

Are Selfies a Sign of Narcissism and Psychopathy?

A new study examines selfies, narcissism, psychopathy and self-objectification

Posted Jan 08, 2015

There has been a lot of talk about selfies in the media. In fact, the word selfie was recently added to Oxford's online dictionary. But psychologists know surprisingly little about the effects of selfies or about the people who post them. A new study appearing in an upcoming issue of *Personality and Individual Differences* examined the relationship between selfie-posting, photo-editing and personality.¹ Are people who post selfies on social media sites narcissistic and psychopathic, or self-objectifying, or both?

In this study, the authors examined self-objectification, along with three traits, known as the “Dark Triad”: narcissism, psychopathy, and machiavellianism.² They're called “dark” because they have an almost evil connotation and are associated with a callous and manipulative way of interacting with other people.³

Narcissism: Extreme self-centeredness and a grandiose view of oneself. Narcissists have an excessive need to be admired by others and have a sense of entitlement. They're likely to agree with statements like: “I'm more capable than most people,” and “I will usually show off if I get the chance.”⁴

Psychopathy: Impulsivity and lack of empathy.⁵ Those high in psychopathy are likely to agree with statements like: “Payback needs to be quick and nasty.”⁶

Machiavellianism: Manipulative-ness without regard for others' needs. Those high on this trait tend to have little concern about morals.⁶

Self-objectification: This is a tendency to view your body as an object based on its sexual worth. Those high in self-objectification tend to see themselves in terms of their physical appearance and base their self-worth on their appearance.⁷

To examine the association between selfies and personality, Fox and Rooney used data from a nationally representative sample of 1,000 men between 18 and 40 years old.¹ Participants completed personality questionnaires assessing the dark triad and self-objectification. They were asked how many selfies they had taken and posted on social media in the last week, as well as how many other photos they had posted and how much time they spent on social media sites. They were also asked to rate how often they used various methods to make themselves look better in pictures, such as cropping, filtering, and re-touching.

Results showed that both narcissism and self-objectification were associated with spending more time on social networking sites, and with more photo-editing. Posting numerous selfies was related to both higher narcissism and psychopathy, controlling for the overall number of other types of photos posted. Machiavellianism was unrelated to photo behavior when taking these other variables into account.

This study suggests that narcissists are more likely to show off with selfies and make extra effort to look their best in these photos. Interestingly, psychopathic men posted more selfies, but didn't tend to edit them more than their less psychopathic counterparts. The study's authors speculated that this may be because they lack self-control and don't really filter what they put on Facebook—editing photos suggests a level of careful self-presentation that you would be unlikely to find among those high in psychopathy.

But these results also show that men who view their bodies as objects are more likely to edit their photos. Self-objectification tends to be associated with low self-esteem⁸—quite the opposite of narcissism, which is correlated with high self-esteem.⁹ But this is consistent with other findings that both narcissism and low self-esteem are related to greater Facebook use.¹⁰ It is also important to note that those high on self-objectification didn't post more selfies—they were just more conscious about their appearance in the ones that they did post. Given the greater self-objectification tendencies of women, it would be interesting to examine these questions in a female sample as well.¹

But before you start accusing all your selfie-posting Facebook friends of being self-obsessed narcissists and psychopaths, realize that these correlations (though statistically significant) were relatively small, and the sample studied didn't include women.

Since I originally posted this article, new research has been conducted on selfies and narcissism, this time examining both men and women. Click here to read about the new findings.

Gwendolyn Seidman, Ph.D. is an associate professor of psychology at Albright College, who studies relationships and cyberpsychology. Follow her on Twitter for updates about social psychology, relationships, and online behavior.

References

- 1 Fox, J., & Rooney, M. C. (2015). The Dark Triad and trait self-objectification as predictors of men's use and self-presentation behaviors on social networking sites. *Personality & Individual Differences, 76*, 161-165. doi: 10.1016/j.paid.2014.12.017
- 2 Paulhus, D. L., & Williams, K. M. (2002). The Dark Triad of personality: Narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy. *Journal of Research in Personality, 36*, 556-563. [http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0092-6566\(02\)00505-6](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0092-6566(02)00505-6).
- 3 Jones, D. N., Paulhus, D. L. (2010). Differentiating the Dark Triad within the interpersonal circumplex. In Horowitz, L. M., Strack, S. N. *Handbook of interpersonal theory and research*. New York: Guilford. pp. 249-67
- 4 Raskin, R., & Terry, H. (1988). A principal-components analysis of the Narcissistic Personality Inventory and further evidence of its construct validity. *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology, 54*, 890-902. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.54.5.890>
- 5 Jonason, P. K., & Krause, L. (2013). The emotional deficits associated with the Dark Triad traits: Cognitive empathy, affective empathy, and alexithymia. *Personality & Individual Differences, 55*, 532-537. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2013.04.027>
- 6 Christie, R., & Geis, F. L. (1970). *Studies in machiavellianism*. New York: Academic Press.
- 7 Fredrickson, B. L., & Roberts, T. A. (1997). Objectification theory: Toward understanding women's lived experienced and mental health risks. *Psychology of Women Quarterly, 21*, 173-206. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-6402.1997.tb00108.x>
- 8 Strelan, P., Mehaffey, S. J., & Tiggemann, M. (2003). Self-objectification and esteem in young women: The mediating role of reasons for exercise. *Sex Roles, 48*(1/2), 89-95.
- 9 Campbell, K. W., Rudich, E. A., Sedikides, C. (2002). Narcissism, self-esteem, and the positivity of self-views: Two portraits of self-love. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 28*, 358-368. doi: 10.1177/0146167202286007
- 10 Mehdizadeh, S. (2010). Self-presentation 2.0: Narcissism and self-esteem on Facebook. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking, 357-364*. doi:10.1089/cyber.2009.0257