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Do vulnerable narcissists profit more from Facebook use than grandiose narcissists? An examination of narcissistic Facebook use in the light of self-regulation and social comparison theory

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ABSTRACT

This work examines the assumption that grandiose and vulnerable narcissism, although positively correlated, have different consequences for frequency and time expenditure of Facebook use and, additionally, the importance of social comparisons for both constructs. Participants completed measures of Facebook use, grandiose narcissism, vulnerable narcissism, social comparison orientation, and self-esteem. Four studies (*Ns* = 384, 175, 289, and 520) provided evidence that vulnerable narcissism, but not grandiose narcissism, was linked to Facebook use and to social comparison orientation if partial correlations between narcissism and Facebook use were employed controlling for core narcissism. Further analyses indicated that social comparison orientation operated as a mediator between vulnerable narcissism and Facebook use. Implications for understanding the distinction between grandiose and vulnerable narcissism in the prediction of Facebook use and social comparison orientation are discussed in the light of self-regulatory theory: Vulnerable narcissists seem to use Facebook as *means* to attain narcissistic *goals* (e.g., compare themselves with important others) whereas grandiose narcissists seem to utilize different strategies in order to attain self-regulatory goals.

1. Introduction

In the last two decades, social networking sites (SNSs), i.e., web-based communication platforms, which allow users to form and maintain a wide network of social connections (cf., Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2011), have gained much popularity, resulting in SNSs use being ubiquitous in many societies. With almost 1.2 billion daily active users, Facebook is the most popular and widely used SNS worldwide (Facebook, 2016).

What makes Facebook so popular? Facebook not only allows users to stay in touch with friends, to form new “friendships”, and interact with other users (e.g., by posting status updates – thereby informing other users of their whereabouts and actions, commenting on photographs and other users' updates, and chatting with other users), but also allows users to create online profiles of themselves and present a rich set of self-relevant information (e.g., accomplishments, activities, relationship status; Manago, Taylor, & Greenfield, 2012).

1.1. Social networking sites (SNSs)

The recent proliferation of SNSs has resulted in research examining social behavior online and the role that SNSs play in users' everyday lives. Moreover, recent research has begun to investigate different motivations for usage of Facebook (e.g., Joinson, 2008; Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2012) as well as how personality influences usage or non-usage of Facebook (Ryan & Xenos, 2011). Results of the latter approach suggest that Facebook use is positively correlated with characteristics of the Five Factor Model, e.g., extraversion and neuroticism (Ross et al., 2009; Ryan & Xenos, 2011). Materialism (Ozimek, Baer & Förster, 2017), narcissism (Brailovskaia & Bierhoff, 2016; Liu & Baumeister, 2016; Mehdizadeh, 2010; Ryan & Xenos, 2011), loneliness (Ryan & Xenos, 2011), and social comparison orientation (Lee, 2014; Ozimek & Bierhoff, 2016; Ozimek & Förster, 2017) have also been shown to predict online social activity. Interestingly, the literature has yielded mixed results concerning the effects of self-esteem and well-being on Facebook use: Some studies found positive associations (e.g., Gonzales & Hancock, 2011), whereas other studies reported negative correlations (e.g., Chou & Edge, 2012; Ellison, Steinflied, & Lampe, 2007; Lee, 2014; Steinfield, Ellison, & Lampe, 2008).

Even though motivation for using Facebook has been a key area of research, there are still major knowledge gaps in this domain. Why is Facebook so appealing? The *Social Online-Self-Regulation Theory* (SOS-T;

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Ozimek et al., 2017) centers on self-regulation as an explanatory approach for Facebook use. In general, self-regulational theories claim that people have *motives* (i.e., more abstract, superordinate goals) that trigger specific *goals*, which can be attained by certain *means* (cf., Carver & Scheier, 2001; Förster, 2015). People can attain one single *goal* by several *means* (i.e., *equifinality*) and also several *goals* by one single *means* (i.e., *multifinality*; for an introduction see Kruglanski et al., 2002). Regarding the SOS-T, people use SNSs, such as Facebook, to regulate themselves – SNSs may be used as *means* to attain individual *goals*, be it materialistic needs or more social capital with the ultimate goal of increasing the individual's self-esteem. In this context it is irrelevant whether SNSs as means are functional or dysfunctional, i.e., it is irrelevant whether people are really attaining their individual goals by using SNSs or not. Nonetheless, they may use SNSs because they *think* they can regulate themselves by employing them.

There are some facets of personality that are strongly connected with self-regulation. For example, narcissism may be conceptualized as a self-regulatory system (Campbell & Foster, 2007). It represents an individual's capacity to engage in a variety of self-regulation strategies (e.g., displaying material goods, bragging) to maintain and affirm an inflated positive self-view based on individuals' needs for validation and attention (Pincus & Roche, 2011). As Campbell and Foster (2007) point out, these self-regulation strategies are both causes and consequences of narcissists' inflated self-views. In accordance with this, the Social Online-Self-Regulation Theory suggests that narcissists might use SNSs as *means* to increase their self-esteem and to *regulate* themselves (cf., Ozimek et al., 2017).

Theory and research indicate that it is necessary to differentiate between two types of narcissism (Wink, 1991), namely grandiose narcissism, characterized by overt grandiosity and extraversion, and vulnerable narcissism, reflecting a more covert form of narcissism associated with anxiety, defensiveness, and introversion (Pincus et al., 2009). In terms of self-regulation, it has been proposed that whereas grandiose narcissists engage in the aforementioned self-regulation strategies to regulate their self-esteem (i.e., through overt bids for attention and admiration), vulnerable narcissists are too insecure to demand admiration and validation overtly; thus, they crave approval from others (Bosson et al., 2008; Dickinson & Pincus, 2003). As a consequence of this distinction, we propose that self-regulation strategies shown online, as they are reflected in patterns of Facebook use, will differ considerably between grandiose narcissists and vulnerable narcissists.

Interestingly, recent research on narcissism and Facebook use demonstrated that both types of narcissism were positively related to Facebook use (Brailovskaia & Bierhoff, 2016; Mehdizadeh, 2010; Ryan & Xenos, 2011). The fact that both facets are positively correlated with Facebook use seems to be surprising, though. Why should both types of narcissists use the same self-regulation strategies concerning self-presentation and interaction on Facebook? Previous studies have employed zero-order correlations (cf., Brailovskaia & Bierhoff, 2016). Because grandiose and vulnerable narcissism are positively correlated (Wink, 1991) it is in a further step reasonable to employ partial correlations.

Therefore, the aim of this research was to investigate the relationship between both facets of narcissism on the one hand and Facebook use on the other hand while statistically controlling for the common core of narcissism. In order to gain a more profound view of the associations between these constructs, we examined the results of four independent online studies. In the next section, we give an overview of the literature on the link between narcissism and Facebook use.

1.2. Narcissism

Non-clinical narcissism is defined as a pervasive pattern of grandiose self-view, excessive need for admiration, a relative lack of intimacy with others, and the use of self-enhancing self-regulation strategies (cf., Liu & Baumeister, 2016; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001).

The most common differentiation within the concept of narcissism was presented by Wink (1991), who suggested a grandiose and a vulnerable subtype. The grandiose subtype is characterized by overt grandiosity, feelings of entitlement, the need for admiring attention from others, extraversion, exhibitionism, and exploitative behaviors whereas vulnerable narcissism reflects a more covert form of narcissism associated with anxiety, defensiveness, hypersensitivity, introversion, dependence on others, and the tendency to withdraw from social interactions. Despite being interpersonally shy, hypersensitive to slight provocations, and outwardly self-effacing, vulnerable narcissists harbor underlying grandiose expectations (Caligor, Levy, & Yeomans, 2015).

Even though the grandiose subtype and the vulnerable subtype are easily distinguished from a theoretical point of view, they do share core features of narcissism, such as conceit, arrogance, disregard of others, and self-indulgence, as well as the use of antagonistic interpersonal strategies (Miller & Campbell, 2008; Miller, Price, Gentile, Lynam, & Campbell, 2012; Wink, 1991). According to Morf and Rhodewalt (2001), the two subtypes of narcissism differ mainly by their self-regulation strategies (cf., Ng, Cheung, & Tam, 2014).

Vulnerable narcissists tend to rely more than grandiose narcissists on social feedback to regulate the self (Zeigler-Hill, Clark, & Pickard, 2008). They are too insecure to demand admiration and validation overtly, thus they crave approval from others (Bosson et al., 2008; Dickinson & Pincus, 2003). All in all, they are less successful in managing their self-esteem through self-enhancing strategies than grandiose narcissists, so that in most cases, they rely upon external feedback from others to regulate their self-esteem (Dickinson & Pincus, 2003).

Grandiose narcissists, on the other hand, tend to use overt strategies to regulate the self – including those strategies that have been proposed in Campbell and Foster's (2007) extended agency model. According to this model, the grandiose self can be conceptualized as a self-regulatory system based on a variety of interpersonal skills (e.g., charm), as well as the use of intrapsychic (e.g., fantasies of power) and interpersonal strategies (e.g., self-promotion). Compared to vulnerable narcissists, they are more successful in asserting their claims and are more likely to regulate their self-esteem through overt self-enhancement, devaluation of individuals who threaten their positive self-view, and denial of weakness (Dickinson & Pincus, 2003).

To sum up, in terms of self-regulation, it has been proposed that whereas grandiose narcissists engage successfully in the aforementioned self-regulation strategies to regulate their self-esteem (i.e., through overt bids for attention and admiration), vulnerable narcissists tend to be too insecure to assert their feelings of entitlement and instead waver between shameful disavowal of entitled expectations and angry assertion of these expectations (Dickinson & Pincus, 2003). In conclusion, we propose that grandiose and vulnerable narcissists differ in usage of self-regulating strategies.

1.3. Facebook and narcissism

SNSs offer many benefits that may especially appeal to vulnerable narcissists as means of gaining attention of the widest audience possible (Carpenter, 2012), and therefore of pursuing their goal of self-enhancement and being admired.

First, SNS-users can reflect on what kind of information they want to present on their profile to convey the desired impression. These tools should especially appeal to vulnerable narcissists who tend to be hypersensitive when it comes to the feedback of others (Hendin & Cheek, 1997).

Second, SNSs allow users to collect information about other individuals without having to engage in conversations with them – users can simply visit other users' profiles and gather the information of interest. Since narcissists report little interest in intimacy and close relationships (Campbell, Brunell, & Finkel, 2006; Campbell & Miller, 2011) and SNSs are built on the base of superficial social relationships