



A diary study of the influence of Facebook use on narcissism among male college students



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ABSTRACT

The present study explored the relationship between grandiose narcissism and Facebook use among college students. Participants completed a measure of grandiose narcissism and reported about their frequency and duration of Facebook use twice each day for four days. Consistent with previous work, narcissism was positively correlated with frequency of Facebook use. However, linear mixed model analyses revealed that Facebook use did not predict subsequent narcissism after controlling for previous level of narcissism. On the other hand, narcissism was a reliable predictor of subsequent Facebook use even after controlling for earlier Facebook use. These results converge with recent work in (a) observing a link between narcissism and Facebook use and (b) casting doubt on the popular notion that Facebook use leads to narcissism. Instead, the data suggest that narcissistic self-regard increases the frequency of Facebook use. Such findings are interpreted in light of the self-expressive opportunities that Facebook provides, and future research directions involving more recently developed social networking sites are proposed.

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1. Introduction

Narcissism refers to a normally distributed personality trait that is characterized by, among other things, grandiosity, lack of empathy, and a need for admiration (APA, 2013). Social and personality psychologists have expended significant empirical energy to identify the correlates and consequences of non-pathological narcissism (e.g., Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Emmons, 1987; Raskin & Hall, 1979), and recent work has extended the scientific understanding of the concept in two important ways: (1) researchers and theorists have differentiated between grandiose and vulnerable narcissism and (2) researchers have explored the environmental and genetic underpinnings of the trait. In this paper we focus on grandiose narcissism, the form of narcissism characterized by positive affect, including high self-esteem; beliefs in superiority over others; exhibitionism; and the big five characteristics of extraversion, disagreeableness, and relative emotional stability (see Miller & Maples, 2011) and explore a possible environmental catalyst of such narcissism: use of social networking websites.

Investigations of the origins of narcissism have focused upon genetics and parenting with only the most recent work considering the causal influence of non-parenting environmental factors. Like most other personality traits, narcissism is heritable, with heritability estimates hovering around .60 (Vernon, Villani, Vickers, & Harris, 2008). Recent investigations have identified a reliable influence of parenting as well. For instance, current and retrospective reports of parental affection are related positively with grandiose narcissism (Horton, Bleau, & Drwecki, 2006), and reports of parental affection during the first few years of life predict narcissism 20 years later (Cramer, 2011). With such work on parenting and genetics as a backdrop, the most recent work on the origins of narcissism has investigated the possible influence of new media, particularly social network site use, on narcissism.

Social networking websites are a class of website that allow individuals to trade messages and information with one another either privately or publicly. According to a recent study, more than 75% of internet users use social networking sites, with over 80% of internet users between 18 and 64 maintaining Facebook profiles (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). With over 890 million daily users, Facebook is easily the most popular social networking site to date (Facebook, 2014). Although, newer sites like Instagram and Twitter are closing the popularity gap, with the former showing 23% growth in usage during 2013 alone (GWI, 2013) and the latter boasting 500 million users (retrieved from Wikipedia about Twitter on Aug. 29, 2014).

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Given the popularity of these sites, it is not surprising that researchers have been exploring the correlates and consequences of such use, with a recent PsycInfo search with the keyword “Facebook” returning 1622 articles. Much of such work is devoted to the exploration of how Facebook use is related to self and personality, with 416 PsycInfo papers returned from a search of “Facebook and Self” and 237 for Facebook and Personality.

Such work is grounded, primarily, in one of two theories regarding how on-line social networks might facilitate narcissism. To start, such sites provide an opportunity to craft an idealized identity, one that can include all of the best aspects of oneself (including the most attractive pictures, the most favorable information, and recounts of one's most impressive successes) and that need not include one's hardships, liabilities, and/or weaknesses. Such idealized self-presentation could create narcissism via a self-perception process, in which one slowly internalizes the idealized self-image that one crafts online, even though one might have been fully aware at the time of crafting that it was a non-representative sample of the self's artifacts.

Interestingly, the basic assumption of this theory – that individuals create idealized social networking profiles – has received only inconsistent support, with some researchers, in fact, finding no evidence of idealized presentation and, instead, evidence of accurate self-representation. Other researchers have observed evidence of idealization online (Buffardi & Campbell, 2008; Ong et al., 2011). For the purposes of this paper, it is fair to say that idealized presentation theory, despite its mixed support to date, remains a viable, intuitive, and popular (at least among laypersons, see Ablow, 2013) notion that would lead one to predict that more social networking use would create more grandiose narcissism.

An additional theory of social networking's effect on narcissism comes from a simple reinforcement perspective. That is, social networking sites provide vast opportunities to receive congratulations, encouragement, and other generally positive responses to one's posts, and indeed, the vast majority of individuals on Facebook receive highly positive feedback (e.g., “likes” and congratulatory comments; Valkenburg, Peter, & Schouten, 2006). This “liking” behavior is so pervasive that as of 2012, there were, on average, 2.7 billion likes on Facebook each day (Facebook, 2012). Given the established link between parental warmth and grandiose narcissism, one can presume that such consistent positive feedback could nurture effectively the beliefs in one's superiority and entitlement, which are a cognitive cornerstone of the narcissistic system. It is also worth noting that one's personality traits may create in on-line reinforcement possibilities a self-fulfilling process by which those high in grandiose narcissism (and thus, high in self-esteem) are particularly likely to post messages or images that receive positive feedback, whereas those with lower self-esteem are less likely to elicit such ego-boosting reactions (Forest & Wood, 2012). In sum, the relatively simple behavior-reinforcement system involved in social network posting and feedback may facilitate narcissism by providing consistent social glorification.

1.1. Empirical work linking online social networking to narcissism

There is substantial correlational evidence linking grandiose narcissism to both amount and quality of social network use, evidence that is consistent with the theories discussed previously. To start, those who use Facebook tend to be higher in narcissism than those who do not (Ryan & Xenos, 2011), and narcissism is related positively to frequency of posting on other's Facebook sites, to the number of status updates one provides from one's own site, and to the number of “friends” one has (Buffardi & Campbell, 2008; Ong et al., 2011; Wang, Jackson, Zhang, & Su, 2012 but also see Davenport, Bergman, Bergman, & Fearington, 2014; Skues, Williams, & Wise, 2012). High levels of narcissism are also

associated with a tendency to select particularly physically attractive profile pictures (Bergman, Fearington, Davenport, & Bergman, 2011; Buffardi & Campbell, 2008; Kapidzic, 2013; Mehdizadeh, 2010; Wang et al., 2012) and with more frequent use of 1st person pronouns, and less frequent use of antisocial words, in status updates (DeWall, Buffardi, Bonser, & Campbell, 2011). Of course, the causal implications of such correlational work are unclear. While it is possible that such evidence reflects the influence of social networking site use on narcissism, it seems equally reasonable to presume that individuals high in grandiose narcissism are drawn to social networking sites and use them in different ways than individuals lower in such narcissism. Such causal ambiguity has prompted experimental work that can explore more effectively the causal direction of the narcissism–social networking use relationship.

Such experimental work has been ambiguous in its implications for the possible influence of social networking site use on narcissism. A 2012 study by Gentile, Twenge, Freeman, and Campbell randomly assigned college students to make edits to their Myspace page or participate in a google maps control activity. The researchers found that those who edited their Myspace pages had higher post-test narcissism scores. However, a second study reported no effect of Facebook edits on levels of narcissism. Another experimental investigation (Horton, Reid, Barber, Miracle, & Green, 2014) assigned participants randomly to engage in “agentic” or “communal” Facebook use (changing profile information, posting a status update, etc. vs. reading friend's posts, checking on the next five friend's birthdays, etc.) or in a non-Facebook activity. There were no differences between the conditions on post-computer task narcissism. Interestingly, narcissism was correlated with participants' reports of their weekly amount of Facebook use. The authors interpreted these data as calling into serious question the common notion that social networking use promotes narcissism.

One critique of such experimental work has been that it creates an unrealistic context in which participants use social networking sites. That is, participants posting status updates in response to experimental prompts may have a very different impact (a much less impressive one) than might the same behavior that is performed in a realistic and meaningful way. As such, the current study employs a diary methodology, one that asks participants about their Facebook use and assesses their narcissism levels twice each day. Such a diary study was recently used to assess the link between social networking use and mood. This study by Kross et al. (2013) observed an inverse relationship such that more social networking use was associated with less positive mood and more negative emotion. Given the positive emotion with which narcissism is commonly associated, this diary result casts further skepticism on the possibility that social networking use would facilitate narcissism. The current study assesses directly the link between natural Facebook use and dispositional narcissism.

We focus our efforts on Facebook use primarily due to the popularity and thus, potential impact of the site. As noted previously, Facebook has, by far, the most traffic of any social networking site, reporting more than 1.3 billion users monthly and over 800 million daily users (Facebook, 2014), and is the most heavily researched social network site, with its 1622 PsycInfo returns easily outdistancing Twitter (679) and MySpace (204). The current paper hopes to contribute to this expanding literature.

1.2. Overview

The current study tracked Facebook usage and grandiose narcissism at 8 time points over a span of 4 days. This allowed for the natural pattern of social networking behavior and responses to be explored with minimal intrusion from the researchers. This

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