Can the occurrence of narcissism be understood as a psychological response to social changes in postmodernity?

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the occurrence of narcissism, an inflated sense of self-importance, in the postmodern society through a literature review. The research question is: Can the occurrence of narcissism be understood as a psychological response to social changes in postmodernity? Empirical evidence has shown a generational increase in narcissism over the past decades. Thus, there could be a causal connection between social changes in postmodernity and the rise in narcissism. Firstly, the historical definition of narcissism, as well as how it is defined today as a disorder and as a personality trait, is provided. Further, historical social changes that have occurred in postmodernity are discussed as potential causes of the rise in narcissism. Lack of social constraints resulting in instability and uncertainty were suggested to be some of the main causes related to increased narcissism. Narcissism was found to be linked to several trends in contemporary society, such as social media use, the increased demand for cosmetic procedures, and rampant consumerism. Lastly, the consequences of narcissism were shown to be destructive to society and could be linked to many of today's social ills, such as climate change and the rise in mental illnesses. Solutions to stop the spread of narcissism are proposed. Further research is needed in order to better the understanding of narcissism and its effects on the world. To do so, studying narcissism should not only be studied by psychologists but also by sociologists, who could provide a larger perspective by studying how narcissism is affected by society, and in turn, how narcissism affects society.

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1. Introduction

These days more and more people emphasize physical appearance, celebrity worship, attention-seeking, and material wealth. Phenomena such as self-promotion on social media, taking so-called selfies, and going under the knife to enhance one's appearance, has become normalized. A big goal for many is to become rich in order to afford a luxurious lifestyle. Reality-TV shows like *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* and *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills*, where one can follow the lives of the rich and famous, gain massive audiences. Some wish to become famous because they value fame in itself and attempt to achieve it through the internet or reality-TV programmes such as *Paradise Hotel* and *Love Island*. Song lyrics conveying messages like "I love myself", "I don't need anybody else", "I'm attractive", and "focus on me" are not uncommon to hear these days. When googling "how to love yourself", you get as many as 2 090 000 000 results, including tips like "praise yourself", "stop all criticism", and "focus on yourself". What do all these phenomena have in common? An excessive focus on the self, also referred to as narcissism.

The generations born from around the 1980s onwards, Millennials and Generation Z, have been termed the "Snowflake Generation" by the mass media for being overly sensitive, entitled, and viewing themselves as unique and special, just like a snowflake (Collins, 2019). Such traits are linked to narcissism. Twenge and Campbell (2009) have claimed that there is an ongoing narcissism epidemic in the USA. They describe narcissism as a psycho-cultural disease that is having a significant impact on the culture. Furthermore, they argue that narcissistic personality traits have risen as much as obesity over the last decades. Narcissistic personality disorder, the pathological version of the trait, has also become more common. A study found that young Americans in their 20s were three times more likely than older people over 65 to have experienced narcissistic personality disorder in their lifetime (Stinson et al., 2008). This supports the notion that young people growing up today are more narcissistic than previous generations.

I have chosen to write about narcissism because, having observed the trend of self-centred behaviours, I have wondered if we have become more obsessed with ourselves and less concerned about others than we were before. Thus, this thesis will examine how social

trends could have contributed to the rise of narcissism. My thesis question is: Can the occurrence of narcissism be understood as a psychological response to social changes in postmodernity?

In this thesis, our time will be referred to as postmodernity, a term popularized by Michel Foucault (Aakvaag, 2008). Firstly, the thesis will address the historical definition of narcissism and how narcissism as a disorder and as a personality trait is defined today. Accordingly, it will be looking at how social trends in postmodernity could have influenced the increase in narcissism. Thereafter, it will look at how narcissistic behaviour manifests itself in contemporary society in the domain of social media, cosmetic procedures, and consumerism. After that, a discussion of the potential causal connection between the occurrence of narcissism and social changes will follow. Lastly, the consequences of a narcissistic culture and potential solutions of how to stop the spread of narcissism will be discussed.

It is essential to study both the human mind and the society we live in to understand what narcissism is and how it develops. Psychology looks inwards and studies an individual's mind to understand human behaviour, whereas sociology looks outwards and studies society as a whole and how it shapes the way individuals act and interact with each other. Narcissism has, until now, primarily been studied within clinical, social, and personality psychology (Campbell & Crist, 2020). It has not been widely studied within the domain of sociology because sociologists have viewed the topic as being exclusively psychological and thus irrelevant to the social sphere (Valadez & Clignet, 1987). Since society shapes how people think, feel and behave, and in turn, individuals themselves shape society, looking at narcissism through sociological lenses could enhance the understanding of this complex concept.

2. Method

I chose to do a literature review to analyse empirical evidence on narcissism already collected by various researchers. I figured literature review was the best method to use because narcissism is a sensitive topic and difficult to study. I used the search engine Oria as well as Google Scholar to look for relevant literature. Moreover, I attempted to find peer-reviewed articles of high quality to support my arguments. While searching, I used the word "narcissism" and combined it with other keywords such as "postmodernity", "social media", "plastic surgery", "consumerism", "sociology", and so on. Additionally, I used books I found helpful from the library and from previous courses I had taken.

I started off by finding reliable literature describing what narcissism entails, including its history and how it is defined today. Since narcissism has been chiefly studied within the discipline of psychology, I searched for literature primarily within journals of personality and social psychology. I also drew largely on *The Narcissism Epidemic* (2009) written by Campbell and Twenge and *The New Science of Narcissism* (2020), written by Campbell and Crist. Both Twenge and Campbell have a long history of studying narcissism.

I also attempted to look for sociological literature, but I found that narcissism had not been widely studied within this domain. Thus, it was difficult to find relevant sociological theories addressing the development of narcissism. I eventually chose to draw on the influential contribution on narcissism in society, Christopher Lasch's *The Culture of Narcissism* (1979), which is relevant to sociology, and Durkheim's theory of anomie (1897). I figured these theories could contribute to a better understanding of the potential causal connection between the occurrence of narcissism and society. Furthermore, by providing evidence for a culture of narcissism, I chose to highlight three specific trends in contemporary society in which narcissistic behaviour is evident, which is through social media usage, the motivation to undergo cosmetic surgery, and the engagement in excessive consumerism. Thus, I searched for journals describing the relationship between these domains and narcissism.

The strength of using this research method was that I was able to find much reliable psychological research already conducted on narcissism. There are, however, some

limitations. Firstly, most of the evidence I found on narcissism was based on research conducted in America. That made it difficult to say for sure whether a narcissistic culture extends to other parts of the world. This is why it is important to be cautious of generalizing these narcissistic patterns. Additionally, even though much evidence points in the direction of increased narcissism in society, some researchers do not agree to this claim and have found contradictory evidence (Trzesniewski & Donnellan, 2010). Furthermore, some argue that we have to be cautious of labelling certain generations as more narcissistic because people have a tendency to mistake changes in themselves for changes in the world. As people grow older they often become less self-centred and thus, it is easier for them to believe that the younger generation is more egocentric (Eibach, Libby & Gilovich, 2003). Lastly, finding relevant sociological research on narcissism was not an easy task. Hence, the chosen sociological theories do not necessarily provide solid empirical evidence on the interplay between narcissism and social changes in postmodernity.

3. The historical definition of narcissism

The word narcissism derives from the Greek mythological character Narcissus, who fell in love with his own reflection while looking at it in the water. He got stuck in admiring himself and became unable to connect with anyone besides himself. Narcissus stared at his own image until his death (Rhodewalt et al., 2020). This legend captures the most extreme consequences of narcissism. Some have declared Narcissus as a reflection of our modern times (Twenge & Campbell, 2009).

Psychoanalysis is a theory within psychology that has a long history of studying narcissism. Psychoanalysis studies the conscious and unconscious processes in the mind and focuses on psychological drives related to aggression, sex, and pleasure-seeking. It is assumed that early childhood experiences mould the personality to a large extent. Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, was early in addressing narcissism. Though Freud's theory is not commonly used today, it has had a considerable influence within the psychological domain and on the study of narcissism (Campbell & Crist, 2020).

Freud first brought up the concept of narcissism in the essay "On Narcissism: An Introduction" in 1914. In his explanation of narcissism, he distinguishes between primary and secondary narcissism. He argues that a primary narcissism occurs at birth, is a natural part of the human mind, and represents self-love (Tyler, 2007). The libido, which is the psychological energy deriving from instincts of self-preservation and sexual instincts, is directed towards the self at this phase. The libido drives the id, which, according to Freud, is one of the components of the human personality. The id is comprised of unconscious processes. It is driven by the pleasure principle and seeks immediate satisfaction of needs. At this stage, the individual is highly self-centred (Davey et al., 2014).

Later, as the individual matures, the ego, another part of the personality, develops. The ego operates in the unconscious, preconscious, and conscious parts of the mind. At this point, the libido directs itself outwards, from the subject itself towards external objects. At this phase, self-centeredness declines. The ego is concerned with the reality principle and regulates the instant needs of the pleasure principle within the id. It ensures the needs are

met in appropriate ways that are realistic and socially acceptable. Freud states that a primary narcissism is necessary for the ego, or the self, to be established (Tyler, 2007).

The last part of the personality, the superego, is also present in all parts of the mind. The superego is considered society's agent in the mind (Lasch, 1979), in which morals and values from society and representations of authority, such as the parents, are internalized. It helps the individual to act according to social norms by regulating the id's urges and making the ego choose to behave moralistically and strive to achieve ideal goals (Davey et al., 2014). Failure to obey these morals can lead to feelings of guilt (Tyler, 2007).

The secondary narcissism occurs later in adolescence and adulthood and can become either normal or pathological. Freud postulates that experiencing trauma or unreturned love can lead to the libido withdrawing from external objects and turning back to the individual itself, the ego. This increases the risk of developing pathological narcissism. That can lead the individual to treat external objects as if they were a part of the self, and thus becoming self-centred in a harmful way (Kilminster, 2008).

4. Defining narcissism today

A lot of empirical research has been conducted since the time of Freud. Thus, we have a different understanding of what narcissism is today. Narcissism is a complex concept that exists on a continuum. There exists a difference between pathological narcissism and narcissism as a personality trait. Narcissism becomes a disorder when behaviours or beliefs are causing impairment (Campbell & Crist, 2020).

4.1 The difference between secure high self-esteem and narcissism

Narcissism has for a long time been described as an extreme form of inflated self-esteem or self-esteem "on steroids" (Brummelman, Thomaes & Sedikides, 2016). This claim is controversial, and the relationship between narcissism and self-esteem are still being discussed. Self-esteem is described as "global feelings of self-liking, self-worth, respect and acceptance" (Rosenberg, 1965, as cited in Kernis, 2003, p. 2). Research has shown that there are two forms of high self-esteem, secure high self-esteem, which is the healthy form of self-esteem, and fragile high self-esteem, which has been linked to narcissism.

Secure high self-esteem is beneficial to an individual's psychological well-being and relates to positive attitudes towards the self. It is a feeling of self-worth that is genuine, stable, realistic and congruent with both high implicit self-esteem and high explicit self-esteem. Implicit self-esteem entails nonconscious, automatic self-evaluations. High explicit self-esteem relates to conscious feelings of self-worth. According to Epstein and Morling's (1995) (as cited in Kernis, 2003) Cognitive-Experiential Self-Theory of personality, humans have two systems of information processing. The first system is cognitive, rational, and conscious. It is where the explicit self-esteem resides, and it is based on logical analyses of self-worth. The other system is experiential, automatic, and nonconscious. This is where implicit self-esteem is located, and it is guided by automatic processing of affective experiences (Zeigler-Hill, 2006). People with secure high self-esteem like themselves for who they really are. They do not need to feel superior to others, are not highly vulnerable to threats, nor do they require constant validation. Secure high self-esteem arises naturally when successfully overcoming life challenges and having

social relationships where one is valued for who one is, not for what one has achieved (Kernis, 2003).

On the other hand, fragile self-esteem is associated with defensive, unstable, and contingent feelings of self-worth. There are several subtypes of fragile self-esteem. Firstly, discrepant self-esteem is associated with low implicit self-esteem and high explicit self-esteem. When implicit self-esteem is low, the underlying negative feelings are nonconscious and thus difficult to be aware of. That can lead to reacting defensively to negative evaluations directed towards the self. Contingent self-esteem, another form of fragile self-esteem, is dependent on external factors, such as achievements and how one is perceived by others (Kernis et al., 1997, as cited in Kernis, 2003). When high self-esteem itself is pursued, it is contingent, not true self-esteem (Deci & Ryan, 1995, as cited in Kernis, 2003). If someone actively seeks to feel good about themselves, they are more prone to engage in self-enhancement and self-promotion strategies to maintain their self-esteem, which is not adaptive in the long run. They are likely to attribute their success to how great they are, whereas they may deny their involvement when failing and blame external circumstances. Furthermore, defensive self-esteem is when someone rejects their negative self-feelings by presenting them positively, yet falsely, in order to be socially accepted. The last subtype of fragile self-esteem is unstable self-esteem, in which self-esteem fluctuates across situations (Kernis, 2003).

According to Kernis (2003) and several other researchers, narcissism could be associated with fragile high self-esteem. Furthermore, the psychodynamic "mask model" has been used to describe the relationship between narcissism and self-esteem for a long time. This model argues that behind the mask of grandiosity of the narcissist lies deep feelings of insecurity and inferiority (Kernberg, 1975; Kohut & Wolf, 1986, as cited in Di Pierro, Mattavelli & Gallucci, 2016). This model also states that narcissists have low implicit and high explicit self-esteem. However, this argument has not been fully supported. Some argue that narcissists really do have high self-esteem and are overly confident (Twenge & Campbell, 2009).

4.2 Narcissistic personality disorder

According to the National Epidemiologic Survey on Alcohol and Related Conditions, the point prevalence of pathological narcissism or narcissistic personality disorder (NPD) in the USA could be around 2%. The point prevalence is looking at how many people are having the disorder at a particular point in time (Campbell & Crist, 2020). The lifetime prevalence, which is the number of people having the disorder at some point in their lives, is higher and estimated to be around 6.2%. The rates of the disorder are greater among men than among women (Stinson et al., 2008). Given measurement difficulties, it is not easy to say for sure how many people experience the disorder.

When diagnosing someone with narcissistic personality disorder, they have to meet at least five of nine criteria that have been present for a longer period of time, found in the *DSM-5*, the current version of the diagnostic tool *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. The first criterion is grandiosity, which entails having a grandiose sense of self and viewing oneself as superior. Second comes actively fantasizing about power, status, and fame. Furthermore, there is an existing belief that one is unique and special, and that one desires to associate with people of high status. The fourth criterion includes an expectation of being excessively admired. Moreover, there is a strong sense of entitlement and an expectation of getting wishes fulfilled. Narcissism is also characterized by exploitation of others and lack of empathy. Additionally, the vulnerable subtype of narcissism is associated with being envious of other people, while the grandiose subtype is related to a belief that others are envious. Lastly, narcissism is associated with arrogance (Campbell & Crist, 2020).

The mentioned diagnostic criteria are more consistent with the grandiose subtype. It has been assumed that narcissists display high self-esteem to conceal their fragile self-esteem, hence the psychodynamic "mask model" mentioned above. However, recent research has shown a significant difference between what has been termed grandiose and vulnerable subtypes of narcissism. Both types relate to the traits of self-importance, sense of entitlement, and antagonism. The grandiose, overt type differs from the vulnerable, covert type by exhibiting self-esteem, confidence, and boldness. On the other hand, the vulnerable narcissist represents low self-esteem and anxiety. Vulnerable narcissists are not as easy to spot and are often called "hidden narcissists" (Campbell & Crist, 2020).

Moreover, research has suggested that both subtypes are associated with contingent self-esteem but claim their self-esteem are regulated differently. Grandiose narcissists have been assumed to regulate their self-esteem through overt strategies such as self-aggrandizement, which entails seeking attention through promoting oneself as important, through competition and by devaluing others. On the other hand, vulnerable narcissists seem to depend on external validation, such as others' approval, to maintain their self-esteem. This suggests that hypotheses of fragile self-esteem relating to narcissism are more complex than earlier proposed (Zeigler-Hill, Clark, & Pickard, 2008).

The narcissistic personality disorder is hard to treat. Firstly, this personality disorder is highly comorbid with other mental illnesses, which means that one or more disorders can co-occur. That makes it challenging to identify the right treatment approach. Some of these mental illnesses, relating especially to the grandiose subtype, include other personality disorders and substance use disorders. When it comes to vulnerable narcissists, they are more prone to anxiety and depression (Caligor, Levy & Yeomans, 2015). In addition, grandiose narcissists do not always seek treatment because it is difficult for them to acknowledge their problems. However, vulnerable narcissists are more likely to ask for help because they can become significantly impaired (Campbell & Crist, 2020).

The most popular forms of therapy used to treat narcissistic personality disorder are psychodynamic therapy, cognitive behavioural therapy, and psychiatric medication. Psychodynamic therapy originated from Freud's psychoanalytic therapy. Thus, the therapist is focusing on understanding the patient's unconscious processes in the mind. It is attempted to identify hidden emotions and thoughts often with roots in childhood experiences. Cognitive behavioural therapy mainly focuses on changing destructive thought patterns, behaviours and emotional responses. While psychiatric medication is an option for treating the disorder, there are no clear recommendations of what kinds of medication are having the best effect (Campbell & Crist, 2020).

4.3 Narcissism as a personality trait

Since narcissism exists on a spectrum, there are different levels of narcissism. While pathological narcissism represents the most extreme form, narcissism as a personality trait is more common. It is similar to clinical narcissism but exists to a lesser extent. It can be hard to discern between narcissism as a disorder and as a trait. When assessing pathological narcissism, the Pathological Narcissism Inventory (PNI) is applied. However, when measuring narcissistic attributes, the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI) is frequently used (Pincus et al., 2009, as cited in Maxwell, Donnellan, Hopwood, & Ackerman, 2011). This measurement is suited for measuring grandiosity. The most popular measurement of vulnerability is the Hypersensitive Narcissism Scale (HSNS). Both of the scales capture attributes such as entitlement and self-centeredness (Campbell & Crist, 2020). Most of the evidence that will be presented in this thesis concerns narcissism as a personality trait measured by the Narcissistic Personality Inventory.

5. Social changes in postmodernity

As mentioned earlier, narcissism has not been widely discussed within the discipline of sociology. However, some have theorized that narcissism could be understood as a psychological response to social changes that have occurred in postmodernity. A social change is defined as "the alteration of mechanisms within the social structure, characterized by changes in cultural symbols, rules of behaviour, social organizations, or value systems" (Form & Wilterdink, 2020, p.1). This makes narcissism a relevant topic of study within sociology.

Many western societies have undergone significant changes over the last decades. Several sociologists have argued that we have entered a new era following modernity, commonly known as postmodernity. Postmodernity, which many agree started around the 1970s, involves a move from production to consumerism (Aakvaag, 2008). Rather than referring to the transition from modernity to postmodernity, Zygmunt Bauman describes a move from solid modernity to liquid modernity. Solid modernity was characterized by the faith in human progress, the belief in controlling the world through science and rational thinking, the rise of bureaucratic institutions, the rise of capitalism, technological development, urbanization, secularization, and individualization. The attempt to construct a solid social order through reason and rationality in modernity was unsuccessful and led to the social order undergoing liquefaction, a dissolution process (Aakvaag, 2008).

The liquid modernity is thus characterized by constant change within the social order, creating uncertainty and risk and generating anxiety and insecurity in people (Bauman, 2000, as cited in Jacobsen & Poder, 2008). The transition to postmodernity has led to digitalization, globalization, deregulation, decentralization, and increased individualization (Jacobsen & Poder, 2008). Postmodernity exists in countries such as the USA, Australia, and Western Europe. The sociological theories that will be presented attempt to address how social changes in postmodernity may have contributed to the rise of narcissism in society.

5.1 Lasch on the culture of narcissism

In the 1970s, psychologists noticed an increase in symptoms of narcissistic personality disorder in America. As a result, the disorder was included in the *DSM-III*, a previous edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, in 1980. The 1970s were termed "The 'Me' Decade" by Tom Wolfe (Tyler, 2007). It was a decade of several social changes, which may have influenced why individuals started to exhibit narcissistic traits. Some of these changes resulted from emancipation movements for women's rights, civil rights, and LGBTQ rights (Kilminster, 2008).

In his writing of the influential book, *The Culture of Narcissism* (1979), historian and social critic Christopher Lasch merged psychological and sociological approaches in his historical analysis on the emergence of narcissism in the American society. This makes his work relevant to a sociological analysis of how narcissism unfolds in society. Despite the fact that society has changed drastically since Lasch's critics and the lack of empirical evidence for his claims, several of the points he made then are still relevant today (Kilminster, 2008).

Lasch wrote his book during the late capitalism, a period characterized by pessimism, economic stagnation, and decline of trust in the government. Contrary to Tom Wolfe, who argued that the rise in narcissism was associated with the economic growth in the post-war period, Lasch theorized that people became more self-absorbed during an economic crisis, which happened in the mid-70s (Twenge & Campbell, 2009). Lasch claimed that society was in a psychological and moral crisis and argued that changes in the social structure correlated with a rise of narcissism. He claimed he witnessed traces of narcissism through "the fascination with fame and celebrity, the fear of competition, the inability to suspend disbelief, the shallowness and transitory quality of personal relations, the horror of death" (Lasch, 1979, p. 176). Lasch connected the dominance of the narcissistic personality type with the consumer culture that promised fulfilment of needs by consuming (Kilminster, 2008).

Lasch argued that the old social order characterized by an individualistic culture of discipline, robust individualism, and responsibility, had been replaced with a narcissistic culture. Individualism had been replaced with self-absorption, justified as the search for

authenticity in therapies, in which people often reported feeling empty, anxious, and depressed. The ethic of leisure and self-fulfilment had replaced the work ethic. People's individual moral responsibility had been displaced by dependence on bureaucratic institutions and experts such as psychologists, doctors and lawyers (Kilminster, 2008). Furthermore, Lasch argued that narcissism was the psychological expression of bureaucratic dependence, or what he called "the new paternalism" (Kilminster, 2008, p. 138). He stated that bureaucratic dependence had extended the experience of dependence of childhood into adulthood. He claimed that adults displayed childish symptoms such as living for the moment without a sense of historical continuity, dreaming of limitless satisfaction, fearing death, impulsiveness, and an inability to cope with setbacks. These are all characterizations of narcissism. Lasch also noticed people's avoidance of deep, long-term social relationships. Such people are well suited for higher positions in bureaucracies as well as in business and political institutions, in which human relations are usually shallow. Impression management and manipulation of relationships conducted in a competitive way are not uncommon in such circumstances.

Lasch drew largely on clinical psychoanalytic material, especially from the works of psychoanalysts Kohut, Klein, and Kernberg, to support his claims. According to psychoanalysis, a stable upbringing representing a strong superego consisting of clear parental authority of discipline and love, is essential to the development of a strong sense of self. That is enabling individuals to identify with authority and develop the ability to regulate their emotions. Because the family as the primary source of socialization became undermined due to growing dependence on professional expertise and the state, Lasch argued that the individual felt abandoned. Due to a lacking foundation of security, the individual became prone to feelings of emptiness and anxiety, Lasch stated. According to psychoanalysis, this could result in a defensive mechanism involving the individual retreating into a grandiose self to defend against vulnerable feelings, leading to lacking control of aggressive impulses (Richards, 2018).

5.2 Durkheim's theory of anomie

A society with low social regulation and integration encourages isolated individuality and refrains from advising people what they should do. Émile Durkheim, considered as one of the founders of sociology, referred to this as the condition of anomie. By anomie, he

referred to normlessness, a social condition in which people lack moral restraint. He developed the concept during his study on suicide. By conducting this study, he attempted to explain why some types of societies experienced higher rates of suicide than others. Thus, he was looking at values, social structures, and cultural norms, or what he called social facts, within the different types of societies that could have contributed to why people chose to commit suicide (Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2018).

Durkheim claimed that there existed a differentiation between healthy and pathological societies. He believed that a condition of anomie characterized a pathological or abnormal society. According to him, modern societies were prone to anomie in periods of drastic changes in the social structure, particularly in times of economic and social crises. However, anomie could also occur during an economic boom. In such circumstances, new norms have to develop because the old ones have disintegrated and do no longer apply to the new situation (Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2018).

Durkheim argued that in anomic societies, people lack a clear idea of what is appropriate behaviour and what is not. Mechanical solidarity, which refers to a stronger collective conscience or a stronger common morality, leads to social cohesion in traditional societies. Modern societies are characterized by organic solidarity in which this collective conscience is weakened, and people are held together by the division of labour. In such societies, individuals can feel disconnected from society and lose their meaningful connections with others. Thus, normlessness can lead to people feeling hopeless, a lack of purpose in life, and feelings of not belonging (Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2018). Narcissism could be a psychological response to anomie. When there is a lack of restraints and guidelines to appropriate behaviour, it can lead to alienation, whereby people become separated from each other. Thus, it can lead to people turning to themselves rather than to others.

6. Narcissism in contemporary society

Several decades later since narcissism first caught public attention, it is more relevant than ever. Researchers have claimed that a culture of narcissism is on the rise and have found evidence that people are becoming more narcissistic. Until now, most of the research on the topic has been conducted in the USA, hence we cannot say for certain whether the trend has spread to other parts of the world. Twenge's (2013) findings suggest that today's values in high school and college students have shifted from intrinsic with an emphasis on community feeling, caring for others, and belongingness, toward extrinsic involving fame, money and materialism. She claims that the current generation is "more Generation Me than Generation We when compared to previous generations" (Twenge, 2013, p. 11).

Twenge and Campbell (2009) conducted a cross-temporal meta-analysis in an attempt to measure whether narcissistic traits in the population had increased. To do so, they found 85 samples of 16 275 college students in America that had completed the Narcissistic Personality Inventory between 1979 and 2006. The results showed a generational difference. Millennial college students born between the 1980s and the late 1990s were found to be more narcissistic than college students from generations before them, such as Baby Boomers born between the end of the 2nd World War and mid-1960s and Generation X born between 1965 and 1980. A narcissistic response of the Narcissistic Personality Inventory seemed to particularly increase between 2000 and 2006. In fact, two-thirds of the students surveyed in 2006 scored above the average sample score from the students in 1979-85. However, since the data only came from college students, it did not represent the rest of the population (Twenge, Konrath, Foster, Campbell, & Bushman, 2008).

Furthermore, the National Institutes of Health surveyed a nationally representative sample of 34 653 American adults about whether they had experienced symptoms of the narcissistic personality disorder during their lifetimes. The results showed that 3.2% of those over 65 years old had had the disorder at some point. When it came to the adults in their twenties, as much as 9.4%, almost three times as many, had experienced it (Stinson et al., 2008). These findings suggest an increase in narcissism within the younger generation. If narcissism was mainly related to age, the rates of narcissism would be constant over generations. However, what we see here, is that a much larger amount of the younger

adults had experienced the disorder, while fewer of the older individuals had had it, even though they have had much longer time developing it (Twenge, 2013).

Narcissism is linked to several trends in our contemporary society. Much has changed since Lasch wrote about how narcissism manifested itself in society in the 1970s. As we will see, the rapid technological development could have played a part in why today's generation, according to evidence, are more narcissistic than generations before them.

6.1 Social media

Perhaps not surprisingly, narcissism manifests itself on social media platforms. Most of us possess electronic devices enabling us to continuously receive information from all over the world and stay connected on social media. People of all ages use social media today, and research has shown that around 72% of Americans use one or more social media sites (Pew Research Center, 2021). Internet and social media addiction have developed as actual problems, which proves how important it is to people in their everyday life.

Studies have demonstrated that the increase in narcissism among the generations of millennials and generation Z has been rising alongside the increased usage of social media platforms. This has raised the question of whether social media sites reinforce or even create narcissistic tendencies in people. Social media seems like the perfect habitat for narcissists, where they can boost their ego and receive constant feedback from many people instantly. It is an arena designed for self-promotional content, manipulation of one's public image, exhibiting vanity, and gathering large numbers of superficial friendships, in which all are characteristics of narcissism (Buffardi & Campbell, 2008, as cited in Bergman, Fearrington, Davenport, & Bergman, 2010).

Narcissism has been shown to be positively correlated with addictive social media use (Andreassen, Pallesen, & Griffiths, 2017). In order to maintain their self-esteem, narcissists love getting a high number of likes, comments, shares and having a large online network of friends and followers. Narcissists are competitive and wish to portray themselves as popular to the outside world. To achieve that, they tend to update about their accomplishments, diet, and exercise routine (Marshall, Lefringhausen, & Ferenczi, 2015). They often post self-focused pictures and might selectively choose to post pictures of

others if they are perceived to be of high status. Moreover, they often post updates in the belief that other people are interested in what they are doing because they see themselves as unique and important (Bergman et al., 2010).

Furthermore, the global social phenomenon of taking "selfies" or capturing self-portraits has become a large part of our modern culture. They are often taken on holidays, with friends, at the gym, or of the face from a well thought out angle. A study showed that the main motivation for posting selfies on social media is attention-seeking, in which individuals seek external validation through others' approval. Narcissists have been shown to post selfies more frequently (Sung, Lee, Kim, & Choi, 2016). Taking selfies have become so important that some have even risked their lives to document what they are doing. In fact, a study found that as many as 137 selfie accidents, including 259 deaths, had occurred between 2011 and 2017. The most common reasons for the deaths were transport accidents, drowning and falling (Bansal, Garg, Pakhare, & Gupta, 2018). This is alarming and shows how far some are willing to go to get that selfie. It seems that showing off to others is sometimes more important than one's own safety.

Social media is a platform where one can portray a certain image of oneself which may not necessarily correspond with reality. Erving Goffman used the concept of impression management to describe this process. People tend to share positive happenings and avoid posting about negative life events. As Goffman would describe it with dramaturgical concepts, actors play roles on a stage to make a certain impression to the audience frontstage, which in this case are social media platforms. Backstage behind the scenes, which here involves real life behind the screen, is where the performance is prepared. The portrayal made online can make a false impression of how life is in reality (Goffman, 1959).

6.2 Cosmetic procedures

Narcissists tend to put a strong emphasis on how they look. The importance of physical appearance is rising in our society. Looking like the ideal man or woman has become more of a pressure due to the internet era. There are constantly debates concerning body image and how one is supposed to look like. When information is easily accessible around the clock through electronic devices, it is easier to be influenced by the heavily edited photos

of perfect faces and bodies circulating online. Social media plays a big role here and is creating a distorted perception of beauty. The consequence is that people become less satisfied with themselves. Many resorts to cosmetic surgery in an attempt to achieve unattainable beauty standards. "Snapchat dysmorphia" has even become a phenomenon where people request cosmetic procedures to resemble edited photos as a result of using filters on Snapchat (Hunt, 2019). Snapchat filters can make the eyes bigger, the nose smaller, and the skin flawless.

Undergoing various cosmetic procedures has become a global trend. Cosmetic procedures include surgical and nonsurgical procedures performed in order to enhance and reshape parts of the body that otherwise are well-functioning. According to the International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery, as many as 11 363 569 surgical procedures and 13 618 735 nonsurgical procedures were performed in 2019 worldwide. The total procedures were increased by 7.4%, compared to 2018. The most common surgical procedures include breast augmentation, liposuction, eyelid surgery, tummy tuck, and nose reshaping, whereas the most popular nonsurgical procedures are Botox and fillers. Some of the countries with the highest number of procedures performed are the USA, Brazil, Japan, South Korea, Mexico, and Italy. More females than males are undergoing plastic surgery, but the number of men is increasing. Procedures are most common in people between age the age of 35 and 50 (ISAPS, 2019). The "mommy makeover" is a common procedure for this age group, in which women who have been giving birth wish to recreate their body before pregnancy (Twenge & Campbell, 2009).

During the Covid-19 pandemic, there was an increase in people undergoing cosmetic surgeries. One may wonder why people suddenly would want to undergo surgery during such a time. It turns out that the biggest reason for this was likely the "Zoom Boom". When people were forced to work from home during lockdown, many used Zoom, a video communication platform, for many hours every day. That resulted in people having plenty of time studying their face and their imperfections. Consequently, facial procedures grew significantly (Daniel, 2021).

Evaluation of patients' psychological health before undergoing cosmetic surgery is crucial. A study found that around 47.7% of patients that wished to undergo cosmetic procedures met the criteria for a psychiatric disorder, where the most common were narcissistic

personality disorder, body dysmorphic disorder, and histrionic personality disorder. It was found that narcissism was observed in 25% of the cosmetic surgery patients. Narcissists tend to seek rejuvenation procedures. Looking young and attractive is important to narcissists thus they tend to resort to surgery out of fear of looking old (Napoleon, 1993, as cited in Malick, Howard & Koo, 2008).

6.3 Consumerism

Narcissists tend to value money and material wealth and often engage in overconsumption. In our culture, these priorities are perceived as leading to happiness. The media constantly bombards us with advertisements reinforcing the notion that excessive materialism is needed to truly be happy. The focus is often on self-indulgence, where it is not unusual to hear slogans such as L'Oréal's "Because you're worth it", Pepsi's "Live for now", or Coca Cola's "Open happiness" (Twenge & Campbell, 2009).

The goal for many today is to become rich and be able to afford to live a luxurious lifestyle filled with expensive vacations, clothes, jewellery, and lavish real estates. Such priorities characterize a narcissistic mindset. Even those who cannot afford it resort to easy credit and home mortgage and are thus left with large debts. The products we buy are used as identity markers and give an indicator of who we are. They are used as status symbols to give an impression of being well-off and having a high social status in the social hierarchy (Twenge & Campbell, 2009).

The emphasis on materialism could be due to the existing fascination with the rich and famous in society. The mass media are fuelling this obsession by continuously reporting on celebrity news. Celebrities are worshipped and looked up to and thus have an immense influence on society. It exists an obsession with the self-obsessed. Fame in itself is highly valued, and many desire and even feel entitled to become famous and will do what it takes to get there. This is evident when observing how many of today's celebrities are famous only for being famous. These people usually reach attention through reality-TV programs and social media. One example is the popular reality-TV programme *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, which debuted in 2007 and lasted for 20 seasons. It made the Kardashian family worldwide famous. Thus, the Kardashians have influenced the culture to a large degree, especially when it comes to society's beauty standards. Rather than hard work and

genuine achievement, admiration and money seem like the goal for many (Twenge & Campbell, 2009).

Celebrities have proven to be exhibiting narcissistic traits. Because they impact the culture to a large extent, they could be reinforcing materialistic values in society. A study conducted by Young and Pinsky (2006) examined celebrities' personality characteristics by surveying a sample of 200 celebrities appearing on the Loveline radio show hosted by Pinsky. They compared the findings with the personality of 200 MBA students. The study showed that celebrities are a highly narcissistic group and had a significantly higher score on the Narcissistic Personality Inventory than that of the MBA students. From the celebrity sample, reality-TV personalities had the highest scores of narcissistic traits, especially on vanity, followed by comedians, who scored highest on authority and superiority. Lastly came actors and musicians. People with narcissistic traits are prominent on reality shows because they are entertaining and create lots of drama (Campbell & Crist, 2020).

A study conducted by Pew Research Centre asked 18-25-year-olds about the most important goals in life of their generation. As much as 64% answered becoming rich as the main goal and 41% answered becoming famous as the second most important goal. Such goals were much more important than helping people in need (Heimlich, 2007). Dreaming and fantasizing about an extravagant lifestyle, and even feeling entitled to it, shows that many seek instant gratification and are governed by what Freud called the pleasure principle. It is the principle that leads children to seek and fulfil their urges and wishes immediately. That is contrary to the reality principle, the mechanism regulating that our needs are satisfied when it is socially appropriate. Easy credit has made it easier to get what you want without necessarily working hard for it. In such circumstances, pleasure is prioritized over other life values. This is referred to as motivational hedonism (Ksendzova, Iyer, Hill, Wojcik, & Howell, 2015). People seem to want to live for themselves in the moment (Twenge & Campbell, 2009).

Within postmodern societies, high material wealth has been reached by governments actively pursuing economic growth. Our society is based on a linear model of economy, which entails that raw materials are being used to make products, often non-recyclable, then utilized, and eventually thrown away when it is non-functioning. This has led to a destructive throw-away society, which has serious consequences for our planet.

Overconsumption is one of the contributing factors to some of the greatest challenges of our time, which are climate change, environmental degradation, pollution, and extinction of species. Because of these radical changes, the geological epoch we are currently living in has been termed the Anthropocene, or the human epoch (Wright, Nyberg, Rickards, & Freund, 2018).

These narcissistic tendencies suggest that many people today view the only purpose for the earth's resources are indeed to serve the self. Today, we know much about the environmental damage we humans have caused by constantly prioritizing economic growth. Then, one may wonder why our culture of consumerism keeps continuing more than ever before? Even though many acknowledge that the environment matters, what has to be done in order to reverse the damage, is daunting. Shaw and Bonnett (2016) claim that the culture of narcissism can be viewed as reflecting a sense of great loss. Moreover, they suggest that grief is one of the responses to a dying planet, in which they argue that narcissistic entitlement is a form of a grief response. Denial is thought to be the first stage of the grieving process, which can explain why there is a lack of action to do something with the problem. Self-absorption can be understood as a defensive mechanism that leads people in consumer cultures to engage in "retail therapy" and other self-indulgent activities in order to escape the uncomfortable reality.

7. Discussion

This paper has aimed to shed light on the complex concept of narcissism and how it unfolds in society. Narcissism is considered a personality disorder at the extreme and as a personality trait to a lesser extent. The core characteristics of a narcissist involve a sense of entitlement, self-absorption, a need for admiration, and antagonism. Psychoanalysis, which has had a considerable impact on how narcissism has been interpreted, has argued that the narcissist conceals a fragile sense of self behind a mask of grandiosity. Recent studies, however, have suggested that there are two subtypes of narcissism. The grandiose subtype is considered an overconfident narcissist, whereas the vulnerable subtype has a fragile sense of self. The way these subtypes regulate their self-esteem is still being discussed. Healthy self-esteem has been shown to differ significantly from the form of self-esteem linked to narcissism.

The debate over whether people had become more narcissistic first started in the 1970s, around the beginning of postmodernity. Lasch argued that the lack of authority in society, or a reduction of a clear representation of the superego, was to blame for why people had become more self-centred. Moreover, he argued that consumer capitalism encouraged self-gratification (Shaw & Bennett, 2016). Lasch has been criticized for a conservative bias and for being overly pessimistic. Him attributing narcissism to a whole culture without providing sufficient evidence has been questioned (Kilminster, 2008). Durkheim's theory of anomie stated that when regulation and integration in society are low, it can lead to the individual running wild in an insatiable search for gratification, and being governed by the urges of the id, as Freud would have described it. Durkheim theorized that people would become dissatisfied when their wishes were no longer restrained. Eventually, it could lead to individuals turning to themselves and feeling disconnected from each other and the world (Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2018). Thus, both Lasch and Durkheim stressed the importance of clear authority to maintain a healthy society and to encourage moral behaviour.

Instead of arguing that the superego had been in decline, the theory of informalization by Wouters, Waldhoff, and Elias suggested that the balance of the functions of the id, ego, and superego, had been restructured (Kilminster, 2008). This theory stated that the superego had become more differentiated, in which the ego, or the conscience, now was

guiding people's actions to a larger extent than before. Wouters referred to a new form of self-regulation that had emerged, which was more flexible and malleable, described as the "third nature" personality. Rather than guilt shaping our conduct through a fear of failure to obey the rules of society, shame had now become more important in shaping behaviour (Kilminster, 2008). Anthony Giddens described this new personality as "the reflexive self" (Aakvaag, 2008, p. 276). In a postmodern society characterized by constant changes and uncertainty, individuals now must construct their own identities based on reflexive choices. This is a different form of identity formation than that of traditional stable societies where one's identity was assigned at birth (Aakvaag, 2008).

What these theories suggest is that the decline of social constraints resulting from social trends in postmodernity have altered the personality of individuals. The uncertainty of the future this development has caused, has made people more anxious. According to Twenge (2011), the increased anxiety is related to narcissism. The transition from the stable, traditional society to the unstable, postmodern society has led to increased geographical mobility in which people no longer live around the same people their whole life. Today, it is not unusual to move from one place to another several times throughout one's lifetime. As a result, relationships with others are becoming highly superficial rather than deep-rooted. In such circumstances, many individuals develop a fragile sense of self. That leads to people becoming highly vulnerable to social-evaluative threats. Individuals now seem to be highly self-conscious and very aware of how they are perceived by others. In fear of appearing dull, they actively manage the image they portray in front of others. When faced with social-evaluative threats, people's fragile self-esteem can lead them to act in defensive attempts to promote themselves, which is often confused with true self-esteem. The importance of exhibiting high self-esteem also has roots in the self-esteem movement that occurred in the 1970s (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2012).

This corresponds to the evidence of increased narcissism in society provided in this thesis. Even though the prevalence of narcissism is hard to measure, several studies have shown that narcissism has been on the rise for several decades. It seems like the increase of narcissism is linked to the increased anxiety people feel in today's uncertain society. We can see clear manifestations of narcissism in contemporary society on social media, through the increase of cosmetic surgery and via the engagement in conspicuous consumption.

It seems that we are not becoming any happier by actively seeking to feel good about ourselves by overconsuming, improving our appearance with surgery, and seeking constant admiration on social media. Emphasizing money, wealth and status, seem to lead to an unhealthy mind. Across the world, we see a significant increase in mental health problems that seem to be particularly prevalent in individualistic postmodern societies, such as the USA, Canada, Australia, and Western Europe. Individuals living in cultures placing emphasis on collectivistic values, such as in Asia, report lower rates of mental disorders. Statistics from the study *Global Burden of Disease* show that about 970 million of the global population suffer from a mental or substance use disorder (Ritchie & Roser, 2018). Even though narcissism is usually negatively correlated with depression and anxiety, which are the most common mental illnesses, studies have shown that American's self-evaluations, self-esteem and narcissism rose at the same time as these mental health illnesses. Twenge (2011), raise the question of whether young people have buffered themselves against mental health problems with positive self-feelings.

The emphasis our society places on technological progress and economic growth, has according to Max Weber, led to rationalization or disenchantment of the world (Eriksson-Zetterquist, Kalling, Styhre, & Woll, 2014). Such materialistic priorities have, as mentioned earlier, serious consequences for our planet. By being selfish and only caring about our own instant needs and indulge in rampant consumerism, we do not take into account how destructive it is for the climate, the animals, and the future generations. As we can see, narcissistic tendencies characterized by less concern for others, less empathy, and less engagement in social and political issues have serious consequences for the planet (Twenge, 2013).

It looks like narcissism is rooted in many of today's social problems and is creating an unhealthy society. Escaping from reality and living in a fantasy do not solve our problems. Instead of indulging in the pleasure principle, as Freud would say, we should try to face the reality of the world we live in. Several issues have to be solved. Some of the greatest problems remain the increase of mental health issues and climate change, in which shallow social relationships and overconsumption are some of the underlying problems, all related to narcissism.

That is why narcissism is so important to understand. Narcissism has always been attributed to the individual by being a disorder and a trait, which is why it has been mostly studied within psychology. Narcissism has not only been shown to be rising within individuals but is now also considered a cultural condition in which our values has shifted towards the direction of self-admiration. Since children are the most affected by cultural change, it could explain why the generation growing up have been shown to be more narcissistic (Twenge & Campbell, 2009).

In order to better the understanding of how narcissism is manifested in the culture and how it affects society as a whole, studying narcissism from a sociological perspective could be helpful. Comparing different cultures and people from different age groups, ethnic groups, and social classes, could enhance our understanding of how narcissism affects society. For instance, people living in collectivistic cultures such as Asians and Middle Easterners have been shown to be less narcissistic than those living in individualistic cultures such as Americans and Europeans (Foster, Campbell & Twenge, 2003). A study conducted by Markus and Kitayama (1991) found how the "self" is interpreted differently in East Asian cultures compared to the European American culture. They claimed that East Asians view themselves as integrated with others, whereas European Americans see themselves as separated from others. They referred to this distinction as interdependent versus independent construal of the self, similar to that of collectivism versus individualism. Markus and Kitayama (1991) not only see a difference in the set of cultural values, but also in psychological processes. They found that East Asian societies place importance on connectedness, caring for others, fitting in, holistic thinking, and group harmony. On the other hand, American culture emphasizes independence, standing out from others, autonomy, logical thinking, and expressing uniqueness.

Lastly, this raises the question of whether there exists a solution to the culture of narcissism? Changing an entire culture is almost an impossible task. However, something can be done. We could start by stopping to teach the notion that self-esteem in itself is important in order to succeed. Evidence has shown that high self-esteem solely does not necessarily lead to success. Instead, it can lead to an inflated sense of self, that can cross into narcissism. Genuine self-esteem is important to mental health and is a result of performing well. Hence, self-esteem has to be developed naturally rather than being actively pursued (Twenge, 2013). Prioritizing collectivistic values such as trust, deep

social connections with others, gratitude, empathy, and civic engagement could change our culture in another direction. Furthermore, should we try to re-connect with the world and re-enchant it, rather than stay disconnected and letting it remain disenchanted, as Weber stated? Lastly, maybe we should consider directing our focus from ourselves towards our community?

8. Conclusion

This thesis has aimed to shed light on how narcissism is manifested in our culture. Narcissism is characterized by a sense of entitlement, an excessive need for admiration, difficulty in maintaining deep social relations, and a lack of empathy. Earlier it was believed that narcissists portrayed a grandiose self in order to conceal their fragile self-esteem. However, recent research has shown that there are two subtypes of narcissism, the grandiose, who is overconfident, and the vulnerable, who is having a fragile sense of self-worth. The self-esteem and emotional self-regulation of narcissists remain a complex issue (Ronningstam, 2017).

The rise of narcissism became a topic in the USA during a time where we entered the era of postmodernity, characterized by a lack of social constraints and a transition from production to consumerism. This created instability and uncertainty in society. As evidence suggests that narcissism has been rising since then, it could be a causal connection between social trends in society and the occurrence of narcissism. Research, primarily drawn from college students in the USA, has shown an increase in narcissism as a disorder and a trait for the last decades, especially evident on social media, in the rising rates of cosmetic procedures and through the engagement in excessive consumerism. Since many global trends stem from America, it is not unlikely that narcissism has already spread to other parts of the world. Narcissism has been suggested to be related to several social ills in society. That makes narcissism an important topic of study which has to be further investigated.

The discipline of sociology, in addition to psychology, could enhance our understanding of how a culture of narcissism affects society as a whole. Firstly, psychologists should conduct more research on narcissism in individuals of other age groups and compare the findings to other generations to gather more evidence of increased narcissism in people. Further, the culture we live in play a crucial role in shaping the self (Foster et al., 2003). This is why sociology could be relevant to the study of narcissism. Sociologists could provide a further understanding of how our individualistic society seem to foster individuals high in narcissism by identifying how factors such as cultural values, socialization patterns, and structural inequality, could have contributed to this

development. Narcissism could explain some of the sociological trends in society, such as increasing divorce rates and the rise in violent acts (Foster et al., 2003). An understanding of how narcissism is affected by society, and in turn, how narcissism affects society as a whole, is therefore necessary.

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