

## Study shows technology may lessen empathy

By Dan Holtmeyer  
U. Nebraska via UWIRE

College students are becoming less empathetic and more narcissistic, and the key might be in technology.

Cell phones, social networks like Facebook and other sources of constant information seem to impact young people's moral judgment. But according to recent research, it's less in how the technology works, and more in how it's used.

A joint study between researchers at Western Kentucky University and Flagler College found students who used social media in self-promoting or self-involved ways tended to be more narcissistic and less nuanced in their moral reasoning.

"It's not as much about the usage as about the attitudes," Meghan Saculla said.

Saculla, one of the two researchers and a graduate student at Flagler College, to The Chronicle of Higher Education earlier this month.

The 279-student survey defined self-absorbed behavior as posting exorbitant numbers of pictures or focusing status updates on the self. Men were more likely to do so than women even though they use technology less.

Saculla worked with W. Pitt Derryberry, an associate psychology professor at Western Kentucky University and the study's primary investigator. Both presented their findings to the American Educational Research Association two weeks ago.

An important consideration is causation, both researchers said. Their findings only related a certain use of social media and narcissistic characteristics, finding a correlation between the two. They didn't mean one caused the other.

More narcissistic individuals, for instance, could simply find an ideal platform in media like Facebook, the researchers said, an idea supported by faculty at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

"I suspect that people choose their communication media in ways that best meet (their) needs," Dawn Braithwaite, chairwoman of communication studies, said. "Communication is goal-directed."

If the goal is self-promotion, then students' use will adjust accordingly, whichever medium they choose.

"It's not Facebook, necessarily," Braithwaite said. "But it makes it easier."

Still, the findings fit an emerging pattern of slumping empathy among college-age individuals even as narcissism rises. According to research by Sara Konrath of the University of Michigan, the focus of a Scientific American article published early this year, empathy has been on the decline for three decades. Whether it's an effect of technology, a change among generations or how much people read, college students care less about others on average than in the past.

Derryberry and Saculla pointed out in their paper that narcissism has been on the rise since before technology began to stretch into the public consciousness like it has today. Because of this, they said, it could be that the favored cause-effect arrow is backward, and narcissism changed the use of technology even as it developed.

But Jenna Stephenson-Abetz, a UNL communication studies graduate student who has studied social network use, saw some possible effects in how people approach social media specifically. Students, she said, tend to be very deliberate in the image they project.

"It's a space where they can completely be very, very selective," she said.

They try to create a specific image, she said, one that has to appeal to friends, family and coworkers. That takes strategy.

"(The findings) wouldn't surprise me, given the thought and time that goes into maintaining the profile," Stephenson-Abetz said.

All of that effort is in the name of preserving public face, Braithwaite said, an intent that filters students' use of social media and can create the appearance of excessive self-focus.

"Usually the picture that people paint on Facebook is relatively positive," she said. "Most of us communicate in a way that preserves our face."

Students who use social media as a means of self-promotion also exhibit less of an ability to morally reason outside of themselves, called post-conventional reasoning, according to the researchers.

Whatever technology's effect, researchers agree on its involvement in these patterns. Still, Michigan's Konrath found some optimism in the decline of empathy and rise of narcissism.

"The fact that empathy is declining means that there's more fluidity to it than previously thought," she told the magazine. "It means that empathy can change. It can go up."

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