



Research Article

Exploring the Role of Social Media Use in Developing Narcissism among Gen-Z Undergraduate Students

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between social media use and narcissism among Gen Z. In this study, a quantitative research method was adopted, and 213 students at Government College University were selected through a convenient Sampling technique. A structured questionnaire was used to collect data, in which the intensity of social media use and the level of narcissism were measured on a 5-point Likert scale. The collected data were analyzed by SPSS software, which included descriptive statistics and regression analysis. The regression results showed that social media use is a key factor predicting narcissism. This research indicates that social media can have a significant impact on the psychological attitudes of young people, especially on self-esteem and self-fulfilling tendencies. However, considering the limitations of the research, more extensive and diverse samples need to be investigated to better understand the relationship. The findings have important practical and theoretical implications for academia, psychologists, and policymakers.

Keywords: Social media use, Narcissism, Gen Z.

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Introduction

Social media platforms have become an integral part of modern life. These platforms provide an opportunity for individuals to interact, exchange information, and express themselves (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). There has been a rapid increase in the use of social media around the world, which has had a profound impact on human attitudes and psychological characteristics (Kuss & Griffiths, 2011). The younger generation, in particular, is at the forefront of social media use, which makes its impact even more significant. Narcissism is a personality trait that involves self-centeredness, a desire to stand out, and a strong desire to be admired by others (Foster et al., 2015). People with narcissism often view themselves as abnormal and are constantly seeking attention and praise (Twenge & Campbell, 2009). Modern research has shown that there is a strong link between narcissism and social media use (Buffardi & Campbell, 2008).

Globally, social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok have given a new dimension to self-presentation, where individuals share their ideal and chosen images and information with others. (Vogel et al., 2014). This process can increase self-esteem and compare tendencies in individuals (Chou & Edge, 2012). Therefore, psychologists emphasize that social media can play an important role in the development of narcissism (Mehdizadeh, 2010). The use of social media is also increasing rapidly in the context of Pakistan, especially among university students (Ali, 2016). The younger generation is using these platforms not only for entertainment but also for educational, social, and personal purposes. However, there is limited research available at the local level on the psychological effects of this increased use, which further increases the importance of this topic.

Global research also shows that excessive use of social media promotes behaviors such as self-esteem, desire for attention, and self-promotion (Andreassen et al., 2017). Additionally, individuals who are more narcissistic are more active on social media and share more of their personal information (McCain & Campbell, 2018). This dichotomy makes the topic more complex and important for research. In Pakistani society, where collectivism is valued, increasing self-esteem through social media marks an important social change (Hofstede, 2001). These changes can affect young people's attitudes, perceptions of self, and social relationships. Therefore, it is important to understand this relationship on a scientific basis so that its positive and negative effects can be clarified.

Theoretical background

The theoretical background provides the basis for this research, in which the relationship between social media use and narcissism is explained in light of prior literature. First of all, self-presentation theory is very important in this regard. According to this theory, individuals try to present a certain and favorite image of themselves to others in social situations (Goffman, 1959). Social media has made the process easier and more effective, where individuals highlight their chosen images, ideas, and achievements (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). This phenomenon can promote narcissism. Because people are constantly trying to get praise and attention (Mehdizadeh, 2010). The second major theory is the social identity theory, which states that individuals shape their identity through social groups and relationships (Turner et al., 1979). Social media platforms give individuals the opportunity to be part of different online communities, where they can strengthen or change their identity (Vogel et al., 2014). In the process, individuals try to make themselves look better and stand out, which can increase narcissistic tendencies (Andreassen et al., 2017).

Similarly, Uses and Gratifications theory also plays an important role in this research. According to this theory, individuals use media to meet their specific needs, such as entertainment, information seeking, and social interaction (Katz et al., 1973). In the context of social media, individuals use it to gain self-esteem, attention, and express themselves, which may be linked to narcissistic attitudes (Whiting & Williams, 2013). Moreover, social comparison theory also helps in understanding this relationship. According to this theory, people compare themselves to others. To assess one's own worth and status (Gerber et al., 2018; Festinger, 1954). Constantly looking at the successful and exemplary lives of others on social media can create a sense of superiority or inferiority in individuals, which affects the tendencies to narcissism or selfishness (Chou & Edge, 2012).

In light of all these theories, it can be said that social media not only gives individuals the opportunity to create and present their own identity. Rather, it also affects the narcissistic tendencies. This theoretical framework provides a strong foundation for this research and illustrates how various psychological and social factors shape the relationship between social media use and narcissism. Based on the theoretical background this research offered the following hypothesis;

H₁: There is a nexus between social media use and narcissism

Methodology

A quantitative research method was used in this study. To examine the relationship between social media use and narcissism. The universe of this research consisted of students from Government College University (GC University), who were selected as core participants. Non-probability sampling, Convenience sampling was used, and a total of 213 students were included in the study.

A structured questionnaire was developed for data collection, based on pre-existing and standardized scales. The questionnaire consisted of two main parts: one part was related to the measurement of social media use. The social media use scale was adapted from the work of Tuck and Thompson (2024). The second part of this research was designed to test the level of narcissism. The narcissism scale was adapted from the work of Foster et al. (2015). All items were arranged on a five-point Likert scale to better measure participants' responses. Pilot testing of the questionnaire was also carried out to ensure its clarity and comprehensibility.

The data was collected through direct surveys from university students, and informed consent was obtained from the participants. The obtained data were entered into the SPSS software after coding, where it was analyzed. Descriptive statistics and regression analysis were used to analyze the data to determine the relationship between variables and their effects.

Data Analysis

Table 1 shows the demographic profile of the students. The majority (74.2%) of the students were male and belonged to the age group of 18-22 years. 58% of students enrolled in a university in the last 2 years. 64.3% of students were residing in hotels, and 71.4% of students have up to 500 friends on social media.

Table 1. Demographic profile.

Demographics		F (%)
Gender	Male	158(74.2)
	Female	55(25.8)
Age	18-20	117(54.9)
	21-23	84(39.4)
	24 or above	12(5.6)
Enrolment Duration	≤ 2 years	125(58.7)
	≥ 2.1 years	88(41.3)
Residential status	Hostel	137(64.3)
	Daily visitor	76 (35.7)
Number of online friends	≤ 500	152(71.4)
	≥ 501	61(28.6)

Descriptive Analysis

Table 2 explores the respondents’ replies related to the intensity of use of social media. The findings show that the majority of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statements of the questions. They are addicted to using social media in daily life.

Table 2. Descriptive analysis of the respondents regarding the intensity of use of social media (n=213).

Sr.	Items	SD	D	N	A	SA
		F (%)	F (%)	F (%)	F (%)	F (%)
1	I spend a lot of time on social media every day.	22 (10.3)	19 (8.9)	15 (7)	101(47.4)	56 (26.3)
2	Social media is an important part of my daily life.	18 (8.5)	8 (3.8)	6 (2.8)	89 (41.8)	92 (43.2)
3	I check my social media accounts every day.	9 (4.2)	11 (5.2)	12 (5.6)	68 (31.9)	113 (53.1)
4	I feel uncomfortable if I don't use social media for a while.	9 (4.2)	11(5.2)	7 (3.3)	61(28.6)	125 (58.7)
5	I spend most of my time on social media.	10 (4.7)	5 (2.3)	12(5.6)	63(29.6)	123 (57.7)
6	I feel like my day is incomplete without social media.	8 (3.8)	6(2.8)	5(2.3)	72 (33.8)	122 (57.3)

Table 2 shows the frequency distribution of narcissistic behavior among the respondents. Findings show that all the respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statements of the question. Findings also show that most of the respondents have narcissistic behavior.

Table 3. Descriptive analysis of the respondents regarding narcissistic behavior.

Sr.	Items	SD	D	N	A	SA
		F (%)	F (%)	F (%)	F (%)	F (%)
1	I like to make people feel special and appreciated.	5 (2.3)	6(2.8)	11(5.2)	102 (47.9)	89(41.8)
2	I consider myself more talented and better than others.	6 (2.8)	7(3.3)	10(4.7)	91 (42.7)	99(46.5)
3	I want people to notice my successes.	8 (3.8)	6 (2.8)	9(4.2)	59 (27.7)	131(61.5)
4	I like to be the center of attention.	11(5.2)	7(3.3)	5(2.3)	77 (36.2)	113(53.1)
5	I understand my appearance and personality better than anyone else.	8(3.8)	6 (2.8)	5(2.3)	56 (26.3)	138(64.8)
6	I feel like I deserve special treatment.	5 (2.3)	7(3.3)	5(2.3)	73 (34.3)	123(57.7)
7	I post pictures of myself on social media to inspire others.	5 (2.3)	11(5.2)	6(2.8)	72 (33.8)	119(55.9)

Hypothesis testing

Table 3 describes the hypothesis testing. The findings revealed that social media use has a significant nexus with narcissistic behavior. Moreover, the R² value shows that the independent variable 41.4% regress the dependent variable.

Table 4. Relationship between social media use and narcissistic behavior.

Variable	β	F	R ²
Social media use	0.643**	149.096***	.414

Discussion

This research was conducted in GCU Lahore, one of the most prestigious universities located in a metropolitan area. The aim of this research was to identify the relationship between social media use and narcissism. This relationship has become an important topic of research in recent years, especially after 2020. Modern studies show that social media platforms provide individuals with a wide range of opportunities to highlight themselves, self-presentation, and gain social attention, which can reinforce narcissistic tendencies (Koterba et al., 2021). Platforms such as Instagram and TikTok, in particular, place a greater emphasis on visual content, allowing individuals to try to influence others through their iconic photos and videos (Boursier et al., 2020).

In this research, we proposed a hypothesis to check the nexus between social media use and narcissism among undergraduate students. The findings of the hypothesis confirm this relationship. Recent research also shows that greater use of social media is not only linked to narcissism. It also plays a role in its development. For example, individuals who are more narcissistic tend to be more active on social media, share more posts, and try to get attention through likes and comments. (Casale & Banchi, 2020). Conversely, receiving constant positive feedback can also further strengthen narcissism, creating a reinforcing cycle (Fioravanti et al., 2021). In the post-COVID-19 era, when online activity increased significantly, the use of social media also saw a boom. During this time, individuals spent more time online, which led to an increase in self-esteem and social comparison trends (Zhao & Zhou, 2021). These conditions provide a favorable environment for the expression of narcissism, as individuals have more opportunities to shape and present their identity on online platforms (Kircaburun et al., 2020).

Furthermore, recent studies indicate that various features of social media, such as "likes," "followers," and "shares," play an important role in increasing narcissistic attitudes. These features provide individuals with instant social validation, which reinforces the core characteristics of narcissism, such as the desire for appreciation and self-importance (Lervik-Olsen et al., 2024). In addition, algorithms also promote content

that gets more attention, which leads users to be more self-motivated (Marengo et al., 2022). In the context of Pakistan, although research on this topic is limited, available studies show that the increasing use of social media among young people is affecting their psychological attitudes, including self-esteem and social comparison (Rasheed, 2024). In Pakistani society, where collective values have traditionally been valued, increasing individuality and self-improvement through social media marks an important social change, which may influence narcissistic tendencies. Overall, recent literature strongly supports that social media use and narcissism are closely linked. It's not just a direct relationship. It is also shaped by various psychological factors, such as self-esteem, social comparison, and social validation. However, longitudinal and experimental research is needed to further elucidate the nature of this relationship, to better understand cause and effect.

Conclusions

The main objective of this study was to examine the relationship between social media use and narcissism, especially in the context of university students. The results showed that there is a positive and meaningful relationship between high social media use and narcissistic tendencies. It shows that as individuals spend more time on social media, they may have increased self-esteem, desire for attention, and self-esteem. Furthermore, the research also highlighted that social media platforms provide individuals with an opportunity to present their ideal identity, which may play a role in the promotion of narcissism. The results of the regression analysis supported that social media use could be an important factor predicting narcissism. Overall, this research emphasizes that the use of social media needs to be balanced and responsible. To reduce its potential negative psychological effects, while also benefiting from its positive aspects.

Limitations

There are some important limitations to this research. The first limitation is that the research sample was limited to Government College University (GCU) students only, which may make it difficult to apply the results to other universities or the wider population in general. The other important limitation is the use of easy availability sampling, which can limit the representativeness and increase the chances of bias. This study used a self-reported questionnaire, which has the potential for social desirability bias, i.e., participants can present their answers in a better way. Similarly, the design of the research was cross-sectional, due to which the cause and effect between the variables cannot be clearly established. In addition, the study did not include other potentially confounding variables, such as other aspects of personality, mental health, or cultural influences that could have influenced the results. Finally, the use of social media was measured in a general way, while the impact of different platforms (such as Instagram, Facebook, TikTok) could be different, which needed to be tested separately.

Implications

This research has a few practical and theoretical implications. Practically, the findings provide important guidance for academia, psychologists, and policymakers. Awareness programs can be introduced at the university level. To make students aware of the responsible use of social media and its psychological effects. Based on these findings, psychologists can develop interventions that help reduce the increasing trends of narcissism and promote a healthy self-concept of students. Further, digital well-being and social media literacy can be incorporated into the curriculum. So that the younger generation can adopt a balanced online attitude. Parents and teachers can also take advantage of these results to better guide young people's online activities. Academically, this research adds significantly to the existing academic literature. It explains the relationship between social media use and narcissism in an ideological context. In particular, this study reinforces the usefulness of Self-Presentation Theory and Social Identity Theory, which describe the formation of online self-esteem and identity. The results of this research also indicate that social media is a platform where traditional psychological theories need to be reinterpreted in the modern digital environment. Furthermore, this research provides the basis for future researchers to create a more comprehensive theoretical model by incorporating other potential variables, such as self-esteem, mental health, or social comparison, into this relationship.

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