

# LIKING OR JUST WANTING? FOOD PREFERENCES AND NARCISSIST PERSONALITY TRAITS

L.M. Petre

**Ligiana Mihaela PETRE**

Department of Psychology,  
Faculty of Psychology and Educational Science,  
Bucharest University

**Abstract:** We study the association between narcissist personality traits and sweet, salt and fat related behaviors. 157 patients were included. The Millon Clinical Multiaxial Inventory – III (MCMI-III) was used for assessment of personality traits and PrefQuest was used for measuring recalled food preferences. The results confirmed that salt, fat and salt, sweet, fat and sweet taste preferences are positively associated with narcissist personality traits. The data provide novel insights into the relationship between narcissist personality and food taste preferences.

**Keywords:** food preferences, taste preferences, narcissist personality traits

## **Introduction**

High intakes of sodium, sugar and fats have been linked to the development of chronic diseases such as cardiovascular diseases, obesity and diabetes (WHO/FAO, 2003). Liking for these nutrients also play a role in the sensory perception of food and would be seen as an essential component of desire, and desire a major contributor of preferences. There is a latent or stated presumption that food choices are a close or even direct reflection of sensory hedonic responsiveness (Mela, 2006).

We used the concept of “liking” and “wanting” as a subjective and habitual taste preference from a biopsychological paradigm (Elfhag & Erlanson, 2006; Berridge, 2004). The biopsychosocial theory applied to drug craving a distinction between liking and wanting implying different actions of brain

system (Elfhag & Erlanson, 2006; Robinson & Berridge, 2001). Liking, or palatability, refers to one's hedonic responses to a food and is a triggered affective state that requires no motivation for further reward (Garbinski & al., 2014; Berridge, 2009). Wanting, on the other hand, refers to one's motivation and appetitive drive to consume a food. It is postulated that eventual sensitization of brain systems after repeated exposure will in particular mediate the subcomponent of reward that can be labeled as "wanting". This would mean that a substance such as sugar can be craved, wanted and sought out, even it is not considered as pleasurable anymore (Elfhag & Erlanson, 2006; Berridge, 2004). When wanting is high, it makes the desire food more attractive and attention seizing which can trigger thoughts of eating (Garbinski & al., 2014; Berridge, 2009). However, liking and wanting go together to taste and food preferences.

Interactions of food components with human biology and with social and eating context give rise, in some predictable ways, to relatively stable individual food likes or preferences (Mela, 2000). Sensation seeking is one of the personality characteristics that has often been associated with individual differences in taste preferences and a close relationship between the gustatory system and personality (Sagioglou & Greitemeyer, 2016). For example, people with high in sensation seeking tend to have an increased preference for spicy food and caffeine (Byrnes & Hayes, 2015). Bitter taste preferences are positively associated with antisocial personality traits and most robustly predict everyday sadism (Sagioglou & Greitemeyer, 2016). Preference for sweet foods predicts pro-social personalities, pro-social intentions and behaviors (Meier & al., 2012). People who liked sweet foods are higher in agreeableness (Bailey, 2016).

The construct of narcissism shows no sign of fading away. It is one of the oldest personality constructs, it continues to fascinate psychologists and it has infiltrated popular culture (Krizan & Herlache, 2018). As a result, the topic of narcissism is undergoing an exponential explosion in scientific attention. There are a flexible use of the term "narcissism", denoting everything from a self-oriented motivational state, a normal phase of psychological development, a configuration of personality traits, to a personality disorder. At its core, narcissism is defined by an orientation toward seeking out self-enhancement experiences from the social environment to satiate needs for admiration and recognition (Roche, Pincus & al., 2013). Clinical views of narcissism have understood that self-involvement presents with *grandiose* thought, feelings, and behaviors (e.g. vanity, exhibitionism, over-confidence) as well as *vulnerable* thoughts, feelings, and behaviors (e.g. defensiveness, withdrawal, and resentment) (Krizan & Herlache, 2018).

The personality viewed as an evolutionary adaptation (Millon, 1969,

1981, 1990, 2011) and personality disorder as a problem in adaptation give rise to individual differences in personality styles ranging on spectra from normal to disordered. Personalities are considered an human successful or failed efforts to balance three essential bipolarities that comprise the goals of life: existential survival (avoiding death or pain and enhancing life and pleasure), ecological adaptation (passive environmental accommodation and active environment modification), and species replication (maximizing reproduction and self-focus on nurturing progeny and other focus) (Pincus, Krueger, 2015). The narcissist personality according to the evolutionary model, are one of two “independent” personality patterns classified as CEN spectrum (Confident, Egotistic, Narcissist) by Millon which stated that they exhibit a primary reliance on self rather than others, and have learned that maximum pleasure and minimum pain is achieved by diminishing the significance of others and turning passively to the high status they assign to themselves. There are described three levels of narcissism. The mild or normal level, termed the confident style, is self-centered but also successful in social and occupational settings. The abnormal or moderate egotistic personality demonstrates an outlook and behavior that begins to antagonize others by virtue of his presumptions and disclaim for others. The most serious level, the narcissist disorder, possesses arrogance and self-indulgence that justifies the designation as set forth in DSM criteria (Millon, 2011). Vulnerable narcissism and aspects of grandiose narcissism were identified in individuals with eating disorders (Fairburn & al., 2003). Moreover, the eating disorder identity compensates for the lack of a clear identity and sense of self (Fassino & al., 2009). Best practice standards include narcissism into the conceptualization of eating disorders (Bailey, 2016).

To the extent that the assessment of the subjective taste preferences and narcissist traits predict an outcome, the result would seem important from a process relates standpoint. The psychological effects of food preferences may provide information about the taste preferences and personality (Deglaire & al, 2012).

## **Methods**

### *Participants*

The participants were 157 subjects, 79 men and 78 women, with a mean age of  $30.52 \pm 12.67$  years ( $m \pm SD$ ), and an age range of 18 to 80 years.

### *Instruments*

*Taste preferences.* The preference for salt-, sweet- and fat was asses with Prefquest (Deglaire & al., 2010) which measures recalled liking for the four sensations: salt, sweet, fat an salt, and fat and sweet. PrefQuest (PQ) included for four types of items: liking for sweet, fatty-sweet, salt, and fatty-salt; preferences in the level of seasoning by adding salt, sweeteners or fat;

preferences for types of dishes in a restaurant menu; overall questions about sweet-, salt-, and fat- related behaviors (Deglaire, Schlich & al, 2012, 2014, 2015, 2016).

*Narcissistic traits.* Millon Clinical Multiaxial Inventory-III (MCMI-III) was used to identify and measure personality and narcissist traits. MCMI-III is a 175-item, true-false self report format. The inventory contains 24 clinical scales arranged into four distinct Clinical Personality Patterns, Severe Personality Pathology, Clinical Syndromes, and Severe Clinical Syndromes.

#### *Procedure*

The participants were selected within medical settings after they accepted to participate for a eating behaviors research. They were in ambulatory treatment for chronic or acute disorders. The patients were invited to a psychological assessment starting with personality assessment. From a number of 687 participants, were selected a number of 157 subjects which presents narcissist personality traits (mild, moderate and severe).

#### *Statistical methods*

The PrefQuest and MCMI-III subscales were both found to have an acceptable normal distribution in the prevailing sample, and parametric test were accordingly used for all analysis. Pearson  $\chi^2$  was used for comparing taste preferences to sex, gender, age and personality and ANOVA was applied for the analysis on differences in taste preferences. Two-tailed significance tests were used and the selected level of statistical significance was  $p < .05$ . For all statistical analysis the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was used.

### **Results and Discussion**

In Pearson correlation was observed weak relationship between narcissist personality and preferences for sweet food ( $r = 0.210$ ,  $p=0.01$ ), sweet-fat food ( $r=0.212$ ,  $p=0.01$ ), salty food ( $r=0.289$ ,  $p=0.01$ ) and salty-fat food preference ( $r=0.178$ ,  $p=0.005$ ).

**Table 1**  
**Sweet, Sweety-fat, Salt, Salty-fat food preferences in relation to narcissist personality**

		Sweet pref.	Sweety-fats pref.	Salty food pref.	Salty- fat food pref.
Narcissist traits	P - value	,210**	,212**	,289**	,178*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,008	,008	,000	,026
	N	157	157	157	157

\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

\*\*, Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The result suggests a weak differentiation of food preferences for sensorial attributes related with different levels of the narcissist personality. Grandiose or vulnerable narcissism, it characterized by lack of clear identity and sense of self, which could be pseudo-fuelled by food, no matter what kind of food or taste, even at the imaginary level. The narcissist personality style learned that the pleasure and satisfaction with life comes with the self-centering and minimizing the significance of others. In terms of food preferences, the psychological mechanism could be described as the narcissist centering on food as possession or achievement in detriment of sensorial or taste experiences with food. They “choose, but not choose” all taste types of food. In fact, they “want” the food, more that they “like” it. The narcissist personality style didn’t know what they like because their innate low capacity to feel or interact with sensorial world.

### **Conclusions**

Everyone has to eat. The food is everywhere for most of us, included persons with narcissist personality style, which is an independent personality with a passive social pattern (Millon). They don’t look or search for anyone or anything, maybe not even food. In the same time the narcissist person always expects attention, gratitude and reward. The food is a type of reward for narcissist person that they think it deserves because their sensitivity to gratification. They want it even they don’t really know if they like it. They have to learn what they really like and need. This type of discrimination and awareness could be achieved within relation with food, which is one of the most accessible contexts where the narcissist feels entitled to nurture their self. In the

other hand, most researchers demonstrate the potential for chronic excessive food intake to sensitive “wanting: in disconnection from perceivable qualities of “liking”, rendering individuals vulnerable to weight gain (Finlayson & Dalton, 2012). Because of narcissist’s low capacity to discriminate between what they likes in behalf to egotistic behavior, they tend to oscillate between compulsive and restrictive eating. In this study we showed that sweet, salt, sweet and fat, salt and fat food, positively correlated with narcissist personality traits. These results can contribute to more understanding of narcissist personality and food preferences and may help to define psychotherapeutic intervention for shaping the narcissist personality in a more adaptive way. The narcissist personality could be shaped through the refinement of food preferences and the development of experiences with food. Future research must be done in this direction.

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