

But First, Let Me Take a Selfie:

The Impacts of Social Media on Narcissism

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### **Abstract**

The current literature review discusses how narcissism can manifest through the use of social media. Due to the advancement of communication technologies, as well as the use of social media platforms, narcissistic tendencies have become more apparent in the current generation than in any other. Social media is viewed as a trigger or enabler of narcissistic tendencies in its users. Through discussion of technological advancements, generation gaps, self-presentation and recent research, connections are displayed between social media networking and narcissism. The review shows that while there have been numerous attempts to explain the connection between social media and narcissism, there remain many gaps still needing to be filled. The review ends with a discussion and directions for future research.

## **But First, Let Me Take a Selfie:**

### **The Impacts of Social Media on Narcissism**

During the past decade the use of social media has manifested into an integral part of modern society (Singh & Bostick 2012). It is known that some social networking websites, such as Facebook, have more users than most countries have people. While many would argue the positive aspects of social media networking, such as the ease of communication for example, it has become clear that the use of networking websites is sometimes related to a series of negative repercussions (Brooks, 2015). In fact, researchers have found that our obsession with social media is becoming less about connecting with others and more about vanity, egocentricity and self-promotion. As the popularity of social networking continues to rise, researchers are becoming increasingly aware of its users mental wellbeing. More specifically there has been emphasis placed on narcissistic tendencies that seem to be emerging, possibly as a consequence of social media usage (Brydon, 2010).

### **Narcissism**

The term narcissism is said to have roots dating back to ancient Greek mythology. The tale is of a young man named Narcissus whom as the story tells, fell in love with his own image that was reflected in a pool of water. Today, narcissism takes on a similar meaning and generally refers to a pathological or grandiose feelings of the self that are typically characterized by arrogance, self-absorption, entitlement, and reactivity to criticism (Zeigler-Hill & Jordan, 2013). Over the past decade, there has been an increase in the use of the term in both clinical as well as societal settings. Currently, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-5) classifies the abnormal trait under Narcissistic Personality Disorder, otherwise known as NPD. NPD is listed

in the DSM-5 as one of the ten clinically recognized personality disorders. However, NPD is diagnosed as a severe mental disorder that requires treatment from specialized professionals (Pincus & Lukowitsky, 2010) and for this reason the term narcissism, throughout this paper, will refer to those who may display narcissistic characteristics such as grandiose feelings of intelligence, attractiveness, or entitlement, (Buffardi & Campbell, 2008) but do not necessarily have a mental illness. While interest in narcissism has generally thought to be based in disciplines such as clinical or social psychology, other fields have begun to take notice of the unique personality trait. Some of these fields include criminology, political science and evolutionary psychology (Zeigler-Hill & Jordan, 2013). This paper attempts to connect current psychological research to determine if there is a connection between the use of social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter and the emergence of narcissistic tendencies in its users.

It is important to note that this paper does not aim to blame the use of social networking platforms for the development of narcissistic tendencies. Rather, it attempts to highlight that narcissistic tendencies can be triggered/enabled through the use of social media. Therefore, the assumption is that while everybody has the ability to display narcissistic tendencies, people who take part in social media networking are more likely to display these traits than those who do not. It is also important to note that not everybody who uses social media will display narcissistic traits.

While it is evident that the current millennial generation is more involved with technology than ever before, there remains much controversy over technology's impact on user personality. Some would argue that social media has become a way for people to open up and portray their 'true selves' and thus what some see as narcissism, others simply see as expressions

of individuality that could not be communicated before. Others theorize that people whom take part in social media networking inherently possess stronger narcissistic traits than those who do not take part. These points will be discussed in greater detail later.

### **Growth of Technology**

Over the past twenty years technology and social media platforms have caught fire. While computers and the internet can be dated back as early as the 1960's it has only been within the last ten to Technology and thus the accessibility of social networking platforms have since become a worldwide pandemic that is at the fingertips of millions. Technology has come a long way from beepers, landlines and dial up internet. Instead there is a new world of cellphones, laptops and tablets that do everything from sending texts, to streaming live video and listening to voice commands. With the growth of technology has come a growth in the various types of social networking websites. Today, the most popular websites and apps include Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram and are preceded by hundreds of others including Snap Chat, Pinterest, Youtube, Vine and Tumblr, just to name a few. According to Quandt and Pape (2010) the lives of media users in post-industrial countries have changed considerably. Major technological companies have turned devices into digital hubs for homes. Other technological advancements such as Xbox's, DVD's, CD's, Ipod's, Tablets, and E-Readers have also adapted the idea of the digital hub (Quandt & Pape, 2010).

Technology has also become more affordable and thus more accessible to the general public. While the devices themselves may often be considered expensive in today's standards, they are still gaining popularity daily. Today, Apple's newest iPhone can sell at as much as eight hundred dollars. The Pew Internet project states that as of 2014 90% of adult American's own

cell phones (2015). Statistics Canada also notes that the use of mobile devices such as smart phones has increased from 53% in 2012 to 60% in 2013 (Stats Canada). Major corporations profit from introducing new products yearly and thus it becomes the need of the consumer to have the newest and latest technology. With the prevalence of technology and thus social media platforms, it is evident that there are many opportunities for narcissistic traits to be brought to the forefront. As more technology becomes readily available every year, there are more opportunities there are for young children and adults alike to gain accesses.

### **Millennial Gaps**

It does not take long for one to notice that there is an immense generation gap in the use of technology and social media networking websites. One might hypothesize that if you were to give a 60 year old and 4 year an identical tablet and ask them to complete the same task, the 60 year old would have much better odds. Speaking from personal experience I have become alarmingly aware that in actuality, the 3 year old is more likely to complete the task with ease and in a much quicker sequence than the 60 year old. This immense difference in technological ability can be attributed to what is called the generation Y gap. This generation, otherwise known as generation Y, is known as those whom are born after 1978 and before 1994. Generation Y are typically seen as the first generation to adapt to technological advancements that previously did not exist (Miskec, 2005).

Generation Y was born during the same time that technology was rapidly changing and developing. As generation Y began to grow, so did the availability, popularity and variation of technology (Twenge, 2014). The timing of the new paradigm which started with basic mobile communication, quickly boomed into a widespread interest in social media networking in the

early 2000's. A longitudinal study found that the generation gap between the adoption of technology into everyday life between younger and older Americans is widening. They state that this generation gap of technological ability is fueled by generation Y's rapid amalgamation of mobile and social behaviors (Forrester, 2010). The study looked at a large pool of ages ranging from age 18 to 30 (Gen Y) to ages 45 to 54 (Young Boomers) all the way up to 66 and older (seniors). They found that generation Y outperform baby boomers and seniors on almost everything technology related. The report also concludes that the digital attitudes and behaviors that Gen Y and Gen X are developing now will forever follow them and will only be further manifested in the generations that are too follow them. (Forrester, 2010). It is evident through this longitudinal study that there is a clear generation gap in the use of technology. One would hypothesize then that there is also a generation gap in displays of narcissistic traits in generation Y than in any other generation, and this will only continue with each coming generation. Another study was conducted with a sample of 218 undergraduate students. The students were given asked to complete a self-report that measured their overall relationship with Facebook. More specifically time spent using Facebook, meaningfulness associated with Facebook use, frequency and meaningfulness of status updates as well as relationships that are formed on Facebook. They were also given self-report measures on self-esteem and narcissism. The findings of the study concluded that people whom have more friends on Facebook are more likely to be narcissistic while those with less friends are less likely to be narcissistic (Schwartz, 2010). Thus, those who have a large number of friends and are avid social networking users are more likely to be narcissistic, and Generation Y is stronger in these characteristics than any other generation.

### **Self-Presentation on Social Media**

The way in which a person portrays themselves on social media can be connected to levels of narcissistic traits. Self-presentation is extremely important for those whom display narcissistic tendencies (Kapidzic, 2013). With the aid of modern technological tools, anybody can edit their photographs to make them look of the highest quality. The user also controls anything that they write, like or share on their social media platforms. The user's ability to control all aspects of their "page" allows them to display only their best and most "attractive" self. Often social media networking sites are used as a projector for all things "exciting" in a person's life (Ong et al., 2013). It is thought that in offline or face-to-face social interactions, individuals are careful to present, monitor, and manage the self. This is done to maintain and ensure a smooth flow of interactions (Schlenker & Wowra, 2003 as cited in Michikyan, 2014). The article also states that self-presentation can be viewed as the attempt to create, modify, or maintain a certain self-image in the presence of an audience (Brown, 2007 as cited in Michikyan, 2014). Thus, if a user presents themselves efficiently, they will receive adequate praise from their followers. This notion of praise contributes to the feelings of self-worth displayed by the users (Ong et al., 2011).

While one would hypothesize that narcissistic individuals are the ones who strive for popularity and perfect self-presentation, it has become evident that even those who do not display narcissistic traits also desire attention on social media. When users receive likes or comments it attributes to a temporary ego-boost (Taylor, 2003). Take for example, over the past couple of years the invasion of the selfie phenomenon. Not only did the trend take off almost instantly, the slang term itself has now found its way permanently into the English dictionary, further defining American's connection with technology (Brown, 2014). The selfie was

developed by social media users as a further extension of ones online identity. Traditionally self-portraits were used to glorify a person of power such as royalty or persons of high governed status (Saltz, 2014).

Not only do social media users aim to present their best self to their online community, they also strive for popularity amongst their networking friend groups. The amount of “likes” or “comments” that a person’s photo or status may receive signifies the popularity of the individual. Therefore narcissistic traits in social media users are brought forth when individuals begin competing for popularity.

While some would argue that the use of social media platforms has a definite impact on narcissistic tendencies in its users, others would argue that this is not necessarily the case. There is plenty of literature that suggests that social networks help users communicate by giving them the ability to keep in touch with family and friends. According to Pempek and Yermolayeva social networking sites provide an easy, accessible way to interact with peers and gather feedback. Social networking websites as a form of connection are significant as they are available and accessible almost all the time. The tools associated with social networking website also make communication even easier to accomplish. These communications and relationships can help to facilitate a sense of identity as well as intimate relationships either friendly or romantic (Pempek & Yermolayeva, 2009).

As mentioned above researchers may argue that social media has become a way for people to open up and portray their ‘true selves’ or begin to develop self-concepts. As a result, what some see as narcissism others simply see as expressions of individuality that could not be communicated before the introduction of technology. According to Pack adolescents often use social media platforms to display their identities, self-disclose, communicate with peers, or

receive feedback and validation concerning intimate and non-intimate social relationships. This use of social networking helps to allow adolescents to begin to develop a sense of self (Pack, 2015).

Others may theorize that people whom take part in social media networking inherently possess stronger narcissistic traits than those who do not take part. In many cases, grandiose narcissists do believe they are superior. However, on the other side of the spectrum vulnerable narcissism reflects a defensive and insecure grandiosity that obscures feelings of inadequacy, incompetence, and negative affect (Miller et. al., 2011). This type of narcissism can also be created and enabled by social media sites deriving from the rejection from their peers.

### **Opposing Research, Future Research & Prevention**

Despite the dramatic increase in the attention given to narcissism, there are still important issues that need to be addressed by scholars interested in this construct. The first issue that has become clear is that there is a lack of research looking at narcissism in relation to social media throughout different cultures. As mentioned above, Americans are experiencing a massive generation gap in the use of technology as well as an influx of new accessible technology yearly. Therefore, the assumption is that due to these factors users in Westernized cultures such as the United States and Canada are at higher risk of displaying narcissistic tendencies. With millions of users worldwide, research should be taken one step future to include multiple countries and settings.

According to the American Psychological Association there has yet to be a definitive study of narcissism. Thus, there has yet to be research done that directly states whether a nationally representative sample of teens from the 1970s scores lower on narcissism than teens

today. Thus, while we are aware of the generation gap in technological ability there has been no solid research that has been able to determine a definite difference between narcissistic tendencies in the past compared to the present.

Another issue that persists with the current research on narcissism and social media is that most of the research is based upon samples of American students (Buffardi & Campbell, 2008). Often the samples are fairly limited in size, and are overtly convenient. It is also a possibility that students who may take part in these studies could be inherently more narcissistic than those who do not take part. Therefore it is difficult to differentiate between narcissistic tendencies that are a product of innate traits rather than social media usage.

It is evident that regardless of whether the belief is that narcissism is a consequence of social media or not, early intervention is likely the best solution for any problem that can arise as a result of social media usage (Barry 2009). Throughout the literature I have come across several different theories and findings that attempt to explain narcissistic tendencies. While each holds merit, it is clear that with the emergence and growth of technology, social networking is one push that should be carefully considered. While it is difficult to abstain from the use of social media as it is such a huge part of our society, monitoring time that especially young children and adolescents spend on social networking websites will go a far way. Twenge and Campbell (2009) state that in today's society we teach our children that you have to love yourself before you can love someone else. While there has been emphasis lately on self-esteem and self-worth especially in young adolescents, we must be careful not to cross the thin line into narcissism. Teaching others to be able to see the signs of narcissistic traits emerging on

their own walls is the best way to reduce the impact of social media before it has the ability to manifest into a bigger issue.

### **Conclusion**

This review provided evidence that narcissistic tendencies can be viewed as a consequence of social media networking. The review also reveals that our current research is still somewhat fragmented and may lack findings and data detrimental to better understand the connection between narcissism and social media usage. Through the discussion of the growth and accessibility of technology, the vast generation gap in technological ability, and the ways in which people strive to present themselves through social media, it has become clear that there is cause for concern. This review did not, however, make connections that can conclusively prove that narcissistic traits are an automatic result of social networking. As mentioned above communications and relationships can help to facilitate a sense of identity as well as intimate relationships either friendly or romantic (Pempek & Yermolayeva, 2009). Because technology and social networking has become such a huge part of everyday life for many people, it is important to make sure that relationships developed using these platforms are healthy and prosperous.

Findings that include data from different countries, and demographic variables are needed so researchers can further span their knowledge and make connections across cultures. It is clear that with the ever changing technological society that we live in, now is the time to take scientific research one step further and integrate items and control variables from previous studies into new and even stronger research designs and to expand these designs to multiple countries and demographic groups. With even more

technological advances taking place daily, it is important for researchers to dig deep into this topic in hopes of making changes for future generations.

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