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SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE 21ST CENTURY NARCISSISTIC CULTURE

Abstract: This paper delves into the influence social media exerts in fulfilling individuals' need for recognition and individuality in the 21st-century. The study focuses on the growing concern with narcissism, a term often defined as an excessive preoccupation with oneself, including one's appearance and public image. The paper argues that this phenomenon may have stemmed from a shift away from collective social needs in earlier societies toward a stronger emphasis on the individual's desire for recognition. Such a shift appears to have contributed to the development of narcissistic values and standards that shape contemporary social behaviour. Additionally, the paper discusses how individuals, increasingly aware of their roles within society, have become active participants in negotiating and redefining societal norms. Social media platforms provide an unprecedented avenue for self-presentation, offering tools to create an idealised version of oneself. The paper examines existing research and reported statistics to illustrate the increasing reliance on social media platforms. than presenting new empirical data, it synthesises findings from prior studies to explore how the growth of these platforms has been discussed in relation to narcissistic tendencies. Therefore, this is not a meta-analysis but a conceptual synthesis of existing literature. The paper examines the complex interplay between digital technologies and modern identity formation, as well as the broader implications of these patterns for societal dynamics and values.

Keywords: mass media, society, narcissistic behaviour, individualism

1. Human nature – The narcissistic spectrum

In the words of Thomas Erikson, “our behaviour is a function of *personality* and *surrounding factors*” (Erikson, 2019, p. 11). Therefore, according to the author, as much as personality traits are inherited, the influence of the surrounding environment on shaping our behaviour is substantial and difficult to dismiss.

Recent scholarship, such as the Narcissism Spectrum Model (Krizan & Herlache, 2017), synthesises clinical, social-psychological, and personality research

to show that narcissistic traits manifest along a continuum shaped by interactions between individuals and their social environments. From the earliest childhood, we create a self-image that supports our self-concept and endorses our feelings from within. This image comprises our opinions and beliefs, how we perceive the world and what we value most. While building this image, we emphasise our positive qualities and explain our flaws and weaknesses. “With our energy turned inward, we become the centre of our attention. We no longer depend on others for attention and recognition. We have self-esteem.” (Greene, 2018, p. 43). However, those who lack this coherent sense of self may develop narcissistic traits. Greene explains, “Narcissists have a sharp break in this early development, and so they never quite construct a consistent and realistic feeling of a self” (Greene, 2018, p. 44).

Greene continues, indicating that narcissists see others as “instruments for attention and validation.” (Greene, 2018, p. 45). Therefore, if other people are just instruments and reality is just a reflection of their needs, relentless attention-seeking is a primary means of coping. This, in turn, as Greene points out, creates a problem, “In trying to satisfy our hunger for attention, we face an inevitable problem: there is only so much of it to go around.” (Greene, 2018, p. 43). Constantly seeking attention and validity, individuals turn to social media to find new audiences to whom they can present themselves. The statement is supported by Vaknin who states that it is a popular misconception that narcissists love themselves, as in reality they are in love with their reflection (Vaknin, 2014).

In today’s digital environment, maintaining a presence on social media and being recognised by other users is both accessible and demanding. Research into average correlations between grandiose narcissism and common measures of social media use, reported by McCain and Campbell in 2016,¹ indicates that grandiose narcissism shows a modest positive association with the size of one’s social network on digital platforms (approximately $r = .20$ number of links, friends, and connections on social media). A smaller correlation has also been observed between narcissism and the amount of time individuals spend on social media ($r = .11$). In addition, grandiose narcissism has been found to predict how frequently users post status updates ($r = .18$) as well as the number of selfies they share online ($r = .14$) (Campbell et al., 2017). Another study into the relationship between social networking site use and narcissistic personality traits, conducted by Gnambs and Appel and reported in *Narcissism and Social Networking Behavior: A Meta-Analysis*, presented comparable results (this reference is to an existing meta-analysis; the present paper does not conduct one). The meta-analysis reported a small-to-moderate overall effect indicating that the link between grandiose narcissism and social networking site use was consistent across platforms, participant characteristics, and time periods. Further analyses highlighted clear cultural differences, with stronger associations observed in high power-distance societies. In addition, behaviours focused on self-presentation and the size of one’s social network showed stronger effects than the duration of social media use (Gnambs & Appel, 2018).

¹ Image available online at <https://osf.io/aycx9/>, (McCain & Campbell, 2017).

However, the challenge of self-presentation lies in the fact that while anyone can post images or comments on a wide range of topics, the sheer volume of content raises the question of whose contributions are actually noticed. Unfortunately, as ‘the ordinary’ has already been done, most attention is paid to the most extreme post, the most unusual image, the most provocative comment and the most unpredictable outcome. An individual’s desire for recognition can at times become so strong that it overrides considerations of moral behaviour, social values, and ethical standards. At one time, journals and registers were used to convey important news, scientific facts and data. However, owing to the Internet, anyone can be an author or a creator of any narrative, only with such a significant number of authors wanting their creations to be noticed, it is not a surprise that society’s values and standards are shifting. Different cultures chose different routes to success. While some emphasised self-criticism and improving weaknesses, others (America) adopted the lifestyle of self-admiration, which in consequence, has created a social environment that promotes self-focus. (Hall, 2011, p. 190).

2. The portrait of the 21st-century digital society

Greene declares that narcissistic traits and tendencies are not confined to a select few but are, in fact, to some extent and to some degree, present within the human psyche. Such a perspective aligns with contemporary psychological discourse, which suggests that narcissism exists along a spectrum, encompassing a broad range of behaviours and attitudes.² This notion challenges the view of narcissism as a pathological condition exclusive to clinical diagnoses, instead highlighting its prevalent role in everyday social interactions and individual self-perception. Greene claims “We must be honest about our nature and not deny it. We are all narcissists. In a conversation, we are all champing at the bit to talk, tell our stories, and give our opinion. We like people who share our ideas – they reflect our good taste to us. We are all prone to flattery because of our self-love.” (Greene, 2018, p. 47). However, at what point did our self-validation become a fascination with ourselves? Being a part of a collective has changed meaning in contemporary society. Once it reflected undertaking various tasks, assignments and duties, working together for the benefit of a collective. Everyone would be a part of that achievement, and this knowledge was enough gratification. However, these days being a part of a collective somehow regards only our social interactions; furthermore, it is used as a ladder to stand out from the crowd. It is the Internet and social media that provides that ladder. As Greene remarks:

² Narcyzm (narcystyczne zaburzenie osobowości) – objawy i leczenie, (2023), dr n. med. Aleksandra Walczak-Tręda, Psycholog: <https://www.medicover.pl/zdrowie/psychiczne/narcyzm/>, date of access: 01.10.2024.

Our brains were built for continual social interaction; the complexity of this interaction is one of the main factors that drastically increased our intelligence as a species. At a certain point, involving ourselves less with others has a net negative effects on the brain itself and atrophies our social muscle. To make matters worse, our culture tends to emphasise the supreme value of the individual and individual rights, encouraging greater self-involvement. We find more and more people who cannot imagine that others have a different perspective, that we are all not exactly the same in what we desire or think. (Greene, 2018, p. 49).

In so much as there is a correlation between the growth of narcissism and the new media, it is still debatable whether media only reflects the tendencies among contemporary young generation or these tendencies are created by the new media since “online platforms are the perfect breeding ground for vanity and self-obsession”. (Derhally, 2022, p. 4). Moreover, as stated by Campbell and McCain, there could be a third option: “It could be that narcissism causes social media use, so that increasing narcissism would increase social media use; it could be that social media use causes narcissism, so that increasing social media use would increase narcissism; or it could be a reciprocal or bi-directional effect. And there could even be a third factor like cultural individualism that causes both.”(Campbell et al., 2017).

At a certain point in time presented news and information were often perceived as more factual, scientific, and objective. Nowadays, mass media platforms present a broad range of content. The gossip column in online news, at times, is more emphasised and commented on than the factual news item. The Internet brought instant news (i.e. newspapers online) where the news items are updated throughout the day in order to encourage the reader and make them want to return frequently during the day. That need for something new to report on is so great that a wide variety of information is presented to the recipient. Since factual, authentic news regarding politics or the economy very rarely needs hourly updating and can only be so much embellished and elaborated on, something new must be presented to the public. Therefore, scandals, celebrity gossip, hearsay and subjective information frequently occupy space in media coverage. News content is often supplemented with less substantive information, updated hourly to encourage continued audience engagement. Media narratives frequently emphasize who holds prominence, who excels or fails in various domains, who possesses substantial wealth or has recently faced financial ruin. Essentially, information regarding individuals’ statuses, achievements, and misfortunes. The reporters interview people and publish their stories no matter how minor they are. However, exposure to large amounts of everyday, non-essential information may encourage individuals to feel that they, too, have something to share or display. According to *Statista.com* social media usage is one of the most popular online activities. In 2024, over five billion people were using social media worldwide, a number projected to increase to over six billion in 2028.³ Social media provided us with a means to

³ Statista.com 2024: Number of worldwide social network users. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/278414/number-of-worldwide-social-network-users/>, date of access: 01.10.2024.

have our views expressed. Brailovskaia et al., also share this opinion declaring that, with the emergence of social networking sites such as Instagram, Facebook or Twitter, people obtained new opportunities to engage in numerous forms of online interactions and self-presentation (Brailovskaia et al., 2020). Moreover, the authors state that these interactions can be precisely planned and controlled since they are not conducted face-to-face. Having more time to create an idealised image of oneself increases the chance to gain positive feedback online from a greater audience and consequently to enhance one’s self-esteem. This is consistent with the narcissistic tendencies and adds to the assumption that social network sites could be desirable for the individuals displaying narcissistic characteristics.

The table below presents an overall growing tendency to spend more time on social media platforms. The data was collected for the period of 2012 to 2024. In 2024 there was a minor drop in daily time spent on social networking, however the cut-off point for the data collected for the survey was in the middle of the year.

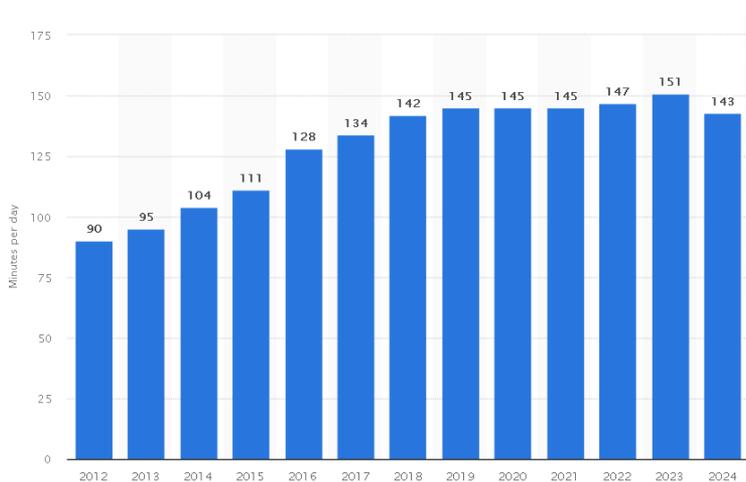


Figure 1. Daily time spent on social networking by internet users worldwide from 2012 to 2024 s(in minutes)⁴

Considering the results of the above-mentioned survey, a pertinent subsequent inquiry involves identifying which social networking sites are the most popular. Answering the question is important since the most popular sites, i.e. Facebook and YouTube, are also those that offer the most opportunities for an individual to ‘present’ themselves to the world.

⁴ Statista.com 2024: Daily social media usage worldwide. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/433871/daily-social-media-usage-worldwide/>, date of access: 01.10.2024.

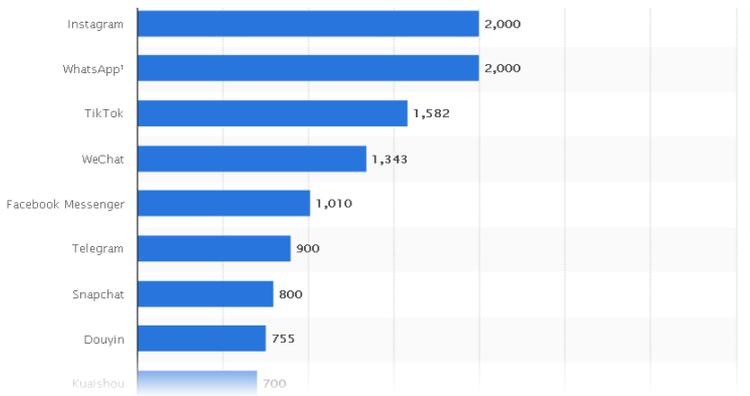


Figure 2. Most popular social networks worldwide as of April 2024, by number of monthly active users (in millions)⁵

3. Social Media Narcissism

According to the 2008 research conducted by the Newport Institute, a health organisation dealing with various mental disorders, 10 per cent of young people suffer from subclinical narcissism. In their opinion, social media contribute to the problem. Getting a ‘like’ on social media is associated with activation of the brain’s reward cycle. This good feeling is due to a dopamine rush in the brain’s reward centre.⁶ The two key reasons for the increase in narcissistic behaviour, according to the research, were a greater focus on building self-esteem in recent years, and the social media encouraging individuals to focus primarily on themselves and their public image. Furthermore, in a 2020 study The Newport Institute stated that narcissists are more likely to develop an addiction to Facebook as a coping mechanism for anxiety (research conducted among 327 Facebook users of an average age of 23). The study concluded that higher levels of narcissism were associated with greater anxiety symptoms, which in turn were linked to an increased likelihood of developing addictive tendencies.

The data gathered in the table below reveals the growing number of Facebook users between 2008 and 2023. With approximately three billion monthly active users in 2023, Facebook is the most widely used online social network worldwide.

⁵ Statista.com 2024: Global social networks ranked by number of users. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/272014/global-social-networks-ranked-by-number-of-users/>, date of access: 01.10.2024.

⁶ Newport Institute, Social media narcissism: Are the apps creating narcissists? <https://www.newportinstitute.com/resources/mental-health/social-media-narcissism/>, date of access: 11.07.2023.

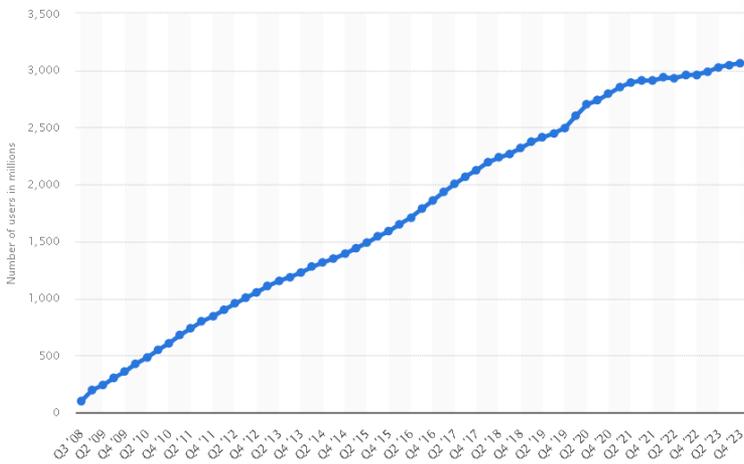


Figure 3. Number of monthly active Facebook users worldwide as of 4th quarter 2023 (in millions)⁷

Since the main focus of social media, such as Facebook or Instagram, is on sharing one’s image and opinions, individuals using these platforms may exhibit a predisposition toward narcissistic tendencies.

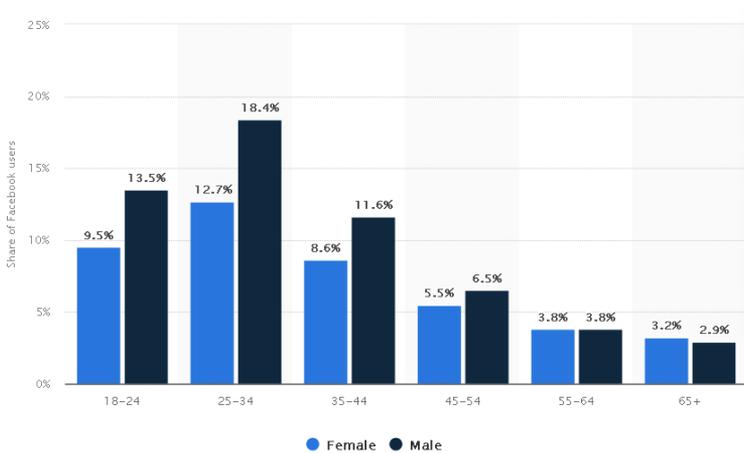


Figure 4. Distribution of Facebook users worldwide as of April 2024, by age and gender⁸

⁷ Statista.com 2024: Number of monthly active Facebook users worldwide. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/264810/number-of-monthly-active-facebook-users-worldwide/>, date of access: 01.10.2024.

⁸ Statista.com 2024: Facebook global user age distribution. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/376128/facebook-global-user-age-distribution/>, date of access: 01.10.2024.

As of April 2024, it was found that men between the ages of 25 and 34 years made up Facebook's largest audience, accounting for 18.4 per cent of global users.

Research into *The Link between Social Media and Narcissism in Young Adults*, 2018, showed that greater social media use predict higher levels of grandiose narcissism. This included the time spent on social media, the frequency of posts and tweets, the number of followers and how often participants posted pictures of themselves on the platforms. The 2018 research followed 74 participants over four months. The conclusion was that the individuals posting large numbers of photos and selfies showed a 25 per cent increase in narcissistic traits, especially those who used Facebook and other platforms that focused more on images than words. Reports from the Newport Institute suggest that behaviours sometimes described as "social media narcissism" may share characteristics with Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD), though this remains a speculative claim and is not formally recognised in diagnostic frameworks. Fully understanding the danger it may evoke, some social platforms are trying to shift toward self-worth building without emphasising an idealised appearance (i.e. 2019, Instagram and the National Eating Disorders Association launched the *#ComeAsYouAre* campaign. The campaign encouraged young people to share their stories of accepting their bodies just as they are, which is crucial in treating eating disorders).

Furthermore, Instagram, in 2019, began hiding 'likes' on its stories. Therefore, individuals can see who likes their posts but cannot compare their likes with others. Consequently, their experience of posting on Instagram shifts towards their expression rather than social comparison or perceived popularity.

4. Mass media's contribution to the rise in the desire for uniqueness

Over the years, for some, the need for recognition and approval has turned into obsession with self, with creating self-image, and finally, in some cases, the craving for establishing a brand.⁹ Scholarly research indicates that social media encourages self-branding behaviours, where individuals consciously construct and manage their online identities to gain visibility and approval (Labrecque et al., 2011). In line with these findings, Derhally (2022) warns that over-investment in personal branding can trap individuals in cycles of exaggerated self-importance. The development of social media and the addictive character of 'likes' and 'follows' seem to contribute to the reinforcement of narcissistic culture. In the words of Derhally: "By putting much energy and focus into personal brand and convincing others to follow us, we can fall into a trap of becoming overly dedicated to our self-importance." (Derhally, 2022, p. 7). Social media platforms accommodate all these development stages since the public here can be both the audience and content creators. The first step,

⁹ The case of Kardashians.

however, was mass media, where the public functioned solely as the audience. The sudden, considerable increase in superhero-type movies from the film industry, with instant all-day access to it, i.e. Netflix, gives the young audience aspirations to emulate them (as the statistics for 2023 show Generation Z makes up the majority of Netflix subscribers).¹⁰ Hall states that the images predominant on television are now considered role models. Moreover, the author adds that the children are encouraged to imitate them (Hall, 2011, p. 196). TV documentaries featuring the lives of celebrities and reality shows dominate prime-time schedules and attract young audiences who may attempt to model their lives on the figures portrayed. Newspapers increasingly prioritise reporting on scandals, rumours, and gossip, often at the expense of more objective and informative coverage.

Radio stations increasingly attract listeners with frequent phone-in contests, often unrelated to knowledge or content, where prizes are awarded simply for being the first to call. Furthermore, children who were praised in the past for being seen, not heard, now take lead roles on television, portraying overtly performative behaviour (Hall, 2011, p. 196). Adolescents are exposed to peers portraying characters engaged in risky or antisocial behaviours, often associated with the pursuit of material possessions as a means of social acceptance. Media portrayals of the rich and famous on television have made wealth far more visible and prominent than in the past. Hall observes that media producers, writers, and editors often deny responsibility for amplifying such trends, arguing instead that they merely reflect behaviours already present in society. He argues that the images displayed on most reality shows may have a devastating effect on our culture. The young generation uses reality TV shows to establish values and standards. Hall finishes by stating that such behaviour does not build character or encourage achieving good education or learning skills.

Some studies suggest that many young people perceive power and money as solutions to life's challenges and as markers of uniqueness and status. Such attitudes may contribute to the reinforcement of narcissistic tendencies. Hall's statement referring to reality shows and their effects on our culture can be underpinned by research into the mechanism of association – priming.¹¹ Priming extends beyond concepts and language; even actions and emotions may be influenced by events occurring outside of one's awareness (Kahneman, 2011, p. 53). Empirical research demonstrates that subtle reminders of money can influence social behaviour, often

¹⁰ According to the data collected by Statista.com, as of October 2024, the most popular English-language Netflix TV show of all time was the first season of the comedy horror TV show "Wednesday," with over 252 million views in the show's first 91 days on the platform. The second most watched on the streaming platform was the fourth season of the American science-fiction series "Stranger Things," counting around 141 million views. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1283935/most-viewed-netflix-show-english/>, date of access: 01.11.2024.

¹¹ Priming reveals the subtle but significant ways our environment shapes our cognitive and behavioural responses. It highlights how prior experiences can shape perceptions, thoughts, and actions without the individual being fully aware of the connection

leading individuals to display greater self-focus, independence, and reduced prosocial tendencies (Vohs et al., 2006). Building on such findings, Kahneman (2011) argues that money-priming effects can extend into many areas of life. His research shows that money-primed people are more independent, selfish and display greater preference for being alone, all the characteristics connected to narcissism (Kahneman, 2011, p. 55). The author finishes by declaring “living in a culture that surrounds us with reminders of money may shape our behaviour and our attitudes in ways that we do not know about and of which we may not be proud”. (Kahneman, 2011, p. 56).

To illustrate the growing influence of television, Netflix serves as a notable example. This subscription-based streaming service lets its members watch TV shows and movies on Internet-connected devices. In 2011 the number of Netflix annual subscribers was 21.5 million; in 2022, this number had grown to 220.6 million.¹² The statistics for other streaming platforms, such as Amazon or HBO, also show a significant increase in the number of subscribers.¹³ Among the most popular series on Netflix, according to the statistics for 2023, were: *Wednesday*, *Stranger Things* and *Lucifer*.¹⁴ All of these shows feature the paranormal and supernatural. Moreover, the main characters in the first two are adolescent. The audience is drawn to the characters with supernatural traits of uniqueness and extraordinary abilities. As stated by Erikson, in *Surrounded by Narcissists*, among common characteristics of narcissism are: unrealistic, grandiose self-image; feeling special and unique; valuing power and fame, thinking the rules do not apply; incredibly self-centred; speaking only about themselves; arrogance and superiority; quick to criticise and judge others; highly sensitive to criticism; constant self-promotion; feeling entitled to the best of everything, demand constant acknowledgement; respond with aggression when questioned; deceitful and manipulative. (Erikson, 2022). Some of these traits are reinforced in series like *Wednesday*, *Lucifer* or *Stranger things*. And when one considers the concept of social proof examined by Dobelli, it is clear what underlying factors guide young people to imitate their peers and engage with similar television content.

Social proof, sometimes roughly termed the ‘herd instinct’, dictates that individuals feel they are behaving correctly when they act the same as other people. In other words, the more people who follow a certain idea, the better (truer) we deem the idea to be. And the more people who display a certain behaviour, the more appropriate this behaviour is judged by others (Dobelli, 2013, p. 10).

¹² Business of Apps. (2023). *Netflix statistics*.

<https://www.businessofapps.com/data/netflix-statistics/>, date of access: 01.07.2024.

¹³ Statista.com 2024: *Quarterly number of Netflix streaming subscribers worldwide*.

<https://www.statista.com/statistics/250934/quarterly-number-of-netflix-streaming-subscribers-worldwide/>, 01.11.2024.

¹⁴ Statista.com 2024: *Most viewed Netflix show (English)*.

<https://www.statista.com/statistics/1283935/most-viewed-netflix-show-english/>, date of access: 01.11.2024.

As stated by Manne, ‘The Narcissism Epidemic’ presents an argument highlighting the increasing prevalence of narcissism among younger generations. This trend has notably intensified, particularly after the year 2000 (Manne, 2014). After Generation Y – the Millennials, the emergence of Generation Z – the Zoomers – was the next stage in demographic and cultural development. While the Millennials craved their individuality in any shape and form to be acknowledged and recognised (‘Snowflakes Society’), the digitally inclined Generation Z further it by creating self-images and presenting them to the world. Parker and Igielnik (2020) claim “Members of Gen Z are more racially and ethnically diverse than any previous generation, and they are on track to be the most well-educated generation yet. They are also digital natives who have little or no memory of the world as it existed before smartphones”. As noted in *The Dark Side of Social Media*, 50 per cent of Gen Z users are on Instagram, while 70 per cent of Millennials access Facebook and 63 per cent use YouTube (Sheldon et al., 2019, p. 25). However, 64 per cent of Millennials stated that Instagram is a medium for communicating existing narcissistic tendencies rather than a platform that inspires extreme narcissistic behaviour. Moreover, narcissists who post selfies on Instagram are more likely to follow attention-seeking users reflecting reciprocity (Sheldon et al., 2019, p. 33).

5. Limitations and Future Research

While concerns about the role of social media in fostering narcissistic tendencies are well acknowledged, it is important to recognise research that highlights potential benefits. Studies have shown that social media can provide opportunities for community building and upholding long-distance relationships. For some users, these platforms serve as valuable tools for social support, particularly for individuals who may feel marginalised in real life. Moreover, the ability to shape one’s self-presentation sometimes can be a form of positive self-affirmation rather than merely narcissistic self-promotion. Recognising all these perspectives provides a more balanced understanding of the complex relationship between social media and personality development (Andreassen et al., 2017).

While this review offers a comprehensive overview of literature on the relationship between social media and narcissistic tendencies, it is not without its limitations. The analysis is based primarily on English-language sources, which limits the inclusion of perspectives from non-English-speaking contexts. Furthermore, the work relies heavily on previously published research rather than original empirical examination, which may restrict the scope. Also, the literature reviewed spans a specific time frame and may not fully capture the most recent developments in digital communication and social media behaviour.

Future studies could build on the findings of this review by adopting a more systematic approach to analysing the relationship between social media use and

narcissistic traits. Long-term research would be particularly valuable in assessing how online behavioural patterns evolve over time and in what way they influence personality traits. Cross-cultural investigations could help identify the extent to which the observed associations are shaped by cultural norms and values, moving beyond the predominantly Western focus. In addition, greater emphasis on empirical, peer-reviewed psychological research would strengthen the evidence base, while exploring potential positive aspects of social media use such as community building and identity exploration which in turn could help provide a more balanced understanding of the topic.

6. Conclusions

How appropriate is the name if one considers its origins? Narcissus from Greek mythology, famous for his beauty, rejected everyone and fell in love with his own reflection. In a different version of the myth, he starved himself to death as he sat by the pond gazing at his image in the water (Erikson, 2022, introduction). Narcissism has long been recognised in human behaviour, but just like most things, it has evolved. Narcissus may have been sitting by the water admiring his reflection. These days, however, through social media platforms, individuals focused on self-presentation sitting in front of their computers can upload their images, show them to the world and wait for the approval in the form of the ‘likes’. Hence, this new image of narcissism can be seen as a transposition of the old myth, an archetypal image adjusted to the projection of a self in the postmodern world in which truth and reality are often interpreted as subjective and shaped by cultural, social, and individual perspectives. In the digital world which we now inhabit, personal value is often quantified by the number of ‘likes’ and ‘followers.’ An increased focus on self-presentation can make us preoccupied with creating and presenting our brand on social platforms, affects our images of self-creation and self-representation, as well as disconnects us from the social reality we function in.

Research into the field of narcissism has been continuously expanding, and continues to develop across multiple disciplines. Studying the origins and effects of narcissism remains important for a better understanding of the contemporary world.

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