DIGITAL NARCISSISM AND SOCIAL MEDIA: AN ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

Social media has revolutionised how we look at ourselves since it takes up a major part of our lives. In the year 2006, *Time* magazine named "You" the Person of the Year and included a mirror and a computer on the cover to go with it. According to the famous website *sociologylens.com* digital culture is a culture of narcissism. This paper attempts to explore the traits of a growing tendency towards digital narcissism in the youth of today. The paper is based on a questionnaire, administered by Google form, offered to 100 undergraduate students of colleges affiliated with Himachal Pradesh University. The responses were gathered on four aspects of digital narcissism: (a) selfies; (b) self-admiration; (c) desire for validation; (d) anxiety to be digitally active. The findings reveal that young people are more vulnerable to having a grandiose sense of self and an increasing desire for admiration linked with anxiety to continuously upload and flaunt achievements. This also implies that young people nowadays are increasingly going into the abyss of minds without self-realization and actualization.

Keywords: Technology, Social media, Selfies, Digital narcissism, Self, Upload, Likes.

"*I Update, Therefore I Am.*"

-----Andrew Keen

"*Digital narcissism would be, after all, the expression of an extreme egocentricity fuelled by the existential anguish that generates an individualistic and competitive society in which people are valued less for what they are and more for what they appear. A society in which it's not built inwards but outwards, leaving the interior so empty that it has to be propped up by "like" on artificial images.*"   -----Jennifer Delgado

"*Fiercely competitive in his claim of approval and applause, he mistrusts competition because he unconsciously associates it with an excessive desire for destruction ... Greedy as long as his cravings know no limits, demands immediate satisfaction and lives in a state of restless and permanent desire dissatisfied.*"   ----- Christopher Lasch

INTRODUCTION

The paradox of social media is that social media is less about connecting with others than about connecting with ourselves. The 'self' in the Freudian sense is a seat of vanity, ego and self-promotion. With Facebook boasting over one billion users per day, such an explosion of social media usage had led to marked cultural and social changes. According to the famous website *Sociologylens.com*[1], digital culture is a culture of narcissism. Social media has revolutionised how we look at ourselves since it takes up a major part of our lives. In the year 2006, *Time* magazine named "You" the person of the year and included a mirror and a computer on the cover along with

it. This paper attempts to explore the traits of a growing tendency towards digital narcissism in the youth of today. According to the Merriam-webster[2] dictionary narcissist is "extremely self-centred with an exaggerated sense of self-importance: marked by or characteristic of excessive admiration of or infatuation with oneself." There has also been an emphasis placed on narcissistic tendencies that appear to be linked with social media usage (Brydon, 2010; Carpenter, 2012; Hromack, 2017; Gnambs & Appel, 2018; Sheldon et al., 2019). Ever since Christopher Lasch's bestseller *The Culture of Narcissism* came out in 1978, there has been an acceptance amongst sociologists that modern cultures are undeniably cultures of narcissism. Young people who are born and brought up with digital technology are termed digital natives. With more and more children spending their lives online, we need more "offline epiphany" (Havey and Puccio, 2016, p. 49) to come to terms with the growing impact of online digital culture.

NARCISSISM

Narcissism is a theory in psychoanalysis, which was introduced by Sigmund Freud in his essay On Narcissism: An Introduction (1914). Narcissism is nothing but pathological self-absorption. It was first identified as a mental disorder in 1898 by the British essayist and physician Havelock Ellis. The disorder is named after the mythological figure Narcissus, who fell in love with his reflection in the water. Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) is one of several types of personality disorders characterised by a mental condition in which people have an inflated sense of their importance, a deep need for excessive attention and admiration, troubled relationships, and a lack of empathy for others to the extent that they take others for granted for personal fulfilments. It must be kept in mind that according to Sigmund Freud, narcissism is a normal stage in child development, but it is considered a disorder only when it occurs after puberty. The American Psychiatric Association has listed the classification NPD in its Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) since 1968, drawing on the historical concept of megalomania. Williams (2016) points out that "Narcissus is punished with a terminal fascination for his reflection in revenge for his treatment of Echo, whom he despises for loving him. It is properly understood not as self-love but emotionally monogamous self-love. Those with narcissistic traits may be more capable of considering others as discrete people, and it is this tendency to overreact to criticism that causes the damage over time."

DIGITAL NARCISSISM

It is not difficult to imagine Narcissus taking his unending selfies if he lived to see this day. Also, he would be active on social media probably hoping to get millions of followers. We inhabit such a crucial time in human history that narcissism has taken its roots deep inside men and women. According to Rosen (2007), "The world of online social networking is practically homogeneous in one other sense, however diverse it might at first appear: its users are committed to self-exposure. . .There is no room for reticence; there is only revelation (24)." Our desire to seek the approval of virtual friends and followers, feel good every time we get a like, and project an idealized version of ourselves is a symptom of the fact that digital narcissism has proliferated like fire. It was Andrew Keen who first introduced the concept of Digital Narcissism in 2006 in his path-breaking book, 'Digital Vertigo: How todays Online Social Revolution is Dividing, Diminishing, and Disorienting Us. He calls the Internet age as the era of digital narcissism. Digital Narcissism is expressed through actions, such as taking a large number of selfies and spontaneous and thoughtless over sharing of private moments. According to Keen (2006), today's social media revolution is the second major social upheaval since the industrial revolution. He also argues that ironically social media does little to socialise but rather disorients the users towards a highly

divisive society. According to Weiss (2017), "Social media has become a place for distortions, where our real selves remain backstage. We photograph, Photoshop, curate and upload the best we got. Then we hold our breath and pray for some attention. There's a name for this mindless appetite for attention and validation. It's called "digital narcissism." "The analogue age of the great exhibition," Keen (2006) asserts, "is now being replaced by the digital age of great exhibitionism" (145). According to Campbell (2016), "Narcissists are successful social media creators. They build bridges with others and generate content. They may be annoying at times and have a small risk for internet addiction, but the role that narcissistic individuals play in building social media networks may have helped create the massive social media we have today."

One of the main symptoms of digital narcissism is oversharing. Most digital narcissists believe in uploading signs of success that can be envied. Such egocentricity survives on approval, admiration and validation. In the digital world, this amounts to the number of likes and comments that further reinforces the needs of the digital narcissist. Other than oversharing some other traits of Narcissist Personality Disorder[3] are:

- a belief that you've achieved everything on your own
- superiority
- exhibitionism
- exploitativeness
- vanity
- taking a large number of selfies
- entitlement
- self-promotion
- sharing things considered intimate
- economic prosperity
- fantasising about one's perfection
- sensitivity to personal criticism
- an extremely critical view of others
- competitive nature
- Liking superficial popularity (Jones, 2015).

It is not hard to accept that the world of social media is driven by the need to continually upload success, fame, achievement, beauty and general well-being. This provides a perfect ground for a digital narcissist to keep falling in love with oneself and seek frequent validation of their worth in return for superficial friendship, ephemeral likes and momentary pleasure.

AIM

The study explores how social media can contribute to digital narcissism. The following questions are addressed:

- Is social media becoming a platform for narcissistic individuals to indulge in self-promotion?
- Is social media turning young people into narcissists?

METHODOLOGY

The paper is based on a questionnaire, administered by Google form, offered to 100 undergraduate students of colleges affiliated with Himachal Pradesh University. The responses were gathered on four aspects of digital narcissism: (a) selfies; (b) self-admiration; (c) desire for validation; (d) anxiety to be digitally active (see Appendix 1). Data was also collected through in-class oral feedback sessions.

DATA INTERPRETATION

Two tools were used to collect data: a Google form and oral feedback sessions. The data gathered through the Google form revealed that all ofthe students were active on social media. While most of them took selfies everyday, they did show traits of narcissism like editing pictures to get more likes, planning a trip just to be able to upload their pictures and hoping for more followers
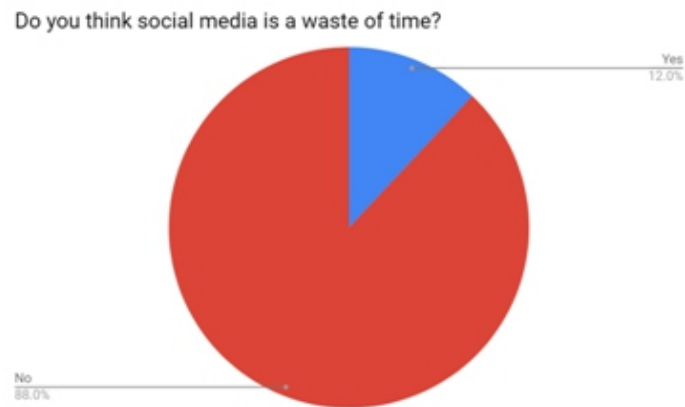

Figure 1

Figure 1 above shows that a significant number of youngsters do not think social media a waste of time. This feeds into the notion of the fact social media has become an extension of one's self. Social media is taken seriously by young adults
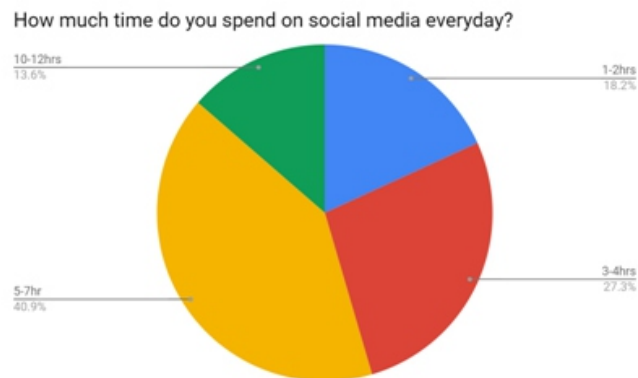

Figure 2

Also, one cannot feign ignorance of the importance of social media considering the amount of time invested in it. Figure 2 depicts that 40.9% of youngsters spent 5-7 hours every day on social media while 13.6% claim to spend 10-12 hours on social media every day.

Some of the comments of the students are given below:

- *I love taking selfies because I am beautiful.*
- *I edit my pictures before uploading them because it makes me more attractive.*
- *I post selfies everyday. I spend one hour everyday taking selfies.*
- *I get lots of likes on my pictures.*
- *Yes, people who are popular on social media are indeed popular in real life too.*

FINDINGS

The followings are the findings of the study:

- The findings reveal that young people are more vulnerable to having a grandiose sense of self and an increasing desire for admiration linked with anxiety to continuously upload and flaunt achievements.
- This also implies that young people nowadays are increasingly going into the abyss of minds without self-realization and actualization.
- It was also found that people who use Facebook and WhatsApp more often showed more narcissistic tendencies.
- Increased social media use is directly linked to narcissism.

IMPLICATIONS

Compulsive sharing has become a spontaneous gesture with the digital narcissist. They share and upload to seek validation for their existence. This not only fuels egocentricity but also pathological narcissism. The desire to get likes and admiration sets into motion a never-ending loop of continuous sharing and instant gratification on being liked and commented on. Social media provides the digital narcissist an ideal means to gratify his or her desires and psychological needs. It was found in the study that most students post selfies to get attention and satisfy the deep-seated human desire for admiration.

LIMITATIONS

- The subjects of the study were young students of rural backgrounds only.
- The study does not take into account the technology gap and the digital gender divide

FUTURE RESEARCH

- The future of digital narcissism can only be speculated. The interesting thing, as their prevalence increases, will be seeing whether society rebels against or accommodates narcissistic traits (Williams 2016).
- Also, is there any antidote to digital narcissism? Does authenticity and mindfulness suffice as Das (2019) claims?
- A collaborative study can be undertaken by a team of researchers to study the impact of different social media platforms on digital narcissism.

CONCLUSION

It is evident from the data analysis of the present study that young people are prone to digital narcissism. It depends on and is proportional to the amount of time invested on social media. From this study, it is evident that seeking approval and admiration is what propels most young people nowadays to display their lives on social media which is directly proportional to the likes they get on their online activities.

ENDNOTES

[1] See https://www.sociologylens.net/article-types/opinion/our-digital-culture-of-narcissism/3246. Sociology Lens is an active and popular community website which brings together news, opinion, reviews and sociology research resources.

[2] See www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/narcissistic.

[3] Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI) is an online personality test.

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obsession-attention-seeking-oversharing

APPENDIX 1

Sample Questions in the Questionnaire:

- How many selfies do you take in a day?
- Do you edit your pictures before uploading them?
- Why do you take selfies?
- In a group picture do you only look at yourself?
- Do you post selfies everyday?
- Do you like comments on your pictures?
- How would you feel if no one commented on your pictures?
- How many likes do you get per pictures?
- How often do you change your profile picture?
- How many friends you have on Facebook, Whatsapp?
- Do you think social media is a waste of time?
- How much time do you spend on social media every day?
- Do you feel you are not that good looking?
- Do you compete with your friends?
- Do you plan a trip only to click pictures so that it can be shared on social media?
- Do you think you look better looking in pictures than in real life?
- Do you judge people based on their profile picture?
- What do you think of those who are not active on social media?
- Which social media are you present on?
- Which social media do you like the best?
- Is it true that people who are popular on social media are popular in real life too?