

A Study on Facebook as a Platform for Narcissism

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Narcissism on Facebook

“What’s on your mind?” says the grey box on the top of the Facebook homepage. If you’re one of the 206.9 million global Facebook users, the answer is obvious: you’re thinking about who to connect with on the most popular social networking site in the world (“Led by Facebook ...” 2010). One hundred and forty-two thousand and fifty-two Americans were new to Facebook this year – an increase of 82 percent since late 2008. Individuals spend nearly seven hours on Facebook a month, accounting for 67 percent of all social media users worldwide (“Facebook Users ...”; “Led by Facebook ...” 2010). But what do they do for these seven hours a month? Facebook users, adhering to a postmodern mindset, use the social networking site as a self-centered image-enhancer – a platform for narcissism.¹

This study looks at the relationship between narcissism and the Facebook status – how often it is updated and what it says. It attempts find Facebook’s role within the postmodern mindset of the time, that the personal narrative is the more important that any others.

Review of Literature

Postmodernism and an Introduction to Facebook

Ed Shane (2001) argues that one must understand the context of a postmodern society before addressing the topic of media narcissism. To see how media plays a role in our culture, one must first know what it means to be part of a postmodern society:

¹ As defined in a study called “Accuracy and Bias in Self-Perception: Individual Differences in Self-Enhancement and the Role of Narcissism,” narcissism is “self-admiration that is characterized by tendencies toward grandiose ideas, fantasized talents, exhibitionism, and defensiveness in response to criticism; and by interpersonal relations characterized by feelings of entitlement, exploitativeness, and lack of empathy” (John & Robins, 1994, p. 210).

1. In a postmodern society, “the society itself is a social construction² of reality.”
Everything that defines people is refined versions of earlier products.
2. People view collective ideas as truth over an absolute authority – be it God or constitutions – and those beliefs can change.
3. Thus, all areas of society desire to know individual feelings and opinions (i.e. public polls) and adjusting them (i.e. propaganda).
4. Life is viewed as Story, and people are the characters the plot revolves around. (Shane, 2001, pp. 120-121)

Modern thought, which is characterized by the use of external standards, reigned prior to this. For instance, the baby boomers, who were born in the wake of television, used persons in the media as standards to model after. Actresses on the big and small screen have showed women how to dress themselves, how much to weigh, how to look young. Cosmetic surgeries are especially high among boomers, because of their view of media personalities as a standard to strive for. The current generation, however, does not view media stars as the standard. This generation, the millennials, in the wake of postmodernism, looks inward, expecting others to follow their pattern. Millennials do not strive for cosmetic perfection like the boomers, but rely on their own imperfect, dysfunctional selves as the standard. “Our stories change us from ‘the different’ to ‘the standard,’” writes Shane. “Others have to measure up to us. If they don’t, no matter” (Shane, 2001, pp. 138-141).

Shane calls this the “mythologization of me”: a focus on what *I* am doing right now with little regard to past or future generations. America finds itself in a culture that is very self-centric,

² Social constructionism says that all ideas, even common sense, are derived from social interactions (“Social constructionism encyclopedia topics,” n.d.).

creating its own sense of reality (Shane, 2001, p. 138). Christopher Lasch in his book *The Culture of Narcissism* writes:

Overexposure to manufactured illusions soon destroys [Millennials'] representational power. The illusion of reality dissolves, not in a heightened sense of reality as we might expect, but in a remarkable indifference to reality. This indifference betrays the erosion of the capacity to take any interest in anything outside the self. (Shane, 2001; p. 138)

Entertainment used to be something external, via a television show, movie, novel or magazine. Now, media is very much internal. "We used to watch other people's performances as our entertainment," said Shane. "Now we are consumed with our own" (Shane, 2001, p. 122). The birth of electronic media allowed for "individual control," letting Americans create their own stories. They hold tightly to our stories as individualists. Mass media allowed for homogeneity; electronic media (via the Internet) "allow us to see ourselves more closely, more clearly, and more separately." Web sites know preferences and individual tastes (i.e. Amazon.com's "More Items to Consider"). "There's an appeal to the sense of self, to the person you perceive yourself to be," based on previous buys and glances on the site (Shane, 2001, p. 120). Between 2005 and 2008, Internet domain names beginning with the word *my* ("myAOL," "My Yahoo," etc.) have tripled. "Using *my* creates the impression that the company is interested in your personal opinion – like so much of our culture, it's all about me," says Jean M. Twenge, Ph.D. and W. Keith Campbell, Ph.D. in *The Narcissistic Epidemic* (Twenge & Campbell, 2009, p. 108). So not only can one see how narcissism is being played out in mediums like television and movies – an issue for the baby boomers – but how narcissism is being revealed in the medium most prevalent among millennials: the Internet.

Facebook as a Platform for Narcissism

Facebook, the largest social networking Web site, acts as breeding ground for narcissism (“Led by Facebook ...” 2010; Buffardi & Campbell, 2008, p. 1304). Social networking pages act as “feedback loops” which encourage users to promote themselves. (Twenge and Campbell argue that the names of social networking sites expose such agendas: “MySpace,” “Facebook,” “YouTube: Broadcast *Yourself*.”) “The structure of the [social networking] sites rewards the skills of the narcissist, such as self-promotion ... and having the most friends,” write Twenge and Campbell (Twenge & Campbell, 2009, pp. 108-110). These structural elements turn Facebook from a community of peers to a “community of me” (Shane, 2001, p. 118).

Facebook and Relationships

Facebook creates an environment in which superficial relationships can cultivate. In a study by Coyle and Vaughn (2008), Facebook users were asked why they utilize Facebook. Forty-one percent of respondents use Facebook to keep in touch with friends, but not used for serious conversations. The site is used especially for sharing trivial information – not “emotional content” – and when there is no need for immediate response. The study showed that students use social networking sites to maintain friendships, but not as the central form of socialization. “Social networking may be convenient for retaining contact when time and distance are issues, but it does not replace voice calls and face-to-face communication,” the study says (Coyle & Vaughn, 2008, p. 15). This is because social networking sites are founded “on the base of superficial ‘friendships’ with many individuals and ‘sound byte’ driven communication between friends (i.e. *wallposts*),” according to a study called “Narcissism and Social Networking Web Sites.” Deep friendships cannot flourish digitally as they can in real life.

The community that Facebook creates – full of shallow communication – sets up the ideal environment for narcissism. Narcissists do not dwell on intimacy or keeping long-term friendships, but are good at starting friendships and use those relationships to look better. Narcissists function well in the context of shallow (as opposed to emotionally deep and committed) relationships,” according to the study “Narcissism and Social Networking Web Sites.” Consider the large number of “Facebook friends” an individual has compared to their in-person relationships: the numbers are vastly different. The strictly Internet friends do not have the same pull as a friend one would see regularly in person (Buffardi & Campbell, 2008, p. 1304). “Being someone’s friend on Facebook does not necessarily mean that you have a deep, emotionally close relationship with him or her,” says Twenge and Campbell. “It’s more a sign of how many people you ‘know,’ or how many people want to say they ‘know’ you.” The number of Facebook friends one has is a status symbol, contributing to a person’s heightened sense of self (Twenge & Campbell, 2009, p. 110).

Personalizing Facebook and the Results Thereof

Another reason why Facebook creates an ideal “breeding ground” for narcissism is because it can be personalized. Facebook profiles ask for predetermined information (i.e. favorite music, favorite movies, relationship status, religion, interests, etc.), maintaining a “highly controlled environment.” It puts users in control of what he or she shows to other Facebook users. He or she can make Facebook into personal PR, by choosing flattering photos and favoring “cool” music and movies (Buffardi & Campbell, 2008, p. 1304). Thus, pages become long lists of “likes, dislikes, opinions,” etc. (Twenge & Campbell, 2009, p. 108). But consequentially, Facebook users cultivate relationships for popularity or prestige developing false images of themselves, which is a product of narcissism. Referring back to the definition of

narcissism, which stated that narcissism is self-admiration characterized by “tendencies toward grandiose ideas” boasting of talents, etc., one can see how these ideas correlate; Facebook is a platform to “post” those feelings of entitlement (John & Robins, 1994, p. 210). In fact, one study shows that most students who use Facebook do not regard privacy settings in order to keep strangers from viewing their page. They want to be known by the rest of the world, not just those they have established relationships with. Therefore, students post images and statuses to boost their image. According to a study by Peluchette and Karl (2010), there are two different types of images one wants to portray on Facebook: a shocking/sexy image or a professional image (Peluchette & Karl, 2010, pp. 31-32). Note that both types of image presentations have self-centric motives; both have the main goal of impressing others.

The first type of Facebook user tends to assume that no one but their peers view their page. But even when they do know that those outside their social network can see their profile (i.e. future employers, parents, professors, etc.), popularity takes reign over privacy. Adolescents in particular care more about the benefits of revealing certain information on Facebook than the consequences. “The need to belong has been shown to correlate positively with the willingness to join a social network site,” according to a study on information disclosure on Facebook. “For young adults, the need to be part of their social group and the need for popularity are key elements in their lives” (Christofides, Muise, & Desmarais, 2009, p. 342). Social networking sites give individuals the ability to be seen; having their presence known by many individuals is a form of popularity. These popularity-seeking users will post photographs of themselves drinking, partying and engaging in other reckless behavior. These users are also the ones that post particularly sensual profile pictures, often altered to make them look more attractive than in real life (Buffardi & Campbell, 2008, p. 1311). Others use Facebook to improve their image for

future employers. According media reports, Facebook profiles have been used by employers to determine if a job candidate is suitable (Christofides, Muise, & Desmarais, 2009, p. 341).³ These Facebook users are conscious about what they put online, but they still desire a similar level of popularity and prestige bred by narcissism (Buffardi & Campbell, 2008, p. 1305).

The Role of the Status

As a product of the postmodern era, social networking Web sites like Facebook have acted as a platform for narcissism, allowing individuals to live out their self-centric stories online with everyone watching. All of these studies have looked at how images and profile questionnaires have contributed to narcissism, but no study has looked at the Facebook status which answers the aforementioned question, “What’s on your mind?” as it relates to narcissism. This too may be an indication of how the millennials act narcissistic on social networking sites.

Methodology

This study looks at how narcissism is manifested on Facebook by specifically analyzing the language used in statuses. The methodology relies on a consistent definition of narcissism. The one maintained in this study is narcissism as “self-admiration that is characterized by tendencies toward grandiose ideas, fantasized talents, exhibitionism, and defensiveness in response to criticism; and by interpersonal relations characterized by feelings of entitlement, exploitativeness, and lack of empathy,” according to a study on narcissism by O. P. John and R. W. Robins (1994).

The 50 participants studied were chosen at random. Every tenth Facebook friend of a female millennial (the researcher) accounted for 25 of the studied. Every tenth Facebook friend

³ Courts have even used Facebook profiles have also been used to verify criminals’ alibis (Christofides, Muise, & Desmarais, 2009, p. 341)!

of a female baby-boomer (the researcher's mother) accounted for the other 25, to diversify. The status updates the week of March 31 to April 7, 2010 were counted then analyzed for textual evidence of narcissism.

The way a status is presented determines whether or not it is narcissistic. If the status is relaying information, then it is not narcissistic. If it is meant to draw communication from others (i.e. praise or pity) then it is. Therefore, any boasting or bragging was counted as narcissistic. Any countdowns to events (i.e. birthdays, parties, other writs of passage) were as well. The questions asked while analyzing the statuses are as follows:

1. Is this status meant to enhance one's image?
2. Does this status brag about an activity or purchase?
3. Does this status solicit pity?
4. Is there a countdown to an event?

Different demographics were studied to see if it affects one's percentage of narcissistic statuses. The categories are as follows:

1. Age: (millennials, busters, boomers)
2. Sex
3. Religiosity (religious preference listed or not) ⁴

Finally, the study also analyzed the number of status updates in the week. Each demographic's number of status updates was compared with the average number of updates of all participants. In this study, frequency is also an indicator of narcissism ("exploitativeness"; 1994). The number of narcissistic statuses to un-narcissistic was also taken into account.

⁴ Those who listed a religion or used spiritual rhetoric (i.e. "follower of Christ," "grace") as their religious preference, they were considered religious. Those who had no answer, put "atheist" or "agnostic" or something snarky like the "Chicago Cubs" were grouped with the non-religious.

Findings

One-hundred and ninety statuses were pulled from the 50 profiles observed in this study. Sixty-one statuses were considered narcissistic according to the questions presented in the methodology, accounting for 32 percent of all statuses. Four percent of all statuses contained self-enhancement language, 22 percent bragging, six percent solicited pity, and no statuses contained event countdowns. Those statuses that could have fallen under two categories were put into just one for accuracy’s sake. (See Appendix A for more details.)

Table I: Breakdown of Narcissistic Statuses

<i>Guidelines</i>	<i>Number of Statuses</i>	<i>Percentage of Total</i>
<i>Self-Enhancement</i>	8	4%
<i>Bragging</i>	42	22%
<i>Solicit Pity</i>	11	6%
<i>Countdown</i>	0	0%
Total	61	32%

n=190 statuses

Twenty-four profiles studied belonged to millennials (born between 1981 and 2000) with 93 updates, nine belonged to busters (1965-1980) with 58 updates, and 17 belonged to baby boomers (1944-1965) with 39 updates. Millennials updated their statuses 3.875 times a week on average, busters updated about twice as much (6.444), and boomers at 2.294 times. Millennials had a total of 25 narcissistic statuses, accounting for 27 percent of all their status updates. Busters had 19 narcissistic statuses (33 percent), and boomers had 17 (44 percent).

Table II: Number of Statuses Updated and Percentage of Narcissistic Statuses According to Age

<i>Generation</i>	<i>Total # of Participants</i>	<i>Total # Status Updates</i>	<i>Average # Status Updates Per Person</i>	<i>Total # of Narcissistic Statuses</i>	<i>% of Narcissistic Statuses</i>
<i>Millennials</i>	24	93	3.875	25	27%
<i>Busters</i>	9	58	6.444	19	33%
<i>Boomers</i>	17	39	2.294	17	44%
Total	50	190	3.800	61	32%

n = 190 statuses

Twelve profiles belonged to men and 38 belonged to women. Men updated their statuses a total of 53 times, at an average of 4.417 times a week per person. Men had 11 narcissistic statuses accounting for 21 percent of their statuses. Women updated their statuses a total of 137 times, with an average of 3.605 times a week. Women had 50 narcissistic statuses accounting for 36 percent of all female status updates.

Table III: *Number of Statuses Updated and Number of Narcissistic Statuses According to Gender*

<i>Gender</i>	<i>Total # of Participants</i>	<i>Total # Status Updates</i>	<i>Average # Status Updates Per Person</i>	<i>Total # of Narcissistic Statuses</i>	<i>% of Narcissistic Statuses</i>
<i>Male</i>	12	53	4.417	11	21%
<i>Female</i>	38	137	3.605	50	36%
Total	50	190	3.800	61	32%

n = 190 statuses

This study also looked at religion's role in narcissism on Facebook. Twenty-six participants listed themselves as religious on their Facebook profiles, with a total of 89 status updates averaging 3.423 times per person. Twenty-nine of these "religious" profiles were narcissistic, accounting for 33 percent of all "religious" statuses. Twenty-four participants did not list themselves as religious, with a total of 101 status updates averaging 4.208 times a week. Thirty-two of those statuses were narcissistic, accounting for 32 percent of all "non-religious" statuses.

Table IV: *Number of Statuses Updated and Number of Narcissistic Statuses According to Religiosity*

<i>Religious Preference</i>	<i>Total # of Participants</i>	<i>Total # Status Updates</i>	<i>Average # Status Updates Per Person</i>	<i>Total # of Narcissistic Statuses</i>	<i>% of Narcissistic Statuses</i>
<i>Male</i>	26	89	3.423	29	33%
<i>Female</i>	24	101	4.208	32	32%
Total	50	190	3.800	61	32%

n = 190 statuses

Analysis

The data shows that the percentage of narcissistic statuses does not increase or decrease among different ages, genders, or religious preference. The average percentage of narcissistic statuses is 32 percent, and every demographic – except for baby boomers – were within five percent of that average. Busters updated the most with an average of 6.444 times a week, nearly twice as much as millennials. This may be because some busters used external means of updating their statuses – TweetDeck or Twitter’s “selected tweets” – contributing to this increase. This is consistent with polls that conclude the majority of Twitter users are between the ages of 25 and 54, accounting for 64 percent of new Twitter users in July 2009 (“Teens Don’t Tweet ...” 2009). Facebook invites all generations to be narcissistic, even though boomers grew up in the reign of modern thought, because social networking sites are products of the postmodern mindset. As for gender and religiosity, being male or female, religious or non-religious did not affect an individual’s narcissism or number of status updates. Narcissism is not linked to age, gender, or religiosity.

Though nearly one-third of all statuses were narcissistic, it’s hard to say whether that proves or disproves the theory that Facebook is a platform for narcissism. Is there a limit to how much a person can talk about herself before it becomes narcissistic? John and Robins call narcissism “a tendency toward” self-enhancement and bragging – is 32 percent considered excessive (1994, p. 210)? To answer the thesis in a more conservative way, if *any* narcissism appears on Facebook – even just one narcissistic post out of the bunch – then it would be enough to say the theory’s valid, if not proven.

Conclusion

This study shows that the number of narcissistic statuses someone posts does not solely speak to the issue of narcissism. Only by keeping both content and frequency in mind can one determine if another is truly using Facebook as a platform for narcissism. If a person does not write any narcissistic Facebook statuses in a week, but updates ten or fifteen times within that week, that may be more telling than a person bragging once.

Narcissism is a part of the postmodern culture, not something that can be determined by what someone says in their Facebook status or how many times they update. The study showed that yes, narcissism plays a role on Facebook, but to call someone narcissistic solely on their Facebook would be unfair. It can be a platform for narcissism, but it has everything to do with the culture of the time.

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Appendix A

Table V: *Examples of Facebook statuses according to their appropriate subcategory. Underlines indicate why they fit into each subcategory.*

<i>Self-Enhancement</i>	<p><i>Female Boomer</i> <u>My neighbor told me she loves to see me because I'm always smiling.</u> It's interesting that my positive personality touches those that don't know me well. :) Happy Monday folks! Yeah, you too, Jenn. Lol...</p>
<i>Bragging</i>	<p><i>Female Boomer</i> I carefully checked through the beautiful basket that the Easter Bunny left at my door. It was filled with <u>yummy chocolate eggs, chocolate bunnies, M&Ms, pink and yellow Peeps</u> and some beautiful flowers...but there wasn't a puppy! :>(I guess I'm going to have to go and find one for myself. HAPPY EASTER, everyone!!!</p> <p><i>Female Millennial</i> <u>gets to see Matt soon!!!!</u> (As in two weeks.) ;)</p> <p><i>Male Buster</i> Nothing is on my mind. <u>But my belly is full from Easter dinner.</u></p>
<i>Solicit Pity</i>	<p><i>Female Boomer</i> The white flag is out. I surrender. <u>The world wins today.</u></p> <p><i>Female Buster</i> The alarm not going off when it's supposed to <u>is never a good way to start the day.</u></p>