



# Grandiosity on display: Social media behaviors and dimensions of narcissism<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

This study examined the relationship between dimensions of narcissism and selfie posting/sending frequency and other self-promoting behaviors on social media. Participants ( $N = 124$ ) completed an online survey of narcissistic traits and social media use. Global narcissism was significantly correlated with numerous social media behaviors, including frequency of selfie posting, perceived attractiveness of selfies, tag/comment/like behaviors, as well as variables specific to individual social media platforms. Among narcissism dimensions, Grandiose Exhibitionism exhibited the most consistent association with social media behaviors. The Leadership/Authority dimension generally demonstrated the weakest correlations with selfie posting/sending frequency and other social media behaviors. Additionally, PROCESS analyses revealed that traits reflecting global narcissism, Grandiose Exhibitionism, and Entitlement/Exploitativeness were associated with selfie posting/sending frequency through a motivation for others to show interest and admiration. Implications for this research and future directions are discussed.

## 1. Introduction

Recently, significant debate has centered on the social appropriateness of the phenomenon known as the “selfie” (i.e., a self-portrait photo that one takes of oneself). Selfies increased exponentially with the introduction of smart phone technology incorporating two-way camera lenses, allowing users to upload selfies instantly to a variety of Social Networking Sites (SNS) (Day, 2013). Research on selfie postings among the millennial generation shows that over 50% of all millennials in the United States have shared selfies (Taylor, 2015). A societal backlash against the selfie has become widespread, with selfie-taking often labeled as a selfish act. For instance, the popular Coachella music festival in California banned use of the “selfie-stick” in 2015 by publicly stating “NO Selfie Sticks/Narsissistics (sic)” (Tatro, 2015), and elsewhere, selfie-sticks have been referred to as “wands of narcissism” (Grubb, 2015).

### 1.1. Multidimensional conceptualization of narcissism

Narcissism is a personality construct marked by a grandiose sense of self-importance, low communion with others, and feelings of entitlement (Brown, Budzek, & Tamborski, 2009). Narcissism is a continuous construct, with extreme trait variations demonstrated in narcissistic

personality disorder (NPD), characterized by a pervasive pattern of grandiose behaviors, excessive need for admiration, and empathy deficits (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). While a variety of conceptualizations of narcissism exist, evidence suggests narcissism is heterogeneous in nature (Brown et al., 2009). For example, although research using the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin & Terry, 1988) commonly focuses on total NPI scores, the measure has been shown to be comprised of three distinct factors: Leadership/Authority (NPI-LA), Grandiose Exhibitionism (NPI-GE), and Entitlement/Exploitativeness (NPI-EE; Ackerman et al., 2011). NPI-LA, characterized by perceived leadership abilities and social potency, is generally associated with adaptive outcomes. NPI-EE reflects entitlement in interpersonal contexts and a willingness to manipulate others, and is consistently associated with maladaptive outcomes. Finally, NPI-GE is indicative of self-absorption, a belief that one is superior to others, and exhibitionistic traits, and has both adaptive and maladaptive correlates (Ackerman et al., 2011). Given the multidimensional nature of narcissism, and evidence suggesting a divergent pattern of associations with its dimensions, research examining the nomological network of this construct should distinguish between its facets rather than treat it as unidimensional (Brown et al., 2009).

Researchers have argued that SNS are attractive to those high in narcissism because they consist of a large network of shallow,

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impersonal relationships and give narcissists autonomy over how they choose to present themselves, often in self-enhancing ways (Buffardi & Campbell, 2008). Buffardi and Campbell (2008) argued that narcissists are drawn to SNS that allow them to behave in ways that are self-promoting through wall-posts and selective posting of attractive profile photos. These behaviors may satisfy motivations for narcissism such as gaining admiration from others (Weiser, 2015), and further fuel their inflated self-views (Halpern, Valenzuela, & Katz, 2016).

### 1.2. Global narcissism and SNS behaviors

Previous research has made important inroads pertaining to the interplay between narcissism, behavioral motivation, and social media behaviors. Researchers have examined a variety of measures related to how narcissism manifests itself on SNS. In the last six years alone, narcissistic tendencies have been linked with increased online social activity (i.e., more hours spent on SNS; Davenport, Bergman, Bergman, & Ferrington, 2014), status update frequency (Carpenter, 2012; DeWall, Buffardi, Bonser, & Campbell, 2011), photo liking/commenting frequency (Panek, Nardis, & Konrath, 2013), commenting on others' posts (DeWall et al., 2011), and number of friends and followers (Bergman, Ferrington, Davenport, & Bergman, 2011; Carpenter, 2012; Panek et al., 2013). Another study examining narcissism and SNS use differentiated between “active” and “passive” usage of SNS (Davenport et al., 2014). Active users of SNS were defined as creators of content as they engaged in more status updates, tweets, photo posting, likes and comments; whereas passive users were less engaged in content creation. Davenport et al. (2014) found that narcissistic students tended to be active users of Twitter, whereas narcissistic adults tended to be active users of Facebook.

Recent research has focused particular attention on the selfie phenomenon as it relates to narcissism. Narcissistic tendencies such as attention-seeking, exhibitionism, and inflated perceptions of one's physical appearance appear to naturally lend themselves to selfie posting on SNS. Indeed, individuals who are higher in narcissism tend to rate selfie-posting more favorably (Lee & Sung, 2016) and post more selfies on SNS (Halpern et al., 2016; Sung, Lee, Kim, & Choi, 2016; Weiser, 2015). Furthermore, those higher in narcissism also perceive their selfies to be more attractive than those lower in narcissism (Moon, Lee, Lee, Choi, & Sung, 2016; Ong et al., 2011), which is not surprising given research showing that narcissistic individuals favor posting photos based on how attractive they appear (Kapidzic, 2013; Wang, Jackson, Zhang, & Su, 2012). A motivation to display attractiveness in profile photos may help users perceive themselves as more appealing to others (Kapidzic, 2013; Wang et al., 2012), pointing to positive impression management and self-promotion as likely underlying mechanisms.

### 1.3. Narcissism dimensions and SNS behaviors

Few studies have examined the ways in which the dimensions of narcissism are associated with SNS behaviors. Using a Polish adaption of the NPI (Bazińska & Drat-Ruszczak, 2000) which exhibits a four-factor structure that differs from the original measure, Sorokowski et al. (2015) found the admiration demand, vanity, and leadership subscales were all weakly associated with self-posting among men, whereas only admiration demand was correlated with selfie-posting in women. In a large online study using the NPI, Weiser (2015) found that while NPI-LA, NPI-GE, and NPI-EE all correlated with selfie-posting at the bivariate level, only NPI-LA and NPI-GE remained significant in a multivariate model. Finally, McCain et al. (2016) found that Grandiose Narcissism was significantly associated with frequency of taking and posting selfies on SNS (McCain et al., 2016). These studies vary in their methodology and measures, though the association between selfie-posting and grandiose and exhibitionistic tendencies appears to be a consistent finding across samples.

### 1.4. Study aims and hypotheses

Consistent with prior research showing a relationship between SNS use and narcissism, this study examined selfie-posting and other SNS behaviors across three separate social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram). It was predicted selfie posting/sending frequency would positively correlate with global narcissism, as would a range of other SNS variables, including ratings of selfie attractiveness, hours per week spent on SNS, tag/comment/like behaviors, and specific activity on the three SNS. Next, regarding profile settings, we expected increased narcissism to be associated with a having a “public” Facebook profile, since this setting may be indicative of the exhibitionistic traits characteristic of narcissism.

Given the heterogeneous nature of narcissism and the fact that fewer studies have examined the SNS correlates of individual dimensions of narcissism, we analyzed associations at the subscale level as well. Although all subscales were predicted to exhibit positive associations with selfie-posting and other SNS behaviors, NPI-GE was expected to exhibit the strongest and most consistent correlations.

Finally, because of evidence suggesting narcissistic individuals may strive to maintain a grandiose sense of self via assertive self-enhancement (Back et al., 2013), we hypothesized that narcissism would be positively associated with a motivation to use SNS so that others will show interest and admiration (i.e., a self-interest motivation), and this association would be stronger than a motivation to keep others up-to-date on one's activities. At the subscale level, we expected NPI-LA to exhibit the smallest association with self-interest motivation because it is considered more adaptive and associated with positive outcomes (Ackerman et al., 2011). To further examine this hypothesis, we tested whether there was a significant indirect effect of narcissism on selfie-posting frequency through self-interest motivation. Specifically, we hypothesized a significant indirect effect with global narcissism and the maladaptive subscales of NPI-GE and NPI-EE as predictors, but not with LA as a predictor.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants and procedure

Participants were recruited via the psychology research pool at a small urban university and through snowball sampling on social media, and completed surveys online using Qualtrics. The initial sample consisted of 127 social media users aged 18–72 years ( $M = 34.3$ ,  $SD = 14.6$ ), but 3 respondents were eliminated because they omitted more than 20% of items on the NPI or majority of the social media questions, yielding a final sample of 124. The sample included 93 men (75%) and 31 women (25%). To increase the accuracy of self-reported responses, participants were asked to open separate browser windows to check their SNS (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) while completing the survey.

### 2.2. Measures

#### 2.2.1. Narcissism

Participants completed the Narcissistic Personality Inventory - 13 (NPI-13; Gentile et al., 2013), a 13-item self-report measure of trait narcissism, which is made up of three factor analytically derived subscales (NPI-LA, NPI-GE, and NPI-EE). Each item is comprised of paired statements and the respondent must choose the statement that best describes them. Narcissistic responses were scored as a 1 and non-narcissistic responses were scored as 0, with higher average item scores indicating increased narcissism. NPI-Total had strong internal consistency ( $\alpha = 0.82$ ), as did NPI-GE and NPI-LA ( $\alpha = 0.77$  and  $\alpha = 0.70$ , respectively), but NPI-EE had a lower value, though consistent with previous research ( $\alpha = 0.42$ ; Ackerman et al., 2011).

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