Social Media and Narcissism: Models of Narcissism and Effects on Individuals

Louka Jackson

Communication and Marketing, Ontario Tech University Canada

ABSTRACT

Narcissism has been associated with the discussion of social media for at least a decade. Social media has been viewed as a prime setting for narcissistic grandiosity, and the growth of social media has been potentially linked to increasing cultural manifestations of narcissism. The birth of social media into our culture is something that has drastically altered the communication patterns of human behavior. At times, social networking is a constant barrage of opinions and ideas being formulated on the World Wide Web that in turn could trigger a response of feedback from a viewer. This can be done in an attempt to gain popularity and attention from the people that we interact with online. There are different associations with narcissistic personality disorder and has with social media.
Keywords: Narcissism, Internet, Social media, Model, Self-esteem.

INTRODUCTION

The use of social media has markedly increased over the past few years. The number of users of online social networking sites (SNSs) worldwide stood at approximately 2.46 billion in 2017, and it is estimated that there will be around 3.09 billion social media users around the globe by the end of 2021. In October 2019, Facebook (FB) alone had 2.45 billion monthly active users. Instagram (IG) has recently surpassed 1 billion monthly active users, the vast majority of whom are using it on a daily basis.

Social networking sites (SNSs) such as Facebook or Twitter have become an important part of the lives of hundreds of millions of users worldwide. Researchers and journalists have argued that the popularity of SNSs is connected to users' narcissism and that social networking behavior reflects narcissistic tendencies [1] [2] [3]. However, the existence and the boundary conditions of the link between SNSs use and narcissism is a matter of debate. Whereas some empirical studies found support for a positive relationship between narcissism and social networking behaviour other studies found mixed results or even negative effects.

Narcissism is characterized by an inflated sense of the self and self-entitlement. Two distinct, albeit related forms of narcissism are documented [4] [5]: *Grandiose narcissism* involves a sense of self-importance, uniqueness, dominance, and grandiosity. *Vulnerable narcissism* is characterized by insecurity, interpersonal hypersensitivity, and social withdrawal. Individuals with a pronounced grandiose narcissism perceive themselves as gifted, remarkable, and successful, and individuals high in grandiose narcissism engage in active self-presentation. These individuals need others in order to demonstrate their high and superior qualities and achievements.

Narcissists' high self-esteem is rather unstable and narcissists are more likely to react aggressively when they are faced with threats to their embellished self-concepts. Cultural influences are considered to play a substantial role in the development and maintenance of a narcissistic self. Initial studies that compared narcissism in different world regions suggest that narcissism is more prevalent in Western cultures (USA and to a lesser extent Europe) than in Eastern cultures [6] [7] [8] [9]. Some researchers

further identified an increase in narcissism across time, whereas others found few support for generational changes in narcissism.

Connection Between Narcissism and Social Media

Differences in narcissism across regions and time have been connected to the prevalent media culture, which is considered to reflect and shape individuals' narcissism. In many cultures and world regions, the engagement in SNSs has become an immensely popular pastime activity. Recent data from national surveys suggest that nearly 79% of all Internet users in the United States are active in SNSs. Since the early days, concerns have been raised that Facebook is a playground that promotes narcissistic tendencies by encouraging users to present themselves frequently and in most positive ways. Indeed, SNSs entail particular features of communication that differ from offline communication, and that might suit narcissistic tendencies.

First, SNSs provide easy access to a large number of other individuals. Users have the opportunity to send self-related information to a large audience and to receive feedback about oneself and information about others. Second, users can select the information they reveal about themselves [10]. They can use pictures and words to communicate success and superiority (thereby ignoring incidents that do not fit their embellished self-concept). Third, the asynchronicity of communication on SNSs gives users the opportunity to craft their self-presentations meticulously.

The first study on the relationship between SNSs use and narcissism showed that users' self-reported grandiose narcissism was significantly related to the quantity of their social interactions (a composite measure of number of friends and number of wall posts) but not to the quantity of information listed in the "about self" section. Moreover, the researchers rated the extent of self-promoting content (mainly self-promotion in pictures and quotes) on the participants' Facebook pages and correlated these ratings with self-reported grandiose narcissism. Several Facebook content indicators such as self-promoting quotes yielded a positive relationship with self-reported narcissism, whereas others (e.g., self-promoting pictures) did not. These results suggest that narcissists seem to be particularly attracted to activities that reinforce their sense of self-importance and provide the means to present themselves favorably to others [11] [12]. They further strive for a large audience by gathering a large number of Facebook friends and craft frequent status updates that reflect their grandiose self-image.

A sizeable research on the link between SNSs and narcissism was conducted, paralleled by substantial media coverage on the topic. To date the available research is spread through different disciplines and remains somewhat inconclusive: Whereas many studies have supported the notion of a positive relationship between grandiose narcissism and the number of contacts on SNSs or even reversed relationships. Similarly, whereas some narrative reviews in the field tend to emphasize the narcissism-SNSs link, others assess the connection to be non-established [13].

Models of Narcissism and Social Media

There are different models for conceptualizing narcissism in social media [14]. These models are, of course, not the only ways to approach the topic but will hopefully provide some suggestions for intrepid researchers. These are meant to spur thinking beyond the standard trait model – narcissism as a trait is associated with social media use – by looking across levels of analysis, from the individual to the network to the culture. There is nothing wrong with the standard trait model – especially when used with an eye toward construct validation – but additional models can be helpful.

Expanded Trait Model

The trait model focuses on the link between narcissism and social media. The goal of the expanded trait model is to take the additional step to ground narcissism in the more basic traits and use that to explain narcissism/social media

relationship. For example, there is an easy case to be made that the aspects of narcissism related to extraversion should be important for social media connections [15].

There are several basic models that can be used to better understand narcissism. The most obvious of these is the Big Five model, where narcissism seems to be grounded primarily in (low) agreeableness, extraversion (for grandiose narcissism) and neuroticism (for vulnerable narcissism). Researchers might also want to use more expansive variants of the Big Five that can offer more precision [16]. These include the HEXACO model with six factors (including an honesty/ humility factor that is not well captured by Big Five measures like the BFI. For more detail, a ten aspects model that divides each to the Big Five into two aspects could be used, or even examining the Big Five at the facet level using a tool like the NEO with 30 facets. This approach in particular provides a very nuanced view of narcissism.

The other direction is to ground narcissism and social media into a two factor model. Several useful two factor models are available [17]. These include the big two meta-traits of *plasticity* (extraversion plus openness) and *stability* (conscientiousness plus agreeableness minus neuroticism) based in a cybernetic trait model. These Big Two have provided a useful description of social media use. A similar approach that focuses on social behavior in the interpersonal circumplex, with axes of agency/communion, power/love, extraversion/agreeableness, dominance/affiliation, etc. depending on the version used. This approach has been useful for modeling narcissism [18].

A final approach is to ground narcissism and social media in basic approach and avoidance motivations. There are several approaches to conceptualizing these basic drives, with behavioral activation (e.g., pleasure and reward seeking) and behavioral inhibition (e.g., pain or risk avoidance) being the most established in the literature as the BIS/BAS model.

Narcissistic Lens Model

A narcissistic lens model approach for understanding narcissism and social media focuses on the specific aspects of social media that are predicted by narcissism and the cues observers use to detect narcissism from social media. The metaphor of a lens for conceptualizing the importance of cues or traces (e.g., social media content) mediating the link between an individual's traits (e.g., narcissism) and observer's perceptions of narcissism originated in the work of [19], so these are sometimes referred to as Brunswikian lens models. Importantly, the cues used can be false or invalid which raises the possibility for training. So, for example, narcissism might predict several aspects of social media use, such as self-promotional images or number of connections. Observers might detect narcissism modestly from the social media, but use a combination of valid cues (e.g., self-promoting photo) and invalid cues (e.g., the use of "I" in the text).

Researchers have used this lens model approach in many instances as noted earlier, including studying the perception of personality from bedrooms, appearance, and Facebook. The challenge in this work is extracting the specific cues from the social media site or other observable data (e.g., thin slices) [20]. These data often takes both objective data (e.g., counting friends on a Facebook page) and less objective data (e.g., trained observer judgments of certain aspects of the page such as the profile picture when isolated from other page content). But the results can yield a great deal of insight.

Social Media as Self-regulation Model

The Social Media as Self-regulation Model (SMSM) focuses on the use of social media for self-regulation. Self-regulation is typically conceptualized as narcissistic self-enhancement or self-protection. Self-enhancement is arguably grounded in approach motivation and self-protection in avoidance motivation [21] [22] [23] [24]. Self-enhancement is about actively seeking opportunities to enhance social status or self-esteem and actively confronting those who try to lower the

narcissist's status or esteem; self-protection is about avoiding potential threats to the self-concept or self-esteem (i.e., ego threats). Self-enhancement is associated with grandiose narcissism and self-protection with vulnerable narcissism. But these ideas have not been fully explored or agreed upon in the field. The SMSM predicts that narcissistic self-enhancement (and self-protection) should be part of a dynamic and recursive process. So, for example, a grandiose narcissist posts an attractive selfie on Instagram (Narcissism-> social media), this selfie is liked and positively commented on by the narcissist's followers which, in turn, further bolsters the narcissist's positive self-views [25].

This recursive process makes sense theoretically, but the dynamic nature of this process has rarely been studied in full. The field is filled with correlational work showing the link between narcissism and social media. There is little longitudinal work showing that narcissism predicts social media, nor that social media use reinforces or bolsters narcissism. Furthermore, there have been few efforts to test causal claims via experimental methods by, for example, manipulating narcissism or self-esteem threat and measuring social media use, or manipulating social media responses (e.g., follower comments or likes) to see if these causally impact narcissism. As a result, the SMSM is currently a primarily heuristic model. It makes intuitive sense, and pieces of it have been tested, but the complete dynamic and recursive aspects of the model need much more research [26].

Social Network Models

Another theoretical approach to understanding narcissism in social media is to examine narcissism within egocentric or sociocentric networks. The existing work suggests that in real life social networks grandiose narcissism is associated with network centrality. This is consistent with the reliable finding that grandiose narcissists have more friends or followers on social media [27]. What is missing, however, is a good model on narcissism in computer-mediated social networks. These data would give a good deal of insight into how narcissism is functioning in the space of the social network – are narcissistic individuals central? Is that centrality driven by narcissists' actively building these networks, or by others connecting with the narcissists? How active are these networks? And how stable is this centrality?

What is most exciting is the prospect of watching these networks change over time. On the one hand, grandiose narcissists could play a crucial role in building social networks. Social media without narcissists would be blander and narcissistic self-promotion might be a driver of social network use and build out [28]. On the other hand, narcissistic self-promotion may grow dull or off-putting over time, and narcissists' social networks might show high turn-over in membership or high rates of "muting" (i.e., having the narcissists' posts removed from friends' information feeds without the narcissists knowing). Social network models of narcissism and social media are, in our opinion, one of the most exciting areas for empirical and theoretical growth.

Effect of Social Media on Self-esteem

Social media has been shown to have significant effects on the self-esteem of its users. Psychologists have extensively studied the need to belong, and some postulate that social media provides a convenient way to fit in with others. Belonging to a group encourages the development of collective self-esteem which is described by social psychologists as the "aspect of the individuals' self-concept which derives from their knowledge of their membership in a social group together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership". In that respect, social media use could arguably increase self-esteem levels [29].

However, several studies have shown that social media uses increases narcissism and negatively affects self-esteem. Certain traits have been found to be correlated with social media use including extraversion and unconscientiousness;

these traits are often connected to narcissistic behavior [30]. In one study, researchers found that narcissism was the highest predictor of social media activity out of all of the factors studied which indicates that narcissistic behavior and social media use are strongly correlated. In another study using undergraduate participants, those with higher levels of narcissism were more active on social media. Narcissists tend to prefer shallow relationships, and social media provides a method of obtaining hundreds or thousands of superficial "friends." In addition, social media profiles allow the user to create an inflated, grandiose self-image that aligns with a narcissistic viewpoint [31].

Another factor of interaction with others is the inherent need to compare oneself to one's peers. Self-comparisons are helpful in many daily tasks including dealing with emotions, making decisions, and receiving ideas from others. Social comparisons are either upward or downward; in the former case, a person compares him/herself to others whom they perceive as superior, and in the latter case, a person compares him/herself to others who they perceive as inferior [32] [33] [34]. Social media widens the circle of social comparison – instead of comparing oneself to those physically near, one can compare oneself to people from around the globe. In addition, self-comparisons become even more troubling because social media often promotes self-image inflation and distortion in order to impress other users of social media. In a study where subjects were exposed to profiles designed to facilitate upward social comparisons, subjects were found to have lower self-esteem.

CONCLUSION

Social media have changed the world in massive and still poorly understood ways. It contributes to narcissism which has played an important role in this process at the individual, network and cultural level. We are almost a decade into trying to understand this process and now have some replicable findings for grandiose narcissism, some useful theoretical models and approaches and some hints about ways to move forward. It will be remarkable to see how this space looks in another decade.

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