Full length article

Are sex differences in antisocial and prosocial Facebook use explained by narcissism and relational self-construal?

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ABSTRACT

Previous research has found that some people use Facebook for antisocial purposes, such as for "trolling" or attention-seeking. Conversely, others use Facebook in prosocial, relationship-enhancing ways, such as to increase belonging or to connect with friends. Few studies, however, have investigated differences between men and women in their antisocial and prosocial use of Facebook. The present study sought to address this research gap by examining whether these sex differences might be explained by narcissism and relational self-construal (i.e., the extent to which an individual defines their self in terms of close relationships). To this end, 573 participants living in the United States completed measures of narcissism, relational self-construal, and motives for using Facebook. Results revealed that men reported more antisocial motives for using Facebook than did women, which was explained by their greater narcissism. Conversely, women reported stronger prosocial motives for using Facebook, which was explained by their more relational self-construal. We discuss ways that these findings can contribute to the development of interventions to promote prosocial online behaviour.

1. Introduction

Logging into Facebook, individuals are afforded a variety of opportunities in how they choose to interact with others. They can engage in attention-seeking or trolling, or reach out to their friends and feel a sense of connectedness and belonging. Do men and women differ in these uses of Facebook? While some researchers have assumed that men and women share the same motives for engaging with others on Facebook (Hargittai, 2007), others have called for further investigation into sex differences in motives for using social networks (Lin, Califf, & Featherman, 2013). To fill this research gap, the present study examined sex differences in the extent of endorsing two types of motives for using Facebook: antisocial motives, such as using Facebook to seek attention or to bully/troll others, and prosocial motives, such as using Facebook to increase belonging and to connect with others. This study sought to understand whether these sex differences could be explained by the extent to which men and women differ in narcissism and self-construal.

We predicted that men would be more strongly motivated to use Facebook for antisocial purposes, in part because their higher narcissism and the resulting greater focus on their self encourages antagonism towards others and the sort of self-aggrandizement that may alienate others (Emmons, 1987; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). In contrast, we proposed that women would be more strongly motivated to use Facebook for prosocial purposes, in part because their more relational self-construal — the extent that they define their identity through their social relationships (Cross, Bacon, & Morris, 2000) — and thus their focus on close others (Cross, Hardin, & Gercek-Swing, 2011) encourages their greater engagement in relationship-promoting behaviours (Mattingly, Oswald, & Clark, 2011). Importantly, these findings may contribute to the tailoring of interventions and policies which encourage prosocial online behaviours by promoting more relational ways of interacting while curbing antisocial behaviour. In the following sections, we discuss the ways that sex differences in antisocial and prosocial Facebook motives might be explained by sex differences in narcissism and self-construal, respectively.

1.1. Sex differences in antisocial Facebook use

We focused on two components of antisocial motives for using

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Facebook: attention-seeking and bullying/trolling. Attention-seeking was defined as online behaviour which serves an individual's egoistic concerns of self-presentation in relational contexts (Seidman, 2014). Importantly, attention-seeking on Facebook is construed as a negative gratification (Mäntymäki & Najmul Islam, 2016) as it may decrease perceived social cohesion (Hollenbaugh & Ferris, 2014). In addition, using Facebook for attention-seeking can be conceptualized as antisocial because it is perceived as annoying and the perpetrators as unlikeable (Choi, Panek, Nardis, & Toma, 2015), and has been linked with exhibitionism (Carpenter, 2012). Attention-seeking behaviour may be detrimental to our social circles because it can encourage negative social comparison between individuals, it increases the negative content of posted information, and because it can lead to exploitation without mutual benefits to social capital and social-grooming needs (Carpenter, 2012; Fox & Moreland, 2015; Garcia & Sikström, 2014; Paulhus & Williams, 2002). Previous research has found that men are more likely to use Facebook for self-promotion (Karl, Peluchette, & Schlaegel, 2010), especially to accentuate status and risk-taking tendencies (Tifferet & Vilnai-Yavetz, 1991).

Second, we investigated bullying/trolling, which refers to destructive, disruptive, or deceptive online behaviour that evokes negative emotional reactions in others and has no apparent purpose (Buckels, Trapnell, & Paulhus, 2014; Thacker & Griffiths, 2012). Importantly, trolling can be conceived as a type of cyberbullying (Willard, 2007). Men are more likely to engage in bullying on Facebook (Kokkinos, Baltzidis, & Xynogala, 2016), and trolling online in general (Sest & March 2017) relative to women. However, no research has yet examined why men might engage in these antisocial uses of Facebook. In the present study, we hypothesised that narcissism may be a trait that explains men's more antisocial motives for using Facebook relative to women.

Trait narcissism is a form of sub-clinical narcissism that varies within the general population (Foster, Campbell, & Twenge, 2003). Narcissists are self-focused and characterised primarily by their exploitativeness, need for leadership, grandiose self-perceptions, and self-entitlement (Ackerman et al., 2011). They show increased attention-seeking, egotistical biases, nonconformity, hostility, prejudice, and a lack of consideration and tolerance for others (Ackerman et al., 2011; Campbell, Foster, & Finkel, 2002; Campbell, Rudich, & Sedikides, 2002; Hodson, Hogg, & MacInnis, 2009; Miller & Campbell, 2008; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001; Raskin & Terry, 1988). A recent meta-analysis of 350 studies found that men consistently score higher on measures of narcissism than women (Grijalva et al., 2014). Relatedly, the key characteristics of narcissism suggest that it is one facet of an agentic gender stereotype generally attributed to men (Grijalva et al., 2014). Indeed, whilst they rate themselves highly on agentic traits (e.g., intelligence, extraversion), narcissists tend to undervalue communal traits such as morality and agreeableness (Campbell, Rudich, et al., 2002). Additionally, narcissists tend to respond to negative feedback with derogation (Kernis & Sun, 1994), and their self-representations readily feature aggressive and sadistic elements (Raskin & Terry, 1988). We argue that these characteristics enable narcissists to use Facebook in antisocial ways to meet their self-promotion needs and to counter ego threats (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998).

Accordingly, when narcissists use Facebook, they tend to do so for self-promotion (DeWall, Buffardi, Bonser, & Campbell, 2011; Fox & Rooney, 2015; Ryan & Xenos, 2011) and to elicit attention from their circles (Bergman, Fearrington, Davenport, & Bergman, 2011). For example, narcissists are more likely to post self-promoting content (Buffardi & Campbell, 2008), including frequent Facebook status updates (Ong et al., 2011) and brag about their achievements in their updates (Marshall, Lefringhausen, & Ferenczi, 2015). Notably, narcissists receive less validation in the form of likes and

comments the more they post on Facebook, suggesting that their self-promotion behaviours may be perceived as socially unpleasant (Choi et al., 2015). They also tend to seek more social support than they are willing to reciprocate, get angry when social contacts do not comment on their content, and retaliate against negative comments (Carpenter, 2012). Indeed, they are more likely to engage in Facebook bullying (Kokkinos et al., 2016).

In this vein, many of the traits that are descriptive of a narcissist are also descriptive of a bully, such as proneness to aggression and manipulativeness (Locke, 2009), low agreeableness (Bradlee & Emmons, 1992; Karl et al., 2010; Rhodewalt & Morf, 1995), and reactions such as derogation to negative feedback with the intent to re-establish power and self-esteem (Baldasare, Bauman, Goldman, & Robie, 2012; Kernis & Sun, 1994; Rafferty & Vander Ven, 2014; Twenge & Campbell, 2003). Narcissism is also linked with a drive for negative social influence and power, which is the result of selfish behaviour and self-serving interactions (Foulkes, Viding, McCrory, & Neumann, 2014). In turn, this motivation for negative social influence and power also undergirds trolling behaviour (Craker & March 2016), further highlighting how narcissists can meet their need for social influence and power (Ackerman et al., 2011) within a social media context by engaging in such behaviour. Narcissism (by virtue of the exploitative and self-entitled components) has already been linked with cyberbullying (Karl et al., 2010; Kokkinos et al., 2016). Thus, we hypothesised that narcissism would mediate men's use of Facebook for more antisocial purposes.

1.2. Sex differences in prosocial Facebook use

In the present study, prosocial motives for using Facebook were conceptualized as need for belonging and maintaining relationships through connecting and communicating. Prosocial behaviour can include empathic, warm, pro-relationship behaviour that promotes a sense of belongingness and connection between individuals (Dainton & Stafford, 1993; Fehr, Harasymchuk, & Sprecher, 2014). In terms of online prosocial behaviour, individuals may use Facebook to increase their sense of belonging to relevant social groups (Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2012). Women are more likely to use Facebook to maintain existing relationships relative to men (Joiner et al., 2012): they are more likely to use it to express emotional support (Joiner et al., 2014), engage in more prosocial interactions (Buffardi & Campbell, 2008), and to communicate (Junco, 2013; Muscanell & Guadagno, 2012). We hypothesised that sex differences in relational self-construal could explain why women may have stronger prosocial motives to use Facebook than men.

In contrast to the self-focused orientation of narcissists, individuals with a relational self-construal build a positive sense of self by focusing on the well-being of close others and by cultivating successful relationships (Cross, Morris, & Gore, 2002). In Western, individualist cultures, women tend to construct a more relational self than men due to differences in socialization and the prevalence of gendered social norms (Cross et al., 2002; Marshall, 2010). For example, socializing emotional openness in girls relative to boys, or the sex division in caregiving occupations in adulthood, may encourage women to construct and maintain a self that is more aware of others' needs (Cross & Madson, 1997). Indeed, individuals with a more relational self-construal report increased self-confidence when thinking of close others (Gabriel, Renaud, & Tippin, 2007), rate the quality of their relationships more highly (Morry & Kito, 2009), and have more optimistic evaluations of how committed others are to the relationship (Cross & Morris, 2003). Accordingly, when pursuing goals, they take into account the needs, commitments, and desires of others (Gore, Cross, & Kanagawa,