could also contribute to more supportive campus environments.

We encourage educators and mental health stakeholders in Bangladesh to consider personality-informed approaches to student well-being and social development. Addressing relational patterns early may help universities cultivate students who are both academically capable and prepared to contribute constructively to diverse professional and community settings.

Abbreviations

ANOVA - Analysis of variance

NPD - narcissistic personality disorder

NPI-16 - Narcissistic Personality Inventory-16

SD - standard deviation

SDG - Sustainable Development Goal

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate

This study was conducted as part of a graduation research monograph at the Department of Anthropology, Faculty of Social Science, Comilla University, Comilla, Bangladesh. The research proposal was presented to the respective exam committee, which provided necessary comments, including its ethical considerations. The proposal was reviewed and approved by the 2023 BSS final-year examination committee of the anthropology department at Comilla University (Ref: ANP-BSS 2023:08), which served as the approving body for student research in the absence of a separate institutional ethics board. The full name of the ethics committee is the Graduation Degree Academic Research Approval Committee, Department of Anthropology, Comilla University, Cumilla, Bangladesh. All procedures were performed in accordance with relevant guidelines and regulations, including the Declaration of Helsinki (followed updated 75 WMA General Assembly, Helsinki, Finland, October 2024). All participants were informed of the study's purpose and provided informed consent prior to participation.

Consent for publication

Not applicable

Use of Artificial Intelligence

The authors sought assistance solely from Curie AI to check and improve English-language grammar, clarity, and style. The tool was not used to generate scientific content, data, analysis, or conclusions. The author(s) reviewed and edited all AI-assisted text and take full responsibility for the content of this publication.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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Author Contribution

SA and RAC initially conceptualized and designed the study. SA coordinated the study and collected the primary data. SA and FS analyzed and interpreted the quantitative and qualitative data and primarily drafted the manuscript. RAC supervised the entire study, including data collection and manuscript drafting. He also provided methodological guidance throughout the research process and critically reviewed the manuscript. KUB contributed to the interpretation of the findings and critically reviewed the manuscript for important intellectual content. All the authors read, reviewed, and approved the final manuscript.

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Data Availability

The datasets (including the quantitative survey data and qualitative interview data, comprising audio recordings, transcriptions, translations, and coding) generated, used, and analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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Footnotes

1. Higher scorers were defined descriptively as participants whose total narcissism score exceeded the sample mean. This classification was used only for descriptive comparisons and should not be interpreted as a clinical cutoff for narcissistic personality disorder.

Figures

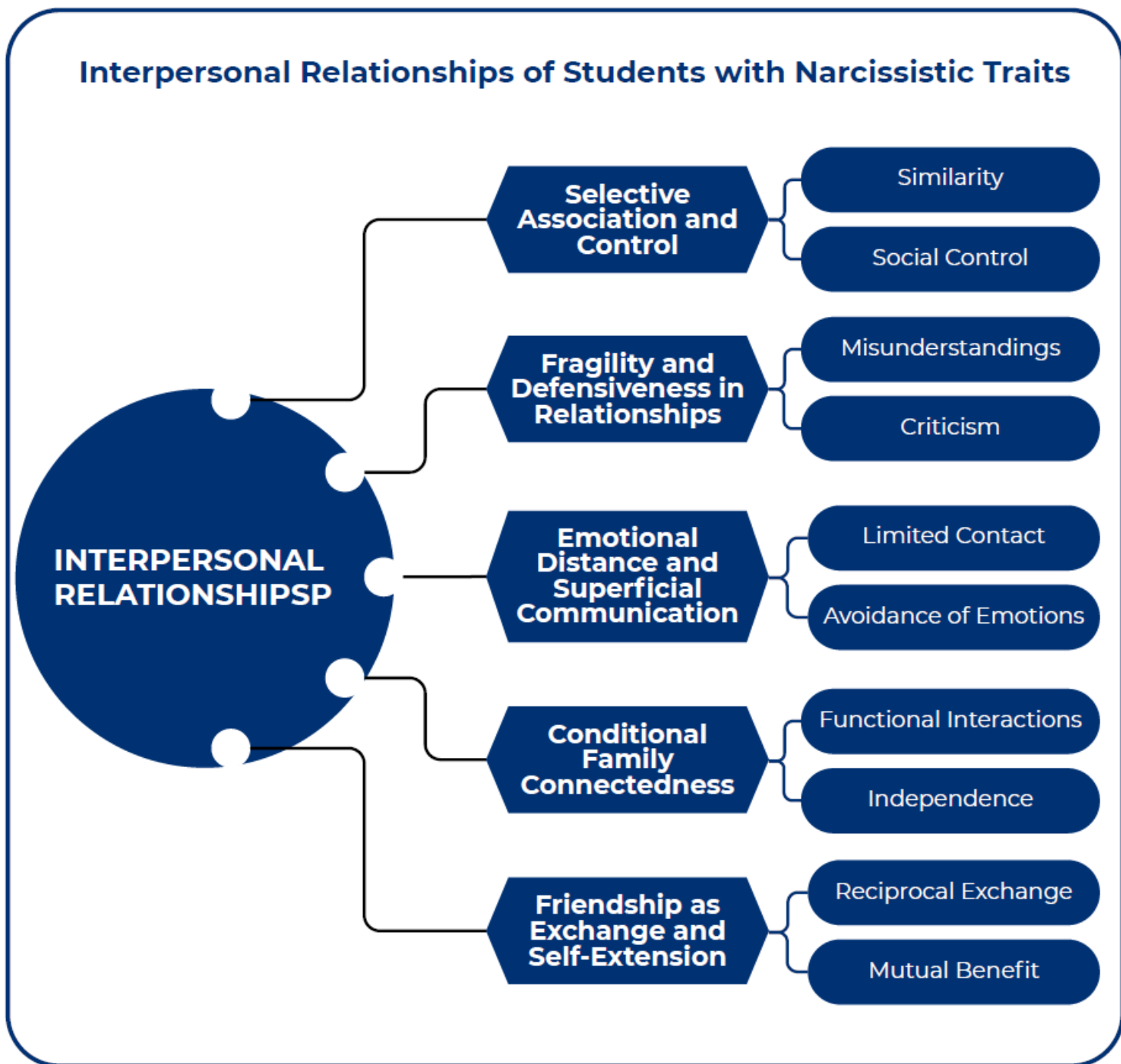


Figure 1

Legend not included with this version.

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