



Narcissistic power poster? On the relationship between narcissism and status updating activity on Facebook



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ABSTRACT

The pervasiveness of social networking sites and the popularity of status updates have prompted the question whether excessive online self-presentation is motivated by narcissism. The present studies assessed (1) whether this concern is shared by users of social networking sites, and (2) the actual relationship between narcissism and frequency of status updates using self- and informant reports of narcissism and an observational measure of status updating activity. Results confirmed that users of social networking sites believe that narcissism strongly predicts status updating activity. However, analyses of the actual relationship in a German and US sample yielded null-results. Using the equivalence testing approach allowed us to conclude that the effect of narcissism on status updating activity is not substantial.

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1. Introduction

The rise of the internet and especially the emergence of social networking sites have changed our ways of communication and self-expression dramatically (Bazarova, Taft, Choi, & Cosley, 2013; Weiser, 2001). With about 1.28 billion users of Facebook alone (Facebook Newsroom, 2014), it can be postulated that online self-presentation has become a “normal thing” to do (Buffardi & Campbell, 2008). While Facebook is by far the most popular social networking site world-wide (Mander, 2014), a broad range of these sites exist often tailored to a geographical region (e.g., Russia: VKontakte; China: Sina Weibo), created for a particular target group (e.g., mothers: CafeMom; researchers: ResearchGate), or focused on a specific life domain like business (e.g., Xing, LinkedIn), dating (e.g., PlentyofFish, Badoo), or traveling (e.g., CouchSurfing, WAYN).

Apart from inviting users to create and maintain a profile, many social networking sites also offer more dynamic tools for self-expression and communication (Winter et al., 2014). A very prominent example – implemented in most social networking sites – are so called status updates (Facebook’s term) or, more general, microblogs (Banerjee et al., 2009). In contrast to more traditional forms of communication like phone calls, e-mails, or text

messages, these short one-to-many messages enable and encourage users to quickly share short updates about their daily lives with a large audience, like for example, all their friends on Facebook (Manago, Taylor, & Greenfield, 2012; Ong et al., 2011). Users might then receive social feedback, that is, “likes” or comments. Around 400 million Facebook status updates created each day (Pring, 2012) clearly indicate that users enjoy the opportunity to keep their family, friends, and acquaintances posted about their thoughts, ideas, and feelings, as well as their current activity or state of mind (Banerjee et al., 2009).

Due to the popularity of status updates and the pervasiveness of social networking sites researchers started to wonder about the motivations for excessive online self-expression and raised the concern that frequent posting might be a sign of narcissism (e.g., Bergman, Fearington, Davenport, & Bergman, 2011; Carpenter, 2012; Rosen, Whaling, Rab, Carrier, & Cheever, 2013). And while there are no systematic studies on the public opinion yet, countless press articles, blog posts, and comics (e.g., Jayson, 2009; O’Dell, 2010; Rosen, 2007) provide at least anecdotal evidence that this concern is also shared by the general public (Buffardi & Campbell, 2008; McKinney, Kelly, & Duran, 2012).

Narcissism, in its subclinical conceptualization as a personality trait, is characterized by a grandiose self-view, a pronounced self-focus, strong feelings of entitlement, a need for social admiration but a lack of concern for others and hence is related to many intra- and interpersonal problems (Back, Schmukle, & Egloff, 2010; Back et al., 2013; Campbell, Rudich, & Sedikides, 2002; Morf &

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Rhodewalt, 2001). Even though subclinical narcissism is conceptualized and measured as a continuous trait (Campbell & Campbell, 2009), for the ease of exposition in the following we will use the term “narcissist” to describe people who score relatively high on measures of narcissism.

1.1. Why status updates might be attractive for narcissists?

First of all, status updates are easily accessible and instantly reach a broad audience that is invited to provide feedback in form of “likes” or comments. Therefore, status updates might cater perfectly to narcissists’ sustained need for attention and external affirmation (Bergman et al., 2011; Campbell et al., 2002). Moreover, status updates provide high-control over self-presentation because content, timing, and wording can be chosen carefully (Buffardi & Campbell, 2008; Mehdizadeh, 2010). Even after having posted the status update, it is possible to remove it as well as to censor unflattering comments – an amount of control not known in e-mail or text message communication. Thus, narcissists have several ways of ensuring that their online self-presentations reflect their overly positive self-views (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001).

Secondly, status updates are not directed towards a specific receiver but a large audience and all this audience might share is one common friend: the poster him- or herself because interconnections in Facebook friends’ lists are usually scarce (Hampton, Goulet, Marlow, & Rainie, 2012). This, as a matter of course, determines a certain self-focus of status updates. Additionally, in contrast to many other forms of communication, like for example, face-to-face communication or phone calls, there is no need to grant even a minimum amount of attention to your communication partners – it is feasible to post status updates non-stop without having to read or respond to anybody else’s post (Panek, Nardis, & Konrath, 2013). Because narcissists tend to be self-centered, egoistic, like to talk about themselves, and show a lack of empathy (Bergman et al., 2011; Buss & Chiodo, 1991), these characteristics of status updates should suit them well.

Last but not least, on social networking sites, it is common to have many “friends” or “followers” rather than just a few selected intimate friends. Narcissists are primarily interested in superficial relationships to gain admiration or to achieve status and also often fail to establish deeper and longer friendships (Back et al., 2010; Campbell & Campbell, 2009; Carlson, 2013). Hence, social networking sites might be the perfect social environment for narcissists (Bergman et al., 2011; Buffardi & Campbell, 2008).

On the other hand, status updates also have drawbacks for narcissists and it could be argued that several functions of status updates cater more to a non-narcissistic population. Firstly, narcissists might fail to receive the intended attention and affirmation if nobody comments on or “likes” their status updates. Similar to narcissists’ interpersonal problems arising in real-life long-term relationships (Back et al., 2010; Campbell & Campbell, 2009; Carlson, Vazire, & Oltmanns, 2011; Paulhus, 1998), narcissists’ status updates might be charming and pleasant in the beginning but potentially start to annoy their “friends” or followers once their arrogance and entitlement become too obvious. As a result, friends on Facebook possibly choose to give no or even negative feedback, block the status updates from being shown to them or might decide to unfriend or unfollow the narcissist. In comparison to real-life situations, the fact that status updating is easily accessible, has no constraint of time or location, and addresses a large audience at once might speed up the process of getting to know the “dark” sides of a narcissist. For the narcissistic poster this might result in a quick loss of “friends” and followers and thus, might render status updating less appealing.

Secondly, several studies point to other important functions of status updating than just self-presentation (McKinney et al.,

2012). Morris, Teevan, and Panovich (2010) reported that users often ask questions via status updates in order to gather reliable information from their social network. Seeking advice from friends and caring about their opinion would not be expected to be associated with narcissistic personality traits. Similarly, status updates are used to initiate ad hoc meetings (Barkhuus & Tashiro, 2010) and therefore potentially boost users’ social life. Non-narcissists might also turn to status updates for social support (Manago et al., 2012) maximizing their chances to reach all potentially helpful friends without investing much time. Moreover, sharing good news via status updates might just as well be seen as a way to capitalize on positive events and enhance social bonds (Gable, Reis, Impett, & Asher, 2004; Sas, Dix, Hart, & Su, 2009) rather than seeking to impress friends and followers to gain admiration. Narcissists are not very interested in maintaining relationships or investing into strong ties but status updating might be a very useful tool for just that (McKinney et al., 2012). Due to increased residential mobility, friends and family are often spread all over the country or even world (Oishi, 2010) and status updating can help to maintain a shared reality (French, Zech, Quinten & Kerschreiter, in preparation), increase feelings of connectedness (Köbler, Riedl, Vetter, Leimeister, & Krcmar, 2010), and reduce feelings of loneliness (große Deters & Mehl, 2013).

Last but not least, while it is common to include many short-term acquaintances in one’s friends list, users of social networking sites vary dramatically in their number of such friends (see e.g., Manago et al., 2012: Range: 29–1200 friends on Facebook). Hence, for some users status updating might be a way to communicate with a circle of intimate friends rather than presenting themselves to superficial acquaintances.

1.2. Empirical evidence regarding narcissism and status updating

To date, only a few studies have investigated the association between narcissism and status updating activity. Panek et al. (2013) found positive relationships between narcissism and self-reported frequency of Facebook status updates as well as tweets on Twitter both for college students and adults. Similarly, in a sample of adolescents, narcissism predicted status updating activity measured with open-ended questions over and above extraversion (Ong et al., 2011). Winter et al. (2014) also found a positive relationship between self-reported frequency of status updates and narcissism in a sample of German students. However, in another study even though posting tweets on Twitter was significantly associated with narcissism, no significant correlation with status updating activity on Facebook emerged (McKinney et al., 2012). Similarly, Bergman et al. (2011) found no significant relationship between narcissism and Facebook status updates.

Several studies did not specifically measure status updating activity but aggregated over several Facebook behaviors what renders interpretation difficult (Smock, Ellison, Lampe, & Wohn, 2011). Rosen et al. (2013) report a positive relationship between narcissism and general Facebook use which was operationalized to include behaviors like status updating, “liking”, commenting, or browsing photos. “Self-promotional behaviors”, a measure aggregating over status updating, changes of profile info or profile picture, and posting or tagging of photos of oneself were positively related to grandiose exhibitionism, a subscale of narcissism (Carpenter, 2012). Similarly, a preference for status updates was positively correlated with the subscale exhibitionism but unrelated to overall narcissism (Ryan & Xenos, 2011).

In summary, empirical evidence regarding narcissism and status updating activity is sparse and results are mixed. This warrants further assessment of the topic and our second study aimed to address two major limitations of previous research. Firstly, instead of asking participants to self-report how often they post status

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