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The Rise of Narcissistic Personality Traits in The Digital Age: an Evaluation of Social Media Use From A Clinical Psychology Perspective

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ABSTRACT: As digital environments have moved to the center of daily life, the ways in which people present themselves and seek approval have undergone a profound transformation. This review addresses, from a clinical psychology perspective, the visibility of narcissistic personality traits in the digital age and their relationship with social media use. The study evaluates the conceptual framework and dimensions of narcissism, its distinction from healthy self-esteem, the debate over its cross-generational course, the reward and reinforcement processes of social media, the culture of likes and selfies, the clinical outcomes, and the approaches to intervention, in light of current meta-analyses and large scale studies. The evidence shows that there is a small to moderate and consistent association between grandiose narcissism and social networking behavior, and that quantified feedback can establish a cycle that reinforces approval seeking. It is emphasized that grandiose and vulnerable narcissism relate to social media in different ways and that cultural context moderates this relationship. The review proposes that narcissistic traits be evaluated within a nonstigmatizing, dimensional and developmental framework, and that integrated approaches targeting self-awareness, empathy, and the regulation of self-esteem be considered in intervention.

KEYWORDS: narcissism, social media, self-esteem, approval seeking, clinical psychology, digital self.

1. INTRODUCTİON

With the spread of digital environments, the ways in which people express themselves and interact socially have undergone a profound transformation. Social media platforms have become a stage on which users continuously display their lives, receive feedback, and compare themselves with the presentations of others. This transformation has widened the place of self-presentation and approval seeking in daily life, and has strengthened the tendency to tie one's sense of self-worth to external and quantified indicators. In this context, observations that narcissistic tendencies have become more visible, especially among younger generations, are increasingly discussed both in the public sphere and in the clinical field.

Although narcissism in everyday language is often equated with vanity, in clinical psychology it is a far more layered concept. As a personality trait, narcissism includes components such as grandiosity, a need for admiration, and weakened empathy, and it is distributed to varying degrees across the population. Its extreme form, which markedly impairs functioning, corresponds to the clinical picture defined as narcissistic personality disorder. It is therefore more accurate to think of narcissism not as a single category, but along a continuum extending from healthy self-esteem to a pathological pole.

The relationship between social media and narcissism is a topic that has been intensively studied in recent years. The opportunities for self-display that these platforms offer facilitate a selective and idealized presentation of the self; quantified indicators such as likes, comments, and follower counts, in turn, provide an immediate and measurable response to this presentation. The reward value of this response can reinforce self-presentation and approval seeking behaviors. However, the direction and strength of this relationship are not uniform; they vary according to personality traits, the manner of use, and cultural context. For this reason, the phenomenon should be addressed within a reciprocal and context sensitive framework, without being reduced to a simple cause and effect relationship.

From the standpoint of clinical psychology, the importance of this picture is not limited to the prevalence of a personality trait. Narcissistic patterns are associated with clinically meaningful outcomes such as weakened empathy, a fragile self-esteem dependent on external approval, relationship problems, and heightened sensitivity to criticism. The vulnerable narcissism pattern, in particular, can interweave with conditions such as depression and anxiety. For this reason, understanding narcissistic traits and their interaction with the digital environment directly concerns clinical practice, in terms of both evaluation and intervention.

The aim of this review is to address, within a holistic framework and from a clinical psychology perspective, the appearance of narcissistic personality traits in the digital age and their relationship with social media use. The study seeks to clarify the conceptual framework and dimensions of narcissism, to set out its distinction from healthy self-esteem, to evaluate the debate over its cross-

generational course with current evidence, to examine the reinforcing processes of social media, to discuss the clinical outcomes, and to review routes of intervention. In the sections that follow, the method is first explained; then the conceptual framework, the cross-generational course, the reward system of social media, the culture of likes and selfies, the distinction between grandiose and vulnerable narcissism, the clinical outcomes, the cultural context, and interventions are addressed; and in the discussion and conclusion, the findings are brought together to develop recommendations for the future.

2. MATERİALS AND METHODS

This study was designed as a narrative review. Its aim is not to carry out a particular statistical pooling, but to integrate the accumulated evidence on the relationship between narcissism and social media use within a conceptual framework and to interpret it from a clinical standpoint. This approach is well suited to bringing together findings produced by different methods, to making the multidimensional nature of the phenomenon visible, and to developing implications for practice.

The literature search was conducted through English and Turkish publications in international databases. The search combined key concepts such as narcissism, grandiose and vulnerable narcissism, self-esteem, social media, approval seeking, and intervention, together with their equivalents. Priority was given to meta-analyses, large sample studies, epidemiological research, and the field's foundational theoretical sources. Where the contested aspects of the concept were concerned, different findings and opposing views were presented together.

It is known that the narrative review, while well suited to addressing a phenomenon within a broad framework, carries certain limitations. Involving more flexibility than systematic reviews in the selection and interpretation of sources means that selection and emphasis may be influenced by the author's viewpoint. To reduce this limitation, priority was given to meta-analyses carrying high evidential value; the findings of individual studies were evaluated within the broader pattern of evidence. Especially on contested topics such as the cross-generational course of narcissism, conflicting findings were reported as they are, and a one directional reading was avoided.

The selected sources were evaluated according to the criteria of currency, methodological soundness, and relevance to the topic. The findings were organized under the headings of conceptual framework and dimensions, cross-generational course, the reinforcing processes of social media, clinical outcomes, cultural context, and interventions. In the process of interpretation, quantitative effect sizes and clinical meaning were considered together; the role of cultural context in the transfer of the findings was also taken into account. Since the study is based on published literature, no data were collected directly from human participants. In addition, throughout the text narcissism is addressed not as a stigmatizing label, but as a dimensional and understandable phenomenon.

In integrating the findings, a balance was sought among different types of evidence. Meta-analyses and large scale studies were taken as the basis for setting out the general pattern of the phenomenon and its effect sizes; theoretical sources provided the framework for making sense of these findings. Evaluations regarding cultural context were used to bring into relief the points to be attended to when transferring international findings to local reality. This multilayered approach aims to consider both the strength of the evidence and sensitivity to context together. In this way the review seeks not merely to list the findings, but to bring them together within a coherent and practice oriented narrative.

3. FİNDİNGS AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

3.1. Narcissism: Conceptual Framework and Dimensions

Narcissism is a multi-component construct defined by features such as attributing exaggerated importance to the self, a need for admiration, and difficulty in taking into account the perspective of others. In clinical psychology, this construct can be addressed both as a personality trait distributed to varying degrees across the population and, in its extreme form that markedly impairs functioning, as narcissistic personality disorder. The diagnostic criteria cover symptoms such as grandiosity, a constant expectation of admiration, a sense of entitlement, and a lack of empathy (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Today, however, the field tends to see narcissism not merely as a category, but as a dimensional construct extending from healthy self-esteem to a pathological pole.

Contemporary approaches distinguish two separate but related faces of narcissism. Grandiose narcissism is marked by a sense of superiority, a display of self-confidence, dominance, and a desire to attract attention. Vulnerable narcissism, by contrast, corresponds to a pattern that appears outwardly timid but inwardly carries a high sense of entitlement, extreme sensitivity to criticism, and a tendency toward shame (Pincus and Lukowitsky, 2010). These two forms can be interpreted as the expression, through different defensive strategies, of the same core vulnerability. The distinction is clinically decisive, because the two patterns are associated with both different outcomes and different intervention needs.

At the theoretical level, narcissism has been addressed within a long psychodynamic tradition. Self psychology ties the narcissistic pattern to unmet needs for mirroring and idealization in early life, while the object relations tradition focuses on the fragile self structure and the defenses underlying the grandiose self (Kohut, 1971; Kernberg, 1975). The dynamic self-regulatory processing

model, developed more recently, conceptualizes narcissism as a self-regulating system in which the person continuously seeks external approval and admiration in order to sustain a grandiose self-image (Morf and Rhodewalt, 2001). This model is especially illuminating in understanding why the self-esteem of the narcissistic individual is so dependent on external feedback, and why social environments occupy such a central place in this cycle.

At the level of measurement, self-report instruments have made the empirical study of narcissism possible. The Narcissistic Personality Inventory was developed as a widely used instrument for assessing subclinical narcissism and has formed the basis of numerous studies (Raskin and Terry, 1988). The spread of these instruments has made it possible to study the course of narcissism over time and its relationship with variables such as social media; however, by the nature of self-report, it has also brought certain limitations, particularly in the measurement of the vulnerable pattern.

The sense of entitlement, one of the components of narcissism, is especially illuminating in understanding the concept. Entitlement is the tendency to see special treatment, privilege, and the priority satisfaction of one's expectations as a natural right. When unmet, this tendency prepares the ground for disappointment, anger, and interpersonal conflict. The sense of entitlement may appear more openly in the grandiose pattern and in a more covert and inward form in the vulnerable pattern. This component shows that the narcissistic pattern is not merely a matter of self-admiration, but that the relationship established with others and the expectation of reciprocity are also affected by it.

These developments in measurement also make visible a limitation of the field. Self-report instruments, relatively successful in capturing the grandiose pattern, may struggle to capture the covert and defensive expressions of the vulnerable pattern, because people carrying this pattern may be unwilling to notice or report these features in themselves. In addition, the fact that grandiosity and healthy self-confidence may be answered similarly in self-report makes the two difficult to distinguish. For this reason, in the assessment of narcissism, a multisource approach that considers the person's relational patterns, history, and clinical observation together yields more accurate results than reliance on a single instrument.

3.2. The Distinction Between Healthy Self-Esteem and Narcissism

One of the most critical distinctions in understanding narcissism is to differentiate it from healthy self-esteem. Healthy self-esteem rests on a realistic and balanced evaluation of oneself, an unconditional self-acceptance, and an inner sense of worth. This kind of self-esteem can remain relatively stable without depending on external success and approval; it can evaluate criticism not as a threat, but as a source of information for growth. Narcissistic self-esteem, by contrast, even when outwardly high, is fragile and dependent on external feedback; it needs constant nourishment and is easily shaken in the face of criticism.

The fundamental difference underlying this distinction concerns the source and stability of self-esteem. In healthy self-esteem the sense of worth is internal and continuous; in the narcissistic pattern, the sense of worth fluctuates depending on the approval of others and on displays of superiority. This dependency drives the person into a constant search for approval and a pressure to prove themselves. The tension between outward self-confidence and inner fragility is a distinctive feature of the narcissistic pattern and explains why even small criticisms can provoke disproportionate reactions.

This distinction also relates to the difference between the level and the stability of self-esteem. Research suggests that a high but unstable self-esteem may be associated with certain difficulties independently of low self-esteem. In unstable self-esteem, the sense of worth fluctuates rapidly depending on daily events and external feedback; this fluctuation drives the person into a constant state of vigilance and a search for approval. The coexistence of outwardly high self-confidence with inner fragility, often seen in the narcissistic pattern, can be explained precisely by this instability. Healthy self-esteem, by contrast, is distinguished less by its level than by its stability; it can remain relatively steady in the face of external events and does not need to prove its sense of worth at every moment.

This distinction takes on a special importance in the context of the digital environment. Social media carries the potential to shift the source of self-esteem toward external and quantified indicators; criteria such as the number of likes and followers can turn into an immediate and external barometer of the sense of worth. While a person with healthy self-esteem may meet these indicators with relative distance, for a person with fragile self-esteem the same indicators can become the fundamental support of the sense of worth. For this reason, in clinical evaluation, the emotional weight the person gives to digital feedback offers an important clue to the stability of self-esteem.

3.3. The Cross-Generational Course of Narcissism: A Debate

The claim that narcissism has increased over generations has found wide resonance both in the public sphere and in academia, but it has at the same time been hotly debated. A cross-temporal meta-analysis combining a large number of university samples reported that scores on the Narcissistic Personality Inventory rose by about one third of a standard deviation between 1982 and 2006, which corresponds to a marked increase (Twenge et al., 2008). This finding was read together with a general upward trend in individualistic traits and was tied to a strengthening of the emphasis on the self in modern societies.

However, this claim has met with strong objections. Some researchers have shown that in certain university samples there was no significant increase over the same period, and have argued that the observed trend may stem from differences in sampling and method (Trzesniewski et al., 2008). More recent studies have further complicated the picture; some analyses have reported that the increase peaked around 2008 and then declined, with narcissism scores approaching earlier levels. A current cross-temporal meta-analysis conducted on a global scale and over a wider time range likewise showed that the course is not one directional and linear, but sensitive to period and contextual factors (Oberleiter et al., 2025). For this reason, it is more appropriate to read the cross-generational course of narcissism in a cautious and context sensitive manner, rather than through a definite epidemic narrative.

Another dimension of the debate concerns other tendencies mentioned alongside narcissism. For example, a meta-analysis reporting that dispositional empathy among university students declined over time drew a picture consistent with an increase in self-focused tendencies (Konrath et al., 2011). On the other hand, large scale epidemiological data on the prevalence of narcissistic personality disorder reveal the clinical dimension of this picture; in a large national sample the lifetime prevalence of narcissistic personality disorder was reported as about six percent, and the rate was found to be higher among men and young adults (Stinson et al., 2008). The table below presents together the principal evidence on the cross-generational course and on the relationship of narcissism with social media.

The fundamental lesson to be drawn from this debate is not to be swept up in a single striking narrative. The epidemic discourse, asserting that narcissism has increased ceaselessly over generations, has found a strong echo in the public sphere and has also been criticized on methodological grounds. Questions such as the consistency of measurement instruments over time, the representativeness of samples, and how cultural changes affect measurement complicate a simple increase narrative. The body of evidence suggests that there may be some change in self-focused tendencies, but it requires caution regarding the direction and magnitude of this change. For this reason, this review neither wholly rejects nor accepts as it stands the claim of an increase; it conveys the findings as they are, together with their contested aspects.

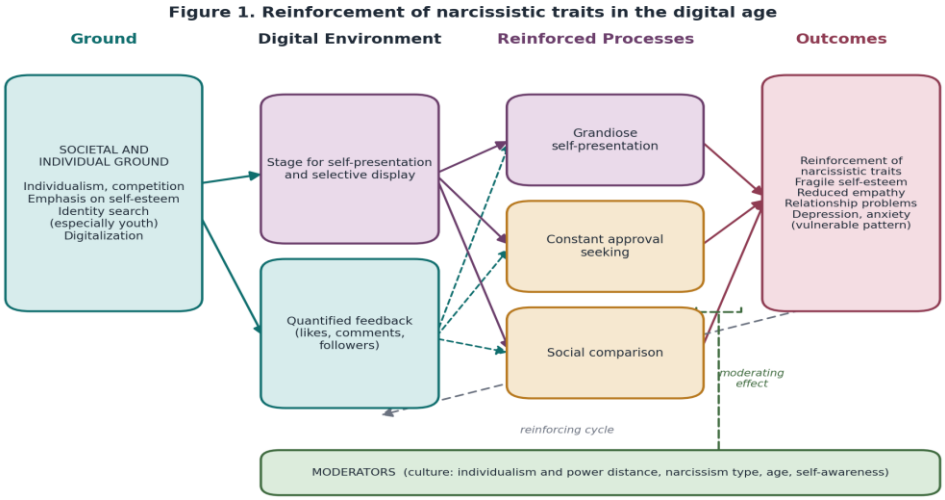
Table 1. Principal evidence on the cross-generational course of narcissism and its relationship with social media.

Source	Finding	Effect and result
Twenge et al. (2008); 85 samples	Cross-generational rise in NPI scores (1982 to 2006)	About one third of a standard deviation
Trzesniewski et al. (2008)	No increase found in some samples	Counter finding, course contested
Oberleiter et al. (2025)	Global cross-temporal reappraisal	Non-linear, period dependent course
Konrath et al. (2011)	Decline in dispositional empathy over time	Consistent with self-focused tendencies
Gnambs and Appel (2018); 57 studies	Grandiose narcissism and social networking behavior	ρ about 0.17 (small to moderate)
McCain and Campbell (2018); 62 samples	Grandiose narcissism and social media indices	r about 0.11 to 0.20
Stinson et al. (2008); national sample	Lifetime narcissistic personality disorder	About 6 percent

As the table shows, while the evidence consistently supports the relationship of narcissism with social media, it requires a more cautious reading regarding the cross-generational course. This table shows the necessity of evaluating the phenomenon without reducing it to an exaggerated epidemic discourse, yet taking it seriously as a clinically meaningful tendency.

In this debate, it is important to preserve the distinction between a societal trend and clinical prevalence. A slight change in the average level of narcissistic traits in a community does not mean that the prevalence of narcissistic personality disorder in the clinical sense has changed to the same degree. The clinical consequences of a shift in the average depend on what happens at the extreme of the distribution, and these two levels should not be confused. Clinically, what matters most is the degree to which the person's traits affect their functioning and relationships; trends at the societal level, on the other hand, are meaningful mainly for understanding the cultural and technological ground on which these traits are shaped.

Figure 1. The reinforcement of narcissistic traits in the digital age, from the societal ground to outcomes, and the moderating factors.



3.4. Social Media and the Reward System: A Reinforcement Cycle

In understanding the relationship of social media platforms with narcissistic tendencies, the fact that these environments operate like a reward system plays a central role. When a user makes a post, they receive immediate and quantified feedback in the form of likes, comments, and shares. This feedback turns into a concrete and measurable indicator of social approval and, from the standpoint of learning theories, serves as a powerful reinforcer. The fact that the feedback arrives with unpredictable and variable timing may further increase the effect of this reinforcement, because variable interval reinforcement is one of the strongest patterns in sustaining behavior.

This reward process also finds a correlate at the neural level. It is known that social approval activates the brain's reward circuits and that this activation motivates the repetition of the behavior. The constant and easily accessible approval that social media offers embeds this reward based learning into the fabric of daily life. However, explaining this mechanism through the language of dopamine alone remains incomplete; what is decisive is the meaning and value the person attributes to this feedback. As the weight that approval carries for the person's sense of self-worth increases, so too does the search for feedback become a more central motive.

Another feature of these environments is that self-presentation is selective and adjustable. Users can carefully choose, edit, and idealize the content they present; in this way they can put forward a self-image stripped of the ordinariness of real life. This possibility provides a favorable ground for grandiose self-presentation. Indeed, early studies showed that social networking profiles can be used as a means of narcissistic self-presentation (Buffardi and Campbell, 2008). When idealized presentation combines with the quantified approval that comes to it, a cycle is established that feeds self-presentation and approval seeking behavior.

Another factor feeding this cycle is the design of the platforms. Social media applications are designed so as to increase user engagement and the time spent on the platform; notifications, the infinite feed, and quantified feedback indicators aim to keep attention and participation continuous. These design features can further strengthen the search for feedback in a user who is sensitive to approval. Thus the approval cycle in the digital environment is fed not only by the person's own tendency, but also by an environmental architecture that interacts with that tendency. This picture once again reveals the necessity of considering individual psychology together with the structural features of the environment.

The fact that self-presentation is so adjustable can turn impression management into a constant preoccupation of daily life. In offline life, self-presentation is naturally limited and momentary; in the online environment, the person has a great degree of control over which moment, from which angle, and with what editing is shared. While this control offers the possibility of constructing a positive self-image, it can also widen the distance between the presented image and the lived reality. As this distance grows, so too does the anxiety of protecting the presented image and the need for approval directed toward it. Thus impression management can turn into a self-sustaining preoccupation that absorbs more and more of the person's energy and attention.

3.5. The Culture of Likes and Selfies and Constant Approval Seeking

The reward system of social media takes concrete form in daily life as a like-oriented search for approval. When a person begins to experience the likes their posts receive as a measure of their own worth, receiving likes can turn into a goal. This drives a tendency toward more frequent, more attention-grabbing, and more idealized posts. The disappointment and sense of worthlessness that arise

when the expectation of likes is not met, in turn, make visible the fragility underlying this search. Thus a transient source of approval can, over time, turn into a self-sustaining pattern.

Selfie culture is a visual and body-focused appearance of this process. It has been reported that the behavior of frequently sharing one's own image may be associated with narcissistic traits; this association overlaps with a desire for self-display and to be liked (Sorokowski et al., 2015). However, the meaning of this behavior varies by context; at times it can be an expression of self-confidence, at other times the expression of a deep need for approval. For this reason, rather than reading selfie posting on its own as an indicator of narcissism, it is necessary to take into account the underlying motive and the person's general pattern.

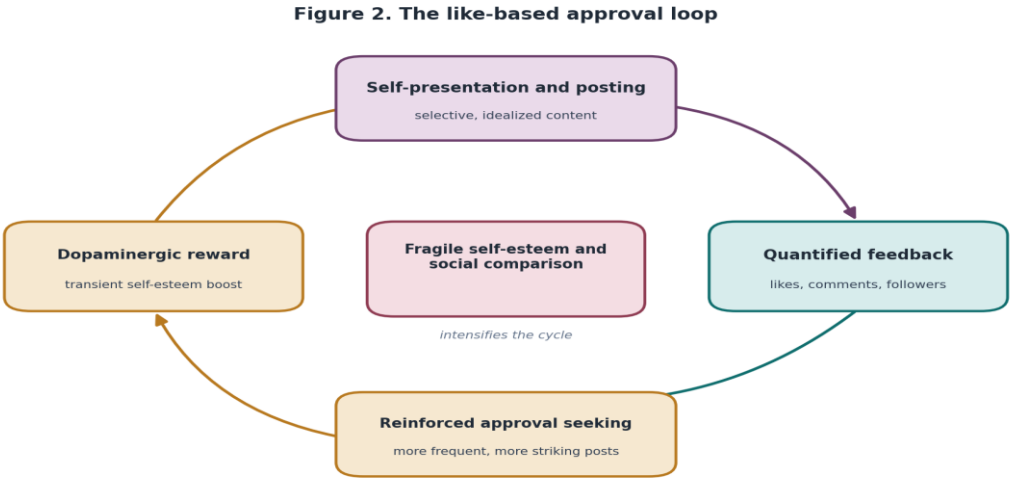
The motives behind selfie and self-presentation behaviors are likewise not uniform. The same behavior may in one person be an expression of self-confidence and of sharing one's life, and in another a means of supporting a fragile self-esteem through approval and likes. This motivational diversity once again reveals why it can be misleading to read the behavior itself as an indicator. What is truly informative, clinically, is the emotional need with which and the frequency with which the person carries out these behaviors, how they respond to the feedback received, and how they feel in the absence of that feedback. For this reason, self-presentation behaviors should be evaluated in the context of the person's general pattern and inner world.

Beneath this search for approval, social comparison plays a powerful role. Social media prepares the ground for constant and largely upward comparisons; the person compares others' carefully constructed presentations, composed of their best moments, with their own reality in its entirety. This asymmetric comparison can feed both a sense of inadequacy and the motive to make a more striking presentation in order to compensate for it. In the narcissistic pattern, this comparison often interweaves with the need to prove superiority, and in the vulnerable pattern with a fear of worthlessness. In both cases, comparison destabilizes the sense of self-worth by placing it on an external and relative ground.

The concept of like addiction should be used with care. The addiction here is not identical to a substance addiction in the clinical sense; it points more to a pattern in which approval becomes a powerful reinforcer and behavior is sustained in dependence on that reinforcer. Even so, it is known that in some individuals social media use can become compulsive, difficult to control, and disruptive of daily functioning. At this point, the boundary between healthy participation and a problematic pattern should be evaluated less through the amount of use than through the degree of the person's dependence on approval and the extent to which it overshadows the other areas of their life.

These observations are also supported by meta-analytic evidence. A meta-analysis combining more than fifty-seven studies found a small to moderate and consistent association between grandiose narcissism and social networking behavior, and reported that this association was replicated across different platforms and time periods (Gnambs and Appel, 2018). Similarly, another meta-analysis combining more than sixty-two samples showed that grandiose narcissism is positively associated with indicators such as time spent on social media, frequency of posting, number of friends and followers, and self-display (McCain and Campbell, 2018). These findings show that the bond between social media and narcissistic self-presentation is not incidental. The figure below summarizes the like-based cycle that feeds this relationship.

Figure 2. The like-based cycle extending from self-presentation to quantified feedback and then to approval seeking, intensified by fragile self-esteem.



3.6. Grandiose and Vulnerable Narcissism: Different Relationships with Social Media

The relationship of narcissism with social media differs markedly according to the type of pattern. Meta-analytic evidence reports that grandiose narcissism is consistently associated with social media behaviors, whereas vulnerable narcissism does not show a significant and stable association with these indicators (McCain and Campbell, 2018; Gnambs and Appel, 2018). This difference suggests that the two patterns operate with different motives; grandiose narcissism is more willing to take the stage for attention and admiration, while vulnerable narcissism may display a more timid and complex attitude owing to anxiety about being evaluated.

Nevertheless, it is thought that the relationship of vulnerable narcissism with social media may appear in more covert and problematic forms. Individuals carrying the vulnerable pattern may relate to platforms through constant comparison, approval seeking, and anxiety about exclusion, rather than through direct grandiose display. This form of relationship has been associated with a problematic and compulsive pattern of use and with the negative affect that accompanies it (Casale and Banchi, 2020). Thus in vulnerable narcissism, social media can become, rather than a stage for grandiosity, a means of temporarily repairing a fragile self-esteem and of testing it through comparison.

The distinction between these two patterns also requires reflection on the developmental roots of the vulnerability. It has been argued that early relational experiences and emotion regulation skills shape the stability of a person's self-esteem and their susceptibility to fragility. A study conducted in a Turkish sample reported that adverse childhood experiences are negatively associated with psychological well-being and that cognitive emotion regulation plays a determining role in this relationship (Yildirimer, 2024). This finding suggests that part of the fragile self-esteem and the intense need for approval may be rooted in early relational experiences, and that emotion regulation skills are an important mediator along this path.

The expressions of these two patterns in the digital environment also differ. The grandiose pattern often turns toward displays of success, status, and attractiveness, toward taking the stage before a wide audience, and toward standing out with attention-grabbing content. The vulnerable pattern, by contrast, may appear more in the form of watching others' lives, comparing oneself with them, and regulating one's mood through the approval received or not received. In this second case, despite the outward timidity, an intense need for approval and anxiety about being evaluated are at work within. For this reason, in clinical evaluation, as much as what the person does on social media, the emotional need that these behaviors serve should also be taken into account.

Thinking of these two patterns together offers an insight into the common core of narcissism. Many theoretical approaches argue that beneath both the grandiose and the vulnerable expression lies a sense of self-worth that is dependent on external approval and easily shaken. While the grandiose pattern tries to cover this fragility with displays of superiority, the vulnerable pattern expresses it through withdrawal and heightened sensitivity. The fact that these two expressions can appear alternately in the same person over time or in different situations supports this common core view. This view is also clinically instructive, because the ultimate goal of intervention, whichever pattern is dominant, is to place the sense of self-worth on a more internal and stable footing.

3.7. Clinical Outcomes

One of the clinically most striking outcomes of narcissistic patterns appears in interpersonal relationships. Grandiosity, entitlement, and weakened empathy make reciprocity in relationships difficult; relationships that seem impressive at first can, over time, end in conflict and dissatisfaction. The limitation in the capacity for empathy makes it hard for the person to take into account the feelings of others and to build reparative relationships. This pattern can prepare the ground for isolation and recurring ruptures, both in close relationships and in the wider social context.

A second outcome is the instability of self-esteem and the emotional fragility that accompanies it. A self-esteem dependent on external approval can be rapidly shaken in the face of criticism, failure, or the absence of approval. This fragility can, especially in the vulnerable narcissism pattern, interweave with conditions such as depression and anxiety. The tension between the outward sense of superiority and the inner fear of worthlessness makes the person's mood excessively dependent on external events. As a consequence of disproportionate reactions to criticism and of threat perception, interpersonal anger and defensiveness may also accompany this picture; indeed, it has been shown that threatened self-esteem may be associated with aggression (Bushman and Baumeister, 1998).

A third outcome is the fragility brought by tying the sense of self-worth to external and quantified indicators. A person who ties their sense of worth to likes, follower counts, or external success may experience a constant state of vigilance toward fluctuations in these indicators. This feeds both a chronic search for approval and the sense of worthlessness and emptiness that arises when this search is not met. Clinically, this picture points to a pattern in which a display of self-confidence on the surface coexists with a fragility in the depths, a pattern that should be evaluated with care.

A fourth outcome is that these patterns can interweave with other mental conditions. Vulnerable narcissism is often seen together with depression, anxiety, and shame-based distress; the grandiose pattern, in turn, can be associated with outwardly expressed anger, impulsivity, and relational conflict. Beneath this coexistence there often lie difficulties in emotion regulation. A self-esteem dependent on approval makes the regulation of emotions dependent on external events and on the reactions of others; this in turn

prepares the ground for sudden and intense fluctuations in mood. For this reason, in clinical evaluation the narcissistic pattern should be addressed together with the accompanying conditions and with attention to the capacity for emotion regulation.

These outcomes also have a long-term cost. Although narcissistic traits may seem to provide the person with certain advantages in the short term, such as self-confidence, assertiveness, and impressiveness, over time a price can emerge in the form of the erosion of relationships, recurring conflicts, and a narrowing of the support network. Since weakened empathy and reciprocity make it hard to build deep and sustainable bonds, the person can drift into an increasingly isolated position. This isolation can, by further increasing the need for external approval, create a vicious cycle that reinforces the pattern. For this reason, the outcomes of the narcissistic pattern should be evaluated not through single events, but within the long-term course of the person's life.

These outcomes also have a developmental context. Adolescence and young adulthood are the periods in which identity development and sensitivity to peer approval are most intense; in this period, self-worth is not yet settled and is more open to external feedback. The large place that social media occupies in the social lives of young people can lead this developmental sensitivity to interweave with quantified indicators of approval. This may be one of the reasons why narcissistic tendencies are more visible in young people; yet this visibility is often a feature of a developmental stage and is balanced out over time. For this reason, in evaluating narcissistic traits in young people, taking into account the developmental context and the transient sensitivities of the period is important, both for avoiding excessive pathologizing and for the early recognition of patterns that genuinely persist.

3.8. Cultural Context and Turkey

The relationship between narcissism and social media is not independent of cultural context. Meta-analytic evidence has shown that this relationship varies by culture and may be stronger, in particular, in cultures where power distance is high (Gnambs and Appel, 2018). This finding suggests that narcissistic self-presentation and the search for approval are shaped by the cultural values and societal expectations within which the person lives. Understanding narcissism in the digital age therefore requires taking into account not only individual psychology, but also the cultural and societal patterns within which the person lives.

In a context such as Turkey, where strong family and community ties exist alongside a rapid experience of digitalization, this interaction can take on a distinctive appearance. Traditional societal expectations and patterns of approval can take a new form on digital platforms; the pressure of social visibility and of being liked can intensify further in the online environment. A study evaluating the Turkish context has argued that social pressure takes on a new form on digital platforms and that this regime directs individuals toward idealized presentations and a pressure to prove themselves (Yildirimer, 2025). This appearance emphasizes that the search for approval in the digital environment is not merely an individual tendency, but a phenomenon fed by societal and cultural dynamics.

This cultural sensitivity has consequences for both research and clinical practice. Rather than the direct transfer of criteria and findings developed in international samples, they need to be adapted to the local context and supported by local validity studies. Since the way narcissism is expressed, how it is socially perceived, and which behaviors are approved vary from culture to culture, a culturally sensitive approach to evaluation is necessary both to prevent mislabeling and to understand the phenomenon correctly.

The cultural framework can also be thought of through the distinction between individualism and collectivism. In contexts where individualist values come to the fore, personal achievement and self-promotion are more directly approved; in contexts where collectivist values are dominant, the self is often defined through one's position within the family and community. In a context such as Turkey, where these two tendencies coexist and are rapidly transforming, the digital environment forms an interesting point of intersection; the person may have to attend at once both to the approval of the community and to individual visibility. This tension can lend a distinctive color to self-presentation and the search for approval. Therefore, in evaluating narcissistic tendencies, understanding the dynamics of cultural transition within which the person is situated is valuable for interpreting the phenomenon correctly.

In the Turkish context, the relationship young people establish with the digital environment is one of the areas where these cultural dynamics are most visible. The intense and early use of social media by the young population leads both identity development and patterns of societal approval to be shaped in this environment. On the one hand family and community expectations, and on the other the desire for individual visibility and to be liked, can operate together as two forces shaping the self-presentation of young people. This context makes clear the need for local studies to understand how approval seeking and social comparison are experienced in young people. A culturally sensitive and developmentally attentive approach makes it possible both to avoid pathologizing young people unnecessarily and to recognize early the situations that genuinely require support.

3.9. Clinical Evaluation and Interventions

The clinical evaluation of narcissistic traits requires a careful and dimensional approach. In evaluation, whether the person's narcissism carries a grandiose or a vulnerable pattern, the degree to which their self-esteem is dependent on external approval, and the extent to which this pattern affects their functioning should be considered together. The frequent interweaving of the vulnerable

pattern with conditions such as depression and anxiety requires a careful differential evaluation. It is known that the recognition and management of narcissistic personality disorder carry marked clinical challenges (Caligor et al., 2015).

At the level of intervention, psychodynamic approaches have a long tradition in the treatment of narcissism. These approaches, by focusing on the fragile self structure and the unmet needs underlying the grandiose defenses, use the therapeutic relationship as a space of repair and understanding. Transference focused and self psychology based approaches aim to transform the person's regulation of self-esteem and their relational patterns. Integrative approaches such as schema therapy, in turn, offer a complementary framework by addressing the maladaptive patterns formed in the early period and the coping styles they trigger.

The cognitive behavioral framework, for its part, focuses on the thought and behavior patterns that accompany the narcissistic pattern. In this approach, the aim is to help the person notice their entitlement and superiority-based expectations, their disproportionate reactions to criticism, and their dependence on external approval, and to replace these with more flexible alternatives. The development of empathy skills and the placing of self-esteem on an internal and stable footing lie at the center of this work. Where digital use is concerned, psychoeducation and awareness work that addresses the person's relationship with social media and the meaning they attribute to feedback can serve a complementary function. The table below summarizes these evaluation and intervention approaches.

Another important dimension of evaluation is the person's motivation for change. Individuals carrying a narcissistic pattern often seek help because of the reactions of others toward them or because of accompanying conditions such as depression and anxiety; the pattern itself is often experienced as consistent with the self. This can make it difficult to establish and sustain the therapeutic relationship. For this reason, in the clinical approach, establishing a safe and collaborative relationship, without judging the person and without unnecessarily triggering their defenses, is of primary importance. This relationship provides a ground on which the underlying fragility can be safely addressed.

Table 2. Evaluation and intervention approaches for narcissistic traits.

Approach	Focus	Target
Psychodynamic (transference focused, self psychology)	The fragile self beneath the grandiose defenses	Regulation of self-esteem and repair of relational patterns
Schema therapy	Early maladaptive patterns and coping styles	Transformation of maladaptive schemas
Cognitive behavioral approach	Entitlement, superiority expectations, dependence on approval	Flexible thinking, empathy, and self-awareness
Clinical evaluation	Distinction between grandiose and vulnerable pattern	Accurate differential evaluation and choice of intervention
Digital psychoeducation	Social media use and the meaning attributed to feedback	A healthy digital relationship and a balance of self-esteem

Among the intervention approaches, group based work can also occupy a valuable place. The group setting allows the person to experience the perspective of others, to develop their capacity for empathy, and to receive feedback within a safe framework; this supports the experience of reciprocity that can remain limited in the narcissistic pattern. Where digital use is concerned, simple awareness practices that help the person review their relationship with social media can be complementary; noticing the pattern of use, monitoring the emotional response given to feedback, and strengthening offline sources of satisfaction can be parts of this work. These practices aim not to prohibit use, but to help the person establish a more conscious and balanced relationship with the digital environment.

The addressing of accompanying conditions is also an important part of intervention. Since the narcissistic pattern can be seen together with conditions such as depression, anxiety, or substance use, the evaluation and treatment plan should also cover these accompanying conditions. The person often presents to the clinic not because of the narcissistic pattern itself, but because of these accompanying distresses or relational crises; this moment of presentation can be an opportunity to address the underlying pattern. Where there is marked loss of functioning, a risk of harm to self or others, or severe accompanying conditions, referral to a

comprehensive mental health evaluation takes priority. Thus intervention is carried out within a holistic framework that considers not only the personality pattern, but also the person's general mental well-being.

As the table shows, intervention for narcissistic traits is not limited to a single approach. The strongest effect is expected within an integrated framework, adapted to the person's pattern and need, in which different approaches complement one another.

4. DİSCUSSİON

The evidence brought together in this review shows that the relationship of narcissistic traits and social media use in the digital age is a multidimensional phenomenon for clinical psychology. The most consistent aspect of the picture that emerges is that the relationship between grandiose narcissism and social networking behavior is replicated across different samples, platforms, and time periods. This consistency suggests that social media offers a favorable ground for narcissistic self-presentation. By contrast, the claim that narcissism has increased over generations is far more contested and does not bear a one directional reading.

The body of findings reveals that the relationship is not a one directional cause and effect bond, but a reciprocal and self-feeding process. While social media offers an attractive stage for individuals with narcissistic tendencies, it can at the same time reinforce approval seeking behavior through the quantified feedback and opportunities for comparison that it provides. This two-way interaction shows that reading the phenomenon simply as social media producing narcissism, or as only narcissists using social media, is inadequate. A more accurate framework is a cycle in which the personality tendency and the features of the environment reciprocally feed one another.

The distinction between grandiose and vulnerable narcissism is especially illuminating in understanding this picture. That meta-analytic evidence finds a consistent relationship with grandiose narcissism but not with vulnerable narcissism points to the two patterns relating to social media in different ways. The grandiose pattern is willing to take the stage; the vulnerable pattern may establish a more covert relationship with platforms, based on comparison and approval seeking. This distinction shows how important it is, in clinical evaluation, to determine which pattern the person carries, both for understanding the risk and for correctly targeting the intervention.

The evidence on reward and reinforcement processes is instructive in understanding the mechanism of the phenomenon. That quantified feedback operates as a reinforcer and that social approval carries reward value explains why self-presentation and approval seeking behavior can be so sustained. However, explaining this mechanism through the language of neural reward alone remains incomplete; what is decisive is the meaning the person attributes to the feedback and the weight it carries for their sense of self-worth. This point is also important for intervention, because what needs to change is often not the use itself, but the meaning the person attributes to it.

The findings that cultural context moderates this relationship show that the phenomenon cannot be read as a universal pattern. Narcissistic self-presentation and the search for approval are shaped by the cultural values within which the person lives; in some cultural contexts this relationship can be stronger. In a context such as Turkey, where strong community ties and rapid digitalization coexist, societal expectations and patterns of approval can take on new forms in the digital environment. This appearance emphasizes the necessity of cultural sensitivity and of local validity studies in evaluating the phenomenon.

In carrying these findings into clinical practice, avoiding stigmatization carries a special importance. Narcissism is often used in everyday language as a derogatory label; a clinical view, by contrast, addresses it not as a flaw or a weakness of character, but as an understandable pattern beneath which there often lie a fragile self and unmet needs. This framework both makes evaluation more accurate and reduces the barriers before the person's seeking help. Seeing narcissistic traits within a dimensional and developmental framework also guards against overgeneralizations such as the notion that everyone who uses social media is a narcissist.

The body of findings reveals the value of seeing narcissism not as a static trait, but as a self-feeding process. A self-esteem dependent on external approval fuels the search for approval; this search is temporarily satisfied by the quantified feedback that social media offers; but since the underlying fragility is not resolved, the need reappears. This cycle operates in both the grandiose and the vulnerable pattern, albeit with different expressions. This process view is, clinically, both a difficulty and an opportunity; it is a difficulty, because self-feeding patterns tend to become entrenched; it is an opportunity, because an effective intervention on any link of the cycle can change the whole system in a positive direction.

This picture shows that clinical evaluation must be multifaceted. The narcissistic pattern must be understood not only through observable behaviors, but with attention to the underlying motives, the source of self-esteem, and the person's relational patterns. The quantity of social media use is far from being a criterion on its own; what is decisive is the quality of the relationship the person establishes with this environment and the meaning they attribute to feedback. For this reason, clinical evaluation should go beyond measuring the amount of behavior and aim to understand the person's inner world and the need that these behaviors serve.

Another important implication of the findings is that the individual and societal levels should complement each other. The interaction of narcissistic tendencies with the digital environment takes root not only in the person's inner world, but also in the societal and technological context within which they live. For this reason, individual interventions show a more lasting effect when considered

together with broader efforts that support digital literacy and encourage a healthy online culture. The contribution of clinical psychology in this area is not limited to working with the individual; carrying an awareness of the healthy foundations of self-worth and of a balanced relationship with the digital environment to society is also a part of this contribution.

In a broader view, the phenomenon of narcissism in the digital age does not remain confined to the clinical field alone. Fields such as education, media literacy, and digital design play a role in the shaping and the addressing of this phenomenon. Educational programs that convey to young people the internal foundations of healthy self-esteem and the effects of social comparison, the more responsible design of digital environments, and the support of a healthy online culture at the societal level are complementary efforts that reinforce the effect of individual interventions. For this reason, the contribution of clinical psychology involves, alongside work carried out with the individual, carrying an awareness of healthy self-development to these fields. This holistic view shows that the response to the challenges brought by the digital age should also be multilevel.

Certain methodological limitations should be observed in interpreting the findings. Narcissism is mostly measured on the basis of self-report; this creates difficulties, particularly in the evaluation of the vulnerable pattern. Since a significant portion of the studies examining the relationship between social media and narcissism are cross-sectional, they do not give a definite conclusion about the direction of the relationship; whether the personality tendency directs the use, or the use reinforces the tendency, often cannot be disentangled. In addition, that the effect sizes are small to moderate shows that the relationship is a real but not to be exaggerated bond. The rapidly changing nature of the platforms may also limit the currency of findings obtained at a particular period.

Despite these limitations, the body of evidence presents a consistent and clinically meaningful picture. Social media provides a favorable environment for narcissistic self-presentation and the search for approval; this relationship appears more markedly in the grandiose pattern and in more covert forms in the vulnerable pattern. The real task before the field is to disentangle the direction of this relationship with longitudinal designs, to examine the relationship of vulnerable narcissism with social media through more sensitive measurements, and to test interventions by adapting them for different patterns and cultural contexts.

5. CONCLUSİON AND FUTURE DİRECTİONS

This review has addressed, within a holistic framework and in light of current evidence, the appearance of narcissistic personality traits in the digital age and their relationship with social media use from a clinical psychology perspective. The basic conclusion reached is that there is a consistent but not to be exaggerated relationship between grandiose narcissism and social media behaviors, whereas the claim of a cross-generational increase in narcissism is far more contested. Seeing the phenomenon as a cycle in which the personality tendency and the features of the environment reciprocally feed one another prepares the ground for both a more accurate evaluation and more effective interventions.

From the standpoint of clinical practice, the first implication is the value of evaluating narcissistic traits within a dimensional and nonstigmatizing framework. Careful attention to whether the person carries a grandiose or a vulnerable pattern, to the degree to which their self-esteem is dependent on external approval, and to how this pattern affects their functioning is the precondition of the correct intervention. The second implication is that intervention should often target not social media use itself, but the meaning the person attributes to feedback and the source of their self-esteem. The third implication is that the strengthening of empathy and of internal self-esteem lies at the center of work directed at the narcissistic pattern.

One of the priority directions from the standpoint of research is the wider adoption of longitudinal designs. Disentangling the direction of the relationship between narcissism and social media use is possible only with studies that follow people over time. Such designs make it possible to determine whether the personality tendency directs the use or the use reinforces the tendency, and to understand at which point in this cycle intervention is most effective.

A second direction is the more sensitive examination of the relationship of vulnerable narcissism with the digital environment. Although the existing measurement instruments are relatively successful in capturing the grandiose pattern, they can remain limited in capturing the covert and complex expressions of the vulnerable pattern. Studies examining the relationship of this pattern with problematic use, comparison, and negative affect can fill an important gap in the field.

A third direction is the strengthening of the cultural validity of measurement instruments and findings. Since the way narcissism is expressed and its social meaning vary from context to context, there is a need for instruments developed and tested in local samples. In a context such as Turkey, with its distinctive societal and cultural dynamics, the development of culturally sensitive measurements for both research and clinical evaluation is one of the priority needs of the field.

A fourth direction is the development of intervention and prevention efforts. Especially for young people, digital literacy and psychoeducation programs that strengthen the internal foundations of healthy self-esteem and that make the effects of social comparison and of dependence on external approval noticeable can be valuable. Such efforts can weaken the ground of narcissistic patterns before they become entrenched and can support individuals in establishing a healthier relationship with the digital environment. Testing the effectiveness of these programs with controlled studies is an important task before the field.

A fifth direction is for narcissism and the digital self to take the place they deserve in mental health education. The evaluation and the nonstigmatizing addressing of narcissistic patterns often does not appear as a separate heading in clinical training programs. Yet given how widespread these traits are in society and how they interact with the digital environment, it is important that future professionals be trained with the equipment to recognize this phenomenon within a dimensional, developmental, and culturally sensitive framework. This awareness prepares the ground both for more accurate evaluations and for a clinical attitude that does not judge people and that attends to the fragility underlying their presentation.

In conclusion, narcissistic traits in the digital age are a phenomenon that becomes more visible in interaction with the reinforcing processes of social media, but that is not immutable. Reducing this relationship to an exaggerated epidemic discourse, or trivializing it, would both be misleading; a more accurate approach is to take the phenomenon seriously within a dimensional, context sensitive, and nonstigmatizing framework. When individual interventions that strengthen self-awareness, empathy, and internal self-esteem are considered together with prevention efforts that support digital literacy, it is possible to turn the effect of the digital environment on the person's self-development in a healthier direction. The real promise before the field is to be able to translate this accumulated knowledge into culturally sensitive, accessible, and non-stigmatizing practices.

As a final thought, it should be noted that the debate about narcissism should turn toward understanding rather than judging individuals. The need to feel valued and to be seen by others is a fundamental part of being human; the problem is that this need comes to rest on an external and fragile ground and cannot be balanced by empathy. For this reason, the response to be given to narcissism in the digital age should involve not only eliminating a problem, but also strengthening the person's inner sense of worth and their capacity to form mutual bonds with others. The contribution of clinical psychology in this area will be measured both by easing the distress of individuals and by making visible the value of a healthy sense of self-worth and of genuine bonds.

A NOTE ON SENSİTİVİTY

This text addresses narcissism within a clinical and conceptual framework; it does not aim to label any person or group. A diagnosis of narcissistic personality disorder can be made only through the comprehensive evaluation of a qualified mental health professional. People who are struggling because of relationship patterns, fluctuations in self-esteem, or digital use are encouraged to reach out to a mental health professional.

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