

Narcissistic Traits and Social Media Self-Presentation among Adolescents: The Role of Self-esteem and Social Validation

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Abstract: *Social media provides adolescents with opportunities for identity construction, self-presentation, and social interaction while also increasing exposure to quantified forms of social validation. This paper examines the relationships among narcissistic traits, self-esteem, social validation, and online self-presentation during adolescence. Existing literature suggests that grandiose narcissistic traits are associated with greater social media activity and self-promotional behavior. In contrast, vulnerable narcissism may be expressed through more complex patterns involving insecurity and sensitivity to feedback. Self-esteem may influence adolescents' dependence on external approval and their approaches to online self-presentation. The discussion further considers the psychological implications of validation-seeking and negative online interactions. Overall, the reviewed literature highlights the importance of healthy self-esteem and balanced social media engagement during adolescent identity development.*

Keywords: narcissistic traits, adolescents, social media, self-presentation, self-esteem, social validation, mental health

1. Introduction

Over the past decade, Social media platforms have transformed an individual's life into a continuous environment for identity construction and peer evaluation. While these platforms offer opportunities for self-expression and social connection. They develop an environment where external validation is sought and easily quantified as likes, comments and follower count—these visible indicators of approval have become a potent psychological currency among the youth, often influencing how they perceive their self-worth and social status. This environment fosters a culture of hyper-curation: users selectively broadcast the most beautiful, successful and enlightened moments of their lives while hiding their internal struggles. As a result, they tend to compare themselves with others and relentlessly pursue online recognition, carefully curating the content they post to make a favourable impression.

During adolescence, the desire for social validation becomes a vital part when individuals begin to build their identity and a sense of belonging. Social media has amplified this problem by providing quantified feedback, which provides immediate reassurance and can influence how adolescents feel about themselves. While positive feedback can strengthen confidence, relying too heavily on social validation can cause one to base their self-worth of other's opinions rather than on their own self-acceptance. Social validation plays a potent role in understanding why adolescents carefully manage their online self-presentation and how social media influences their psychological well-being.

This need for online approval becomes even stronger in teenagers with narcissistic traits. These individuals often perceive themselves as superior to others, fantasise success, power and admiration, and believe they are entitled to special treatment. Research suggests that narcissistic traits are influenced by whether children get balanced and adequate care during childhood. Narcissism in children is cultivated by parental overvaluation— where parents consistently portray

their child as exceptional and superior to others—which leads to an inflated self-image. Adolescents with higher levels of narcissism tend to display more self-centred, exploitative, and attention-seeking behaviours, which often interfere with their ability to maintain healthy romantic relationships and develop genuine friendships. Findings suggest that narcissism is developed in early socialisation experiences, highlighting the significant role of parents in shaping their child's personality.

Unlike narcissistic features, self-esteem reflects an individual's overall evaluation of their own worth rather than an inflated perception of superiority. High self-esteem in children is cultivated by parental warmth: parents expressing affection and appreciation toward their child. Self-esteem plays a fundamental role in the development of interpersonal relationships by influencing how they perceive themselves and interact with other people. Adolescents who have high self-esteem tend to be more confident and effective communicators, and less dependent on external validation. Whereas, individuals who lack self-esteem are more likely to be sensitive to social comparison and rejection. It not only affects emotional well-being but also shapes the quality of social relationships and the ways in which one seeks acceptance and validation. Accordingly, this paper aims to examine how narcissistic traits, self-esteem, and social validation relate to adolescent's self-presentation on social media and how it may affect their mental well-being.

2. Literature Review

A meta-analysis was conducted by McCain and Campbell (2018) to examine the relation between narcissism and social media use across multiple empirical studies. 62 samples across published and unpublished research (N=13,430) were meta-analysed, examining how grandiose and vulnerable narcissists behave against four key markers of social media use, including time spent on social media, frequency of status updates, number of friends, and number of pictures uploaded.

It was found that grandiose narcissism positively correlated across all four primary social media metrics analysed; individuals with grandiose narcissist traits engaged more actively on social media platforms than those with lower levels of narcissism. Specifically, they significantly spent more time on social networking platforms, posted status updates and tweeted more often, and accumulated a higher number of friends and followers. They also engaged in greater visual self-presentation by uploading profile pictures and selfies more often, reflecting a tendency to seek admiration and maintain a favourable online image. The effect sizes were small to moderate ($r = .11$ to $.20$). In other words, grandiose narcissism is a real, reliable predictor of these behaviours, but it's not a huge one- narcissism explains some of why people behave this way online, not entirely though. Plenty of non-narcissistic people also post often or have big followings for other reasons. Individuals with grandiose narcissism involves an inflated self-image, a need for admiration, comfort with self-promotion, making social media—especially image based platforms, an essential tool to satisfy their need: broadcasting yourself to a big audience and getting quick feedback. Hence, making these features on social media platforms sufficient for grandiose narcissists.

Meanwhile, vulnerable narcissism was not significantly related to social media use across the same four behaviours. The effect sizes ranged widely ($r = .05$ to $.42$) and were inconsistent across studies. Vulnerable narcissism which is a more anxious and insecure form- marked by hypersensitivity to criticism, a fragile self-image, and a tendency to withdraw or become defensive rather than openly self-promote. Unlike grandiose narcissism, it isn't tied to comfort with being seen or admired. Therefore, it doesn't predict the same outward, frequent, visible behaviour. Individuals with vulnerable narcissism may push them to social media platforms for very different reasons, like monitoring others, seeking reassurance, or avoiding rejection. On the contrary, grandiose narcissism shows up clearly how often someone posts, unlike vulnerable narcissism might not show up in frequency at all. It may instead show up in how someone presents themselves, with even more curated content, anxiety about feedback, or a stronger emotional reaction due to lack of likes/comments.

The link between narcissism and social media behaviour was not the same in every situation. Two things changed how strong the link was: culture and type of platform. To rephrase, narcissism predicted social media behaviour more strongly in some cultures and on some platforms than others. Most individuals use platforms like Instagram and TikTok that revolve around images. "Image-based social networking sites" reinforce the connection between narcissism and self-presentation rather than text-based platforms like Twitter or Reddit, since image-based platforms allow more direct narcissistic self-promotion. Initially, this study focuses specifically on adolescents, since they are still developing their sense of identity and use social media for different reasons than adults do.

This paper takes a narrative review approach, pulling together existing research on how narcissism, self-esteem, and social validation shape the way adolescents present themselves on social media. Literature was sourced mainly through academic databases, with a preference for peer-reviewed

articles, meta-analyses, and empirical studies from the past decade, though some earlier foundational work is also included where it helps frame key concepts. The focus throughout was on studies involving adolescents, or those with clear relevance to adolescent development, particularly around four areas: grandiose and vulnerable narcissism, self-esteem, the pursuit of social validation, and social media self-presentation. Studies that didn't touch on at least one of these themes in relation to social media were left out, keeping the review centred on the psychological processes behind how adolescents present themselves online.

3. Discussion

When an individual with narcissistic traits enters a digital world, social media becomes an ideal platform for them to satisfy their needs of admiration. Unlike real-life interaction, it enables teenagers to have complete control over their image, allowing them to curate the content they post and present an idealised version of themselves to a wide audience, in contrast to the offline world where it cannot be achieved so easily. This selective self-presentation allows them to highlight positive aspects of themselves while concealing flaws, failures, and negative experiences in order to present themselves in a better light. Likes and comments function as a primary form of social validation, directly feeding the attention-seeking tendencies inherent in narcissism and reinforcing an exaggerated self-image. For these individuals, every positive interaction becomes the direct external validation for their feeling of superiority over others. As a result, this constant flow of digital validation leads to posting even more curated content to inflate the already existing ego.

Furthermore, social media encourages competitive behaviour, with narcissistic users constantly compare their popularity and status with those of others, fostering competitiveness. This may influence their interaction, focusing on gaining admiration rather than forming genuine connections. These behaviours reinforce a constant cycle of validation-seeking, increasingly depending on external feedback to maintain their self-image, making them more sensitive to criticism or low levels of engagement.

On the other hand, adolescents with self-esteem are more likely to present themselves realistically instead of creating a highly edited online persona. They tend to post to share experiences, achievements, or interests rather than to seek reassurance or admiration, therefore fostering an environment to make genuine connections, celebrate others, and express authentic interests. Although, they may appreciate likes and positive comments, their self-worth is less dependent on external feedback. This is considered a healthy approach towards social media because they possess a grounded sense of self, they can easily step away from platforms for extended periods without experiencing the fear of missing out (FOMO) or digital withdrawal.

Over time, maintaining an idealised online identity may become psychologically demanding. Individuals with narcissistic traits often feel pressure to consistently uphold the image they have created, which can lead to heightened stress whenever their online persona does not align with their real-life experiences. On the other hand, adolescents who have

good self-esteem will feel less pressure to have a perfect online identity since their identity does not depend on being perfect. In turn, this will help them to feel better psychologically and to be authentic both online and offline.

4. Limitations and Broader Implications

Narcissistic rage, a term introduced by Heinz Kohut to describe the anger that arises when a narcissistic individual's need for admiration or recognition is frustrated. It occurs when an individual's grandiose is challenged by minor criticism, disagreement, or social exclusion and even be interpreted as a personal attack. This results in intense emotional response, the individual experiences anger, humiliation, shame, or resentment that is disproportionate to the situation. It usually functions as a defensive response aimed at protecting self-esteem and restoring a sense of superiority. In the context of social media, negative comments, low engagement, or public criticism can trigger these reactions, leading to online conflicts, aggressive communication, or attempts to re-establish a favourable self-image through self-promotional content. Research further has shown that narcissistic rivalry is associated with narcissistic rage- one of the two major dimensions of narcissism described in the Narcissistic Admiration and Rivalry Concept (NARC) developed by Mitja Back, highlighting how important role of emotions in explaining how narcissistic individuals respond to threats to their social evaluation.

Online spaces offer distance, audience and the ability to attack without immediate consequences, cyberbullying often becomes an outlet for narcissistic rage because of such reasons. When someone feels humiliated or slighted, or just doesn't get the admiration they think they deserve, that sting can turn into insulting comments, false rumours, public shaming, or engagement in online harassment in an attempt to feed their inflated ego. Consequently, not only does the narcissistic rage affect those who become victims of cyberbullying, but it also helps create a threatening online environment in which conflicts become more frequent.

Most studies link social media self-presentation to anxiety, depression, or body dissatisfaction. Adolescents with pre-existing anxiety or low self-esteem are drawn towards validation-seeking through social media platforms. In addition, past studies have identified recurring themes in online depression discussions, particularly focusing on the negative experiences individuals have encountered. For example, Lachmar et al. analysed Twitter discussions using #MyDepressionLooksLike, identifying seven negative themes: dysfunctional thoughts, lifestyle challenges, social struggles, hiding behind a mask, apathy and sadness, suicidal thoughts and behaviours, and seeking relief. The diversity of themes from these studies highlights the varied and complex ways individuals experience and communicate about depression on social media.

People who are naturally more sensitive, especially teens who already struggle with comparing themselves to others or don't feel great about who they are, tend to get hit the hardest by being around narcissistic behaviour for a long time, regardless of the fact that it is coming from a loved one or just repeated exposure to someone's rage and rivalry online- the effect

builds up. Narcissists often protect their own ego by putting other people down. It starts to feel a lot like the emotional damage that comes from any kind of relational trauma.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, narcissistic traits, self-esteem, and social validation appear to play interconnected roles in adolescents' social media self-presentation. Grandiose narcissistic traits may be associated with more visible self-promotional behaviors, whereas vulnerable narcissistic traits may involve greater sensitivity to feedback and insecurity. Adolescents with healthier self-esteem may be less dependent on external validation and better able to maintain authentic forms of online self-presentation. These observations highlight the importance of supporting healthy self-esteem, critical engagement with social media feedback, and balanced online identity development during adolescence. Further adolescent-focused research is needed to clarify how these relationships vary across platforms, cultures, and individual psychological characteristics.

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