Social Media's Dual-Edged Sword: Narcissism vs. Self-Esteem

Researchers find that Facebook breeds both narcissism and self-esteem.

Narcissus by Caravaggio

How often do you check your Facebook account? After you post something, do you check back to see how many people 'Like' it? Does your ego inflate or deflate based on how many 'Likes' you get?

I'm embarrassed to admit it, but I get a boost of both healthy self-esteem and ego-driven narcissism based on how many 'Likes' I get on Facebook. Researchers have confirmed that the desire to be 'Liked' on Facebook is a universal phenomenon. We all want to feel worthy of love and belonging. In some ways, the 'Likes' we get on Facebook satisfies this need in a distorted way.

I have two techniques for keeping my ego in check when it rises and falls based on the number of Facebook 'Likes' I get. The first is to parody myself by reciting Sally Field's notorious line "You like me. You really, really like me!" from her 1985 Academy Awards speech. The second is to hum the lyrics "She's so popular" from the Peter Gabriel song, "*Games Without Frontiers*" in a self mocking tone to remind myself that I am being sophomoric.

How do you respond to the potential ego bruising of not feeling 'loved' when nobody 'Likes' what you post on Facebook? How do you prevent yourself from thinking you're god's gift to the world when you get an abundant number of 'Likes'?

Uncharted Territory: The Facebook and Twitter Frontier

Facebook is a multi-edged sword riddled with many paradoxes. On the one hand, Facebook builds social connectivity ... but it also isolates people and creates situations where we are "alone together." Facebook can build self-esteem in a healthy way ... but it can also fuel narcissitic personality traits. Facebook can fortify friendships ... but it can also destroy relationships. The list goes on and on.

People of every generation are struggling to navigate how to incorporate social media into our lives in a healthy way. This is uncharted territory. There is a steady stream of psychological research being released about the impact of Facebook and Twitter on our psyche and our relationships. A June 2013 study from the University of Missouri found that "*Excessive Facebook Use Can Damage Relationships*."

Another June 2013 study from the University of Michigan found that social media reflects and amplifies our culture's growing levels of narcissism. According to lead author Elliot Panek, "the study shows that narcissistic college students and their adult counterparts use social media in different ways to boost their egos and control others' perceptions of them. "It's important to analyze how often social media users actually post updates on sites, along with how much time they spend reading the posts and comments of others," he said.

"Among young adult college students, we found that those who scored higher in certain types of narcissism posted more often on Twitter," said Panek. "But among middle-aged adults from the general population, narcissists posted more frequent status updates on Facebook." According to Panek, Facebook serves narcissistic adults as a mirror. As a middle-aged adult, I think these findings of the difference between Facebook and Twitter may be influenced by a generational technology gap.

Panek says of Facebook, "It's about curating your own image, how you are seen, and also checking on how others respond to this image. Middle-aged adults usually have already formed their social selves, and they use social media to gain approval from those who are already in their social circles." For narcissistic college students, the social media tool of choice is the megaphone of Twitter according to Panek. "Young people may overevaluate the importance of their own opinions," Panek said. "Through Twitter, they're trying to broaden their social circles and broadcast their views about a wide range of topics and issues."

For the study, participants answered questions about the extent of their social media use, and also took a personality assessment measuring different aspects of narcissism, including exhibitionism, exploitativeness, superiority, authority and self-sufficiency. The researchers were unable to determine whether narcissism leads to increased use of social media, or whether social media use promotes narcissism, or whether some other factors explain the relationship.

Does Facebook lead to self-promotion and anti-social behavior?

In 2012, Christopher Carpenter of Western Illinois University published a study titled, "Narcissism on Facebook: Self-promotional and Anti-Social Behavior" in the journal *Personality and Individual Differences*.

For his study Carpenter defined Narcissism as, "a pervasive pattern of grandiosity, need for admiration and an exaggerated sense of self-importance." Carpenter said that for the average narcissist, Facebook "offers a gateway for hundreds of shallow relationships and emotionally detached communication." More importantly, he found that, "social networking in general allows the user a great deal of control over how he or she is presented to and perceived by peers and other users."

The narcissistic personality inventory (NPI) survey sample included 292 individuals, which measured self-promoting Facebook behaviors, such as posting status updates, photos of oneself and updating profile information; and several anti-social behaviors, including seeking social support more than providing it, getting angry when others do not comment on status updates and retaliating against negative comments.

Carpenter hypothesized the grandiose exhibitionism (GE) subscale of the NPI would be the best way predict self-promoting behaviors. The entitlement/exploitativeness (EE) subscale was hypothesized to predict the anti-social behaviors. GE includes vanity, superiority, self-absorption and exhibitionistic tendencies. EE includes a sense of deserving respect and a willingness to manipulate and take advantage of others, Carpenter explained.

His findings showed that grandiose exhibitionism correlated with self-promotion and EE correlated with anti-social behaviors on Facebook. Self-esteem was unrelated to self-promotion behaviors and it was negatively associated with some anti-social behaviors (i.e. self-esteem was related to less of these anti-social behaviors).

"If Facebook is to be a place where people go to repair their damaged ego and seek social support, it is vitally important to discover the potentially negative communication one might find on Facebook and the kinds of people likely to engage in them." Says Carpenter. Adding, "Ideally, people will engage in pro-social Facebooking rather than anti-social me-booking."

Conclusion: It's a thin line between self-esteem and narcissism.
The flip side of all the narcissistic aspects of Facebook is that it can make us feel good about ourselves in a healthy way. Research from the University of Georgia found that people who spent time on their Facebook page scored higher on self-esteem. "Despite the name 'social networks,' much user activity on networking sites is self-focused," said Brittany Gentile, a UGA doctoral candidate who looked at the effects of social networks on self-esteem and narcissism.

According to the UGA research published in 2012 in the journal *Computers in Human Behavio*r, the 526 million people who log on to Facebook every day may be boosting their self-esteem in the process. "Editing yourself and constructing yourself on these social networking sites, even for a short period of time, seems to have an effect on how you see yourself," said Keith Campbell, who heads the department of psychology at UGA and co-authored the book "*The Narcissism Epidemic: Living in the Age of Entitlement.*"

"Social networking sites are a product and a cause of a society that is self-absorbed," Campbell said. "Narcissism and self-esteem began to rise in the 1980s. Because Facebook came on the scene only seven years ago, it wasn't the original cause of the increases. It may be just another enforcer." Social networking should not be seen as an answer to building self-esteem, he said, but the fact that people may get a jolt when logging on doesn't mean they should stop either.

"Ideally, you get self-esteem from having strong relationships and achieving goals that are reasonable and age-appropriate," Campbell said. "Ideally, self-esteem is not something you should take a shortcut to find. It is a consequence of a good life, not something you chase."