

CHAPTER 5

Alienation 2.0 – Symptoms of Narcissism and Aggression

A *Washington Post* article from May 2016 followed a then 13-year-old girl, Katherine Pommerening, who was an avid user of the popular image-sharing site Instagram. Apart from detailing the life of a ‘typical US teen’ growing up immersed in online social media, what may be considered very intriguing about the story was a description of her habits when using Instagram:

She has 604 followers. There are only 25 photos on her page because she deletes most of what she posts. The ones that don’t get enough likes, don’t have good enough lighting or don’t show the coolest moments in her life must be deleted (Contrera 2016, n.p.).

What is of interest with such behaviour is how this form of self-curation is indexed on the value given by other users, expressed as likes. The seeking of larger numbers of likes appears to function as a strong motivator for what content is produced for public consumption. Like rolling out a new product, if it does not achieve high enough sales, it may be withdrawn from production and another product released. For younger social media users, there appear to be high stakes in achieving a sizeable number of followers and likes as proof of social value. Some may go to extremes in order to achieve this, as well as making use of various tools for photo enhancement or engaging in overt sexualisation and risk-taking behaviours in an effort to appease an audience.

This normalisation of social competition in online spaces is linked to accumulation and the ease by which popularity becomes measured. Marx understood that, for as long as human beings and their production were governed by individualism and cutthroat competition under the profit motive, alienation and exploitation would continue where sociality is subsumed by reification. Being

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cost-effective, competitive, flexible, and adaptable become economic virtues while also exacerbating alienation from one another and our own sense of self.

We are afforded more opportunities for social activity online, with greater convenience, speed, reach, and access. That being said, these ICTs emerged out of a distinct ideological worldview that glorifies capitalist individualism. In order to achieve and preserve this form of capitalist individual autonomy, the social relations of production are reified and partially determined by the ‘natural law’ of competition. This concern for the inward, narcissistic turn and its consequences has been shared not only by some members of the Frankfurt School (such as Adorno and Horkheimer) but also the fields of psychoanalysis (emerging from Freud and extending to the Object Relations School) and cultural studies. In this chapter, we will explore some of the implications of these more broad-based online behavioural trends in social media, and how these connect to online social capital. The main connection to be made here is how the nature of competitiveness on social media not only empowers self-aggrandisement in the form of narcissism, but also leads in some cases to aggression.

From Digital Narcissism to Online Id

Social media may appear to be heavily dominated by narcissistic behaviour from a proliferation of selfies, the diligent archiving of the details of everyday life, the dogged pursuit of online social capital, and conspicuous acts of digital display — a digital form of narcissistic behaviour watched over by the corporately owned networks of loving grace.

In a broader context, there has been the unprecedented rise of populist demagoguery, the shocking re-normalisation of racism as an attack on politically correct or civil discourse, the sweeping return of old nationalisms throughout the US, the UK and some European nations, and a living political discourse that starts to resemble Sinclair Lewis’ *It Can’t Happen Here* (1993 [1935]) and Philip Roth’s *The Plot Against America* (2004). With Brexit and the election of Donald Trump, we are seeing ever more digital examples of public aggression and evidence of various forms of narcissistic entitlement that may have surprised even Christopher Lasch, who wrote the arguably sensationalist *The Culture of Narcissism* in the 1970s.¹⁸

Any observable increase in narcissism and aggression cannot be said to be definitively *caused* by social media and any preoccupations with increasing various forms of social capital since it may simply just *facilitate* such behaviours. The affordances of social media and the broader ideological context may serve to understand how, for example, someone like Donald Trump was able to build his own political capital using Twitter, tapping into widespread discontent and using it to his political advantage, under-spending his opponent in terms of media buys while relying more on social media to disseminate his message. Many of Trump’s tweets can be seen as apparent manifestations of

the aggression and narcissism being witnessed on, and possibly facilitated by, social media.

Aided in part by the customisation options that ‘personalise’ the experience and make the user a central node in their social interactive digital space, we might subject the data-flood of selfies and self-promotional utterances to keener analysis through several lenses such as political economy, psychoanalysis and subdomains of identity construction.

Digital Narcissism

The term ‘narcissism’ is subject to a broad definitional latitude, and the conceptual particulars of the term can be expressed and applied in a variety of ways and approaches. A clear distinction needs to be made between ordinary or healthy narcissism, and more extreme forms. A healthy sense of self-regard and self-interest is not problematic, but there are behaviours that can be deemed harmful for the self and others. In the foregoing discussion, I will keep loaded terms such as ‘pathological,’ ‘unhealthy,’ and ‘abnormal’ in suspension, and consign their usage only to when speaking of the clinical literature on the subject.

At issue would be the prospect of a specifically *digital* narcissism. Melding the term ‘digital’ with the standard definition of narcissism might at once open up questions of the possibly enabling, amplifying, or ambient effects social media may have on the construct of the narcissistic personality, *or* invite exploration of how the integration of ICTs in everyday life play a major role in identity construction and development. The digital narcissism ‘tent’ is large enough to include a full spectrum of approaches that range from technological determinism to instrumentalism. At issue would be what central pole holds up this tent.

A neoliberal ideological apparatus appears to enable such behaviours as simply a benign manifestation of self-branding entrepreneurialism, the crucible of American exceptionalism from which much of our ICTs originate; the ‘ecstasy’ of immediacy in communication facilitated by these technologies in an effort to anneal digital presence, and many of the optimistic assumptions buried in the seemingly value-neutral terms of ‘information society,’ ‘economic growth,’ and ‘freedom’ may in fact be little more than glittering generalities. A constructivist viewpoint may direct us to understand digital narcissism as simply an outgrowth of the broader sociopolitical forces that shape both the digital technology and the formation of the individual, perhaps having its narrative extended into the digital domain from the insights provided by Christopher Lasch (1979). In his work we locate the scathing indictments of CEO worship, enabling sociopathic tendencies, of breeding disloyalty as a form of valorising arch-individualism, of a decanted Ayn Rand gospel of selfishness as a moral virtue, and the self-centred practices of everyday life. Lasch’s work may be dated, but there are eerily prescient features in his work that resonate with

effects of the integration of social media and portable digital devices. What is unique about digital narcissism is not the mechanism of narcissism itself, but a kind of megaphone effect with increased opportunities for pursuing narcissistic goals, if not also a competitive pressure to be seen and heard in a vast ocean of social media noise.

The emergence of the ability to manage one's own personal profile on social media is descended from previous digital forms of self-representation online, such as personal websites and blogs. Much of social media today has been able to absorb many of these functions of the earlier web with the incentive of having access to a much larger potential audience. Expressing one's personal views or posting one's pictures can now be done in a much larger social marketplace, but with potentially more competition.

The representation of self and its behaviours migrate to the digital realm, with more recent scholars and commentators such as Jean Twenge and W. Keith Campbell (2003, 2009), Soraya Mehdizadeh (2010); Christine Rosen (2007); and Sherry Turkle (2012) considering how the digital social domain may have an either causative or correlative effect on alienation from the self. Case studies on the subject of online narcissistic behaviour become more plentiful despite the challenges of employing an objective measure for analysis of a constantly shifting and highly personalised digital landscape. There may be some strong correlations between digital expressions of narcissism and the enabling features of social media. It may appear that there is 'more' narcissism, but this may simply be an appearance: with more people having the means to express themselves openly on social media, and the traces of those expressions housed in an ever-expanding digital archive; this may only suggest that we now have more readily available evidence of narcissism that has been with us long before the rise of social media.

Whatever the approach to the subject, what remains somewhat ambiguous is the ultimate aim of digital narcissistic behaviours without risking generalisation. To that end it is useful to consider a variety of strategic objectives that the online narcissist aims to achieve, be this to increase self-validation, online social capital, cornering the market in the 'attention economy,' and online influence, whether these can be treated separately or combined.

Digital Objects and Objectification

Narcissistic traits are more readily recognisable on social media due to the software platform that facilitates more options for self-display. In such venues, narcissistic traits in users were associated with a higher volume of social networking site usage, and particularly through self-description and strategic use of profile photos (Buffardi and Campbell 2008). There may also be a patterning effect whereby new users to social media may engage in behaviour that seeks to adapt and emulate the more successful and established social media users.

When thinking about social media behaviours, one example that may spring to mind as something patently narcissistic would be the proliferation of selfies. Social critics in popular media are quick to raise the alarm that such behaviours are unhealthy, but this fails to appreciate that selfies are hardly anything new. As Jill Walker Retteberg (2014) reminds us, selfies, as a form of self-representation, are descendants of previous means to represent the self, including cave paintings, self-portraits, pre-digital photography, diaries and autobiographies. It is important to understand what a selfie is in the digital context before too quickly leaping to the assumption that all selfies are to be pathologised as dangerously narcissistic given that there are a wide range of other self-display behaviours that are not explicitly a form of posting a selfie.

The traits of extreme or pathological narcissism involve a fragile ego-construct, a punitive and sadistic superego, and poor object relations. In terms of relations with objects, the pathological narcissist will ‘identify with an object and love an object standing for their (present or past) self’ (Kernberg 1975). This stands in contrast with the ordinary narcissist object relation that attaches to an object as representing the parental image. The online representation of self operates as a far more cognitively comprehensible object that the narcissist can identify with in terms of a relation patterned on narcissistic disturbance. ‘Both adult and infantile narcissism include “self-centredness,” but the self-investment of normal adult narcissism is in terms of mature goals, ideals and expectations, whereas the normal infantile self-investment is in terms of infantile, exhibitionistic, demanding, and power-oriented strivings’ (Kernberg 1975). These two modes of narcissism are not yet pathological. The pathology becomes manifest through a series of steps or phases which include a regression from the adult to the infantile, the investment of love toward an object that represents the self, and finally in dispensing with the object-status entirely to allow the full deterioration of object relations so that the grandiose self cleaves to a grandiose projected image of self (1975, 323–4).

The flashpoint for the pathological narcissist emerges when the economic flow is disrupted; i.e., narcissistic supplies decrease or are removed entirely. In the case of the tributary relations the narcissist relies on for validation, such as the constant praise and attention from others. It may be at this point that the tributary relationships conflict with the narcissist’s punitive idea of self-reliance and the reality of dependence upon those very relationships. With the assistance of online representation, the pathological narcissist can have an externalised object of grandiose self that can be manipulated (or otherwise transformed into a punitive superego that will reflect back at the self with unrealistic expectations). The paradox emerges between the self’s belief in extreme self-reliance, and that of depending on others for constant praise and attention. One can imagine the frustration or rage the extreme narcissist would experience in not receiving a steady supply of likes for her or his online contributions. In less extreme cases, there may be a sense of disappointment, or even a questioning of self-worth: a scenario that seems to be more prevalent among adolescent users of social media.

Tracking and Striving For the Perfect Representation

This management of online representation is a perpetual process. Christine Rosen (2007) states that the creation of one's self-portrait used to involve canvas and paint, but that our online self-portraits are composed of pixels. Extending the analogy further, the online self-portrait is always a work in progress, and 'self-portrait' is more than just the visual image, as it includes everything that is said to represent the self such as textual posts that convey personal beliefs and affiliations which contribute to a multimedia-based narrative of the self.

Tracking the impact of our online presence carries over from previous modes of self-tracking behaviours. Using the term 'quantified self-representation,' Retteberg uses the historical example of Benjamin Franklin, who charted how well he was observing thirteen moral virtues in his life, placing each of the virtues in rows, and each day in columns, placing a single black mark on the day he did not live up to the virtue (2014, 10). Retteberg also uses other examples, such as a prisoner marking days served on a cell wall, and the more recent example of people using activity-tracking devices such as FitBit to record number of steps walked, the results of which can be integrated with social media. These kinds of self-accounting behaviours are not an uncommon human trait, and are usually goal-oriented. For instance, Ernest Hemingway would record his weight on a daily basis, just as other people may track their caloric intake, monitor their consumption of alcohol, plot fertility calendars, blood pressure, or bodybuilders who measure the consumption of macro-nutrients and the number of maximum repetitions and sets they can perform. Social media has provided a large number of affordances for people to track and display their progress with the aid of apps, spreadsheets and wearable devices, while also broadcasting that information to an audience that may or may not be attempting to achieve similar goals.

Such tracking and self-accounting behaviours can usually be clustered as self-improvement initiatives, and the sharing of that data might serve a variety of purposes, from seeking encouragement and support from others, motivation, health benefits, to simply boasting. Retteberg, drawing on van Dijck's term of dataism, is interested in how we use quantitative measures to interpret data in a better understanding of ourselves, and to assert control (2014, 68; 73).

Tracking takes on a more pernicious form when it is focused solely on one's online representation and the number of likes one has acquired. It is of some value to consider Baudrillard's discussion of the body as the 'finest' consumer object and object of salvation that constantly needs to be managed with deliberate narcissistic investment (1998, 129). By extending the analogy of this objectification of the body to that of the online self as an object for display and narcissistic concern, it may suggest a false form of 'liberation' and accomplishment since the online self is a form of reappropriation for capitalist objectives: 'where it is invested, it is invested in order to produce a yield' (1998, 131). Whereas bodies in consumer culture come to stand in as a representation of

identity that we ‘inhabit’ and manage with a view to some degree of narcissistic investment for some form of yield, our online profiles with their proliferation of selfies and statements may be the successor: a kind of digital ‘body’ we inhabit, manage, fetishise and capitalise upon.

Posting selfies can present a means for self-expression and the potential for experimentation. The more problematic issue arises when those who post selfies feel they must comply with standard beauty myths in order to compete for attention and approbation, particularly when perceived societal expectations are highly gendered. Those who do not garner the attention they hope for may suffer a blow to self-esteem, and it may exacerbate body image anxieties through a kind of digital dysmorphia; namely, rather than looking in a mirror seeing only ‘flaws,’ a lack of attention and approbation on social media can result in magnifying feelings of inadequacy.

It may become ever more expected among certain demographics to post selfies and engage in competition for attention, and although on the surface this may seem to some as self-aggrandising and narcissistic behaviour, one should not discount the social context in which these users are posting this content. By contrast, the committed narcissist is seeking attention for different reasons. What unites the two is the seeking of online social capital, measured in terms of likes as proof of value.

Not everyone who has a committed interest in tracking their likes on social media is a pathological narcissist, but may be caught up in the curious artifice of the like economy as a way of measuring their social impact. What is unfortunate is when this results in negative outcomes such as body image issues, dangerous risk-taking behaviours, and – in the case of the narcissist – a willingness to adopt extreme or aggressive behaviours when public attention falls below expectations.

This shift in social attitudes that makes the self a digital object of constant improvement, an idealised projection, or a constant work in progress may not necessarily indicate that there is a pathological dimension to a majority of users. What it will indicate, however, is that the need for exhibitionism and validation is exacerbated by a variety of anxiety-inducing phenomena precipitated by broader social expectations with regard to the growth and popularity of digital social communication that may be numerically based. This splits into the twin concerns around self-as-brand management for increasing online social capital, and ‘FOMO’ (fear of missing out). The perceived need to have presence, to participate on social media with more content and more often, and the perception that the institution of celebrity has been democratised as something achievable through the exclusive use of social media, may alter expectations of how interactions occur on these platforms.

Online social interaction is diverse and difficult to evaluate with any definitive accuracy. The rate at which social bonds are formed or dissolve, the number of nodes involved and the rapid nature of today’s instant-communication networks makes it impossible to diagnose – an analogous scenario to Heisenberg’s

uncertainty principle in physics where we cannot know both the speed and location of any particle. And yet there is reasoned suspicion that online social networks cater to a growing desire for unstable, superficial social arrangements. Whether or not these depend on high or low commitment varies from user to user, and what is meant by 'commitment.' For example, a social bond can be high commitment in terms of expectations to be online and to respond regularly, while also being low commitment because of low quality cultivation of interpersonal sharing. For several users, the quantity of social connections they are involved may be too high to cultivate high commitment connections that possess qualitative depth, and for those who have an unmanageable amount of connections even high commitment at the level of regular superficial responses are not possible. It might be reasonable to assume that the higher the density of one's online connections, the lower the individual commitment to maintenance or cultivation when taken as a whole since the analogue nature of time prevents us from doing more than allocating the limited time we have available. However, this may suit the pathological narcissist who is not particularly interested in forming high commitment relationships and may seek a return on investment by maximising the quantity of connections. This strategy was once employed by advertisers who sought to bet on marketing to everyone, but since advertising budgets are not infinite, it made sense to realign a marketing campaign to target niche groups where the statistical odds of getting a return on marketing investment dollar was higher.

Social media is potentially ideal for adopting a narcissistic strategy given the large potential supply of users. Inasmuch as access to a large audience in one-to-many or many-to-many communication opportunities can be developed for noble purposes, there is also the enabling feature of such communication opportunities for providing narcissistic supplies that further exacerbate a pathology. Coupled with the heightened expectations of regular and near immediate communication, this may generate an enormous supply of exploitable human resources for self-validation, yet may also exacerbate the dependency/self-reliance paradox of narcissism.

Intensity and Attention

The intensity of constant communication and the desire to make intensive use of commercial signifiers speaks to how embedded and integrated capitalist values are in many online exchanges. Users who cater to their own narcissistic impulses may feel it is their obligation to engineer intense presence and make intense speech acts. Intensity of this kind is also measured by duration: short burst salvo through aphoristic utterance (we can include photos here as part of intensive speech acts) with the hope or expectation of a long lasting effect (through cross-syndication of content). In this way, the narcissistic user is chained to a belief that s/he is the locus of attention – a position more easily

held given the nature of social media networks to be egocentric in structure. When the narcissistic project of maximising virtual territory and the garnering of public attention is geared toward this project, constructive development of the ego may be waylaid or deferred in favour of a dedicated model of developing one's online character as part of the regime of social capital. The enjoyment of reward is to be had only after the labour is complete, and even then (despite a frequent return to brief adulatory feedback as a sustaining inspiration for further labour) full satisfaction is never achieved. The desire for self-aggrandisement and larger doses of measurable validation far outpaces any short-term and ephemeral sense of self-satisfaction. If there is a source for this kind of communication anxiety, it may be a deficit of satisfaction, the perceived widening gap between effort and reward. The desire itself may become monstrous in magnitude and scope, making it virtually impossible to satisfy. For every temporary satisfaction achieved, full satisfaction is out of the narcissist's reach (bringing the story of Narcissus in line with that of Tantalus). The cluster of particular anxieties experienced with regard to online connection and communication may have their root in a perceived obstruction or failure to make use of one's time. This urge to labour on one's online representation for the purposes of achieving a higher online social capital 'score' only further entrenches the narcissist's dependence on others, but also amplifies the anxiety associated with online ego management, not least of which may be exacerbated further if one's online persona – spread out over a variety of venues – requires frequent modification or alteration. The more social network profiles one maintains, the more exhausting the labour might be in maintaining these profiles.

Online Ego Management

The behavioural tendency of the online narcissist to engage in acts of accumulation can be explained by the unacknowledged motivation that collecting a high quantity of online social connections is a means of recollecting the primary narcissistic self to achieve the impossible unity when there was no distinction and differentiation between self and world. This recollection of the (undeveloped) self is not interested in cultivating quality relationships online since that would take considerable investment and self-awareness the narcissist lacks. In the narcissist's failure to understand or acknowledge that others exist autonomously, quality connections are not desired or cannot be cultivated.

Much of the social communication on social media has an ephemerality to it. Despite the ephemerality of so much social information made public on social media, much of it is archived permanently. The inundation of constant information has the effect of diminishing the value quickly. This rapid devaluation of information presents a difficulty for the committed online narcissist who seeks to make a lasting impression with his or her online efforts, so inasmuch as social media provides a seemingly ideal platform to indulge narcissistic

behaviour, there are a variety of structural elements that make this task difficult or even impossible to satisfactorily achieve. Firstly, individual reach must contend with the high volume of others who are also locked in competition for their share of the attention economy. Secondly, a high volume of new social information tends to diminish the returns for online ego investment. Thirdly, although reach may not extend as far as the narcissist desires, it may extend to such a size that invariably a narcissist will be in direct or indirect competition with another narcissist. When so much of the narcissist's energy is already devoted to defensive measures (the barrier known as the 'narcissistic defence'), direct competition may pose an even higher degree of threat than the usual reserve of envy the narcissist might feel in the presence of indirect competition. Lastly, the efforts to maintain enough presence to satisfy the need for narcissistic supplies can be very labour intensive, involving a great deal of management of both online persona and cultivating a large supply of social connections. Studies continue to indicate higher engagement with SNSs correlated with narcissism (Mehdizadeh 2010, Wang and Stefanone 2013).

Digital Narcissism and Aggression: This is My Sandbox!

Although there may be no reliably conclusive empirical proof to claim that narcissism has increased, or that the web has enabled the traits of narcissism to such a degree as to suggest (as some authors have) an 'epidemic',¹⁹ one can point to the connection between narcissism and aggression.

The link between narcissism and incidents of aggression generally arise from threatened egotism where there is a perception by the narcissist that there is an attempt to undermine or devalue said person (Baumeister et al. 2000, Konrath et al. 2006), or as a result of social rejection (Twenge and Campbell 2003). The ease by which the classical narcissist can treat other users online as mere objects, thus objectifying them, can result in aggressive behaviour when the perceived objects either do not provide tributary supplies or seek to frustrate the narcissist's control. In addition, the narcissist may be imbued with particular ego-attachments that are linked to an infantile sense of territory (Noshpitz 1984). Thus, if the narcissist is presented with a challenge in any self-defined territory such as beliefs involving politics, religion, health etc., this may result in narcissistic rage where a cathartic discharge results in a hostile and aggressive attack on the perceived threat to that territory. One of the first linkages made between narcissism and aggression is attributed to Heinz Kohut who viewed it as separate from the drives, and thus a behavioural reaction, especially when the narcissist's sense of self is perceived to be under attack (Kohut 1984, 138). By contrast, Otto Kernberg adopts the more classical understanding that aggression belongs with the drives, and that its manifestation involves defence and resistance. If we take Kohut and Noshpitz's view of infantilisation and arrested development, and transpose these to digital territory, one may

question whether social media enable these behaviours in being constructed as infantilising spaces linked to the competitive nature of online social capital. Although there may not be a sufficient causal link between the gamification of social media and competitive ‘social’ gaming as leading to aggression, there may be a correlation with respect to how the pathological narcissist may understand the competitive nature of these digital milieus, and responds aggressively depending on the social context. In terms of a connection between the digital and aggression, one might recall Marcuse who says that destructive ‘energy becomes socially useful aggressive energy, and the aggressive behaviour impels growth – growth of economic, political, and technical power,’ and that ‘the more powerful and “technological” aggression becomes, the less is it apt to satisfy and pacify the primary impulse, and the more it tends toward repetition and escalation’ (Marcuse 1969, 257, 264).

Many online news comment areas provide both the benefits and deleterious effects for the narcissist through the software architecture of social comparison information such as counters. The quantification or metrification of online social capital presents the narcissist with a real-time feedback system for where s/he stands in a digital community. On one hand, any praise given to the narcissist in an open comment will provide a higher degree of gratification to them because the comment may be read by others. On the other hand, if a user provides a criticism, this same effect of public reach may cause narcissistic injury. The extremes of gratification and injury may be much higher in the online venue due to ego attachment to one’s online persona as an object extension of the self, and so there is an element of risk between an increase in the narcissistic reward or the devastation to the narcissist’s fragile self-esteem.

The Triumph of the Id

What we seem to be left with is a life indexed on the pursuit of a false happiness where the best result is simply adjustment to the social media environment’s competitive nature, and the pathway to this spectacular happiness is littered with signs that tell us to amass virtual objects, to consume our way to self-actualisation. By posting updates as content in an act of conspicuous production to enhance our status as happy beings engaged in happy acts of play, all while chasing after this digitised dream, alienation may be further exacerbated. Accumulating more likes or connections or retweets may only provide fleeting satisfaction – a pattern well worn in how desire functions in consumer society with its range of new objects that promise a happiness that is temporary and tied almost exclusively to an image of true happiness.

The proprietary demands placed upon personal electronic devices to facilitate internet access are an attempt to translate analogue time (the time of the external environment) into one of digital time which may be compressed or fragmented. It is in internet behaviour where the Id flourishes, pursuing a

program of pleasure seeking and pain-avoidance with no conception of consequence. The idea of consequence can only function if there is a corresponding adoption of continuous time in the triadic register of past, present and future. Instead, the enabling function of social media seems to facilitate and cultivate Id-based behaviour (or else brings about a closer communication between the demands of the Id and the ego, translated into a reconfiguration of the ego-ideal that the superego will punitively enforce). The time of the Id is the eternal present, the epideictic function of self-display, self-disclosure or self-masking. The participatory nature of social media facilitates the expression of the ego-ideal, as well as providing a milieu in which to gratify Id-based impulses. What is particularly of interest would be how digital interaction has splintered the psychological subject by externalising in materialised form the various levels of the conscious and unconscious. Although many of these online social networks provide a playground for the robust Id, the superego's presence is also felt in the way these network platforms are constructed, announcing the rules and controlling how discourse can appear in these milieus.

Online social relations may be governed by the determinist function of capitalist ideology in the form of the spectacle so that most communication seems to orbit around commodities. Since capitalism operates best according to a series of crises (*Kairos*), these are experienced as minor panics or agitation to further retrench one's self in the act of consumption activities, even if no product is being purchased and only referenced. Since commodities take on the transcendental ideal, promising an end to alienation from each other and ourselves, only the trace or residue remains with the particular object rather than the abstract image of self-completion. Since many commodities are indexed on pleasure seeking or the illusion of leisure, these are generally packaged in such a way as to appeal to the Id. The violence endemic to this spectacle is expressed through acts of consumption and aggrandised self-display that operate as a means of achieving the ego-ideal of celebrity status. Since the very term celebrity is tautologous and can only be defined in reference to itself, the ego-ideal transfers the demands of the Id to the online representation of the self. The quiet merger of the Id and superego complete the process of auto-celebration, and yet requires tributary relationships in order to attain external validation. Achieved celebrity status on social media requires a constant reinvestment and staying in the social media game.

In *The Ecstasy of Communication*, Baudrillard writes: 'Today the scene and the mirror have given way to a screen and network. There is no longer any transcendence or depth, but only the immanent surface of operations unfolding, the smooth and functional surface of communication' (1988, 12). If taken to mean that the staged scenario of representation has come to an end because there is no longer any interplay of subject and object in the currency of meaning, then the value of signification has also changed.

Our online consumption is based on images and signs which ensure the illusion of our proximity and access to information while also producing a distance

that operates according to a different spatiotemporal order. In a world governed by objects that are imbued with exchange-value as their primary meaning, the next step was to transform human subjects into objectified and manipulable signs. There is both narcissism and solipsism in this attitude toward other users where among the main goals of online social interaction is self-confirmation, ego validation, control and carrying out the continued commodification of all social relations amidst the promiscuity of digital networks. The nomadic user is in constant pursuit of recollecting him or herself in the maternal, oceanic milieu of the online world and its promises of unity and completion. In reality, much of the internet can be an abyss of screened dis- and misinformation, stock opinions, and venues for self-display.

Online social networks provide for growth for its own sake, be this the accumulation of one's own images, the images of others, the collection of connections, and the overall expansion of these networks in general. For those who can be classified as addicted to these online platforms, the offline world presents itself as a nuisance, as a series of irritations and interruptions that distract the gaze from the screen. Yet, online presence alone can become a redundant marker of one's actual presence as though a deficit in online presence conjures up the fear of ego-scarcity. Online presence may be understood as a territorial marking. For those who are dedicated to increasing their online presence, the aim may be to expand that presence so that it occupies maximum space – an aim that frustrates itself given that the spatial dimension of the internet itself is constantly growing. In this way, users with this view to maximise space may operate under an analogue understanding of space. This analogue way of understanding the internet does not correspond to a digital order of organisation where spatial restrictions are no longer a factor. The real limitations are not in spatial terms, but speed; that is, the speed by which information can travel, and the speed by which one has the energy to expand within digital space. Digital time and digital space are ecstatic in nature in so far as they operate largely outside of analogue space and time. They are not governed by, nor do they keep pace with, the natural environment.

It is not the classical psychoanalytic assumption that we are fundamentally irrational creatures governed by the destructive subconscious drives of the Id which needs to be contained by state and social structures, Freud's later work notwithstanding in *Civilization and its Discontents*. It would be Freud's nephew, Edward Bernays, who would attempt to apply some of the principles of psychoanalysis in the development of public relations and in channelling the unconscious drives to the benefit of marketing products and services. In this way, the attempt was made to redirect the destructive drives toward more economically beneficial activities such as shopping. However, despite this safety valve on the Id, it was not the individual's Id that was ever at issue – that would erupt in anarchic destruction of the state – nor was it simply a matter of controlling individuals in isolation to induce aggressive consumption. Instead, it was the control and perfection of the collective Id. Early crowd studies (Le Bon 1895,

Canetti 1962) point to the abdication of the ego in large mobs, and to how crowds function as a kind of Id-driven dynamo. It is not just the mobs that erupt in violence against the state, but a spectacular society's ability to marshal the Id collectively toward mass consumption.

Online identities, divested of depth and placed within their hyper-individualised content in a pre-made online social network form, have already made the transition to being commodities that others can collect and treat as on-demand objects. This occurs alongside the natural disjunction between the traffic of actual goods and information about them where the latter can be mobilised at an accelerated rate according to the compression of digital space-time (Harvey 2011, 190). These online representations are reduced to their exchange value (their surplus value pegged on an infinite potentiality that is never truly actualised), and as well reifications of the communication economy. Baudrillard (1988) argues that each lives within his or her own bubble, a self as satellised from the natural world as the natural world becomes satellised from the self – and the revised version of this claim can be found in the highly customised and tailored experience social media users are subject to. This distance is entirely abstract, as opposed to the closing (or pollution) of that distance through the instantaneity of global communication. This bewitching sovereignty where each is a master at his or her own controls operating their online puppet, ventriloquising their identity, is a continuation of a game of personal aggrandisement and narcissism which, in the end, only succeeds via the commodification of all online interaction and social relations, into a further retrenchment of ego by alienation. No longer is it simply the alienation of the labourer from his or her labour since consumption and production become identical rather than symmetrical processes. What was once circumstantial consumption in the early public sphere, such as the gathering at coffee houses to discuss politics, has become the driving force by which these social relations can exist at all. At the point which any popular online social utility like Facebook or Twitter make the transition to becoming verbs, these replace the terms associated with social acts as speaking or writing with a new kind of mouth and hand, the prosthesis of communication colonised by a commercial brand and its economic interests.

Online Aggression

Hardly anyone needs to be reminded that the online world can be a hostile 'give no quarter' environment. Potentially divisive and incendiary topics including politics, climate change, religion, gender, and ethnicity can erupt into vitriolic polemics, hate speech, threats,²⁰ and a general rancour where civil discourse is eliminated in the process. The drive to compete with other users to be heard can involve ever more extreme utterances, and such competition may aggravate already aggressive attitudes lurking beneath the surface. Although one may witness such behaviours on the uncensored 4Chan site or in various subreddit,

examples abound on more popular social media sites. Moreover, these utterances and acts of aggression are not consigned to the stereotype of the basement-dwelling troll feverishly tapping away on a keyboard to incite a reaction: even public figures such as celebrities and politicians have been known to engage in impulsive speech acts on social media that may be little more than bullying, insensitive, hostile invectives, indicative of malice or deficit of empathy. In addition, even seemingly well-composed individuals can be baited into an online dispute that escalates to the point of making direct attacks and issuing threats. Even when such events disrupt more civil discourse and are met with condemnation, it has become ever more the case that the instigators of the aggression may castigate the straw-person of ‘political correctness’ as standing opposed to freedom of expression.

The traits of narcissism and aggression are combined in trollish or bullying behaviour as there may be little regard or reflection by the individual on the consequences for one’s online speech acts, and apparent low empathy. Shielded behind a screen, and with the unspoken demand to respond with the immediacy with which social information arrives, childlike eruptions can certainly be more easily triggered.

These forms of online aggression, tied to competition in an attention economy and the perceived demands of instant communication, might be traced in some cases to a form of impulsiveness emerging out of a heated exchange. They may be further facilitated by signs of support for making such utterances; namely, in interpreting a large number of retweets or likes as condoning the act, akin to receiving applause.²¹ Such rabble-rousing is certainly not new, but social media presents a new platform with a much larger audience where such an audience can more easily be measured for proof of support. Pundits and propagandists have long understood the value of making use of the media of the day to incite crowds using hyperbole, polemic and other forms of eliciting pathos to exacerbate divisions with simplistic slogans while demonising the Other. And, as lines are drawn on various issues, pitched battles between users may rage as each side will have a vested personal interest, and these fights may quickly escalate – particularly as more users get involved as spectators or participants who thrive on conflict, using provocation and encouragement to keep the flame wars hot.

Studies in online aggression point to a variety of types that define its dimension, including variables that can be measured on the Message Invective Scale including hostility, aggression, intimidation, offensiveness, unfriendliness, uninhibitedness, sarcasm and flaming (Turnage 2007). A good working definition for online aggression would judge such incidents as fundamentally conflictual in nature. In terms of manifestations, online aggression ‘can result from personal dislike, ideological or political disagreement, racial or religious prejudice or bias against a certain group. Aggression can also occur in response to a violation of accepted social rules and etiquette or *for no apparent reason*’ (Di Segna Garbasz 1997; emphasis mine).

The domain of online aggression and hostility involves a cluster of related studies that include, but are not limited to, current research on cyberbullying, interpersonal studies, computer-mediated communication (CMC), participatory journalism and the digital public sphere. The vast majority of news sites that allow for user-generated commentary are considered generally asynchronous communication environments which can be classified as having lower human-to-human interactivity due to a lack of contingency and mutuality (Burgoon et al 2000). Asynchronous environments differ from synchronous ones on the basis of the latter's capacity for communicative immediacy (such as in live chat). In addition, the rates of interpersonal interactivity may show differences pending the moderation used by the news sites' comment section. User-generated commentary on news sites generally falls within the interaction model of reactive communication (Rafaeli 1988). Interaction can be assumed to be more direct where comment sections are threaded, thus allowing for the nesting of reaction and reply to a 'lead' comment.

The motivations for engaging in online aggression and hostility are multitude and specific to a variety of behavioural traits tied to the user. Combativeness in the online venue can be said to have some basis in ego defence, which can also include indirect ego defence by rising to the occasion in defending another person or group for either reasons of personal validation or on account of identifying oneself with the person or group perceivably under attack.

What generally characterises aggressive online commentary is some form of antagonistic statement that will either make direct attack against another person, or indirectly by associating a point of view with the other person to demonstrate that the position and the people who hold it are equally maligned. Another trend, particularly found in political discussion, is the repetition of talking points and slogans as represented as inviolable truth, thus a rhetorical attempt to shut down further discussion. The person who ritually engages in these behaviours to belittle others, to perform malicious personal attacks, and intimidate – beyond relying on fallacy, crudity, and sensationalism as their weapons – could be defined as possessing lower self-esteem. What functions as ego-insulating behaviour is also indicative of a popular online trend that emerges alongside the rise in punditry and the media by which punditry may be spread.

Aggression and Approbation Cues

Many news sites have implemented a means of approving or disapproving of a user's comment with the aid of the social buttons that permit rating comments up or down. Some news sites have removed the comment feature due to excessive forms of hostility, flaming and spamming. The costs associated with pre-moderated structures whereby comments have to be approved prior to being made visible can be cost-prohibitive whether it is done in-house or outsourced

to a separate company.²² Post-moderated structures rely on users and volunteer moderators to flag content that may violate the rules of the comment area. Unmoderated structures cost virtually little, but open up the space for all the problems moderation seeks to avoid.

Whether comments appear on news stories or on social media that makes use of social buttons in showing approbation or disapproval, users can make decisions without having to justify them. With the deployment of sophisticated botnets or paid trolls, it is not difficult to aggregate a larger number of apparent supporters or objectors to any comment, tweet or post. This may lead to a misleading bandwagon effect akin to social proof as opposed to deeper critical engagement. On those sites that bury user contributions if their aggregate score for approval is too low, such as Reddit, this may lead one to trust the apparent democracy of the majority in deselecting the contribution from the visible feed. This may be construed as social proof of the value of the contributions.

Social proof generally will direct approbation so that the higher the number of thumbs up (or down), the higher the likelihood that other users will contribute as a gesture of social belonging. In a broadly numerical contest of obtaining a large ratio of approval to disapproval, this sets up a competitive aspect where the 'prize' is the community approval of the user as being credible, witty, truthful or informative. Pending the disposition of the user who does not win this 'contest,' ego injury may result which may further elicit an aggressive response.

Aggressive online behaviour might be amplified by over-investment of ego as a result of priority distortion. The perception that the 'stakes' in online comment contests is disproportionately higher than the reward might be. Aggression might result from either the prospect of threat (another user criticising or attacking the user) or as an act of confirmation. Both threat and confirmation denote passionate involvement, sometimes to the extent that it might impair judgement. Catering to an aggrandised sense of opinion entitlement has proven to be prosperous for many news sites given that providing a platform that directly engages self-interest is an effective web traffic driver for getting more eyeballs on ads. By directly or indirectly playing into the narrative of fierce competition, and in providing 'rewards' for 'victory' such as earning a high number of thumbs-up may not only infantilise the space, diminish rational-critical engagement, but also enable aggressive competitive behaviours among those predisposed to such conflict. What makes the 'give no quarter, win the internet' game via user-supplied comments a worthwhile pursuit? The prize or victory only occurs as a form of temporary self-validation, possible intimidation of others, and in potentially gaining an equally fleeting validation from the user community.

When taking online news sites as an example, is difficult to assess if reader-generated opinions today have increased in hostility compared to the past, since traditional news media used editors as gatekeepers, thus rejecting letters to the editor that were harmful, defamatory or libellous, given the legal responsibility of the publication. What problematises effective analysis of hostility levels in

opinion is precisely the lack of access to rejected materials. Just as it is unlikely for any researcher to acquire the rejected letters to the editor of a newspaper from 1918, it is equally unlikely to do so for news sites that may simply delete offending comments in 2018. Problematising analysis further, every editor will most likely have a different threshold of tolerance for comments that will determine what is and is not posted online, partially harmonised to the news site's acceptable standards. This, apart from standardised rules that automatically reject user-comments that contravene hate speech or libel laws, presents a variable, relative and flexible number of outcomes depending on the threshold of each moderator and how s/he responds to any given user-generated comment situation. One disturbing question emerges: if the assumption that online hostility proves true according to a measuring of current trends, how much more hostile might it actually be had not the moderator weeded out the worst comments?

Contributing Factors

Although there exist several diagnostic tools for measuring aggression such as the Buss-Durkee Hostility Inventory (BDHI devised in 1957 and more recently modified as the Aggression Questionnaire, or AQ) or Anderson and Bushman's General Aggression Model, none is perfectly suited to obtaining a reliable measure of online hostility and aggression given the very nature of interactive media itself which is constantly replenishing its textual stock or possibly customised to each user to only display relevant content according to the presets of an algorithm. In addition, the effect of online comments on readers as a means by which it might provoke an incident of conflict may be influenced by the 'digital water line'; namely, the probabilities associated with a user being confronted with a provocative comment among currently visible comments as opposed to those that have been 'buried' or relegated to subsequent pages which would involve navigation to said pages not immediately visible.

The optimistic view that online forums bring together like-minded people for the purposes of group sociability has been challenged on the basis that such online activities might in fact tend toward individualisation in particular cases (Hodgkinson 2007). Although broader and more ambient effects constitute peripheral considerations, they no less may play a role in exacerbating and escalating conflict in the online milieu.

Social comparison information may also prompt extreme disinhibition behaviours due to the magnitude of available real-time content. Any gain in online social capital may have a brief shelf life, which requires constant renewal or escalation to be heard in the clamour of online social competition for attention.

Social media, for some, is a hostile battlefield governed by retaliation and initiating either strategies for revenge or instigating conflict, while also a means

of building the negative aspects of social capital. Although such behaviours may be seen as simply a natural migration of human tendencies from the offline world, arguably the number of conflict events online might prove much higher than in the offline world on account of virtual distance and the ability to conduct attacks anonymously. Virtual distance provides a buffer for the attacker or vengeance-seeker, but also reduces confronting any of the in-person consequences of such behaviour, thus making it a far more preferred mechanism for the rise in what is now recognised as cyberbullying. Despite a considerable and long overdue increase in focal studies on the issue of cyberbullying,²³ there is a conspicuous dearth of studies that deal directly with online hostility in comment culture apart from a few notable exceptions that deal specifically with what is ambiguously called flaming. Given the lack of access to users' non-verbal communication cues, the primary means of evaluating online conflict had been through textual analysis. With the rise of rich media, photo and video examples of hostility can now also form part of the aggressor's arsenal.

Understanding online conflict relies heavily on psychological distal and proximal causes for aggressive or hostile events. Assessing the users' textual production may provide further evidence and insight by the study of these utterances and how they may conform to existing models in understanding aggression such as the general aggression, cognitive-social or the cognitive neo-associative models. Such methods for understanding online hostility may prove highly beneficial in understanding the issue on a case-by-case basis, and assist in developing a strategy for conflict assessment, analysis and resolution. By adopting a broader socio-cultural and psychoanalytic view of the phenomenon as a whole, larger environmental and ambient influences facilitating aggressive behaviour can be more effectively considered.

Social media does provide a space for its more hostile users to engage in bad behaviour. These behaviours may provide validation and satisfaction to those who seek negative attention, or are paid to provoke such incidents. Cynically, conflict sells if only because it may result in more participation on the platform where, ostensibly, more users will be subject to ads for longer. To a certain extent, online aggression in the form of flame wars and acrimonious, glib exchanges provides a form of entertainment for spectators. When the 'combatants' are high-profile figures, it does not fail to make the news, whether it be the feuding tit-for-tat between actor Mark Hamill and US Senator Ted Cruz over net neutrality, or Donald Trump versus his many targets.

A curious kind of tribalism may be emerging from a social milieu that was so frequently touted as an inclusive, democratising space by optimistic network theorists. The spread of fake news, a rise in cyberbullying, trolling, and the use of 'doxxing' by ideological extremists, points to a new kind of emphasis on both virtual territory and using social media to shout down constructive criticism and reason, if not also the use of hostile threats against the lives of those such individuals and groups target.

‘Always Be Closing’

For a number of users, the need to be popular and to always be seen ‘winning’ in one form or another speaks to some of the unspoken expectations of the social media environment. Users may engage in a variety of online persona management tactics such as staging and curation in order to present an ideal self-stripped of any perceived imperfections or dull moments. Focusing on only the glamorous times and the enhanced image does present a warped world scenario on social media where, for some, the environment is heavily populated by individuals living fantastic lives of leisure, luxury and adventure. This may set up an impossible bar for others to aspire to, and particularly because such representations may deviate from reality. Heavy investment of time and labour in the curation and representation of the digital self in order to obtain the benefits of online social capital is caught up in the games of an attention economy, and its most visible sign is the accumulation of likes, friends and followers as a comparative measure. Winning also becomes the object of some online aggression where the aggressor wishes to be seen as the victor.

In the highly competitive environment of social media where attention is critical to increasing one’s stake in the like economy, it should not surprise us that aggressive and hostile tactics may also result. Despite the hundreds of millions of users operating on social media on any given day, attention can be considered something of a scarce commodity, and if it is not those who choose to game the system, others may be choosing to let disinhibition govern behaviour in ways that increase risk-taking, adopting a warped world view of the self and engaging in hostile acts.

It may not prove difficult at this point to see the implications of a more self-involved and competitively driven social media space for the pursuit of online social capital. If, in fact, there is a significant number of social media users following a kind of pleasure principle enabled by the affordances of platforms that can deliver regular notification and potential instant gratification through multi-casting (and cross-syndicating) content, there will be moments of frustration, disappointment, questioning of self-worth and even anger when things do not meet expectations. The fact that we can measure and rank users according to web counters sets up the potential for creating hierarchies and engaging in value judgement on the basis of these counters.

Marx’s four aspects of alienation, in scenarios where the pursuit of online social capital fuses with instances of correlative narcissism and aggression, leads to a kind of ‘alienation 2.0’. Consider an extreme case of a social media user whose primary goal is to bump up her or his ‘score.’ Does the pleasure gained by seeing a change in numbers justify all the effort of production, presence, connectivity and deliberate reputation management? Is there a moment of awareness of the futility of such efforts, and that said efforts only truly serve the interests of corporate social media? In the ruthless pursuit of online social capital gain, would said user one day acknowledge that these numbers do not represent actual, intimate

bonds? In the end, the social media user does not own the product of their labour, and the numbers associated with likes and retweets and followers may, in fact, be trivial tokens of so much labour time spent in building up these metrics.

Narcissism and aggression are arguably more extreme symptoms of the dogged pursuit of online social capital. However, it does call up the existential question of what these counters actually mean. What real value do they represent as they may be little more than a quasi-social version of making one's bank account public, a form of displaying a social media version of class status.

An obsession with analytics – click-throughs, impressions, site visitors, etc. – is facilitated by the affordances of our digital technology, and used by corporations to track and predict, modify and improve operations for the purposes of maximising profit. This migration of analytics to online social spaces allows users to have a visible output of their presence and efforts on social networks, but the danger arises when this also becomes a motivator for engaging in what would otherwise be deemed capitalist traits of branding and vigorous competition, creating what can be more appropriately called a social *marketplace*. This form of transactional model for social interaction that awards or seeks to gain 'points' appears heavily market-centric.

When the social is subject to being measured, and to sometimes viciously competitive aspects of seeking attention, those who have stronger narcissistic and aggressive tendencies may indulge their worst behaviours. Social media may, in fact, bring this out in many users – even those who are otherwise less competitive. The ubiquity of social media's presence, the apparent broader ideological message of its necessity, and the presence of counters to measure popularity, all work as a confluence of factors to enable and facilitate these behaviours.

Just as it is said of lotteries that one must play to win, the same might be said of social media and its highly competitive environment. For those who see so much at stake, what happens to those who lose? What of those who, for one reason or another, just refuse to play? And for those who 'win,' it is largely on the basis of accumulation, which is its own form of alienation in the end – or at the very least leads to those uncomfortable existential questions of what 'winning' means when such victories are fleeting, and one's production is not owned, serving the ends of the social media corporation.

There is some hope that the continued de-stigmatising of mental wellness issues in public discourse can provide some measure of support in understanding the impact social media in its current competition-centred form has on self-esteem, and perhaps lead to a call for corrective changes. Moreover, there may also be pressure to at least make the devices that are used to access social media less 'addictive.' For example, a group of shareholders of Apple have petitioned the corporation to do just that. A number of apps have been developed that track the amount of time one spends on social media, or in silencing the constant and tempting ping of notifications. If the social media environment cannot be made less competitive in the short term, perhaps opting for means to limit time spent on it may prove of some benefit.

Main Points

- The egocentric nature of social media sites that cater to the individual also facilitates and actively enables more narcissistic investment in the digital self.
- The prevailing ideological discourse that privileges individualism and competition provides an ideal ground for narcissistic behaviours on social media, as well as a focus on accumulating a quantity rather than quality of social connections. This may lead to the view of other users as mere objects to be manipulated and to provide narcissistic fodder for the user.
- As social media facilitates self-display and competition for online social capital, there may be ambient pressure for other users to integrate narcissistic behaviours in a competition to be noticed and be considered relevant. Moreover, narcissistic behaviour may be a dominant social norm on social media, and so new users may adopt certain behaviours in an effort to 'fit in.'
- Narcissism's reliance on the Id may result in a larger profusion of grandiose claims, and actions that are performed on social media with little empathy or regard for consequences. This is further facilitated by the nature of computer-mediated communication environments where there is an apparent buffer against consequences due to distance and the ability to conduct oneself under screen aliases.
- Competition for online social capital in conjunction with more impulsive Id-based behaviour can also result in more online aggression as a means to intimidate, attract attention through provocation, or as a reactive narcissistic defence mechanism.