Narcissistic individuals are characterized by an exceptional sense of entitlement, grandiosity, and lack of empathy (APA, 2013). Further, they have a constant need for admiration, and an excessive dependency on others for self-definition (Back et al., 2010). Unfortunately, narcissistic individuals also tend to show high levels of aggression. One theory to explain the relationship between narcissism and aggression is the theory of threatened egotism (Baumeister et al., 2000), which proposes aggression as a method of defending one’s highly favorable view of the self against someone who seeks to undermine that view.

Narcissism can be divided into two subtypes: grandiose and vulnerable. Grandiose narcissism (GN) refers to individuals with high self-esteem who tend to be entitled, outgoing, and charismatic (Du et al., 2021). In contrast, vulnerable narcissism (VN) refers to individuals with low self-esteem who are egocentric and have a strong sense of entitlement (Wink, 1991). Aggression also has two functions. Proactive aggression is the purposeful use of harm to accomplish a goal. Reactive aggression is retaliatory behavior resulting from frustration or perceived provocation. Aggression also has two forms. Overt aggression includes direct physical and verbal harm towards another, while relational aggression is the intent to harm another’s social standing through emotionally manipulative tactics (Rose et al., 2004; Werner & Crick, 1999).

The forms and functions combine to create the following subtypes of aggression: proactive relational (PR), proactive overt (PO), reactive relational (RR), and reactive overt (RO). Separately, the associations between GN and VN with the forms and functions of aggression has been studied (e.g., Du et al., 2021). The present study aims to expand on this research by investigating the unique associations of GN and VN with the four subtypes of aggression.

We hypothesize that VN will be positively correlated with RO and RR aggression, due to their low self-esteem and sense of entitlement, which may make them easily offended and responsive to potential threats (Wink, 1991). Our second hypothesis is that we expect a positive association between GN and PR aggression. Grandiose narcissists are more self-confident and may use proactive aggression in the pursuit of goals and in the attainment of power (Back, Schmukle, & Egloff, 2010).

Methodology

Participants
- 437 undergraduate students between the ages of 18-49 (70.7% female; 75.3% White, 3.9% Black, 14% Hispanic/Latino, 5.5% other, and 1.4% unknown) were recruited from a northeastern university.

Measures
- To measure grandiose and vulnerable narcissism, the Five-Factor Narcissism Inventory Short-Form was used (Glover et al., 2012). To measure the four subtypes of aggression, the Peer Conflict Scale used (Marsee et al., 2014). To measure self-esteem, the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale was used (Rosenberg, 1979).

Results and Discussion

As shown in Table 1, both GN and VN were positively correlated. Consistent with prior research, GN was positively correlated with self-esteem, whereas VN was negatively correlated with self-esteem (Rohmann, Hanke, & Bierhoff, 2019). Biological sex was correlated with RR aggression and was controlled for in all subsequent regressions. Lastly, both GN and VN were positively correlated with the four subtypes of aggression.

Four separate regression analyses were used to test the unique associations between the subtypes of narcissism (predictors) with each of the subtypes of aggression (criterion).

Overall, our findings indicate that VN is a stronger predictor of aggression, possibly due to their low self-esteem that is easily affected by how others view them - they constantly perceive threats and slights in their environment and vehemently react (Wink, 1991). However, due to insecurities, they are more likely to use relational aggression instead of overt, because by using this more indirect form of aggression, it is harder to detect the aggressor and lessen the fear of retaliation (Werner & Crick, 1999).