

Narcissism and social networking

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Social networks are an ideal stage for narcissists to showcase themselves. Accordingly, a lot of people with narcissistic traits are drawn to these platforms as a new study conducted by psychologists from Würzburg and Bamberg shows.

Social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter have become an important part of the lives of many people worldwide. Around two billion users were active on Facebook at the end of 2016; 500 million regularly post photos on Instagram and more than 300 million communicate via Twitter.

Various studies conducted over the past years have investigated to what extent the use of [social media](#) is associated with narcissistic tendencies - with contradictory results. Some studies supported a positive relationship between the use of Facebook, Twitter and the likes, whereas others confirmed only weak or even negative effects.

Most comprehensive meta-analysis so far

Fresh findings are now presented by scientists from the Leibniz Institute for Educational Trajectories Bamberg and the University of Würzburg. They were able to show that there is a weak to moderate link between a certain form of [narcissism](#) and social media activity. When taking a differentiated look at specific forms of behaviour or at the participants' cultural background, the effect is even pronounced in some cases.

The study is managed by Professor Markus Appel, who holds the Chair of Media Communication at the University of Würzburg, and Dr. Timo Gnambs, head of the Educational Measurement section at the Leibniz Institute for Educational Trajectories, Bamberg. For their meta-analysis, the scientists summarized the results of 57 studies comprising more than 25,000 participants in total. They have now published their findings in the *Journal of Personality*.

Forms of narcissism

They think of themselves as being exceptionally talented, remarkable

and successful. They love to present themselves to other people and seek approval from them: This is how psychologists describe the typical behaviour of people commonly referred to as narcissists. "Accordingly, social networks such as Facebook are believed to be an ideal platform for these people," says Markus Appel.

The network gives them easy access to a large audience and allows them to selectively post information for the purpose of self-promotion. Moreover, they can meticulously cultivate their image. Therefore, researchers have suspected [social networking sites](#) to be an ideal breeding ground for narcissists from early on.

Three hypotheses

The recently published meta-analysis shows that the situation does not seem to be as bad as feared. The scientists examined the truth behind three hypotheses. Firstly, the assumption that grandiose narcissists frequent [social networking](#) sites more often than representatives of another form of narcissism, the "vulnerable narcissists". Vulnerable narcissism is associated with insecurity, fragile self-esteem, and social withdrawal.

Secondly, they assumed that the link between narcissism and the number of friends and certain self-promoting activities is much more pronounced compared to other activities possible on social networking sites.

Thirdly, the researchers hypothesized that the link between narcissism and the social networking behaviour is subject to cultural influences. In collectivistic cultures where the focus is on the community rather than the individual or where rigid roles prevail, social media give narcissists the opportunity to escape from prevalent constraints and present themselves in a way that would be impossible in public.

The results

The meta-analysis of the 57 studies did in fact confirm the scientists' assumptions. Grandiose narcissists are encountered more frequently in social networks than vulnerable narcissists. Moreover, a link has been found between the number of friends a person has and how many photos they upload and the prevalence of traits associated with narcissism. The gender and age of users is not relevant in this respect. Typical narcissists spend more time in social networks than average users and they exhibit specific behavioural patterns.

A mixed result was found for the influence of the cultural background on the usage behaviour. "In countries where distinct social hierarchies and unequal power division are generally more accepted such as India or Malaysia, there is a stronger correlation between narcissism and the behaviour in social media than in countries like Austria or the USA," says Markus Appel.

However, the analysis of the data from 16 countries on four continents does not show a comparable influence of the "individualism" factor.

Generation Me

So is the frequently cited "Generation Me" a product of social media such as Facebook and Instagram because they promote narcissistic tendencies? Or do these sites simply provide the ideal environment for narcissists? The two scientists were not able to finally answer these questions.

"We suggest that the link between narcissism and the behaviour in social media follows the pattern of a self-reinforcing spiral," Markus Appel says. An individual disposition controls the social [media](#) activities and

these activities in turn reinforce the disposition. To finally resolve this question, more research has to be conducted over longer periods.

More information: Timo Gnambs et al, Narcissism and Social Networking Behavior: A Meta-Analysis, *Journal of Personality* (2017).
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