



Academic Engagement Moderates the Influences of Narcissism on Student Grades and Retention

Rachel E. Pauletti, Ph.D., Patrick J. Cooper, Ph.D., A. Bell Cooper, Ph.D.
Lynn University



Introduction

Several theoretical models have suggested that narcissism is problematic only to the extent that narcissists are not reinforced for their motives or able to fulfill a grandiose sense of self (e.g., Gebauer et al., 2012; Pauletti et al., 2012).

Indeed, trait narcissism, especially in combination with certain cognitions, biological variables, or situational factors, has long been linked to undesirable outcomes (e.g., Barry et al., 2003; Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Kernis & Sun, 1994; Mead et al., 2018, Pauletti et al., 2012).

While there has been a historical emphasis on social outcomes, academic and professional correlates of narcissism are well-documented. Narcissism predicts academic entitlement (Chowning & Campbell, 2013), academic dishonesty, (Brunell et al., 2011), and lower professional engagement (Credo et al., 2016).

Most of this academically-focused research takes a “main effect” approach to narcissism, sometimes neglecting motivational factors that encourage maladaptive outcomes or encourage adaptive ones.

We seek to apply this nuanced perspective to predicting academic outcomes by evaluating the interaction between narcissism and a host of motivational variables.

Hypotheses

We hypothesized that individuals scoring high on narcissism would perform better on objective measures of academic performance when they reported engagement with their environment across a variety of domains. This hypothesis is rooted in models by Gebauer et al. (2012) and others who have suggested that some narcissists strive to perform better as a means of “fitting in” with their current environment.

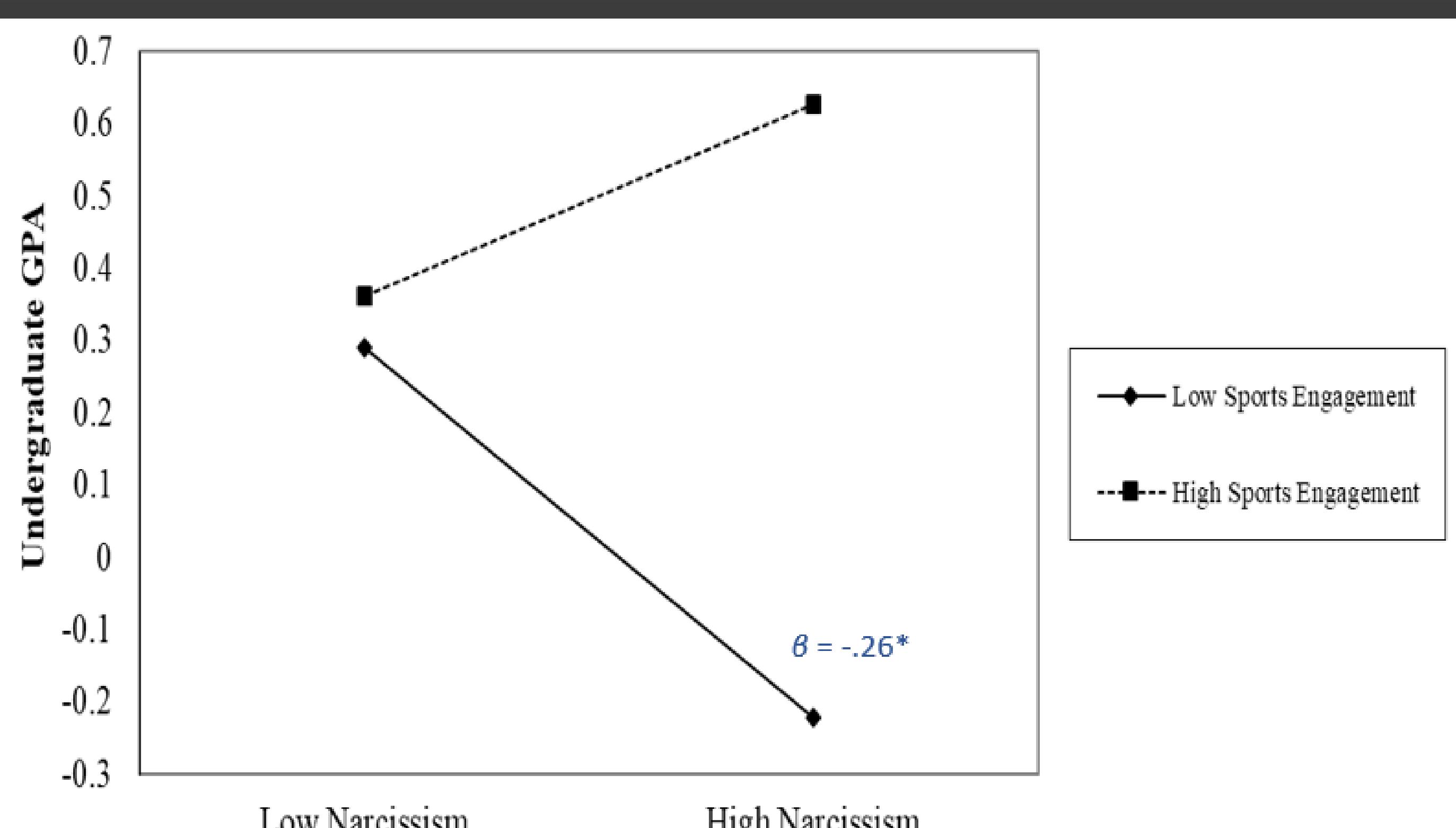
Methods

N = 338 undergraduate students from two universities (one public, one private). Measures and details can be seen below:

Measure	Details
Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI-13; Gentile et al., 2013)	“People always seem to recognize my authority” “I will never be satisfied until I get all that I deserve”
PPAUS Adaption Scale (Swisher et al., 1984)	Self-reported frequency of engaging in leadership, social, and physical activities
Social Media Visibility	Self-reported number of Instagram “followers”
Academic Performance	Grades and withdrawal rates* from official transcripts <small>*Available in one sample</small>

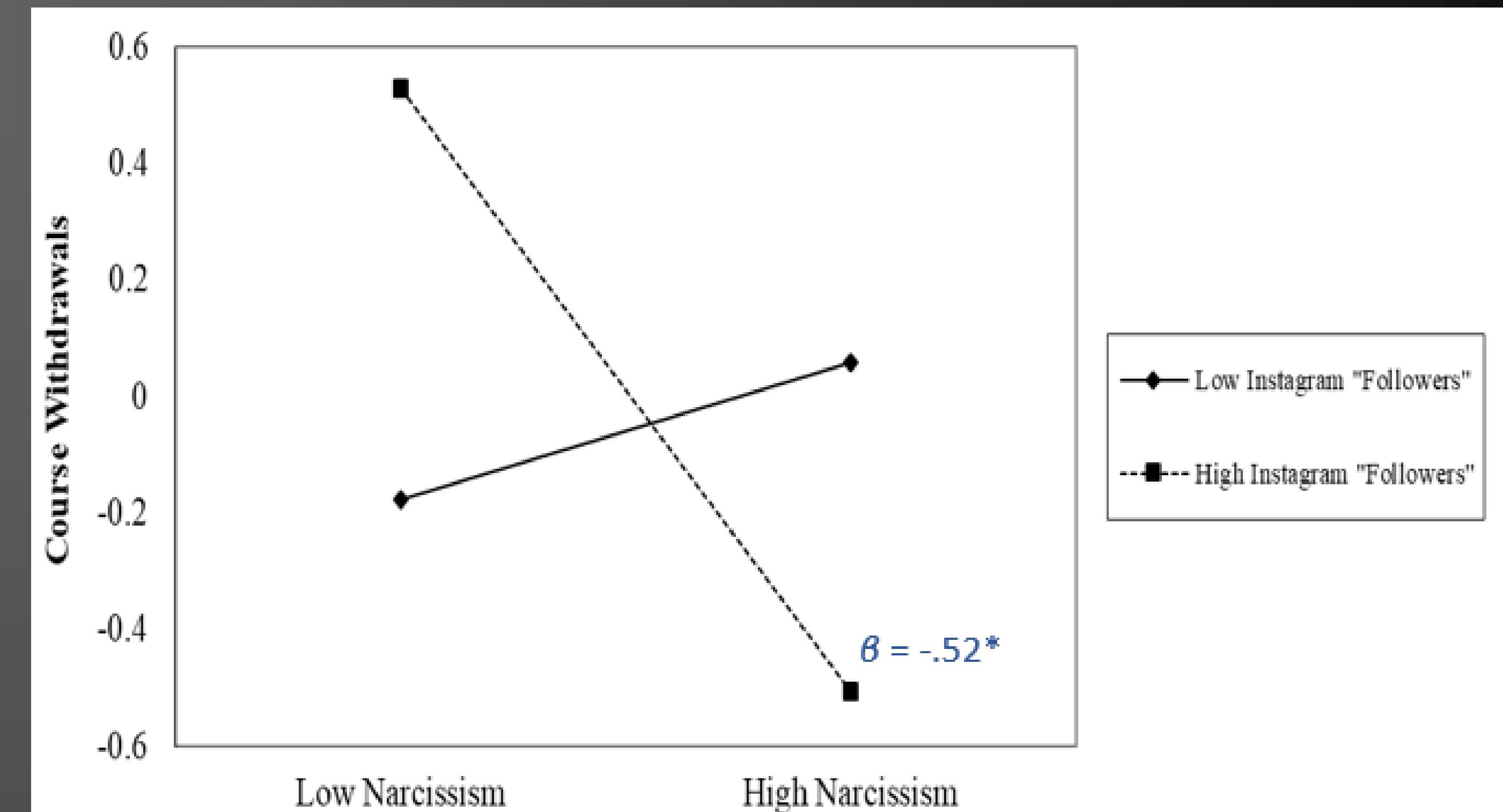
Regression analyses evaluated the hypothesis that the effect of narcissism on academic outcomes would be moderated by each of four motivational/engagement variables (physical, leadership, and social activities, and social media presence). All analyses controlled for gender and cohort. Several interactions emerged.

Results



Narcissism had a negative impact on GPA, but only for students who did not participate in organized sports. This suggests that sports participation mitigates the negative impact of narcissism.

Results (cont.)



Narcissism, in combination with higher Instagram presence (or stronger self-reported social engagement) was associated with fewer course withdrawals, indicating that some narcissists may feel particularly visible and are motivated to protect their social image by staying in and appearing competent in the classroom.

Also, narcissism served as a protective factor, discouraging withdrawal, for those who were not engaged in leadership experiences on campus, suggesting that narcissists benefit by compensating for a lack of tangible leadership positions with academic presence.

Discussion

The results highlight the multidimensional nature of narcissistic motivation, per recent theoretical models (Gebauer et al., 2012; Pauletti et al., 2012), as well as an upside to narcissism. Narcissists may use the academic environment to enhance their self-image, but only when properly motivated.