Millennials, narcissism, and social networking: What narcissists do on social networking sites and why

Shawn M. Bergman [a,*], Matthew E. Fearrington [a], Shaun W. Davenport [b], Jacqueline Z. Bergman [c]

[a] Appalachian State University, Department of Psychology, 222 Joyce Lawrence Lane, ASU Box 32109, Boone, NC 28608-2109, United States
[b] High Point University, Phillips School of Business, United States
[c] Appalachian State University, Department of Management, United States

ABSTRACT

The rise in levels of narcissism among Millennials together with the increased usage of social networking sites (SNSs) raises the question of whether there is a connection between the two. The current study examined the link between narcissism and both SNS activities and motivation for SNSs activities. Results indicated that narcissism did not relate to the amount of time spent on SNS, frequency of status updates, posting picture of others, or checking up on SNS friends. However, narcissism predicted reasons why Millennials use SNSs, such as having as many SNS friends as possible, wanting their SNS friends to know what they were doing, believing their SNS friends were interested in what they are doing, and having their SNS profiles project a positive image. Findings suggest that Millennials' general usage of SNSs is a sign of the times. While narcissists in the Millennial generation do not appear to use SNSs more often than non-narcissists, their reasons for doing so are different.

© 2010 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Recent research supports the often-made assertion that the Millennial generation, those in college from the early 2000s to late 2010s, are more narcissistic than previous generations (Twenge, Konrath, Foster, Campbell, & Bushman, 2008a, 2008b). This increase in narcissism has occurred alongside the increased usage of social networking sites (SNSs) such as MySpace and Facebook, which have now amassed over 100 million users among them (Kwon & Wen, 2010). SNSs appear to be particularly popular among Millennials, with over 90% of college students having Facebook profiles (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). The concern is that SNSs may reinforce, or even create, narcissistic tendencies because they offer a convenient outlet to display vanity, self-promote, and accumulate large numbers of superficial friendships (Buffardi & Campbell, 2008), all of which are characteristics of narcissism (American Psychiatric Association, 2000).

The rise in levels of narcissism among Millennials in combination with the increase in the usage of SNSs raises the question of whether there is a connection between narcissism and SNS usage. As such, the current study sought to determine if the SNS activities of Millennials are related to narcissism. We also went beyond SNS behaviors and examined self-reported reasons why Millennials engage in certain SNS activities, what they hope to accomplish through these activities, and if these self-reported motives are related to narcissism.

1.1. Narcissism

Subclinical narcissism is a personality trait that normal, healthy individuals possess to varying degrees, and numerous studies demonstrate the validity of narcissism as a normal personality trait (e.g., Emmons, 1987; Rhodewalt & Morf, 1995; Watson, Grisham, Trotter, & Biderman, 1984). Subclinical narcissism appears quite similar to its clinical counterpart, but exists to a lesser degree. Thus, like clinical narcissists, subclinical narcissists (referred to as "narcissists" from this point) hold an inflated view of themselves, believe they are special and unique, and expect special treatment from others while believing they owe little or nothing in return (American Psychiatric Association, 2000; Millon, 1996). Narcissists lack empathy and have few, if any, close relationships, yet they strongly desire social contact, as others serve as their primary source of admiration and attention. Because narcissists are unable to regulate their own self-esteem, they must rely on external sources for affirmation (Campbell, Rudich, & Sedikides, 2002; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). Thus, narcissists engage in a variety of strategies aimed to maintain their inflated egos, such as exhibitionism and attention-seeking behavior (Buss & Chiodo, 1991), and dominance and competitiveness in social situations (Emmons, 1984; Raskin & Terry, 1988).

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 828 262 7087; fax: +1 828 262 2974.
E-mail address: bergmans@appstate.edu (S.M. Bergman).

1.2. Social networking sites

SNSs are some of the most popular online websites, and their popularity is continuing to grow. A prime example of this growth is Facebook, which reported a 153% increase in unique visitors from 2007 to 2008 (comScore, 2008). The increased popularity of SNSs could be due, in part, to the fact that SNSs "allow users to become the producers and stars of their productions as they create their own profiles and observe those of others" (Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009, p. 237). Indeed, users invite others to become their friends and can choose to become friends with other users as they please. SNS users can also be the "stars" of their profiles and let others know what they are doing and thinking by updating their status and/or posting pictures.

Previous research has primarily examined how broad individual differences such as demographic characteristics (Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008), the Five-Factor Model (FFM) of personality (Correa, Hinsley, & Zuniga, 2010; Ross et al., 2009), self-esteem (Steinfield, Ellison, & Lampe, 2008), and emotional intelligence (Dong, Urista, & Gundrum, 2008) contribute to the use of SNSs. These studies have found small to modest relationships with SNS usage. Thus, there remains a great deal of unanswered questions pertaining to the factors that influence SNS behaviors (Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008; Ross et al., 2009).

One possible reason for these modest effect sizes could be that the constructs examined were too broad (e.g., FFM, general self-esteem) to predict specific SNS behaviors (Ross et al., 2009). As such, the current study examined a more specific characteristic, narcissism, and its relationship with certain SNS activities.

In addition to examining SNS behavior, we examined the relationship between narcissism and self-reported SNS motives to deepen our understanding of what Millennials are hoping to accomplish on SNSs. Previous research has examined various potential SNS uses and gratifications, such as identity formation (Valkenburg, Peter, & Schouten, 2006; Zhao et al., 2008), impression management (Kramer & Winter, 2008), building social capital (Ellison et al., 2007; Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009), and entertainment (Park, Kee, & Venezuela, 2009; Pempek et al., 2009) but has had limited success in identifying why users engage in certain online behaviors. On the whole, these studies have not directly examined the relationships among specific personality characteristics, such as narcissism, and motivations for SNS behavior. The current study begins to address that void by examining how narcissism relates to the self-report reasons for Millennials' engagement in SNS behaviors.

1.3. Narcissism and social networking sites

Narcissists crave the attention and approval of others and seek out external sources of admiration and attention to help maintain their self-esteem (Campbell et al., 2002; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). SNSs provide an ideal outlet for narcissists to satisfy these needs as SNSs allow users to receive relational benefits from a large number of loose or "weak tie" connections (Ellison et al., 2007; Steinfield et al., 2008; Valenzuela et al., 2009). These online relationships should appeal to narcissists, who are typically unable or unwilling to form deep or "strong tie" connections that require emotional investments, such as face-to-face relationships and friendships (Campbell, 1999; Campbell & Foster, 2002).

Additionally, one way by which narcissists maintain their inflated self-views is to show dominance and competitiveness in social situations (Emmons, 1984; Raskin & Terry, 1988). It would not be surprising to find that narcissists proudly claim high numbers of SNS friends as it will affirm their grandiosity and create a large online audience for their posts and tweets. Narcissists perhaps even see gaining more SNS friends than others as a form of competition.

These positions are supported by previous research that found narcissism predicted higher levels of social activity in online communities (Buffardi & Campbell, 2008).

Hypothesis 1: Narcissism will be positively related to the importance placed on having as many SNS friends as possible, but will not be related to a concern with making as many face-to-face friends as possible.

Hypothesis 2: Narcissism will be positively related to the reported number of SNS friends.

SNSs provide easy opportunities for narcissists to engage in the exhibitionism and attention-seeking behaviors that partly define this personality trait, and which help narcissists maintain their grandiose self-images (Buss & Chiodo, 1991). Additionally, given narcissists' proclivity to have an inflated view of themselves and to believe that they are unique and special (American Psychiatric Association, 2000; Millon, 1996), it is reasonable to assume that narcissists want their SNS friends to know what they are doing, believe that their SNS friends are truly interested in what they are doing, and will work to keep the focus of their profile on themselves by posting pictures that feature only themselves and not others.

Hypothesis 3: Narcissism will be positively related to Millennials' desire to want their SNS friends to know what they are doing.

Hypothesis 4: Narcissism will be positively related to Millennials' belief that their SNS friends are interested in what they are doing.

Hypothesis 5: Narcissism will be positively related to the frequency of SNS status updates.

Hypothesis 6: Narcissism will be positively related to the extent to which Millennials post pictures which only feature themselves, but negatively related to the extent to which they post pictures that feature others.

Narcissists tend to be self-focused and self-important (Carson, Butcher, & Coleman, 1988), and to believe that they deserve special treatment from others yet need to give little or nothing in return (Millon, 1996). Thus, it is reasonable to expect that narcissists will spend little time checking on their friends and instead spend the majority of their SNS time on self-focused activities (i.e., status updates and posting pictures of themselves).

Hypothesis 7: Narcissism will be negatively related to the amount of time spent reading status updates and looking at pictures posted by their friends.

Previous research has suggested that SNS users utilize their profiles to manage their social identity by presenting online selves that are appealing exaggerations of their true selves (Zhao et al., 2008). This idealized self-presentation is easily accomplished via SNSs as users have complete control of their profile content. Because narcissists possess grandiose self-views and tend toward vanity (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001; Raskin & Terry, 1988), narcissists will likely believe that it is critical that their profile presents an extremely positive and attractive image to match their own inflated self-view. This view is supported by previous research that found narcissism to be positively related to posting more self-promoting content on SNSs (Buffardi & Campbell, 2008).

Hypothesis 8: Narcissism will be positively related to the importance that Millennials place on portraying a positive image of themselves through their SNS profile.