



## “Purging my friends list. Good luck making the cut”: Perceptions of narcissism on Facebook



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### ABSTRACT

Social media sites such as Facebook are thought to act as a platform for narcissistic behavior, such as posting self-promoting status updates or attractive photos. Narcissism is identifiable via social media, and it has been associated with negative peer appraisals. This article presents three studies with undergraduate students that examined the interpersonal implications of narcissism on Facebook in light of gender and perceiver narcissism. Results indicated that hypothetical targets who posted narcissistic status updates were perceived as less likeable, less successful, and less worthy of friendship than those who posted neutral status updates. Across the three studies, perceiver narcissism and target gender had some apparent influences on ratings. Implications regarding social media behavior and the interpersonal consequences of narcissism are discussed.

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### 1. Introduction

With the growing popularity of social networking sites such as Facebook, the role of narcissism in social media behavior is drawing more attention, as such sites present a presumed avenue for showcasing egocentrism. Some researchers have speculated that narcissism has become so prevalent and problematic that it may be considered an “epidemic” (Twenge & Campbell, 2010), with social media being regarded as a contributor to (Gentile, Twenge, Freeman, & Campbell, 2012), or artifact of (Clifton, 2011), narcissism in our society. The present study sought to investigate how narcissism might be perceived by others on one particular social networking platform (i.e., Facebook).

Narcissism is characterized by grandiosity, arrogance, entitlement, vanity, and general preoccupation with appraisals from others. Paradoxically, individuals with these tendencies also may not feel that they should have to earn this praise and admiration (Raskin & Terry, 1988). Although this collection of traits may seem rather undesirable to interaction partners, the same interpersonal qualities that make the narcissistic individual aversive to others may also lend themselves to engagement in socially desirable behavior (e.g., leadership, prosocial behavior; Campbell & Campbell, 2009; Kauten & Barry, 2014).

Given the skillful manipulation that is inherent in the construct, individuals with characteristics of narcissism are generally adept at achieving their needs through short-term interpersonal relationships (Jonason, Lyons, Bethell, & Ross, 2013). Narcissists excel in interactions with others based on the positive associations between narcissism and perceived quality of interpersonal relationships, self-reliance, and a robust sense of self-esteem (Barry & Kauten, 2014; Barry & Wallace, 2010). Despite these psychosocial benefits, narcissism may also contribute to strain in one’s relationships.

#### 1.1. Narcissism and interpersonal relationships

Narcissistic individuals are believed to be particularly adept at manipulating early perceptions of interaction partners. Initially, the charm and charisma associated with narcissism serves to entice interaction and relationship partners (Young & Pinsky, 2006). Individuals with elevated levels of narcissism are easily identified (Carlson, Vazire, & Oltmanns, 2011; Lukowitsky & Pincus, 2013; Malkin, Zeigler-Hill, Barry, & Southard, 2013) by factors such as fancy or expensive clothing, self-assuredness, and humor (Back, Schmukle, & Egloff, 2010). Holtzman, Vazire, and Mehl (2010) suggest that narcissistic individuals make positive first impressions based on their extraverted and charismatic personalities, though their disagreeable traits are eventually exhibited, and relationship partners become disillusioned. Similarly, Carlson, Naumann, and Vazire (2011) and Carlson, Vazire et al. (2011) found that well-acquainted others perceive individuals

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who endorse elevated levels of narcissism less positively than do new acquaintances.

Further evidence suggests that individuals who identify themselves as having narcissistic qualities are perceived by well-acquainted peers as being aggressive (Golmaryami & Barry, 2010), even though individuals with high levels of narcissism may perceive themselves as prosocial (Kauten & Barry, 2014). Furthermore, in a sample of adolescents living together at a residential program, individuals with narcissistic tendencies were rated by peers as having an antagonistic interpersonal style (Grafeman, Barry, Marcus, & Leachman, 2015). The same study found that qualities typically associated with narcissism were easily identified by peers, suggesting that narcissism is readily apparent to interaction partners.

No clear conclusions can be drawn from previous research as to how perceptions of narcissism vary as a function of the perceiver's own narcissism. Given that narcissistic individuals are concerned with their image and regard by others, they may be ideal targets for others who are seeking a similar public persona. For example, Campbell (1999) suggested that individuals with elevated levels of narcissistic personality traits prefer partners who would enhance their status over those who are caring and kind. From this perspective, individuals with elevated levels of narcissism would seek out similar interaction partners on the basis of similarity and as a means of social currency and thus may view such partners favorably.

Alternately, narcissistic individuals may perceive similar others as a threat and may, in turn, respond with aggressive behavior to perceived threats (c.f., Bogart, Benotsch, & Pavlovic, 2004; Thomaes, Bushman, Stegge, & Olthof, 2008) based on feelings of entitlement and a desire to achieve dominance in relationships. They may particularly perceive others who present a narcissistic image as rivals. In light of these conflicting possibilities, the present study examined how narcissistic presentations are viewed on social media as a function of the perceiver's narcissism. The investigation also considered the role of gender, both of the target and the perceiver.

### 1.2. Social networking

Over the past several years, social networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, and LinkedIn have become increasingly popular. Twenge and Campbell (2010) suggest that narcissism in the U.S. culture and social networking sites relate in the sense that “narcissistic people [seek] out ways to promote themselves on the Web and those same websites [encourage] narcissism even among the more humble” (p. 107). The authors also suggest that social networking sites are not only a way for narcissistic individuals to self-promote but also encourage others to become “obsessed with other people's narcissism” (p. 110).

Twenge and Campbell (2010) propose that social networking sites reward “the skills” of the narcissist, including self-promotion, posting attractive pictures of oneself, and “having the most friends” (p. 110). Similarly, the more grandiose and entitled an individual is, the more social support he or she seeks out on social networking sites as compared to the social support he or she provides on such sites (Carpenter, 2012). Furthermore, the nature of the specific social media platform (i.e., Facebook) in the present investigation seems especially appealing to narcissistic individuals, as it allows for rather effortless relationships that are maintained via “likes” and comments on one another's posts.

Indications of narcissism on social media do not go unnoticed by other users. Buffardi and Campbell (2008) asked undergraduate participants to complete the Narcissism Personality Inventory (Raskin & Terry, 1988) and then to give permission to the

researchers and other undergraduate students to view their personal Facebook profiles. Researchers coded these pages based on objective analysis of narcissistic content (e.g., number of friends, wall posts, groups, and lines in the ‘About Me’ section), and research assistants coded the pages based on subjective analysis of self-absorbed, self-conscious, self-important, and self-promoting qualities. The authors determined that strangers were able to accurately identify narcissism on social media. According to Buffardi and Campbell (2008), greater frequency of social interaction and attractiveness of the main profile image are two of the most relevant indicators of narcissism on Facebook. Additionally, Facebook users with high levels of narcissism often use more self-referential text on the site (DeWall, Buffardi, Bonser, & Campbell, 2011). Mehdizadeh (2010) extended this discussion in a study that asked undergraduate participants to complete a series of questionnaires and for access to their Facebook pages. Based on the content of an individual's profile page, strangers were able to accurately perceive the degree to which an individual was narcissistic.

### 1.3. Present study and hypotheses

Although research has begun to examine several indicators of narcissism on Facebook as well as others' perceptions of narcissism on Facebook (Buffardi, 2011; Buffardi & Campbell, 2008; Clifton, 2011), more work is yet to be done. The present study examined whether ostensible target individuals who posted narcissistic status updates on the social networking platform were perceived as likeable and successful, as well as whether the perceiver would like to be friends with the individual who posted the status. These three particular elements were chosen based on their potential connection to narcissism and its interpersonal consequences. Specifically, we wanted to determine whether narcissistic individuals are perceived as likeable and successful in light of their abrasive attributes on the one hand and the capacity for one to mold an ideal persona online via social media on the other (Buffardi, 2011). Narcissistic individuals may also be perceived as successful due to greater visibility in high-power positions (Twenge & Campbell, 2010). Given the various realms in which narcissism has thrived, we allowed participants to define perceived successfulness on their terms. In addition, because a central element of social network sites such as Facebook is having “friends” or “following” others, we wanted to examine the apparent influence of narcissistic status updates on the perceivers' judgments about the friend-worthiness of those who posted such statements.

The secondary purposes of the study involved investigating these relations as a function of the level of narcissism reported by the perceiver and as a function of gender, both of the perceiver and the target. It has been suggested that men are more narcissistic than women when assessing non-pathological narcissism but that no gender differences are evident when examining vulnerable narcissism (Grijalva et al., 2015). Accordingly, we were interested in whether narcissistic statements would be perceived differently based on the target's gender.

It was hypothesized that, based on the negative interpersonal consequences of narcissism (c.f., Grafeman et al., 2015), targets who posted narcissistic statuses would be rated as less likeable and less successful than targets who posted neutral statuses (Hypothesis 1). Despite divergent theoretical possibilities, it was hypothesized that, based on the desire to be associated with others who may raise their social standing (Campbell, 1999), individuals who endorsed elevated levels of narcissism would rate hypothetical targets who posted narcissistic statuses in a positive light (Hypothesis 2). Gender of the perceiver and the target was examined as a potential moderator in these relations.

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