

# Narcissism and Social Networking Sites: The Act of Taking Selfies

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## Abstract

*This study focused on why the act of taking selfies and posting them to the Internet is a factor leading to an increase in narcissistic and selfish behaviors. This study examined whether the Millennial Generation believes the selfie phenomenon is a contributor to the rise in narcissism. A 12-item survey was administered to 93 female college participants. A single open-ended question asked whether respondents found their behavior in posting selfies to be narcissistic. This study found that 55% of participants agreed that posting of selfies to different social networking platforms encouraged their narcissism and selfish behaviors.*

## I. Introduction

Named Word of the Year in 2013 by the Oxford English Dictionary, the term “selfie” has become ubiquitous in the vocabulary of nearly every teen and young adult in the technological world. A selfie is defined as “a photograph that one has taken of oneself, typically one taken with a smartphone or webcam and shared via social media” (Oxford Dictionary, 2013). For the Millennial Generation (Gen Y), the act of taking selfies and overall usage of various social media platforms are an integral part of life. The Millennial Generation’s comfort with social platforms has given this specific age group a more positive view of how social media might be affecting their lives. Studies, however, link social media use in young adults to various behavior development issues (Noor Al-Deen & Hendricks, 2012).

Millennials, aged from 18 to 33, are hyper-connected, but typically exhibit little awareness of or concern for others except as an audience. A study by San Diego State University professor Twenge shows that narcissism levels have risen steadily during the past few decades, making the Millennial Generation, also known as “Generation Me,” more selfish and self-absorbed than any other previous generation (Firesstone, 2012). Narcissism is typically illustrated as a tendency to believe one’s self to be superior to others’, to persistently pursue admiration from others, and to participate in egotistic thinking and behavior (Panek, Nardis & Konrath, 2013). Taking selfies and sharing photos on popular social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter are considered to be one of the biggest contributors to the rise in narcissistic behavior among Millennials. According to a study the Pew Research Center’s Internet & American Life Project using a nationally representative phone survey, adolescents in the United States are sharing more personal information than ever on social media.

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An additional study investigating the relationship between social media use, empathy and narcissism found that for both males and females, posting, tagging, and commenting on photos were associated with higher narcissism scores (Alloway, Runac, Qureshi & Kemp, 2014). Buffadi, a postdoctoral researcher at the Universidad de Dueto in Bilbao, Spain, wrote, "Narcissists use Facebook and other social networking sites because they believe others are interested in what they're doing, and they want others to know what they are doing" (Firestone, 2012).

This study aimed to examine how social media has changed our developmental and behavioral personalities, and how social media, specifically the act of taking and posting selfies, is deemed to be a main contributor to the rise in narcissistic behaviors in recent generations. Additionally, this study explored how the Millennial Generation thinks about the act of taking and posting these self-portraits to social networking sites.

## II. Literature Review

### ***Defining and Measuring Narcissism***

Narcissism is characteristically illustrated as an affinity to believe one's self to be superior over others, to incessantly pursue adoration from others, and to participate in egotistical thinking and behavior (Panek, Nardis & Konrath, 2013). Escalations in narcissism prove to be a potential risk to developing young adolescents in terms of their emotional and psychological health. Narcissism is recognized in conjunction with the use of personal communication as a method for self-enhancement and self-promotion, inhibiting individuals from establishing lasting intimate connections (Panek, Nardis & Konrath, 2013). Consequently, this can damage an individual's ability to shape healthy, mutually beneficial relationships (Alloway, Runac, Qureshi, and Kemp, 2014). Additionally, those with elevated narcissism levels tend to be more prone to respond with violent and aggressive behavior after being critiqued. Online relationships often appeal to narcissists, who are characteristically not able to, or unwilling, to form meaningful friendships that demand any time or emotional investment (Carpenter, 2012).

### ***History of the term "selfie"***

Despite "selfie" becoming a phenomenon of the 21st century, the act of sharing a selfie with friends pre-dates the Internet. The act of distributing "cartes de visite," or pocket sized photo cards, dates back to the 1860s (The Economist, 2014). In 1880, the photo booth was introduced, which attracted people to take self-photographs just as they still do today. The invention of the self-timer in the late 1880s allowed for any individual taking a photograph to preset their camera and allow themselves 5 to 10 seconds to get into a shot. This is believed to be the inception of what is now known as a selfie, or self-photograph.

In 1948, the first Polaroid camera was sold. This camera could be held at an arm's length, which encouraged individuals to take more intimate self-photos (The Economist, 2013). The slang expression "selfie," however, first appeared in 2002 in an online post from Australia. Since then, society's use of the word selfie has increased 170 times, thus encouraging the Oxford English Dictionary to announce it as Word of the Year in 2013 (Day, 2013).

### ***Facebook, Twitter and Smartphones***

The increase in media and technologies that allows society to engage in social media has brought about an increase in the amount of narcissism expressed by Millennials. The growing use of technology, specifically the increase of smartphones, has allowed users to access any type of social networking site with just a few swipes of a finger. Nearly 40% of cell phone holders will use a social networking site on their mobile device at any point in time, and nearly 28% state that they access social networking sites on a typical day. Adolescents, African Americans, Hispanics, individuals with a higher education, and individuals with a greater annual household income are the more likely to use social networking sites on their phones than anyone else (Smith & Zickuhr, 2012). Adolescents are well aware of their online reputes, and tend to actively manage the content and presence of their social networking profiles. In a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center, teens expressed that Facebook is an extension of their social communication and an essential component to their social life. Teens responded that online profiles help determine one's social status. Specifically, teens

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measure their status through the number of “likes” a photo or a status update garners. As a way to acquire the maximum number of likes, Facebook users will manipulate and change their profile content. If users do not achieve the number of desired “likes” on a photo, they may remove the photo from their profile (Duggan & Smith, 2013).

Managing and revising one’s online profile content is a vital aspect of an adolescent’s online identity and “e-personality” (Aboujaoude, 2011). As a way to manage the content on one’s online profile, “59% have deleted or edited something that they posted in the past, 53% have deleted comments from others on their profile or account and 45% have removed their name from photos that have been tagged to identify them” (Duggan & Smith, 2013). In addition, this same study found that nearly 52% of adolescents online express they have had an experience through a social networking site that boosted their confidence (Duggan & Smith, 2013).

In addition to Facebook, Millennials have increasingly relied on Twitter over the past few years to express their desire or curate their online personas. Nearly 24% of online youths used Twitter, up from 16% in 2011 (Duggan & Smith, 2013). Teens who expressed interest in sites, such as Twitter and Instagram, stated that they felt like they could better express their social identity on these platforms because they did not feel the pressure of upholding the same social expectations that Facebook generates (Beasley, B., & Haney). Some Millennials tend to pay more attention to other social networking sites, such as Twitter, as a way to escape the drama and pressure they feel that Facebook elicits. Nevertheless, these same teens still manage to stay active on Facebook, in addition to other social profiles (Smith & Zickuhr, 2012).

### ***Narcissism on Social Networking Sites***

Social networking sites, such as Facebook and Twitter, offer an easy way to participate in the attention-seeking, self-important behaviors of narcissists. It is important for narcissists to share their experiences because they believe all of their followers and social networking friends are genuinely interested in knowing what they are doing (Carpenter, 2012). Social networking sites give narcissistic individuals the chance to keep the focus of their profile’s content specifically on themselves. In doing this, they post status updates, comments and pictures that depict only themselves, and not others, perpetuating their self-interested nature (Aboujaoude, 2011).

Research indicates that those who use these types of social networking sites tend to develop their online profiles to achieve a type of social identity they wish to portray (Gabriel, 2014). In doing this, an individual will exaggerate certain character traits, and present a persona that they believe is appealing to the general public (Alloway, Runac, Qureshi & Kemp, 2014). This unrealistic self-presentation is possible through different social networking platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, because each individual has complete and total control of their profile content. Previous research suggests that narcissism may be positively related to posting different types of self-promoting content on social networking platforms (Alloway, Runac, Qureshi & Kemp, 2014).

After completing a literature review, the following two research questions were asked:

1. Does the act of posting selfies on social networking sites, specifically Facebook and Twitter, encourage selfish and narcissistic behavior in teens and young adults?
2. What do members of the Millennial Generation seek to gain from posting self-portraits on social media sites, and how does it benefit them?

## **III. Methodology**

For this survey, the author emailed a link to an online survey to all of Elon University’s on-campus female Panhellenic Greek organizations, which included nine sororities. Female students involved in Greek life were selected after considering that these college students tend to prioritize social interaction and relationships. The supposition here is that this sample of women would have a surplus of experience with taking selfies and tend to have a higher-than-average involvement in their generation with social networking platforms. The email recipients were asked to complete the 12-question survey as honestly as possible to help the author obtain a broad understanding of how the general population thinks in regard to this subject. All participants were promised confidentiality to ensure honest responses.

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### Questions

The survey questions asked if participants think that the selfies they take contribute to potential narcissism, and the extent to which they think that social media encourages such behavior.

Other survey questions include:

How often do you post selfies to social networking platforms?

Do you determine a person's social standing and popularity based on how many likes or comments they receive on a photo or status update?

If you do not receive the amount of likes you had hoped on a photo, will you take it off the social networking platform? (For the entire questionnaire, refer to Appendix A.)

One open-ended question -- Do you think that posting selfies to different social networking platforms encourages you to partake in narcissistic and selfish behaviors? -- was asked to elicit participants' personal responses on motives for posting selfies. Each response was coded to determine the most common reasons behind why or why not participants thought that posting selfies to different social networking platforms encouraged their narcissism and selfish behaviors.

### IV. Findings

Asked about their daily Internet usage, specifically their daily use of social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter, 73.5% of 93 Elon University respondents reported that they check or update their online profiles more than five times a day, as shown in *Figure 1* below, followed by those who checked their profiles four or five times a day (12.6%).

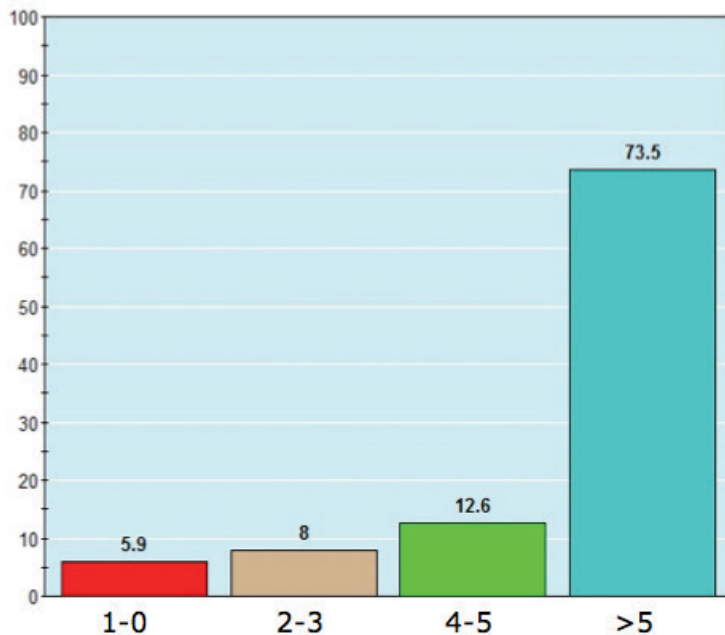


Figure 1. Number of times the participant checks social networking platforms a day

Nearly all the participants in this survey (97.8%) reported that they determine another person's popularity based on how many "likes" or comments that person's profile picture or status update receives. Additionally, 90.2% of the survey participants reported that they post pictures of themselves to social networking sites for the sole reason of receiving "likes" and comments from their online friends. However, only 15.7% of participants expressed that they have or would take a picture down from a social networking platform if they did not receive enough positive feedback, and the majority of participants (60.3%) said that they would allow the photo to remain on the platform.

When participants were asked an open-ended question if they thought that posting selfies to various social networking platforms encouraged their narcissism and selfish behaviors, the respondents had a wide variety of answers. More than half (55%) answered with a definitive “yes.” Selected answers to this open-ended question included the following:

- “I can honestly say that I am 100% guilty of participating in selfish and narcissistic behaviors when I post selfies to the Internet. My main reason for posting selfies is to let people know that I have a social life and to make it seem like I am constantly doing something fun or cool. I feel like it boosts my social status.”
- “Yes, I believe that the phenomenon of posting selfies to social networking sites has contributed to the rise in narcissism. I personally know that the driving force behind posting selfies to Facebook for me is the satisfaction of getting likes and comments on how good I look in the picture and how pretty I am.”

***There were negative answers, too:***

- “I feel that posting pictures of myself to social media sites are a simply a way of allowing my friends and family to see what I am currently doing in my life. I don’t believe that keeping friends and family up to date in my life would fall into the category of partaking in narcissistic or selfish behavior.”
- “No, I don’t think that posting selfies to social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter encourage potential narcissistic behaviors in myself. I personally post selfies to social media platforms as a way to document my travels and experiences. I use this tool for myself to keep memories, not to gain likes or attention from others, so to speak.”

The author analyzed and coded all the responses of the participants who responded yes to this open-ended question, and found the five most common reasons that these participants believe posting selfies to social networking platforms has increased narcissism and selfishness. As shown in Table 1, the highest number of participants mentioned that they sought to impress their online friends by sharing their social experiences. Participants were also highly likely to post to social media in order to receive as many likes as possible from their audience.

**Table 1. Reasons mentioned that posting selfies increase narcissism and selfishness**

Reason for posting selfie	Number of times each reason was mentioned
Posting a selfie allows their audience to notice their “impressive” social life.	52
Getting the maximum number of likes and comments on their selfie.	43
The participant believes they look attractive in their photo, and they want others to perceive them as such.	38
There is someone in specific (ex. Boyfriend, friend) that the participant is hoping to make jealous.	37
The participant genuinely believes that people are interested in what they are doing.	28

The responses received through this survey were similar to those in the 2013 Pew Research study previously mentioned. Consistent with the 2013 Pew Research study, the findings from this survey suggest that Millennials believe that social networking sites are essential to their social life. Additionally, responses from this survey supported the Pew Research study’s conclusion that Millennials base social status on the number of “likes” their photo receives on a social networking site. As a way to acquire the maximum number of likes, Facebook users will manipulate and change their profile content. This is an indicator of narcissism in that respondents of the survey partake in an incessant need to pursue adoration from others, and to participate in egotistical thinking and behavior (Panek, Nardis & Konrath, 2013).

A recurring reason for posting selfies to their online profiles was that the participants believe they look attractive in their photo, and they want others to perceive them as such. These reasons have been distinguished in various studies noted in the literature review and are an identifier of narcissism and selfish behaviors. Millennials who use social networking sites, such as Facebook and Twitter, often develop their online profiles so that they are able to achieve their desired social identity (Gabriel, 2014). The data in Table 1 supports the idea that narcissism is linked to social networking usage and activity.

Despite the high correlation between selfies and narcissism, many respondents argued that selfies did not promote narcissistic behavior. As shown in Table 2, the most common reason for this belief was that they are simply keeping friends and family up to date on their lives, followed by keeping memories and feeling good about themselves. Contrary to their argument, all three most common reasons can be interpreted as indicators of narcissistic behavior.

**Table 2. Reasons participants offered for responding “no”**

Reasons for posting the selfie	Number of times the phrase or reason was mentioned
Posting selfies allows me to keep my friends and family updated on my life.	20
I post selfies for myself as a way to keep memories.	12
Posting selfies to social networking platforms makes me feel good about myself.	10

Previous studies judged posting images to social networking platforms because users believe people are genuinely interested is an indicator of narcissistic behavior (Alloway, Runac, Qureshi & Kemp, 2014). However, participants may not be aware that they are demonstrating behaviors that are associated with narcissism (Carpenter, 2012). Previous studies suggest that narcissism is recognized in combination with the use of individual communication as a technique for self-enhancement and self-promotion (Panek, Nardis & Konrath, 2013).

The most common reason participants responded “no” was the thought that posting selfies allows them to keep friends and family updated. This reason could easily be noted as an aspect of self-promotion, which correlates with narcissism. As distinguished in the literature review, this reason could be perceived as a way for the participants to keep the focus of their profiles content undeniably on themselves, which is seen as a narcissistic act (Aboujaoude, 2011).

Another common reason, “Posting selfies to social networking platforms makes me feel good about myself,” is an undeniable indicator of narcissism. Regardless of whether the respondents admit to it or not, they are participating in these selfish behaviors. They feel this way because posting selfies to social networking sites boosts their self-confidence and overall thoughts about themselves. This response correlates with the Pew Research study’s conclusion that 52% of adolescents online express they have had an experience through a social networking site that boosted their confidence (Duggan & Smith, 2013). Relying on social networking sites as a way to make a person feel good about themselves indicates self-important behaviors associated with narcissism.

Almost all participants (87.8%) responded that the use of social networking platforms as a way to maintain and build social relationships has changed how society interacts and perceives others. The majority of participants (60.6%) also determined that the Millennial Generation puts too much energy and effort into creating their online persona. Among participants, only a quarter (25.4%) reported that they believe an online profile is a true depiction of a person.

## Conclusion

The Millennial Generation uses social media to generate and maintain not only personal relationships, but also their own idealized personas. With social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter being their main channel for social interaction, it is not surprising to find that many Millennials feel the need to present themselves in ways that attract the most attention from their peers.

Based on a survey with 93 college women involved in Greek life at Elon University, this study addressed the fundamental relationship between narcissism and social media. The survey results showed that the majority of participants believe that taking and posting selfies online encourages narcissistic and selfish behaviors. In addition, the study showed that participants think posting selfies is beneficial to them.

In a new phenomenon, this study reveals the connection between taking selfies and the rise in narcissistic behaviors in the Millennial Generation. Narcissism is characteristically defined as “incessantly pursue adoration from others, and to participate in egotistical thinking and behavior” (Panek, Nardis & Konrath,

2013). As shown in both Figure 1 and Figure 2, the majority of the participants' responses correspond with the definition of narcissism. For participants who responded "yes" to the open-ended question, their reasons for doing so lean toward the incessant need and desire to obtain attention and gratification from their audience. Similarly, participants on the opposite side also responded in ways that can be interpreted as having the egotistical thinking and behavioral aspect of narcissism.

Limitations to this study include the relatively small number of survey participants, as well as the depth of the survey questions. Follow-up personal interviews would have provided a better understanding of how the Millennial Generation perceives the new trend and phenomenon of posting selfies to social networking platforms. Future research might include in-depth interviews, as well as the inclusion of young male participants.

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## Appendix A: Survey Questionnaire

1. How often do you post selfies to social networking platforms?
    - a. 0-1 times per week
    - b. 2-3 times per week
    - c. 4-5 times per week
    - d. more than 5 times a week
  
  2. Do you determine a persons social standing and popularity based off how many likes or comments they receive on a photo or status update?
    - a. yes
    - b. no
  
  3. If you do not receive the amount of likes you had hoped on a photo, will you take it off the social networking platform?
    - a. yes
    - b. no
  
  4. Does the potential for positive feedback and number of likes you could receive on a picture encourage you to post your selfie to a social networking platform.
    - a. yes
    - b. no
  
  5. Does posting selfies on social networking platforms help you feel empowered and important amongst your friends and family?
    - a. yes
    - b. no
  
  6. Do you think that posting selfies to different social networking platforms encourages you to partake in narcissistic and selfish behaviors? (Open-ended question)
  
  7. Do you believe that the use of social networking platforms as a way to maintain and build social relationships has changed the way we as a society interact and perceive others?
    - a. yes
    - b. no
  
  8. Do you believe the Millennial Generation puts too much energy and effort into creating an online persona for themselves?
    - a. yes
    - b. no
  
  9. Do you think that an online profile is a true depiction of who a person really is?
    - a. yes
    - b. no
  
  10. Have you ever had an experience with a social networking platform that boosted your confidence or made you feel good about yourself?
    - a. yes
    - b. no
  
  11. Have you ever altered a photo of yourself as a way of making yourself seem more attractive or desirable?
    - a. yes
    - b. no
  
  12. How often do you check or update your online profile?
    - a. 0-1 times per day
    - b. 2-3 times per day
    - c. 4-5 times per day
    - d. more than 5 times a day
-