

Ripples in the Reflection Pond: Interaction as a Tool to Neutralize Narcissism

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In *The Narcissism Epidemic*, authors Twenge and Campbell describe an alarming trend of narcissism developing in the United States and abroad. Technology plays a major role in the expression of this social development: users are co-opting social networking and other applications to further self-admiration and self-absorption. The MySpace and Facebook pages that are popular among both teenagers and adults have, in some cases, become personal shrines. These pages can contain thousands of photos and videos capturing the page's owner from every conceivable angle. At the same time, a user can post countless tweets every day, dramatically describing every minute detail of his or her day. While these technologies likely did not cause the narcissism epidemic, they serve as ideal vectors for its spread. Narcissism is a serious problem, and is on the rise, impacting everything from the ability to have healthy relationships to the United States' educational competitiveness as a nation. However, society can potentially leverage these same technologies to combat narcissism and promote a healthy sense of self. In this paper, I discuss emerging trends of narcissism as well as technology's role in promoting it. I also explore ways that information technology in general and interaction technologies specifically can help stem the tide of narcissism, with the ultimate hope of encouraging a surge of research and development within this vital area.

The Rise of Narcissism and Its Impact

It is tempting to think that in a world contending with such a wide variety of social ills, narcissism should be the least of our worries. Many assert that narcissism can be a positive trait, and may even be a prerequisite for success. But according to Twenge and Campbell, authors of *The Narcissism Epidemic*, "narcissists are overconfident, not just confident, and – unlike most people high in self-esteem – place little value on emotionally close relationships" [1]. Twenge and Campbell cite a number of ways in which narcissism negatively influences society, from teens who post increasingly provocative pictures on their social networking profiles to an increased likelihood of domestic abuse from narcissistic partners. The authors argue that narcissism played a significant role in the race to acquire ever-larger and more expensive houses, which ultimately helped fuel the recent mortgage meltdown. In one study, narcissistic college students were more likely to drop out and show increasingly poor academic performance – suggesting that inflated confidence is robbing students of the motivation they need to truly succeed. As Twenge and Campbell put it, narcissism "is a great predictor of imaginary success – but not of actual success."

Nearly 1 out of 10 Americans in their twenties have experienced symptoms of Narcissistic Personality Disorder, the pathological grade of narcissism that can be accompanied by severe social problems. Data from 37,000 college students shows narcissistic personality traits rising as quickly as obesity. There is reason to believe that a proliferation of technologies centered on user expression (social networking sites, blogs, Twitter among numerous others) is making the situation worse, or at the very least doing little to improve it. Social network sites can enable and encourage the formation a large number of superficial relationships rather than a few deep ones [2]. This emphasis on quantity of friendship over quality correlates with common narcissistic behavior: Narcissists can have trouble forming close relationships because of a lack of empathy and emotional warmth.

Technological Solutions

The same technologies that appear to enable the spread of narcissism can also be co-opted in the battle against it. To better illustrate how this could be done, consider the story of Nancy, a typical 16 year old girl. She spends a great deal of time interacting with friends through Facebook. She tweets frequently, posting near constant updates and images to her Twitter profile. Nancy's parents, like any good parents, want their daughter to grow up to be a selfless, caring, and humble person, capable of forming close bonds and healthy relationships. Because Nancy's computer access and mobile phone are provided at the discretion of her parents, they can potentially impose controls on her devices. Software can be employed to help her parents identify and prevent their daughter's narcissistic tendencies as they develop. And it is hoped that interaction spurred on by new social applications can help Nancy reverse some of the narcissistic tendencies that she has developed.

Identifying Narcissism

Narcissism can develop on the individual level in a way that is analogous to how it has spread at a national level: in small, imperceptible increments over time, making it difficult to recognize the problem. Research suggests, however, that there may be some early warning signs for narcissism. Narcissists can be frequently identified by their social networking profiles. Through collecting objective measures such as number of friends, number of wall posts, and the size of the *About Me* section, as well as subjective measures, including ratings of self-absorption and self-importance by research assistants, researchers were able to find reliable signals indicating narcissism in these profiles [2]. More specifically, the study found that some of these measures did correlate significantly with the subject's score on a Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI), a 40 question test designed to correlate with narcissistic behaviors. Automating or crowdsourcing the classification of narcissism can provide a first line of defense in combating narcissistic tendencies. Given the popularity of online quizzes, it would be simple to implement the NPI within a social networking site. Nancy's parents may employ an online scanning service that would notify them if it appears that Nancy may be developing narcissistic tendencies.

Preventing Narcissism

Nancy's parents have realized that she is beginning to develop narcissistic tendencies: her Facebook profile indicates that she is a little bit too focused on herself. Nancy's parents decide to act.

Because Nancy's parents still pay for her cell phone, and technically have control, they insist that she should install narcissism prevention software. For instance, the camera application on her phone begins to flash warnings and finally ceases to work when Nancy starts to take too many pictures of herself (see figure 1). The app could use facial recognition with a simple one time configuration that easily recognizes its owner.

Nancy's Facebook profile would also be ready to put the brakes on her narcissism. Her parental controls on her page could include limits on the number of self involved online activities. Again, the profile notices and prevents the upload of too many photos of Nancy and it imposes limits on the frequency of updates. Using semantic processing and text mining technologies, the profile learns to differentiate between thoughtful posts and those that are for idle self-obsession. In this way, our social applications may someday help us to resist our own narcissistic temptations, a narcissistic analogue to the Google "Mail Googles" application that prevents e-mailing while intoxicated.

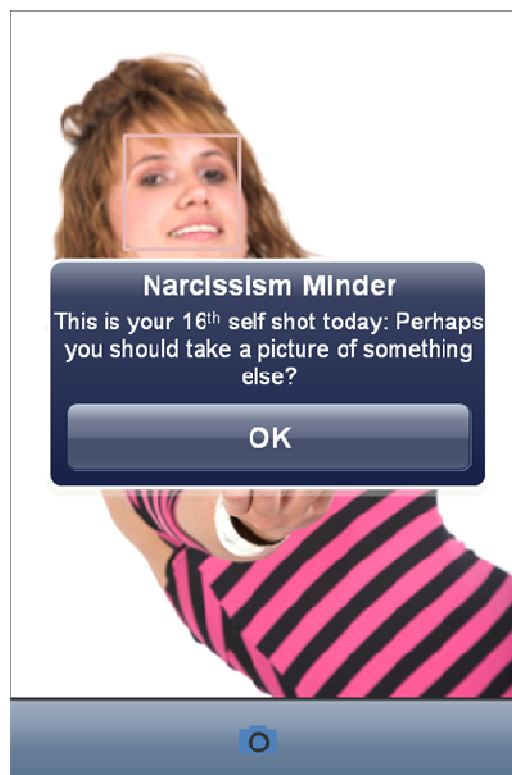


Figure 1. *You ought not to be in pictures.* An app is able to recognize the face of the owner in pictures. When it notices that the user is taking too many shots, it warns the user and ultimately refuses to take any more.

Treating Narcissism

Employing technology to treat narcissism and narcissistic personality disorder is a difficult problem. While well known ELIZA program was an early experiment to develop a computer-based psychologist, systems like these were never widely deployed. Much of the online support for narcissism is, understandably, devoted to those who suffer with narcissistic partners or family members. Are there modes of interaction and meaningful social applications that can combat narcissism?

Twenge and Campbell recommend that, to combat narcissism, one should “try to encourage feelings of morality, caring, and kindness in the narcissist, which will not be seen as threatening and has the potential to change the narcissist’s behavior in a positive way” [1]. A difficult but potentially powerful way that software can help Nancy is by leading her to positive alternatives besides self-involvement. Apps that encourage an expanded world view, encourage Nancy to help the less fortunate, and promote deep connections to her friends may have positive effects on reducing narcissism. Experiments showed that, when narcissists were told that another person (a confederate meant to provoke the subject) was similar to them in some way (for example, had a similar rare fingerprint or shared a birthday), they were more likely to keep aggressive behavior in check than if they had no identified similarity [3]. These kinds of connections to others offer a powerful way of keeping some of the ugly behaviors of narcissism in check. Facebook already has a “Friendship” application that tracks and displays common interests between friends. Applications like this could be extended to show users new types of personal connections through mining of profile information. It may have a positive effect on aggressive social network profiles.

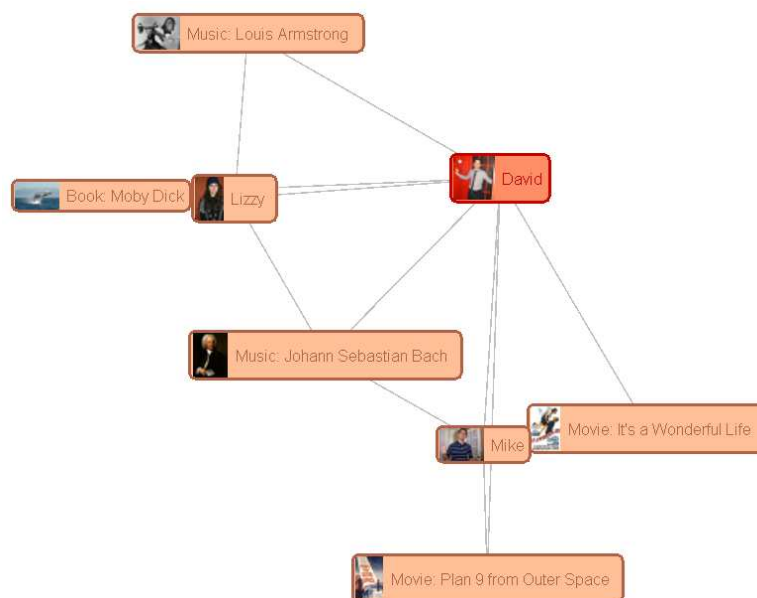


Figure 2. Exploring similarities. New social networking applications can help us to emphasize the ways in which we are similar, increasing understanding and mitigating narcissism. Shown is a mock up of what such an application may look like, based on Vizster.

Twenge and Campbell also discuss ways in which narcissism can be channeled into social good: They suggest that somebody with narcissistic tendencies can become “a highly visible crusader for some positive change.” Kiva.org, a non-profit that specializes in connecting amateur lenders to entrepreneurs in developing countries in need of microloans, offers a Facebook application that shows a user’s friends his current outstanding microloans. Applications like these can help a user brag about something more meaningful, and ultimately, more helpful to society.

Responsibility of Designers

If the evidence of the harmful effects of narcissism hold up to scrutiny, then narcissism should become something that designers consider when developing software. The ACM code of conduct states “When designing or implementing systems, computing professionals must attempt to ensure that the products of their efforts will be used in socially responsible ways, will meet social needs, and will avoid harmful effects to health and welfare” [4].

Unfortunately, there is little commercial incentive to discourage narcissists, and designers may feel pressured to indulge them. Narcissists are often willing to spend significant sums of money and credit to reinforce their positive self identities [1]. Encouraging anti-narcissistic design will likely be a difficult change of pace for designers, who are so often focused on meeting the user’s needs and wants.

But the road to obsolescence is paved with good intentions, and it remains to be seen whether or not any of the proposed solutions will work in practice. Software-based nannies, unlike their TV equivalents, are often circumvented by the ones they intend to protect.

Conclusions

The epidemic of narcissism is a legitimate and growing concern. In this paper, I have attempted to lay out some possible solutions and courses of HCI research that may someday help to stem the tide of narcissism. Before, during and after these technologies are developed, there are a many questions that remain to be answered about the effect of interaction technology in the development or prevention of narcissism. Do certain modes of interaction encourage or discourage feelings of entitlement and self-importance? Will this sense of entitlement blossom with advancements in automation? Will depth of interaction in new social networking applications translate to depth in the relationships that they support? These and many other questions are waiting to be answered in what I hope will become a fruitful new area of interaction research.

Citations

[1] Twenge, J.M. and Campbell, W.K., *The Narcissism Epidemic: Living in the Age of Entitlement*, Free Press, New York, 2009.

[2] Buffardi, L.E., Campbell, W.K., “Narcissism and Social Networking Web Sites,” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 34(10), pp. 1303-1314, 2008.

[3] Konrath, S., Bushman, B., and Campbell, W. K., “Attenuating the link between threatened egotism and aggression.” *Psychological Science*, 17(11), pp. 995-1001, 2006.

[4] “ACM Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct,” <http://www.acm.org/about/code-of-ethics>, 1992.

About the Author

Jimmy Secretan is the principal scientist at Korrelate, inc. in Celebration, Florida, where he focuses on large-scale predictive analytics in a privacy-sensitive context. He holds a Ph.D. in Computer Engineering from the University of Central Florida. He has conducted research in the areas of machine learning, data mining, evolutionary computation, creativity support systems and mobile computing. He was co-chair of the 2009 CHI workshop called “Computational Creativity Support: Using Algorithms and Machine Learning to Help People Be More Creative,” which sought to bring together practitioners from creative disciplines with researchers in the fields of machine learning and data mining.