Narcissism, Internet, and social relations: A study of two tales ☆

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ABSTRACT

Much scholarly literature has investigated the connection of narcissism and Internet use, specifically focused on online social networks. However, there is no consensus about how the narcissists' Internet use impacts their social relations. In part, mixed findings might be explained by failure to account for two distinct types of narcissism, namely a grandiose type and a vulnerable type. In the present study, we expected these two facets of narcissism to show different patterns of associations with Internet behaviors and social outcomes. Anonymous, self-report data were collected from $N = 532$ late adolescent/young adult participants (mean age = 23.33, 54.9% female). Findings from SEM analyses showed that the links between narcissism and social anxiety/social self-efficacy were partially mediated by preference for online social interactions (POSI); however, the two types of narcissism show distinct links to the two outcomes. Vulnerable narcissism was positively associated with POSI, which indirectly predicted problems for both measures of social relations; in contrast, grandiose narcissism was only directly and positively associated with social self-efficacy and negatively with social anxiety.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Grandiose and vulnerable narcissism

The term narcissism was originally coined by Sigmund Freud (1914), and later further developed, notably by Heinz Kohut and Otto Kernberg. These authors view narcissism as a personality structure characterized by a paradoxical existence of two self-views, namely grandiose self-view, which exists alongside feeling of inferiority. Kohut (1971) emphasizes that the grandiose self-typical for narcissism emerges as a reaction to inadequate "mirroring" from parents (not providing enough admiration), leading to low self-esteem. Kernberg (1975), on the other hand, views narcissism as a result of a primitive defensive mechanism called splitting against internal aggression felt towards objects. This mechanism enables the two incompatible self-representations to co-exist.

The underlying narcissistic personality structure can be manifested as two phenotypes or types, namely grandiose and vulnerable narcissism (Pincus & Roche, 2011). The grandiose type is characterized by exhibitionism, self-enhancement, feelings of superiority, and preoccupation with receiving admiration and attention from others. The vulnerable type is characterized by feelings of neglect, anxiety, diminished self-esteem, and insecurity. Both types share grandiose fantasies, a sense of entitlement, and a constant need for validation and admiration (Pincus & Roche, 2011). The difference is that these underlying

tendencies are latent for vulnerable narcissists, either due to their diffidence or distaste for social interactions, whereas grandiose narcissists openly act upon these tendencies, ignoring potential criticism or consequences (Stucke & Sporer, 2002). These types are not simply two facets of one construct, but are two separate manifestations with different etiology (Campbell & Miller, 2011). The proposed conceptual difference between the two subtypes has been supported empirically in several studies. They appear to be largely unrelated, with distinct patterns of associations to other psychological constructs (e.g., Brookes, 2015; Rathvon & Holmstrom, 1996).

1.2. Narcissism and social interactions

The relationships of narcissists are characterized by asymmetry (Paulhus, 2001); although social interactions are essential for narcissists as their weak self-concept is dependent on constant affirmation from other people, they are unable to maintain balanced relationships due to feelings of superiority and insensitivity to others (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). Thus, such relationships often include covert or overt hostility, aggression, and arrogance (Raskin, Novacek, & Hogan, 1991).

Given the distinctive nature of the two subtypes, it comes as no surprise that the way they act with other people is somehow dissimilar. Grandiose narcissists are found to be 'charming,' at least at the first sight (Back, Schmukle, & Egloff, 2010; Paulhus, 1998). They actively seek other people and are often considered agreeable, gregarious, and extraverted (Miller & Campbell, 2008). They also report to enjoy social interactions and rate themselves highly on many socially relevant

characteristics, such as intelligence or attractiveness (Gabriel, Critelli, & Ee, 1994).

On the other hand, vulnerable narcissists oftentimes feel inferior to others, timid, and avoidant (Campbell & Miller, 2011; Rose, 2002). As the fragile part of the narcissistic self is what characterizes these individuals, it is no wonder that they tend to feel less at-ease in social interactions given their manifested insecurity, shyness, and anxiety. They are socially reticent and defensive (Wink, 1991), characterized by maladaptive attachment styles (Dickinson & Pincus, 2003) and less empathy and prosocial behavior (Lannin, Guyll, Krizan, Madon, & Cornish, 2014). Thus, although both subtypes are associated with problems in social interactions, grandiose narcissists seem more agreeable on the surface and tend to actively seek out other people; in contrast, vulnerable narcissists do not appear to enjoy social interactions much.

1.3. Preference for online social interaction and problematic Internet use

For some individuals, online interactions become a preferred mode of relating over face-to-face ones (Caplan, 2003). There are a number of reasons individuals prefer online social interaction, including that they seem safer and more comfortable. However, this has been found to be associated with psychosocial problems such as loneliness (Moreno, Jelenchick, & Breland, 2015), social anxiety (Caplan, 2007) or inadequate social skills (Caplan, 2005). Individuals who prefer online social interactions are also more likely to use Internet in a problematic way, in the sense that it negatively affects outcomes in other life domains (Kim, LaRose, & Peng, 2009). Kim et al. (2009) argue that the relationship between psychosocial problems and problematic use of Internet is in fact cyclical — individuals with pre-existing psychosocial problems are drawn to prefer online interactions over the real-world ones, but their difficulty controlling their Internet use further adds to their problems (i.e., poor social skills).

1.4. Narcissism and Internet

Most studies on the association between narcissism and Internet use have focused on the use of social network sites (SNS). These show that grandiose narcissistic users are more likely to be active on Facebook (Buffardi & Campbell, 2008; Mehdizadeh, 2010) as this permits to self-promote (Choi, Panek, Nardis, & Toma, 2015; Ong et al., 2011). However, few studies have focused on how narcissists' use the Internet and associated outcomes. A study by Odacı and Çelik (2013) did not find significant associations between problematic Internet use and narcissism. On the other hand, Choi et al. (2011) found that covert narcissism was positively associated with tendency towards Internet addiction. Furthermore, Ljepava, Orr, Locke, and Ross (2013) found that overt narcissists were more likely to be frequent Facebook users, while covert narcissists were more likely to be Facebook non-users. However, most studies have not differentiated between subtypes of narcissism, in part because most measured narcissism with the NPI scale, which only assesses the grandiose subtype (Wink, 1991). Given the perhaps more maladjusted nature of vulnerable narcissism, it is plausible to expect that this type of narcissism might experience more problems with Internet use.

2. Current study

Few studies have compared the subtypes of narcissism on the links between Internet use and associated adjustment outcomes. We would expect online social interactions to be preferred over the real-world ones for vulnerable narcissists. Put differently, what is the effect of vulnerable narcissistic Internet use on their real-world social life? Their social reticence and lack of social skills would lead them to prefer online social interactions, as these are less anxiety-inducing, due to an improved ability to control one's self-presentation (Caplan, 2005). However, consistent with Kim et al. (2009), preferring online social

interactions over the real-world ones would take its toll on adjustment, including social life, thus creating a vicious cycle. Therefore, in the current study, it was expected that vulnerable narcissism would be positively associated to problems in social interactions, expressed by lower social self-efficacy and higher social anxiety. Furthermore, it was expected that this relationship would be mediated by preference for online social interactions.

Predictions for grandiose narcissism are less clear; grandiose narcissists have been found to employ SNS to engage in self-enhancement, but their prosocial nature would not necessarily predict a reliance on the Internet over real-world interactions. For this reason, study model tests also included whether the different behavior and adjustment patterns were salient for online social interactions as well as their associated outcomes. However, no directional hypotheses were developed.

3. Methods

3.1. Participants

Anonymous, self-report data were collected once from $N = 536$ late adolescent and young adult participants via Amazon Mechanical Turk (AMT; age range 18–26; mean age = 23.33, 54.9% female). AMT provides an interesting and increasingly common alternative over college student subject pools, as the AMT samples are oftentimes more representative of the general population (Berinsky, Huber, & Lenz, 2012; Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011). To ensure high quality data, the criteria for the current study were defined as follows: Previous HIT (Human Intelligence Task) approval rate 97%, and number of approved HITs higher than 50. Participants, limited to the US, received $2 for the task. Lastly, to ensure that participants did not complete the study twice, we employed the "Unique Turker" script, developed by Myle Ott. The current study was reviewed and approved by a University Institutional Review Board.

The racial/ethnic composition was as follows: 395 European Americans (73.6%), 48 African Americans (9%), 33 Asian Americans (6.2%), 31 Latinos, (5.8%), 12 American Indians (2.2%), and 1 Pacific Islander (.2%). Regarding occupation, 35.3% of participants indicated that they were currently studying at college (12.7%) or that they studied and worked (22.6%). A total of 40.5% of participants worked full-time, 13.2% worked part-time, 8.2% neither studied nor worked, and 2.8% worked several jobs.

3.2. Measures

3.2.1. Grandiose narcissism
Measured by NPI-16 scale (Ames, Rose, & Anderson, 2006). Participants selected one of two statements in a list of 16 pairs of statements (1 = narcissistic answer, 0 = non-narcissistic answer); for instance, "I prefer to be the center of attention" versus "I prefer to blend in with the crowd."

3.2.2. Vulnerable narcissism
Measured by the Hypersensitive Narcissism scale (Hendin & Cheek, 1997), which consists of 10 items rated on a Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). A sample item includes "I dislike being with a group unless I know that I am appreciated by at least one of those present."

3.2.3. Preference for online social interaction
Measured with Preference for online social interaction subscale of Generalized Problematic Internet Use 2 scale (Caplan, 2010). Participants self-reported their preference for online interactions as compared to a real-world ones by rating 3 items on a Likert-type scale (1 = completely disagree to 8 = completely agree); a sample item includes "I prefer communicating with people online rather than face-to-face."