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Narcissism, extraversion and adolescents' self-presentation on Facebook

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ABSTRACT

Social Networking Sites (e.g. Facebook), which afford self-presentation, are gaining popularity amongst adolescents. This study examined the relationship of narcissism and extraversion on adolescents' self-presentation in four Facebook profile features (profile picture, status updates, social network size, photo count), as reported by Grade 7–Grade 9 adolescents. After accounting for extraversion, narcissism predicted features presenting self-generated content (profile picture rating, status update frequency), but not features presenting system-generated content (social network size, photo count).

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1. Introduction

Modern computer-mediated communication (CMC) tools, such as Social Networking Sites (SNS), have seamlessly combined email, instant messaging, website creation, blogging and multimedia content sharing (Livingstone, 2008). The proliferation of SNS, such as Facebook (www.facebook.com), has also been matched with an expanding body of research. One area of research has shown that self-reported personality traits are good predictors of SNS usage and are reflected in personal profiles or webpages on SNS (e.g. Correa, Hinsley, & de Zuniga, 2010; Kramer & Winter, 2008). Amongst the Big Five personality traits, extraversion has been consistently found to be the most important personality trait in predicting SNS usage (e.g. Correa et al., 2010). Media attention has also linked self-presentation on social media with the dispositional trait of narcissism. A recent cross-temporal meta-analysis found narcissism levels in American college students to have risen over the past two decades (Twenge, Konrath, Foster, Campbell, & Bushman, 2008). Indeed, the opportunities for self-promotion afforded by current technological trends vastly exceed that allowed by traditional media, but it is likely that the rise in narcissism has influenced the ways individuals use technology, for this rise in narcissism had mostly occurred before such technology was extensively adopted (Twenge et al., 2008).

Interestingly, narcissists have also been well-documented as highly extraverted individuals (e.g. Vazire, Naumann, Rentfrow, & Gosling, 2008). Yet, limited existing literature has examined both extraversion and narcissism in the context of SNS. Also, despite the rising popularity of SNS amongst adolescents, there has been limited research sampling this population. The goal of the present study is to examine both personality traits of extraversion and narcissism as manifested in certain features of adolescents' Facebook profiles. Existing literature on SNS and the personality traits of extraversion and narcissism will first be reviewed in relation to self-presentational behavior.

1.1. Social Networking Sites and self-presentation

Among the various psychological phenomena that SNS presents, exhibitionistic or self-presentational behavior is especially interesting. Given that users of SNS have almost full control over informational disclosure, they can be more strategic in managing self-presentation, as compared to traditional face-to-face interactions (Bibby, 2008; Buffardi & Campbell, 2008; Kramer & Winter, 2008). Moreover, given the social exposure that SNS affords, enhancement of self-image should be expected with online self-presentation (Walther, 2007). Nevertheless, users need to address broad audiences through self-presentation on their SNS profiles, making stable personality traits key predictors of self-presentation on SNS (Kramer & Winter, 2008).

There are various features available on SNS profiles that contribute to an individual's overall online portrait (Tong, Van

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Der Heide, Langwell, & Walther, 2008). Some of these present content generated by the profile owner (e.g. profile picture, status updates), while others present content generated by friends (e.g. wall-posts), or by the system (e.g. number of friends, number of photos). On Facebook, users typically select a profile picture to display on his or her profile page. Below the profile picture, the 'View Photos' link indicates the photo count that one has been tagged or identified by oneself or by others as being present in the photo, while the 'Friends' box displays one's total number of friends added on Facebook. There is also a 'wall' on the profile page, where friends can post short messages. Users can post messages or 'status updates' on their own walls as frequently as they would like to. Amongst the various features, the profile picture has been posited as the most important means for self-presentation because it represents the individual in the online platform, appearing in search results and alongside every turn of online interaction such as every written wall-post (Buffardi & Campbell, 2008; Siibak, 2009; Strano, 2008). Moreover, photos can be constructed and refined to conceal flaws (Walther, 2007). Expectedly, both college and adolescent SNS users were found to choose profile pictures in which they perceive to appear more physically attractive (Siibak, 2009; Strano, 2008). The present study will examine four Facebook profile features – profile picture, status updates, social network size and photo count – of which the former two features present self-generated content while the latter two present system-generated content.

1.2. Social Networking Sites and adolescents

SNS have gained prominence amongst adolescents since the minimum membership age has been lowered to 13 years old, with more than 70% of America's teens below the age of 17 reportedly visiting SNS (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010). In Singapore, the local media has reported that 24% of 7–14 year olds visit SNS (Channel News Asia, 2009). Given that adolescents are typically concerned with peer acceptance, physical appearance and the impressions they convey, they are receptive to SNS because these sites present platforms to connect to their peers without adult surveillance and to facilitate identity construction and experimentation within a social context (Livingstone, 2008).

1.3. Extraversion and Social Networking Sites

Extraversion relates to the preference to seek social interaction (e.g. Costa & McCrae, 1992b). There are two competing hypotheses on the relationship between extraversion and CMC usage (e.g. Correa et al., 2010; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007). The 'social compensation' hypothesis proposes that introverts gain more from CMC usage as CMC platforms compensate for their relatively weaker social skills. Conversely, the 'rich-get-richer' hypothesis posits that extraverts gain more from CMC usage as their offline sociability is transferred to CMC platforms. Recently, Correa et al. (2010) found extraversion to be positively related to social media usage and to be the most important predictor of SNS usage for emerging adults. Extraverts also made more contact to friends and broadcasted their events on SNS (Bibby, 2008), suggesting that extraverts self-disclose through much self-generated content. In addition, extraversion has been related to larger social networks on SNS (Tong et al., 2008), possibly because an individual's SNS friends are often first made offline (Valkenburg & Peter, 2007).

In addition to support for the 'rich-get-richer' hypothesis, some extent of the 'social compensation' hypothesis is also supported (e.g. Orr et al., 2009). Although introverts had fewer online friends and were less likely to self-disclose online as compared to extraverts, introverts found SNS more appealing than traditional communication methods and spent more time using SNS than extraverts did (e.g. Orr et al., 2009; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007). Taken together, although extraverts self-disclose more on SNS than introverts do, it is likely that extraverts find SNS as appealing as offline social interactions and do not use SNS as substitutes to their offline social interaction. Such is consistent with general findings that extraverts do not use Internet communication tools as substitutes to offline social interaction (Amiel & Sargent, 2004).

1.4. Narcissism and Social Networking Sites

Narcissism is characterized by a highly inflated, positive but unrealistic self-concept, a lack of interest in forming strong interpersonal relationships, and an engagement in self-regulatory strategies to affirm the positive self-views (Campbell & Foster, 2007). Narcissists are exhibitionistic, attention-seeking, and are acutely concerned about their physical appearances (Vazire et al., 2008). Expectedly, narcissists overestimate their attractiveness (Bleske-Rechek, Remiker, & Baker, 2008; Gabriel, Critelli, & Ee, 1994), though they do put in effort to look well-groomed and fashionable (Vazire et al., 2008). These strategies help affirm their positive illusions of their own physical attractiveness (Bleske-Rechek et al., 2008; Gabriel et al., 1994). Narcissists are also often skilled with dealing with new social settings and with starting new relationships, though they mostly seek relationships which can enhance their status and positive self-views (Campbell & Foster, 2007).

Recent literature has documented the manifestation of narcissism in SNS usage. Buffardi and Campbell (2008), in their pioneering study, proposed that SNS provide excellent platforms for narcissistic self-regulation, because SNS allow almost full control over self-presentation and afford the ability to maintain large social network bases of superficial relationships, which narcissists would be especially drawn to. As expected, narcissists had more Facebook friends and wall-posts, and had profile pictures that are rated by others to be more physically attractive and more self-promoting than the profile pictures of non-narcissists. In this regard, the researchers speculate that narcissists may have selected more attractive photos of themselves to affirm their inflated beliefs. Finally, in examining both narcissism and extraversion in relation to rationales for Facebook usage, Bibby (2008) found narcissism to predict usage of Facebook to occupy time, to pursue leisure interests, and to interact with romantic interests, over and above extraversion, suggesting that narcissists enjoy the exhibitionistic nature of SNS.

1.5. The present study

The key research question was to examine the relationship of narcissism and extraversion on adolescents' self-presentation in four Facebook profile features. Given that SNS such as Facebook afford remarkable self-presentational opportunities that fulfill the self-regulatory needs of narcissists, it is likely that such sites tremendously appeal to narcissists, whereas extraverts are likely to rely as much on other forms of social communication as they do on SNS. Thus, it is expected that narcissism should be able to predict the Facebook variables over and above extraversion. The following four hypotheses have been formulated:

H1: Narcissism will predict higher self-ratings of Facebook profile pictures over and above extraversion.
H2: Narcissism will predict a higher frequency of updating Facebook status over and above extraversion.
H3: Narcissism will predict having more Facebook friends over and above extraversion.
H4: Narcissism will predict having more Facebook photos over and above extraversion.

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