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Media Increases Narcissistic Tendencies in College Students
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Introduction

In the recent decade, society has seen more and more cases of narcissistic entitlement (NE; Twenge, Konratin, Foster, Campbell, & Bushman, 2008). An increased emphasis on celebrity worship, material wealth, physical appearance, media styles, and attention seeking in recent years may account for this shift in NE (Chen, 1998), (Ashe, Maltby, McCutcheon, 2005). NE occurs when people believe themselves to be entitled to certain privileges and have an obsessive self-love rooted in an insecure self-esteem. Individuals with NE may also be more prone to go into debt than those without it because they feel entitled to certain things even though they may not be able to afford them.

While research is limited concerning media’s relationship with narcissism, there have been studies relating to each topic separately. Media exposure affects sociocultural depictions of body image (Hargreaves, D., & Tiggemann, M. 2009), levels of aggression (2008, Coyne), and widely-accepted social mores including attitudes regarding materialism. Ermann (2004) discussed how the recent rise in NE can be attributed to the growing influence of media (television, movies, internet, and cell phone use). Young and Pinsky (2006) found that celebrities exhibit higher levels of NE than other people. It is no wonder, then, that by worshipping celebrities, celebrity fans too exhibit an increase in NE.

Media’s increased focus on materialism in the media may be part of the explanation behind the rise in NE. Because the changes in NE and media have taken place concurrently, and because media influences many self-destructive behaviors (e.g., aggression or weight problems), we theorize that the media also influences narcissistic tendencies. More specifically, we propose that different types of media can increase or decrease narcissistic behavior.

Methods

Random assignment was used by recruiting with Sona system through BYU and asking for volunteers with two experimental groups and one control group. Participants included BYU undergraduate students.

A questionnaire was issued which assessed participants’ financial background and levels of NE using the “Psychological Entitlement Scale” (PES). Following the questionnaire, each group was exposed to one of three short video clips:

- Experimental Group 1: A video depicting a life of entitlement
- Experimental Group 2: A video depicting humble circumstances
- Control: A neutral video

Levels of narcissism were measured again after video exposure with the PES. We measured the differences in PES scores between three groups before and after they watched the video clips as our manipulation check. To analyze possible alternative explanations for our findings, we also assessed subjects’ responses concerning financial background and lifestyle.

Results

Those who watched the party scene portraying narcissistic people (Exp Group 1 - see above graph) had higher narcissistic scale scores after they watched the video. Those who watched the humbling video (Exp Group 2 - see above graph) had the highest mean drop in narcissistic scale scores of the three groups. The experimental groups both had a larger difference in narcissism after watching their respective video clips than the control group did.

Our covariates included measures of parental financial assistance and personal student and credit card debt. We found that increased parental monetary support correlates to feelings of entitlement. We hypothesized that video clips portraying narcissism or the lack thereof would change levels of narcissism. Overall, participants in each group experienced a decrease in scores on the Narcissistic Entitlement Scale with a significance value of p = .035. We also tested the influence of financial background on narcissism.

Our secondary hypothesis was that high levels of debt would correlate to high levels of narcissism. We found a positive correlation between amount of debt and narcissistic tendencies, with a correlation coefficient of r = .813.

Discussion

Although much is known concerning media’s effect on society, little is known about media’s connection to narcissistic entitlement. By proving that there is a correlation between the type of media individuals are exposed to and their individual scores of narcissism, we can address questions concerning the causes of and problems of narcissism.

We hypothesized that manipulating the type of media that subjects are exposed to would alter subjects’ PES scores. Our study revealed several connections between media and narcissism and proved that media does effect narcissism.

Some limitations of the study include the participants’ lack ethnic and religious diversity. There were also many more females that participated. Additionally, the questionnaire never prompted participants to declare their age, but did identify their year in school. The videos that were selected may not have been the cause of the change in narcissism, as they were only a few minutes long. Although the PES has been used in research before, it is limited in its ability to assess levels of narcissism. The study may also be better if the questions from the PES were integrated with demographic and red herring questions to make the purpose of the research less blatant.

The results of this study may have also been affected by the moods of the subjects before they participated. The background of the participants may have also had more of an impact on their PES scores than the short video clip participants were exposed to.

Hopefully this study can be used as a springboard for the future study of narcissism and its correlation to the media. Future research could study the amount of media exposure among different age groups and whether the amount differs between genders. This could be done with simple surveys asking questions of frequency. Additional questions could ask why people watch certain types of media, what they get out of it, and whether this affects their narcissistic entitlement.

One could also study which types of media increase people’s narcissistic entitlement. For instance, do magazine ads, TV commercials, reality TV shows, internet ads, soap operas, billboards, music, and radio ads differ in their influence on entitlement levels? Our study could be easily altered by replacing our video clips with other types of media.

References

