

Selfies, Social Media, and Self-esteem

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There are over 162 million photos on Instagram with the hashtag (a way for users to search for specific content and connect over it) #me. Some users might have posted their first today, while others might well be on their way to their fiftieth #me post. The photos are not quick snaps of daily events, instead the tag #me, along with a few others, indicates that these 162 million pictures are selfies (or self-photos). These numbers, which rise hourly, can indicate a serious problem that parents and friends are quick to overlook. Although social media sites have become another medium for documenting daily life, when people are posting in excess it could point to self-esteem issues. And if the signs of self-esteem issues are not spotted and prevented, it could affect other aspects of a person's life including their future.

After researching the different types of self-esteem issues and looking at the pro and con arguments that have surfaced over the years dealing with social media, selfies, how they affect self-esteem and vice versa, I have found there is no right or wrong argument, because the case will differ with each individual person. Instead, what is to be learned from those arguments are the signs that could point to a self-esteem issue and ways to help a friend or relative overcome that issue. If these self-esteem issues go unnoticed on social media sites, users could lose future job opportunities or even land themselves in a dangerous situation from posting excessive, unnecessary self-photos.

According to about.com, in psychology "self-esteem can involve a variety of beliefs about the self, such as the appraisal of one's own appearance, beliefs, emotions, and behaviors." In this research paper we are looking into what appears to be two separate issues, one of low self-esteem and one of exceedingly high self-esteem, or narcissism, it maybe that they are more similar than they appear. Narcissism is defined by the mayo clinic as "a mental disorder in which people have an inflated sense of their own importance and a deep need for admiration." This can be associated with self-esteem in the way that it identifies with the perception of one's self. Although people with a narcissistic personality tend to hold themselves in high-esteem mayo clinic also warns that "behind this mask of ultra-confidence lies a fragile self-esteem, vulnerable to the slightest criticism." So where does social media come in? Social media has become a vessel of public approval from close friends and family to strangers around the world. Apps like Instagram offer a quick response to a photo, and an influx of "likes" might boost self-esteem while the absence of "likes" could bring it down. But research shows that not everybody agrees.

Some studies, like Buffardi and Campbell's (2008) look into the relationship between social media activity and narcissism. In their study they answer questions like "does narcissism predict overall activity in a Web community? Is narcissism apparent in the content of the Web page, and if so, how?" (p. 1303-04). Through their study's they correlated they number of "friends" maintained on their personal Web page, as well as self-promoting evidence including photos selected to post due to their level of attractiveness and boastful self-descriptions (p. 1304). The conclusion of their study showed that "in terms of objective criteria on the Web page [like number of friends, wall posts, and self-indulgent photos], narcissism is related to a measure of Web activity [...] between friends," (p. 1310) pointing to a direct relation between the measure of "objective criteria," including self-promoting photos, and narcissism.

Corresponding with Buffardi and Campbell, a study done by Marcus, Machilek, and Schütz (2006) set out to accomplish almost the same goal but in addition discover if personal Web page personalities provide believable impressions of the users. Their study also included measuring the amount of "personal information provided by the owner, contact information, photographs directly linked to the Web site, external links to other pages, and miscellaneous

items” (p. 1018). These five categories included over 100 items to observe the impression of the “owner’s standing on Extraversion, Openness to Experience, and Agreeableness,” in which the “observers utilized various types of contact and personal information, links, and in particular, the number of photographs, and the amount and emotional quality of personal information” (p. 1024-25). The conclusion to their study “showed that meaningful inferences of personality could be derived from visiting a personal Web site for just 5 minutes, especially if the Web page is well-designed,” (p. 1030) validating Buffardi and Campbells approach to spotting narcissism through an observer’s impression of a Web page.

Other studies show a positive relationship between Web page activity and self-esteem and well-being. A study done by Kalpidou, Costin, and Morris (2011) wanted to find out how Facebook use and attitudes relate to self-esteem and college adjustment. They focused their research on two different groups, first year students and upper class-students, and found their results through averages of minutes spent on Facebook every day and number of friends along with the amount of information offered through features (relationship status, educational information, interest, favorite music, activities, and personal pictures) between those two groups. The conclusion of their research strongly supported a relationship between Facebook and psychological well-being for both groups, “spending a lot of time on Facebook was negatively related to self-esteem” while also reporting that students who were observed with low self-esteem “benefit from using Facebook because they expand their social capital,” and finally that “a social connection to Facebook was positively associated with high scores of emotional and total adjustment in college” (p. 187).

A psychologist and Director of the Media Psychology Research Center, Dr. Pamela Rutledge (2013), agrees with the correlation Kalpidou, Costin, and Morris found in their study. Dr. Rutledge focuses on selfie usage in social media and views them “as a by-product of technology-enabled self-exploration.” And while many view these “self-portraits” to be proof of generational narcissism and moral decline, she lists several reasons why selfies have nothing to do with narcissism. In her article she states that selfies “facilitate self and identity exploration,” “clearly identify a passion or interest,” “can be more about the context than the self,” “are not all about seeking external validation,” and they “offer users the ability to create a life narrative through images” (Rutledge 2013).

Although it seems that there is an argument for and against the correlation between social media, selfies, and self-esteem, parts of each argument mesh together and in turn give a solution to the overall self-esteem issue. Where Buffardi and Campbells (2008) approach to spotting narcissism through an observer’s impression of a Web page was validated by Marcus, Machilek, and Schütz (2006) that confirmed a person’s personality can be accurately determined through what is offered on a Web page, Kalpidou’s, Costin’s, and Morris’s (2011) seeming opposition doesn’t necessarily do that. And instead offer information that is helpful in spotting self-esteem issues through social media. By splitting their study into two groups they were able to supply valuable information on the relationship between age emotional connection to social media sites, or in their particular case Facebook, and academic adjustment. They found that first year students (younger people) finding that “first-year students seek out friends on Facebook as a coping strategy to relieve the stress of college adjustment,” and following that is their finding that “first-year students reported a stronger emotional connection to Facebook than upper-class students did” (p. 187). These results suggest that younger people are more subject to forming an emotional connection to social media sites suggesting that one step in spotting self-esteem issues

is to look at their age. Although, age isn't always a factor, it is a good indication that these issues start from a young age and can be prevented.

In another article "Self-portraits and Social Media: The Rise of the 'Selfie'", the reporter states that it is "cringe worthy to take the time to photograph ourselves, and assume our friend will want to see the results" (p. 1). When the pictures and updates border on the verge of excessive, there is a red flag flying. These excessive posts point to a cry for attention in the form of social and public approval and hint at low self-esteem. According to an article in *Teen Vogue* titled "Selfie Control" by Melissa Walker (2013) girls are more likely to fall into this pattern. In the article Psychologist Jill Webber, PhD. notes that girls in particular are socialized toward seeing themselves as loveable and worthwhile only if others value them and "selfie culture is a way for this tendency to go into over drive," or multiple post that follow one after the other (p. 233). The article continues, "that could be one explanation for total selfie overload" and according to Dr. Webber, "girls who repeatedly post selfies struggle with low self-esteem" (p. 233).

Leaving these signs to go unnoticed could potentially affect the person's life in a negative way. In the article posted by *BBC News*, Rutledge states:

just like with other forms of behavior that push the edges of the social envelope, those who create provocative selfies to get attention will not only not get the kind of attention they really want, but may find that they have created something that they have a hard time getting rid of. (p. 1)

Going back to the study done by Marcus, Machilek, and Schütz (2006) we see why this is important. Their conclusion states that "Web site owners, or those who plan to create such a site, [should be] aware that they should take care of their sires if they want to be seen as who they are, and that strangers may learn a lot about them simply by visiting their Web site" (p. 1030). Meaning that future employers can examine the Facebook pages of a job applicant, and if they don't like what they see, they can turn the applicant down. Or maybe these provocative pictures are seen by a stranger and suddenly the user has a friend request or message from someone they do not know, possibly leading to a stalker situation.

So, how can these self-esteem consequences be prevented? *Teen Vogue* offers up a few tips at the end of their article: if a user is reliant on comments from others on their status and pictures, Dr. Rutledge recommends "shifting your perspective" by either cutting them out completely or making them more fun.

These arguments can be seen across many different genres like news articles, teen magazines, and academic journals. The eclectic collection of these article types point out just how serious this problem with social media has become, and lets us know who all should be aware of this issue. News articles gain the attention of parental guardians and suggest that parents or guardians keep an eye out for signs of self-esteem. Teen magazines, aimed towards girls in their mid-teens and extending to girls in their mid-twenties, target the population that is most susceptible to falling into a self-esteem issue and hopefully help them in some way. While academic journals are what help researchers further their studies and provide the answers that parents and those suffering from self-esteem issues are looking for.

With this research, I was able to find that the signs to low self-esteem can be spotted through social media sites. What also arose from this research are the demographics for the people that are typically the subject of this "selfie culture," which tend to be young-adult (ages 13-26) females. For now there may not be a way to completely regain self-esteem if it has been brought down by social media, but one article did offer up a little help for those who find

themselves down. *Teen Vogue* tells their readers that "everything you share on social media reveals something about you, and you are in control. So maybe you like to travel, or read, or dance, or create crazy 3-D nail art – post that!" (233). The key is to turn the focus away from self-indulgent post and turn it towards more humble and modest post.

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