

How Narcissism and Social Media Can Affect Relationships

by

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Abstract

This study aimed to assess if narcissistic individuals are more likely to display themselves differently on social media. Specifically, if they would use it for the purposes of manipulation and infidelity. Additionally, we wanted to explore the connection between how narcissists use social media and the effects this can have on relationship satisfaction and partner trust. We surveyed one hundred and thirty-three students asking about their social media usage and tendencies as well as trust and relationship satisfaction. We analyzed the results using linear regression and found that social media related infidelity was negatively correlated with partner satisfaction and positively correlated with narcissistic rivalry. Tactics of manipulation were positively correlated with social media related infidelity behaviors and trust was negatively correlated with the latter.

Keywords: Narcissism, Infidelity, Relationship Satisfaction, Manipulation

How Narcissism and Social Media Can Affect Relationships

Social networking sites (SNSs) are undeniably one of the leading forms of communication today. Screen time is ever increasing as more platforms emerge and content has expanded to include things like news, livestreams, and much more. While research on SNSs is plentiful at this point, the platforms and their impacts shift so frequently that new effects and impacts of these sites are questioned with increasing frequency. What is important to know about these sites is that they permeate more of the psyche than what appears on the surface. People who are popular on these sites are referred to as influencers. However, these “social media celebrities” are not the only ones with influence. The social profiles of close friends and family have a large impact as well.

While romantic relationships are considered intimate and often private, many don't weigh the impact SNSs have on their romantic relationships. I have discovered from personal observations and anecdotal reports that a partner may look to the other partner's SNS profile if they are unsure of how they are feeling or want more feedback on the state of their relationship. Generally, some people may think performative (meaning public) displays and communication between a couple is considered an indicator that the relationship is going well as this denotes each is proud of their attachment to the other. Conversely, a lack of a partner's presence on one's SNS profile may spark concern about the state of the relationship. Additionally, discovering one's partner communicating with other potential partners online can be detrimental to a relationship regardless of the motive behind said communication. Thus, how one presents oneself on their SNS profile can drastically affect their relationship. If the information a partner receives does not align with what they thought to be true, it could lead to distrust, dissatisfaction, and unhappiness in the relationship.

Additionally, one could postulate that a partner could create a false sense of happiness and trust in their significant other by manufacturing the content they post on their SNS profile. While this is a trend I have not investigated scientifically, it did inspire this project.

SNSs are very attractive platforms for narcissists. Individuals who rate highly in the trait of Narcissism often use SNSs as an arena to promote themselves and manufacture or alter the content they post to reflect and feed into their self-view (Bergman et al., 2011). These individuals tend to seek out gratification from others from a multitude of avenues. Often, one romantic relationship is not enough to satisfy their need for attention (DeWall et al., 2011). It follows then that narcissistic individuals would seek supplementary attention and gratification from people on SNSs. Additionally, if the attention they are getting from their significant other is less than what they feel they need, they may manufacture indicators such as emotional posts which prompt support from followers on their SNS profile in an attempt to persuade their partner to give them the attention and gratification they desire. All this to say, there is great potential of a narcissist to utilize the forum of SNSs to purposefully manipulate their romantic partners and to seek out additional romantic partners.

This is vital to our understanding of the dangers of social media use as well as how specific people use and abuse these platforms. We hypothesize that individuals who rate higher in the trait of narcissism will be more likely to present discrepant versions of themselves on their social media profiles and that this will negatively affect the happiness, satisfaction, and trust in their romantic relationships. For the purpose of this study, we thought about “discrepant” presentations as those which may be less truthful, exaggerated, or inconsistent with their day to day presentation with their partner.

Literature Review

An accurate assessment of the contributing components to this connection would not be complete without discussing the effect of social media on relationships, how narcissists use social media, and how both of these aspects interact with relationship satisfaction and infidelity behaviors. Literature addressing these topics has been growing in recent years. In 2016, McDaniel et. al. conducted a study on infidelity related behaviors on social media and how they related to marital satisfaction. This study collected data from 338 individuals, or 176 married pairs. These individuals completed the Social Media infidelity-related behaviors scale (SMIRB; McDaniel et al., 2017) as well as the Quality of Marriage Index Scale (QMI; Norton, 1983), items about relationship ambivalence, and finally the Experiences in Close Relationships Scale-Short Form (ECR-S; Wei et al., 2007). A multilevel model showed a significant relationship between infidelity related behavior (IR) and lower relationship satisfaction. While this study assessed the prevalence and impact of IR in married and cohabiting couples, it failed to address the correlation narcissism may have with IR and other actions and/ tendencies which would negatively effect relationship satisfaction. Zeigler-Hill et al. filled this gap with their 2020 study investigating the connection between narcissism and relationship commitment. They specifically assessed whether commitment and attitudes toward romantic alternatives correlate highly with individuals who rank highly in narcissism. This study consisted of 160 students. These individuals included 21 men and 123 women who had a mean age of 20.33 years. Participants completed the Narcissistic Admiration and Rivalry Questionnaire (NARQ; Back et al., 2013), the Attentiveness to Alternative scale (AAI; Miller, 1997), as well as the Commitment Scale (Sabatelli, 1984). The results confirmed their initial hypothesis suggesting that the possibility of potential romantic partners impacts the lower commitment levels typically seen in individuals who rank more

highly in narcissism. While these studies are informative and serve to advance our knowledge in this area, they fail to assess the connection between narcissism and relationship commitment and narcissism and social media use. The present study aims to bridge this gap. We aim to determine if narcissistic individuals are in fact more likely to alter their online personas and if doing so increases levels of dissatisfaction, unhappiness, and distrust in their romantic relationships.

Narcissism and Social Networking Sites

Narcissism is characterized by “self-promotion, vanity, and grandiosity...” and, as with many personality traits, can have a great impact on our actions including how we communicate and present ourselves online (DeWall et al., 2011). Given the associated tendencies, it is not surprising that a 2017 study found that narcissism is associated with “exhibitionistic and attention-seeking posts” (Barry et al., 2017). This is an important consideration as we move into the present study as it establishes how someone who scores highly on narcissism may use SNSs to satisfy their own needs while possibly being unaware of the effect on their romantic relationships. Research has found that narcissists often use SNSs to project a positive image of themselves, showcase their attractiveness and openness to sexual alternatives (Fox & Rooney, 2015). All of these tendencies suggest narcissists utilize SNSs to bolster their skewed view of themselves and to feed their inflated self- image (Bergman et al., 2011). These are all fairly ambiguous results in regard to how these tendencies might actually manifest. Fox & Rooney’s (2015) study found support for the hypothesis that individuals who score highly in narcissism and other dark triad traits may utilize SNSs to perform what they call “cheater strategies” which, like the tendencies above, serve to feed their grandiose view of themselves as they might outside of social media. To

understand how these tendencies and their manifestations can impact the romantic relationships of narcissists, the impact of SNSs on relationships must be assessed.

Social Media and Relationships

Narcissism aside, SNSs have grown to impact every aspect of people's lives, predominantly their romantic relationships. A 2018 study by Abbasi found that SNS use does lead to decreased relationship satisfaction as well as reduced commitment to one's romantic relationship. Additionally, Abbasi found a negative correlation between one's "relationship commitment and interest in alternatives" which when taken with the previous evidence supporting easy access to alternative via SNSs could contribute to the link between SNSs and relationship dissatisfaction (Abbasi, 2018). The key feature of SNSs that shows they yield easier access to relationship alternatives is the widespread acceptability of the "friends" list. As SNSs are used for maintaining connections and networking, individuals often don't question the contents of one's "friends" list. However, Abbasi argues that these lists can serve to "facilitate and emotional and/or sexual affair" (Abbasi, 2019). Thus, given the evidence, SNSs can be said to have an impact on romantic relationships regardless of whether or not they are being used by narcissistic individuals. Taken together, these findings suggest that use of SNSs for narcissists in romantic relationships might be particularly problematic.

Relationship Satisfaction

As discussed above, those who rate highly in narcissism tend to utilize SNSs to feed their self-view. This perspective extends to their romantic relationships as well. This is evidenced by the fact that narcissistic individuals tend to see their romantic relationships "as opportunities for them to maximize gains" as opposed to an opportunity to intimate

connection with others (Zeigler Hill et al., 2020). To this point, Buffardi found that the partners of narcissistic individuals often report decreased commitment, infidelity behaviors, manipulation (Buffardi & Campbell, 2008). This decreased relationship commitment seen in narcissistic individuals is only exacerbated by how easy it is to use social media to seek out romantic and sexual alternatives (Abbasi, 2019). Narcissistic individuals tend to be less committed to their romantic relationships and tend to utilize SNSs as a means of seeking out alternative partners which only “weakens relationship commitment” even more and in turn leads to even lower relationship satisfaction (Abbasi, 2019).

The Present Study

The above research still leaves many unanswered questions. The primary question of interest in regard to this study was whether or not those who rate more highly in narcissism are more likely to utilize social media to manipulate how they present themselves and whether or not this difference in self-presentation contributes to decreased relationship satisfaction. For the sake of this study, presenting oneself differently online can take a number of forms including but not limited to chats, comments, and messages to other people on SNSs and the nature of those messages. That is, whether or not the information shared is considered intimate or emotional and how that might be viewed by one’s significant other. Ultimately, we hypothesized that individuals who rate more highly in narcissism would be more likely to utilize social media as a means of manipulation and an arena for infidelity which would be falsely presenting themselves to online communities, and thus that their romantic partners would be less satisfied and less trusting of them.

Methods

A number of items related to satisfaction were examined, including trust, satisfaction, and happiness. Due to the challenges related to measuring the difference between how one presents themselves online versus in person and privacy concerns regarding accessing individuals social accounts we opted for a series of self-report measures hoping to glean insight from these.

Participants

A group of One hundred and sixty-three Appalachian State University students participated in the study. Twenty-Two were excluded due to incomplete data. Additionally, 8 scored below a 3 out of 5 on the seriousness check and were subsequently excluded. Thus, there were 133 responses in the analysis. Thirty-two of the 133 respondents indicated they were not in a committed relationship while 101 indicated they were. Relationship length among these individuals ranged from two months to over nine years. These students were drawn from a pool of undergraduate students in psychology courses during the Fall 2020 semester after the study received IRB approval.

Procedure

Participants completed the survey for course credit via SONA. A consent form was presented and they were asked to confirm their consent to the study. After this, they were directed to demographic questions regarding relationship status, length, and type. They were then asked to complete each of the following scales, Partner Satisfaction Scale, Tactics of Manipulation Scale, Social Media Infidelity Related Behaviors, Narcissistic Admiration and Rivalry Questionnaire, and the Trust Scale. They ended the survey with a seriousness check which simply asked them how seriously they had taken the survey and what they thought it was about. All measures were distributed using Qualtrics.

Materials

Partner Satisfaction Scale

This is an eight-item scale measured across a five-point Likert type scale ranging from Strongly disagree to Strongly agree. Participants rated their satisfaction based on questions referring to their feelings toward their partner as well as how they felt about their relationship and its stability (e.g., My relationship with my partner/spouse brings me much happiness; Luthar, S.S. & Ciciolla, L., 2014).

Tactics of Manipulation Scale

This scale prompted individuals to consider the question “When you want your partner to do something for you, what are you likely to do?” and then had them rank the likelihood of 35 items (e.g., I compare him to someone who would do it.) on a seven-point scale ranging from “Not at all likely” to “Extremely Likely” (Buss et al., 1987).

Social Media Infidelity-Related Behaviors Scale (SMIRB)

Participants rated how much they agreed with each of the 7 statements on a six-point scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree” (McDaniel et al., 2017). The responses were then averaged to determine the individuals scores of infidelity related behavior (e.g., I sometimes hide the things I say to others online from my spouse/partner.). A higher score indicates a greater tendency to participate in social media related infidelity.

Narcissistic Admiration and Rivalry Questionnaire (NARQ)

This measure asked participants to rate their agreement in response to 18 items (e.g., I enjoy it when another person is inferior to me.) on a Likert-Type scale ranging from 1 (“not agree at all”) to 6 (“agree completely”) (Back et al., 2013). This measure provides insight to

the two narcissistic behavioral strategies of Admiration (i.e., promoting a positive image of oneself with others) and Rivalry (i.e., promoting superiority through competitive means).

Trust Scale

This scale aimed to measure the level of trust a respondent had in their partner and their relationship (Rempel et al., 1985). It gives a series of 17 items (e.g., My partner behaves in a very consistent manner.) and 3 subscales all measured on a 7-point scale from -3 to 0 to 3 indicating Strongly disagree to Strongly agree respectively.

Results

Primary Analyses

To assess bivariate relationships between our measures, a series of bivariate correlations were run between social media infidelity, narcissism, trust, manipulation, and relationship satisfaction. These can be found in Table 1. Social media related infidelity was negatively correlated with partner satisfaction, $r = -0.674$, $p < .001$, and positively correlated with narcissistic rivalry, $r = 0.532$, $p < .001$. Narcissistic Rivalry was negatively associated with partner satisfaction, $r = -0.343$, $p < .001$. Trust was positively correlated with partner satisfaction, $r = 0.492$, $p < .001$, and negatively correlated with social media related infidelity, $r = -0.388$, $p < .001$. Taken together, these findings suggest that individuals who rank highly in narcissism are more likely to utilize SNSs to engage in SMIRB and that those behaviors are associated with lower relationship trust.

Based on the findings the SMIRB was negatively correlated with trust, but positively correlated with narcissistic rivalry, we ran a simultaneous linear regression to further explore these relationships. More specifically, SMIRB and narcissistic rivalry were entered as predictors of trust. The overall model was significant, $F(2,130) = 14.5$, $r^2 = .18$, $p < .001$.

Both SMIRB $\beta = .50$, $t = -5.33$, $p < .001$, and narcissistic rivalry $\beta = .21$, $t = 2.23$, $p = .03$.

This suggests that relationship satisfaction and trust in one's partner are affected by SMIRB and high rankings in narcissistic rivalry. Full results for this model can be seen in Table 2.

For partner satisfaction, the overall model was significant, $F(2, 130) = 54.2$, $r^2 = 0.46$, $p < .001$. This suggests that the correlation is due to the variables and not simply a result of randomness. However, SMIRB was the only significant main effect, $\beta = -.69$, $t = -8.97$, $p < .001$. This finding indicates that aside from all other variables, SMIRB was still associated with lower levels of relationship satisfaction and trust. Full results for this model can be seen in Table 3.

Regression analyses were not conducted using tactics of manipulation or narcissistic admiration. This was done in part because of the seeming overlap between tactics of manipulation and narcissistic rivalry, and because admiration was not correlated with trust nor with relationship satisfaction.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the connection between narcissism, social media use, and trust and satisfaction in romantic relationships. The analysis ultimately showed that there is support for the hypothesis that people who rate highly in narcissistic rivalry could be more likely to use social media as a means of exploring other partners or altering how they present themselves online (i.e., promoting their own self view, engaging in actions they wish to hide from their partner, posting things as a means of manipulating online communities for their desired outcome). Additionally, we found support for the second hypothesis that SMIRB is associated with lower levels of relationship trust and satisfaction. These findings are important when trying to understand how narcissistic behaviors and

motivations are changing as the prominence of technology in our lives is growing. It is important that our understanding of the impacts and implications of these changes on romantic relationships and the manifestation of narcissism grows with this advancement. Knowing how narcissists may use technology differently or how the manifestation of narcissism is changing in today's society is as important for the field of psychology as it is for the average individual looking for a relationship. This study sheds light on some of the ways that narcissists behaviors are altered with the introduction of social media. Finally, seeing how prominent social media has become in society, it is very likely that these manifestations of narcissism (i.e., those seen on SNSs and which require technology) will likely become more common than those previously associated with the trait prior to SNSs. Our analysis yielded results consistent with previous research such as McDaniel et al.'s 2016 which found a correlation between SMIRB and relationship dissatisfaction and Zeigler-Hill et al.'s study which called attention to the association between Narcissistic Rivalry and SMIRB. Future research in this area would be benefitted by developing some kind of program which can analyze an individual's SNS profile and compare it against data received from self-report. Additionally, following relationships with those who rank highly in narcissism for an extended period of time would be an avenue of expanding our knowledge of the longevity of these correlations.

Limitations

This study could be expanded upon by developing a way to evaluate one's social media presence in comparison to their actual demeanor in real life. Without this ability, this study was limited to exclusively self-report measures which didn't allow for a fully objective understanding of the data. Additionally, this study was conducted exclusively with

undergraduates and was only administered one time. Thus, we cannot accurately assess the long-term implications of these behaviors on relationships. Finally, no judgments about causality can be made since the results were merely correlational.

Conclusion

Knowing that narcissistic people tend to use social media in ways that may alter their appearance to promote their self-view is helpful for understanding their how their actions and motivations may shift and present differently as technology continues to encroach on the intimate aspects of romantic relationships. Knowing that narcissistic people are more likely to utilize social media for manipulation and infidelity related behaviors is not only important for scientific inquiry but is just as important for the average person dating or looking for a partner. People who are high in narcissism and engage in SMIRB may be less successful in long term relationships. Additionally, those in a relationship with someone high in narcissism who engages in SMIRB could be setting themselves up for a relationship in with decreased trust and satisfaction.

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Table 1

Correlations and descriptive statistics for social media infidelity behavior, narcissism, manipulation, trust, and satisfaction.

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Satisfaction	-					
2. Trust	.492***	-				
3. Manipulation	-0.101	0.091	-			
4. Infidelity	-	-	0.313***	-		
5. Admiration	0.674***	0.388***	0.207*	0.082	-	
6. Rivalry	-	-0.057	0.354***	0.532***	0.103	-
	0.343***					
Mean	4.11	1.50	2.16	3.09	1.72	4.72
SD	0.648	0.229	1.08	0.729	0.620	0.400

*** $p < .001$. ** $p < .01$. * $p < .05$.

Table 2

Predictors of Trust in Relationships

	Trust	
	R ²	β
Variables	.18***	
SMIRB		-.50***
Narcissistic Rivalry		.21*

*** $p < .001$. ** $p < .01$. * $p < .05$.

Table 3

Predictors of Relationship Satisfaction

	Trust	
	R ²	β
Variables	.46***	
SMIRB		-.69***
Narcissistic Rivalry		.02

*** $p < .001$. ** $p < .01$. * $p < .05$.