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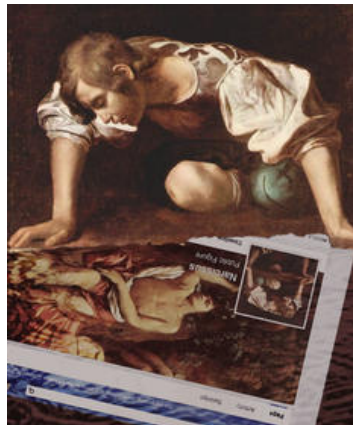
## Close Encounters

From close relationships to online behavior  
by Gwendolyn Seidman, Ph.D.

### Is Facebook Really Turning Us into Narcissists?

Facebook use may be a consequence, and not a cause, of narcissism  
Published on August 11, 2014 by Gwendolyn Seidman, Ph.D. in Close Encounters

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"Narcissus", "Echo & Narcissus" edited by Jocelyn Kolb

There is mounting evidence that narcissism is related to heavy Facebook use, and many in the popular media are quick to blame Facebook for increasing levels of narcissism. However new research suggests that Facebook use may be a consequence, and not a cause, of narcissism.

Many in the popular media bemoan the proliferation of narcissistic posts and photos present on social media. And the research suggests that a lot of what is seen on social media may be narcissistic. Several studies have shown that frequent Facebook users are likely to be more narcissistic<sup>1,2,3</sup>.

Narcissists also tend to post more self-promoting content<sup>1,2,4,5</sup> and are especially likely to select profile photos that emphasize attractiveness<sup>6,7</sup>.

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Some have blamed social media for the increasing narcissism of young people. Intuitively, this claim makes sense. Constantly focusing on yourself and posting photos and information about your daily activities for the entire world to see seems to encourage a glorification of the self. However, it is also likely that narcissists are drawn to situations that allow them to show off.

As you may have learned in an introductory statistics course, correlation is not causation. If Facebook use is related to narcissism, it's certainly possible that Facebook is making people narcissistic, but it is also possible that narcissistic people are gravitating toward Facebook. Fortunately, social scientists have a way of disentangling these two competing explanations: Controlled experiments.

In an experimental study, subjects could be asked to use Facebook, and then researchers could examine how they differed from subjects who were asked to do another activity. In most studies on narcissism and Facebook use, researchers have examined if people who freely chose to use Facebook were more narcissistic. Thus, when researchers found a relationship between Facebook use and narcissism, there was no way to determine if Facebook use increased subjects' narcissism levels, or if narcissistic people were just more likely to choose to use Facebook. If subjects were assigned to use Facebook and then this increased feelings



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of narcissism, as compared to those assigned to a different task, this would support the conclusion that Facebook caused the increased narcissism, since we would know that these individuals did not choose to use Facebook due to their pre-existing narcissism.

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Fortunately, a few experimental studies have shed light on this matter. Gonzales and Hancock<sup>8</sup> found that spending time on one's own Facebook page, as compared to sitting in front of a mirror or a blank computer monitor, led to higher levels of self-esteem. Gentile and colleagues<sup>9</sup> also found that self-esteem, but not narcissism, increased after using Facebook. They did find, however that narcissism levels increased after MySpace use, suggesting that features of MySpace use could increase narcissism. None of these studies investigated the nature of the user's online activities, until a recent experiment by Robert Horton and colleagues. It's possible that some Facebook activities might promote narcissism and others might not.

Horton and colleagues<sup>10</sup> conducted two experiments, varying what type of Facebook activities participants were instructed to engage in during a 15-minute online session. Participants were assigned to agentic, self-promotional Facebook activities, such as posting status updates and photos and updating profile information; communal activities that involve connecting with other people, such as replying to or liking people's posts and posting birthday greetings; or neutral non-Facebook activities. There was a slight tendency for participants who engaged in agentic, rather than communal or neutral activities to express greater narcissistic tendencies immediately following the activity. In the second, similar study, using a larger group of subjects, the experimental manipulation of Facebook activities had no effect on narcissism. These results provide evidence that using Facebook most likely does not cause people to become more narcissistic.

In addition, early research suggested that posting photos and status updates were narcissists preferred Facebook functions<sup>3</sup>. However, newer research suggests that college-aged narcissists are gravitating to a newer platform, Twitter. In a more recent survey of college students, it was found that high levels of narcissism were associated with actively posting on Twitter, but not Facebook<sup>11</sup>. This suggests that Facebook used to be one of the primary venues for young narcissists, but now they are being drawn elsewhere.





Of course, it should be noted that Horton's experiments examined brief single sessions of engaging in Facebook activity. Therefore it is still possible that prolonged use of Facebook could increase narcissism. It is also important to remember that narcissism is far from the only trait that makes Facebook use more likely. For example, studies have shown that Facebook use is also higher for extraverts<sup>3</sup> and paradoxically, people with low self esteem<sup>2</sup>.

The jury is still out, but for now, the evidence suggests that despite the fact that narcissists gravitate toward social media, social media is not turning us into narcissists.

*Gwendolyn Seidman, Ph.D. is an associate professor of psychology at Albright College, who studies relationships and cyberpsychology. Follow her on [Twitter](#) for updates about social psychology, relationships, and online behavior.*

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