



Twitter versus Facebook: Exploring the role of narcissism in the motives and usage of different social media platforms



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ABSTRACT

The amount of research on social networking sites (SNS) and narcissism is accumulating quickly requiring greater levels of variable specification and more fine-tuned hypothesis testing to clearly determine the relationships among key variables. The current investigation examines two of the most popular SNS, Facebook and Twitter, formulating hypotheses around the specific features of each site within college and adult samples. Unlike previous research that has focused almost exclusively on SNS usage, we focused on active usage (i.e., SNS content generation) as opposed to passive usage (i.e., SNS consumption) and included reasons for usage as a potential black box in the narcissism to SNS usage relationship. Results suggest that the features of Twitter make tweeting the preferred means of active usage among narcissists in the college sample, but not the adult sample, who prefer Facebook. In fact, we found no significant direct or indirect relationship with active usage on Facebook for the college sample, calling into question popular press articles linking Millennial narcissism with Facebook use. Additionally platform differences (i.e., microblogging versus profile-based) may explain the importance of active usage on Twitter relative to Facebook. That is, with Twitter, narcissistic motives for usage all manifest through tweeting while Facebook provides other mechanisms to achieve narcissistic motives.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, the popular press has advanced the notion that social networking sites (SNS) and narcissism are tightly linked (Jayson, 2009; O'Dell, 2010). However, the research examining the relationship between narcissism and social networking has yielded modest and somewhat inconsistent findings (e.g., Bergman, Farrington, Davenport, & Bergman, 2011; Carpenter, 2012; Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2012). This line of research has looked at a number of different SNS with a variety of different populations (teenagers, college students, young adults, etc.), and these differences may account for some of the variance in the findings. Thus, recent research has taken a more definitive approach to investigating social networking behavior by making hypotheses specific to different social media platforms (Chen, 2011; Panek, Nardis, & Konrath, 2013). Consistent with this approach, the current study sought to examine the potential differential

relationships between narcissism and two highly popular, but different, SNS, Facebook and Twitter, within the context of two large and diverse samples. Further, unlike previous research that has focused almost exclusively on SNS usage, we examined reasons for usage as a potential black box in the narcissism to SNS usage relationship.

Currently, the two most popular SNS in the United States are Facebook and Twitter (eBizMBA, 2013). It is estimated that Facebook has 750 million visitors per month, while Twitter has 250 million visitors per month (eBizMBA, 2013). The usage statistics indicate growing popularity for both Twitter and Facebook, with Twitter growing significantly faster than Facebook (BCS, 2013). Twitter's recent surge makes it increasingly relevant in the discussion of narcissism. Additionally, Twitter has certain inherent characteristics that might make it more conducive to narcissistic motives and behaviors than other popular SNS, such as Facebook.

1.1. Narcissism

In this study, the term narcissism is used in reference to subclinical narcissism, a personality trait that has been demonstrated to exist at varying levels within the normal population (e.g., Emmons, 1984; Rhodewalt & Morf, 1995; Watson, Grisham,

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Trotter, & Biderman, 1984). Subclinical narcissism manifests in attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors that are similar to clinical narcissism, but to a lesser magnitude or intensity. Subclinical narcissists (hereafter referred to as “narcissists”) believe themselves to be superior, unique or special and therefore exhibit entitled behaviors and beliefs, such as demanding special treatment. This is consistent with their generally elevated self-esteem and self-concept. Ironically, this higher-than-average self-esteem is unstable and must be maintained via outside sources (Campbell, Rudich, & Sedikides, 2002; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). Although narcissists seek affirmation and praise from others, they are incapable of reciprocating due to a lack of empathic understanding (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Millon, 1996) and, in contrast, tend to exploit and use others, making deep, long-term relationships unlikely. To achieve these ends and effectively protect their inflated but fragile egos, narcissists engage in a host of behavioral strategies including exhibitionism and attention-seeking behavior (Buss & Chiodo, 1991) and dominance and competitiveness in social situations (Emmons, 1984; Raskin & Terry, 1988).

1.2. Social networking sites

A key issue plaguing current research on SNS is a lack of specification regarding the type of sites included under the umbrella of “social networking” and assumptions that variables such as personality have consistent effects across social media platforms. Such practices hinder efforts to replicate findings and make theory building difficult. Although we applaud recent efforts to be more deliberate and intentional in building hypotheses around the affordances of specific SNS (e.g., Hughes, Rowe, Batey, & Lee, 2012; Panek et al., 2013; Wilson, Gosling, & Graham, 2012), the overreliance on standard SNS “usage” variables also represents an oversimplification that should be addressed.

SNS usage has been operationalized in a number of different ways (e.g., time spent on the site, status updates, number of connections), which could help to explain the inconsistent findings with respect to personality and SNS usage. It may be more useful to clearly delineate usage as “active usage” or “passive usage”. Active usage refers to engaging with the platform as a *creator* of content (e.g., status updates, tweets, picture posts, likes, comments, etc.). Passive usage refers to engaging with the platform solely as a *consumer* of content (e.g., reading posts or tweets, viewing pictures, etc.). Broad measures of usage, such as “time spent” on the platform, confound these two types of usage. This becomes particularly relevant with respect to narcissism, as narcissists would be expected to engage in more active than passive usage due to their strong need to maintain their inflated egos and garner attention from others. This may explain previous findings of weak or nonsignificant relationships between narcissism and broad measures of SNS usage.

Passive or active usage variables, however, are insufficient in answering the questions of *why* individuals engage or do not engage in specific behaviors, and, more specifically, may not differentiate between those high in narcissism and those low in narcissism (Bergman et al., 2011). For example, some users may update their status in order to check in with friends, while other users may update their status in order to brag or self-promote. Reasons for SNS usage may play an even greater role when they are matched with SNS that have specific affordances that fit with a user’s desired end state. Within this context, the current study examines the two most popular SNS, developing hypotheses around how the features of each site might facilitate or hinder narcissistic motives.

1.2.1. Facebook

Facebook is considered the prototypical SNS (e.g., Bergman et al., 2011; Wilson et al., 2012). Facebook has a number of features

available to users including friend requests, “tagging” others, posting comments, posting pictures, and creating status updates (Tong, Van Der Heide, Langwell, & Walther, 2008) with most features facilitating interaction between a user and his or her community of friends. The size of one’s friend network is somewhat under the control of a user as he or she can send friend requests to users, and choose to accept (or not) friend requests. While users can accept or deny a request from another user, the friend request process in Facebook is a reciprocal one, where if a user accepts a request to join another’s network, that user automatically joins the requester’s network.

Previous research has routinely hypothesized and found a positive relationship between number of friends and narcissism (Bergman et al., 2011; Carpenter, 2012; Ong et al., 2011), with the rationale that having large numbers of friends would be attractive to narcissists as a measure of importance or popularity. Additionally, Facebook allows each user to post their own “status,” a personal statement updating their friends on their activities or whereabouts. Although several studies have included a “status updates” variable, findings with respect to narcissism have been inconsistent (Bergman et al., 2011; McKinney, Kelly, & Duran, 2012; Ong et al., 2011; Panek et al., 2013) and few have directly assessed the reason for users frequency of active usage such as status updates.

1.2.2. Twitter

Unlike Facebook, few empirical investigations have been conducted using Twitter (e.g., Chen, 2011; Hughes et al., 2012; McKinney et al., 2012; Panek et al., 2013). Twitter is a microblogging SNS that, at its core, is different from profile SNS like Facebook, because users do not build a full profile on Twitter. Although “conversations” can occur using Twitter, the medium is designed for one-way interactions where users “tweet” information to their contacts (i.e., post a message to Twitter that contains a maximum of 140 characters). These contacts are labeled as “followers” in Twitter rather than the more egalitarian label of “friends” in Facebook. The process by which users gain followers is different than that of Facebook and does not require the users to send or accept friend requests nor does it require that users become followers of those following them. Thus, Facebook relationships are reciprocal, while Twitter relationships are not.

Given that narcissists have an inflated self-view and engage in a variety of strategies aimed at bringing attention to themselves (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), features unique to Twitter may be more appealing to narcissists than those on sites such as Facebook. Indeed, McKinney et al. (2012) found a significant relationship between narcissism and the number of user tweets, prompting the authors to opine that Twitter might be the preferred SNS platform for narcissists, and to call for additional research. We agree, and the current study, in part, answers that call as we believe the features listed above lend themselves directly to narcissistic motives and behaviors. Thus, a positive relationship between active usage on Twitter should not be surprising and, in fact, a deeper examination of the reasons for active SNS usage and motives of SNS users should reveal additional significant relationships with narcissism. In support of this position, Bergman et al. (2011) found that although overall SNS usage and behavior may not differ for narcissists versus non-narcissists, the reasons for those behaviors can be significantly different. The present study seeks to examine both the active usage and the reasons of narcissists for using Twitter and Facebook to determine if one platform is more conducive to narcissism than the other.

1.3. Hypotheses

Consistent with theory and previous SNS research (e.g., Carpenter, 2012; DeWall, Buffardi, Bonser, & Campbell, 2011;

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