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When social media isn't social: Friends' responsiveness to narcissists on Facebook



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ABSTRACT

Narcissists are characterized by a desire to show off and to obtain external validation from others. Research has shown that narcissists are particularly attracted to Facebook, because it allows them to self-promote. But do they receive the attention they crave on Facebook? This study examined Friends' responsiveness (operationalized as number of comments and "likes") to Facebook users' status updates, as a function of the latter's narcissism. Undergraduates ($N = 155$) filled out a narcissism scale and offered us access to their profiles, from which we extracted indicators of Friends' responsiveness. Results show that individuals high in narcissism were less likely to receive comments and "likes" in response to their status updates than individuals low in narcissism. This effect was driven by exploitativeness and entitlement, two components of narcissism. The findings extend understanding of narcissists' social interactions, an understudied topic, and elucidate some of the psychological factors that drive Facebook interaction.

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1. Introduction

Narcissism is a dynamic system of self-regulatory processes, whereby individuals with grandiose, yet vulnerable self-concepts engage in frequent attempts to solicit attention and affirmation from those around them (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). Narcissists demonstrate a preoccupation with the self, a surfeit of self-love, and a lack of empathy (Raskin & Hall, 1979). Given these socially undesirable tendencies, it is important to understand what kind of personal relationships narcissists are able to foster. Research shows that narcissists exhibit superficial charm and are successful in attracting attention and admiration, particularly when interacting with strangers (e.g., Holtzman & Strube, 2010). However, they have difficulty cultivating deep friendships, because they seek detached admiration rather than intimacy from relational partners (Campbell, 1999). While this body of research has yielded crucial insights into narcissists' social interactions, it has relied primarily on surveys (e.g., Campbell & Foster, 2002) and laboratory experiments, where narcissists interact with strangers (e.g., Barry, Chaplin, & Grafeman, 2006). One important avenue for extending this research is to observe the behavior of narcissists and of their

relationship partners in naturalistic settings, in order to increase generalizability and offset self-report biases.

Social network sites (SNSs) are one venue where behavior and interactions can be directly observed. These sites are frequently described as a haven for narcissists, because they invite users to post self-focused content (e.g., photographs, status updates) and supply a large audience of family, friends, and acquaintances to which this content can be broadcast (Twenge, 2013). Research corroborates that narcissists find SNSs appealing (Ryan & Xenos, 2011) and that they use them with the intention to elicit attention from the audience (Bergman, Fearing, Davenport, & Bergman, 2011). However, it is unclear whether narcissists are successful in garnering this attention. Previous research has focused on how narcissists behave on social media without examining the responses they receive from their social networks (e.g., Carpenter, 2012; McKinney, Kelly, & Duran, 2012; Ong et al., 2011; Skues, Williams, & Wise, 2012). Since social media is interactive, we argue that this is an important area of research and we undertake it in the present study. We focus on Facebook, currently the world's most widely used SNS.

Our study attempts to develop the literature in three respects. First, we explore narcissists' social interactions in an ecologically valid and previously unexamined venue: Facebook. Second, we inquire whether Facebook does indeed allow narcissists to get the attention they crave. Lastly, we take a granular approach to

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the construct of narcissism, by investigating whether the above-mentioned effects of narcissism are driven by some of its components (i.e., entitlement, exploitativeness).

2. Literature review

2.1. Narcissism and social interaction

In their everyday social interactions, narcissists think of other people as a means for regulating their own moods and internal states, rather than being interested in making genuine connections (Campbell, Foster, & Finkel, 2002). Narcissists' instrumental use of interpersonal interactions manifests itself as frequent solicitations of others' opinions of themselves (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001) and seeking validation and admiration from others (Campbell, 1999). Therefore, communication is a way for narcissists to obtain the external validation they need to quell feelings of self-doubt.

Interaction partners find narcissists to be more socially attractive than non-narcissists, at least initially (Paulhus, 1998). These positive responses tend to dissipate over time, as narcissists' incessant self-promotion and lack of empathy becomes apparent (e.g., Campbell & Foster, 2002; Paulhus, 1998). One laboratory experiment shows that unacquainted strangers perceived narcissists as less agreeable the more they interacted with them, suggesting that narcissists' extraverted behavior and engaging self-presentation achieved the desired goal of external validation only at first, but not over time (Paulhus, 1998).

Thus far, few studies have tested narcissists' real-world interactions. In one notable exception, researchers equipped participants with audio recorders as they went about their daily lives for four days (Holtzman, Vazire, & Mehl, 2010). Linguistic analyses of randomly recorded conversations indicated that narcissists tended to be more outgoing, yet engaged in more disagreeable behaviors, such as arguing with others, expressing anger and using foul language, than non-narcissists.

We now turn our attention to Facebook, an ideal venue for capturing narcissists' in-vivo interaction patterns with friends, family, and acquaintances. Are narcissists able to attract a chorus of attention and support from their Facebook audience? Is this one of the reasons they find Facebook appealing?

2.2. Narcissism and Friends' responsiveness on Facebook¹

Indeed, narcissists' propensity to use Facebook is well-documented. Individuals high in narcissism spend more time on Facebook and check their pages more often on a typical day than those low in narcissism (Mehdizadeh, 2010; Panek, Nardis, & Konrath, 2013). Facebook users have also been shown to score significantly higher in narcissism than non-users (Ryan & Xenos, 2011).

One explanation for narcissists' attraction toward SNSs has centered on these sites' ability to support their need for self-promotion. SNSs allow users to publicize their thoughts and to accumulate friends, behaviors ideal for self-aggrandizing. Indeed, narcissists contribute more status updates, comments, and photos to their profiles than non-narcissists (Buffardi & Campbell, 2008; Panek et al., 2013; Ryan & Xenos, 2011).

While profile postings are a means of self-expression, they also serve the purpose of attracting attention and coaxing the audience into engagement (Forest & Wood, 2012). Facebook is fundamentally a social space, where users are explicitly motivated to engage with one another (Joinson, 2008). Audience engagement on Facebook can be denoted by two important indicators: comments that

Friends write in response to a user's status updates, and "likes" (i.e., one-click signals of support), which Friends can similarly add to a user's postings. SNSs therefore create a norm whereby the frequency with which feedback is offered on a given post can be understood as having successfully gained attention from other users (see also Ellison, Vitak, Gray, & Lampe, 2014).

The Facebook algorithm ensures that Facebook users who post frequently are more likely to show up in Friends' newsfeed, which positions them well for attracting feedback from these Friends (Bucher, 2012). Indeed, according to a Pew Research Center report (Hampton, Goulet, Marlow, & Rainie, 2012), those who post more status updates receive more emotional support from Facebook friends. In addition, frequent positive Facebook updates have been shown to invite more "likes" and comments from Facebook friends (Forest & Wood, 2012). Considering that individuals tend to engage in impression management and self-promotional behaviors on Facebook (Rosenberg & Egbert, 2011; Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008), we expect that typical status updates are self-promotional and positive. Hence, we posit the following hypothesis:

H1: the number of status updates a Facebook user posts will be positively related to the number of (a) comments and (b) "likes" received from Friends.

The crucial question is whether narcissists' status updates gain more or less attention from Friends than non-narcissists'. Based on existing research demonstrating interaction partners' unfavorable opinions of narcissists after recurring interactions (Paulhus, 1998), we predict that narcissists' postings will not be met with enthusiasm from Friends, who may find their incessant self-promotion tedious or irritating. This lack of enthusiasm should manifest itself through distancing behaviors, with Friends decreasing their offering of comments and "likes" in response to narcissists' postings, rather than throughout right criticism. Indeed, research suggests that when users choose to engage with one another on Facebook, they do so in a validating and supportive way (Toma, 2013; Toma & Hancock, 2013). Hence, we expect that narcissists' efforts of attracting attention will be met with distancing behaviors:

H2: the positive relationship between the number of status updates and the number of (a) comments and (b) "likes" received from Friends will be weaker for posters with higher levels of narcissism.

2.3. The role of components of narcissism: entitlement and exploitativeness

Recent research has argued that an important avenue for theoretical development is to take a fine-grained approach to the construct of narcissism, because certain narcissism effects may actually be driven by its components (Ackerman et al., 2011). Indeed, narcissism is thought of as multi-dimensional, with several discrete components reflecting both healthy (i.e., self-sufficiency, authoritativeness) and unhealthy behaviors (i.e., entitlement, exhibitionism) (e.g., Raskin & Terry, 1988). Research pinpoints to entitlement (i.e., believing that one deserves the best) and exploitativeness (i.e., taking advantage of others) as two components that are "more interpersonally disruptive" than the others (Reidy, Zeichner, Foster, & Martinez, 2008, p. 866). Those who score high in exploitativeness have been shown to control and take advantage of others (Konrath, Corneille, Bushman, & Luminet, 2013), see relational partners as a way to achieve objectives, and foster non-reciprocal social interactions (Raskin & Novacek, 1989; Raskin & Terry, 1988). Therefore, entitled and exploitative individuals may be particularly apt to drive relational partners away. On

¹ Following Ellison and Boyd's (2013) suggestion, we refer to Facebook connections as Friends.

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