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Narcissism and implicit attention seeking: Evidence from linguistic analyses of social networking and online presentation

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ABSTRACT

Two studies examined how narcissism, a personality trait marked by self-promotion, vanity, and grandiosity, related to how people communicate information about themselves online. We predicted that narcissists communicate in ways that draw attention to themselves. Specifically, we predicted that narcissistic people who used relatively few first-person singular pronouns (e.g., "I," and "me") would display more self-promoting and sexy images of themselves on their Facebook.com profile pages (Study 1) and would use more profane and aggressive words in an online self-descriptive task (Study 2). Both studies supported this hypothesis. Implications for narcissism and online communication research are discussed.

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Each day, people have the capacity to communicate with others through internet connections. With the advent and growing popularity of social networking websites such as Facebook.com and MySpace.com, people can rapidly share information about themselves with hundreds, if not thousands, of others. The prevalence of online communication has even seeped into modern vernacular, with people saying that they will "Facebook" their friends or that they will "blog" about their recent vacation. What is less clear, however, is how the words people use to describe themselves online offer a window into motivationally relevant ways personality expresses itself on the World Wide Web. The current research examined how narcissism, a personality trait marked by self-promotion, vanity, and grandiosity, relates to how people communicate information about themselves online.

We expected that narcissists communicate in ways that draw attention to themselves. Specifically, we predicted that narcissistic people who used relatively few first-person singular pronouns would display more self-promoting and sexy images of themselves on their Facebook.com profiles (Study 1) and would use more profane and aggressive words in an online self-descriptive task (Study 2). We turn now to formulate our hypotheses.

1. Narcissism in virtual and non-virtual environments

Narcissism refers to an inflated and grandiose self-concept. Narcissistic people have elevated levels of agentic traits such as intelligence, power, and dominance (e.g., Brown & Zeigler-Hill, 2004; Campbell, Rudich, & Sedikides, 2002). In terms of the five-factor model (FFM), narcissists score highly on extraversion and low on agreeableness (Miller & Campbell, 2008). Sub-clinical narcissists have good mental health, which is due in part to their high levels of self-esteem (Sedikides, Rudich, Gregg, Kumashiro, & Rusbult, 2004). The link between narcissism and agentic feelings is deeply ingrained. On both explicit and implicit measures, narcissists endorse elevated levels of agency (Campbell, Bosson, Goheen, Lakey, & Kernis, 2007; Campbell, Rudich, & Sedikides, 2002).

Within the context of interpersonal relationships, narcissists use their relationship partners as a means of regulating their positive self-views. This can take the form of selecting attractive romantic partners who can increase positive perceptions of the self (Campbell, 1999), or performing well on difficult tasks when doing so is linked to gaining public admiration (Wallace & Baumeister, 2002). Narcissists are also especially adept at attracting relationship partners. At early stages of relationship formation, they are interesting, exciting, confident, and entertaining (Foster, Shrira, & Campbell, 2006; Oltmanns, Friedman, Fiedler, & Turkheimer, 2004). As their relationships progress, however, narcissists show less warmth and care for relationship partners, engage in game

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playing and infidelity, and are liked less by their partners compared to people low in narcissism (e.g., Campbell, Foster, & Finkel, 2002; Schmitt & Buss, 2001).

A recent study of narcissism in social networking profile pages dovetailed nicely with previous findings investigating narcissism in non-virtual environments (Buffardi & Campbell, 2008). On Facebook.com profile web pages, narcissism related to higher levels of social activity and greater self-promoting themes in posted content. There was agreement between independent observers' ratings of how narcissistic web page owners were and how narcissistic web page owners rated themselves. Thus, narcissism manifests itself similarly in virtual and non-virtual environments.

2. Narcissists' word use and esteem regulation

Narcissists use a number of different routes to boost their self-esteem and, thereby, maintain an overly positive and inflated sense of self. Important to the present research, one method by which narcissists regulate their esteem is through communication patterns. Narcissists brag about their accomplishments in conversation (Buss & Chiodo, 1991) and use more first-person singular pronouns during impromptu monologues (Raskin & Shaw, 1988). First-person pronoun use is one particularly useful variable to examine with respect to narcissism because pronouns offer rich information regarding how people relate to others, especially how people distinguish themselves from others. Thus, using first-person singular pronouns is one means by which narcissists draw attention to themselves.

Narcissists' word use on the internet is one focus of this research. A growing body of research has shown that word use can provide an invaluable means of assessing cognitive, emotional, and behavioral processes (Pennebaker, Mehl, & Niederhoffer, 2003). Like Raskin and Shaw (1988), we use the quantity of first-person singular pronouns used as a proxy for psychological self-importance to examine how narcissists who have used relatively few words that relate to themselves communicate in virtual environments.

3. Narcissism and implicit compensation

A crucial component of narcissism is the need to be the center of attention because doing so fulfills narcissists' goal of being agentic. When attention to the self is not forthcoming, narcissists may engage in compensatory actions to direct attention toward the self (Buss & Chiodo, 1991). The current research seeks to show that narcissists engage in behaviors online to draw attention to themselves when they have used relatively few words about themselves. Although narcissists use language to direct attention to the self more than non-narcissists (Raskin & Shaw, 1988), they may occasionally use relatively few first-person pronouns if doing so can gain them liking, status, and admiration from others. This would enable narcissists to fulfill their goal of appearing agentic (Brown & Zeigler-Hill, 2004; Campbell, Rudich, and Sedikides, 2002). Yet, because the need for narcissists to draw attention to the self is deeply ingrained in their psyche, narcissists may not be consciously aware of this implicit compensation process that occurs when they use relatively few words about themselves.

Thus, we predicted an interaction between narcissism and the number of first-person singular pronouns participants used in predicting responses that may draw attention to the self. When narcissists use relatively few first-person singular pronouns, they may seek to draw attention to themselves. In contrast, when narcissists use a larger number of first-person singular pronouns, they should not engage in responses that may result in them receiving additional attention. Because our conceptual framework suggests that responses depend on the combination of narcissism and the number of first-person singular pronouns used, we did not expect to observe reliable main effects for narcissism or first-person singular pronoun usage.

4. Present research

In the present studies, we predicted that narcissists would display a compensatory pattern through other routes. Specifically, when they did not draw attention to themselves by using first-person singular pronouns, we hypothesized that they would compensate by posting photographs and using language that would draw attention to themselves. The current research tested this hypothesis in two studies. In Study 1, we harvested information from undergraduate Facebook.com profile pages and examined whether narcissistic profile owners displayed a self-promoting and sexy photo of themselves when they had used low levels of first-person singular pronouns to describe themselves online. Study 2 extended this research to a large sample of adults who completed a measure of narcissism and a self-description task on the internet.

4.1. Study 1: Implicit compensation in Facebook profiles

Study 1 provided an initial test of the hypothesis that narcissistic people compensate for using relatively few words related to themselves by engaging in actions that may draw attention to themselves. Participants were owners of Facebook.com profile pages, which contained a section in which participants described themselves and uploaded a picture of themselves to be displayed to members of their social network. We expected narcissistic participants to display a self-promoting and sexy picture of themselves, but only when they had not used many first-person singular pronouns when describing themselves to others.

5. Method

5.1. Participants

Eighty[1] undergraduate Facebook.com owners (55 women, 25 men; age: M = 18.89 (SD = 1.03)) participated in exchange for partial course credit. All participants gave consent to have their Facebook.com pages to be used in the present research.

5.2. Materials and procedure

Owner participants arrived at the laboratory individually and then completed the narcissistic personality inventory (NPI; Raskin & Terry, 1988). The NPI had high internal reliability ($\alpha = .78$; M = 17.76, SD = 6.02, range: 5–30) and responses were summed to form a composite measure of narcissistic personality.

Next, participants logged onto Facebook.com on a lab computer and displayed their main profile page on the computer screen, which is displayed to members of the owner's social network. Once the profile page was displayed, the research assistant saved it and debriefed the participant.

Linguistic content was taken from the About Me section of the Facebook.com profile page. In this section, owners of Facebook.com pages describe themselves in any way that they desire to their social network. To analyze the linguistic content of the About Me section, we used the linguistic inquiry word count program (LIWC; Pennebaker, Booth, & Francis, 2007). The LIWC is a widely used

[1] Eighty of Buffardi and Campbell's (2008) 129 participants were included in this study because these participants included About Me sections in their Facebook.com profiles.

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