The relative contributions of implicit and explicit self-esteem to narcissistic use of Facebook

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore the relationship between narcissism and Facebook use. Based on a conceptualization of narcissism as a discrepancy between implicit and explicit self-esteem, we investigated the relative contributions of each element of self-esteem to different Facebook behaviors presumed to represent narcissism. We measured the explicit and implicit self-esteem of 81 participants using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale and the Self-Esteem Implicit Association Test (IAT), respectively. Most participants then provided access to their Facebook accounts by friending a fictitious person. We coded a sample of these participants' online behaviors, and then analyzed how they related to the measures of self-esteem. Results suggest that implicit rather than explicit self-esteem drives Facebook behaviors associated with narcissism, with implicit self-esteem negatively correlated with number of Facebook friends. These results inform our understanding of the relationship between personality and online behavior.

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1. Introduction

Online social networks (OSNs) have afforded individuals many of the same capabilities of a small broadcasting company. People who use OSNs like Facebook and Twitter control the means of both message production and message transmission. These means are often deployed to do what we call "broadcasting the self": using the OSN as a virtual show-and-tell feed by chronicling the mundane events of daily life through status updates and photo uploads. In essence, individuals with Facebook accounts can broadcast themselves as often as they would like, as if they are the producers of their own personal reality show.

It is not a great leap to imagine that individuals' propensity to broadcast the self via OSNs might reflect their personality. One specific personality trait that seems related to broadcasting the self is narcissism, which is manifested by an inflated self-concept and inability to maintain intimacy in personal relationships, perhaps because the inflated self-concept of the narcissist is easily threatened (e.g., Campbell, Bosson, Goheen, Lakey, & Kernis, 2007; Myers & Zeigler-Hill, 2012). It is easy to see why this might be related to Facebook use, which affords people constant self-promotion behind the shield of computer-mediated communication.

Indeed, previous research suggests a positive relationship between narcissism and OSN use (e.g., Buffardi & Campbell, 2008). This apparent relationship, however, paints an incomplete picture as research in personality suggests that narcissism is based on a discrepancy between explicit and implicit self-esteem. More specifically, people with narcissism tend to have very high explicit self-esteem but very low implicit self-esteem (e.g., Zeigler-Hill, 2006). What we do not know is which of these components of self-esteem is most related to Facebook use. Both seem plausible: Facebook provides a medium through which people can engage in endless self-promotion (explicit self-esteem) but does so in a way that provides protection from ego threat (implicit self-esteem).

The goal of this study was to advance our understanding of the relationship between narcissism and OSN use. We explored the relationship between implicit and explicit self-esteem and both overall OSN use as well as specific Facebook behaviors. Specifically, we measured participants' implicit and explicit self-esteem along with their self-reported OSN use. We also retrospectively monitored participants' Facebook behavior and coded common behaviors (e.g., status updates, photos) for both their frequency as well as how often these behaviors were self-referent. We then analyzed the extent to which the different forms of self-esteem were related to specific Facebook behaviors. Before reporting the results of this study, we briefly explicate narcissism and summarize existing research on the relationship between this concept and OSN use.

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2. Literature review

2.1. Narcissism and discrepant self-esteem

Like many personality attributes, narcissism is more complex than suggested by its common use in everyday language. It is conceptualized in the existing literature in terms of the relationship between different elements of self-esteem. According to the mask model of narcissism, narcissists aim to continuously maintain "grandiose but fragile self-views that mask deep-seated feelings of inferiority rooted in early interpersonal experiences" (Bosson et al., 2008, p. 1417). Specifically, the mask model theorizes that narcissists have high explicit and low implicit self-esteem (Bosson et al., 2008).

Implicit and explicit self-esteem are weakly correlated and are believed to originate from independent systems (e.g., Baccus, Baldwin, & Packer, 2004; Brinol, Petty, & Wheeler, 2006). Explicit self-esteem resides in the cognitive or rational system, which operates at the conscious level and implicit self-esteem in the experiential system, which operates at the nonconscious level (Kernis et al., 2005).

Implicit self-esteem is more likely to "capture unfiltered aspects of self-esteem" (Buhrmester, Blanton, & Swann, 2011, p. 366) because it is measured indirectly, and therefore, respondents cannot knowingly change their responses. Explicit self-esteem, however, refers to attitudes about oneself that the individual forms through conscious deliberation (Brinol et al., 2006). Thus, as against implicit self-esteem, individuals engage in constructing their explicit self-esteem, and this construction occurs to varying degrees (Dijksterhuis, Albers, & Bongers, 2008). The lesser the construction of explicit self-esteem, the more explicit self-esteem reflects implicit self-esteem (Dijksterhuis et al., 2008; Koole, Dijksterhuis, & van Knippenberg, 2001).

People with comparable self-esteem, that is, high explicit/high implicit or low explicit/low implicit self-esteem do not engage in much construction of explicit self-esteem (Dijksterhuis et al., 2008). On the other hand, people with discrepant self-esteem, that is, high explicit-low implicit or low implicit-high explicit self-esteem are "construction workers" (Dijksterhuis et al., 2008, p. 93). In particular, people with high explicit/low implicit self-esteem engage in "self-presentation and self-deception" (Dijksterhuis et al., 2008, p. 93).

Discrepancies between implicit and explicit self-esteem are associated with dysfunctional or negative outcomes (Brinol et al., 2006). For example, citing a study by Shedler, Mayman, and Manis (1993), Brinol et al. (2006) discuss how compared with individuals with consistent self-esteem (high explicit/high implicit self-esteem), those with discrepant self-esteem were "significantly more reactive on a combined index of heart rate and blood pressure and scored higher on behavioral indices of anxiety" (p. 155). Also, individuals with high-explicit/low-implicit self-esteem engage in greater self-enhancement than individuals with high explicit/high implicit self-esteem (Bosson, Brown, Zeigler-Hill, & Swann, 2003). For example, they have overtly optimistic views about their future, rate themselves highly with regard to personal attributes such as intellectual and social abilities, and are more defensive (Bosson et al., 2003). Individuals with discrepant self-esteem, regardless of the direction of the discrepancy (that is, high explicit/low implicit or low implicit/high implicit), will engage in such self-enhancement to a greater extent than individuals with congruent explicit and implicit self-esteem (Bosson et al., 2003; Kernis et al., 2005). Given the aforementioned conceptualization of narcissism as self-esteem discrepancy, the next section explores existing research on the relationship between narcissism and OSN use.

2.2. Narcissism and OSN use

There is a concern that social networking Web sites, which encourage "self-promotion via self-descriptions, vanity via photos, and large numbers of shallow relationships" foster narcissism (Buffardi & Campbell, 2008, p. 1303). Narcissists use relationships to magnify their success and popularity, that is, for self-promotion; however, they are not interested in interpersonal intimacy (Buffardi & Campbell, 2008). OSNs might attract narcissists as these sites encourage shallow relationships through "superficial 'friendships' with large numbers of individuals and 'sound-byte' driven communication between friends (i.e., wallposts)" (Buffardi & Campbell, 2008, p. 1305). Indeed, there is a correlation between high scores on a narcissism scale (Narcissistic Personality Inventory) and quantity of interaction on Facebook (Buffardi & Campbell, 2008; Ljepava, Orr, Locke, & Ross, 2013); posting self-promoting quotes; and main photo attractiveness, self-promotion, and sexiness (Buffardi & Campbell, 2008). Also, narcissism is associated with the number of friends an individual has on Facebook (Bergman, Fearrington, Davenport, & Bergman, 2011). Also, grandiose exhibitionism, a component of narcissism, predicts self-promoting Facebook behavior, friend count, and accepting requests from strangers (Carpenter, 2012).

The relationship between the components of narcissism, that is, explicit and implicit self-esteem, and social network activity is less clear. For example, Krämer and Winter (2008) found no association between participants' explicit self-esteem and their self-presentation on a social networking site. Also, Tazghini and Siedlecki (2013) found no relationship between explicit self-esteem and number of Facebook friends. On the other hand, Mehdizadeh (2010) found that explicit self-esteem and Facebook activity were significantly negatively correlated; specifically, low explicit self-esteem "correlated with a greater amount of time spent on Facebook per session and a greater amount of Facebook logins per day" (p. 363). This is an interesting finding considering that narcissism, manifested as high Facebook activity, should be correlated with high explicit self-esteem. Also, Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe (2007) found that the relationship between intensity of Facebook use and bridging social capital (that is, weak connections between individuals who provide information, but not emotional support, for each other) varied depending on the person's degree of self-esteem. Further, it has been found that individuals with low self-esteem report a greater sense of Facebook connectedness (Tazghini & Siedlecki, 2013). These inconsistent findings suggest a need to further investigate the relationship between explicit self-esteem and OSN use.

RQ1: What is the relationship between OSN use and explicit self-esteem?

There are few studies that have examined the relationship between implicit self-esteem, as a component of narcissism, and OSN use. It is worthwhile to explore this relationship as implicit self-esteem reflects core self-esteem to a greater extent than explicit self-esteem since it is not subject to conscious control or active construction (like explicit self-esteem) (Dijksterhuis et al., 2008). For example, measures of implicit self-esteem, unlike those of explicit self-esteem, are not distorted by social desirability bias (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). Examining the relationship between implicit self-esteem and OSN use can help predict OSN behavior more accurately.

RQ2: What is the relationship between OSN use and implicit self-esteem?