

An 'abyss of self-love': an analysis of the structural components of Facebook

ABSTRACT

Narcissism is increasingly being regarded as one of the most serious sociocultural problems of the contemporary era. Indeed, recent studies by Baldwin and Stroman (2007) and Buffardi and Campbell (2008), among others, have advanced the opinion that new media technologies – particularly social networking websites – have significantly exacerbated the rise and spread of narcissism in contemporary society. Based on this premise that social media provide the perfect platform for the promotion of self-infatuation, this research paper provides a critical analysis of the potential influence of social media in the development of a widespread narcissistic sociocultural condition. In this regard, claims that increasingly consumerist, individualist and media-saturated societies are nurturing a culture of extreme narcissism, vanity and entitlement are examined in relation to an increase in the use of consumer-orientated new media technologies. In particular, by examining the structural components of the popular social networking site, Facebook, this research highlights the connection between the use of this form of new media and the engenderment of an acutely consumerist and narcissistic subjectivity. That is, the role of new media technologies in the promotion of narcissistic identity construction is examined as a factor of particular significance in the formation of contemporary subjectivity. In relation to this, the impact of online narcissism on the perpetuation and propagation of capitalist isolation, alienation and insecurity is investigated before some remedial measures – which co-opt rather than negate such social media – are proposed.

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INTRODUCTION

According to various cultural theorists, the rise of narcissism as a sociocultural condition was a direct consequence of the post-World War II economic boom of the late 1940s and early 1950s, in which the surplus wealth of an increasingly secular, affluent and capitalist society created ideal conditions for the growth of such self-absorption (Lasch, 1980; Wolfe, 1976). However, this increasingly capitalist orientation, together with the augmenting influence of the mass media, soon came under fire, with critics such as Adorno (1947), Horkheimer (1947) and Marcuse (1964) identifying these two developments as promoting individualist and egotistical ideals that are antithetical to democracy. Nevertheless, capitalism and the mass media continued to grow unabated – only momentarily challenged by the emergence of a brief counter-cultural movement away from their imperatives in the late 1960s. This counter-cultural movement was, however, short lived. Indeed, after the student revolts of the late 1960s, the 1970s – commonly referred to as the ‘Me Decade’ – saw the intense re-emergence of ‘an era of narcissism, selfishness and personal rather than political awareness’ (Schulman, 2001:145). This focus on the self as a means of subduing growing economic insecurities resulted in an increased emphasis on materialism and a focus on self-promotion. Consequently, as time passed, this focus on the self intensified through the widespread adoption of neoliberalism in the eighties and the self-absorption of ‘Generation Me’ in the nineties.¹ The legacy of such individualism has in turn been the emergence of increasingly consumer-orientated and media-saturated cultures in the new millennium. And these cultures have engendered the exponential proliferation of narcissistic tendencies around the world (Twenge, 2006; Twenge & Campbell, 2009).

Thus, analysed in relation to ‘consumer culture’, ‘celebrity culture’ and ‘new media’ narcissism has been referred to as ‘the fastest developing social disease of the peoples of the West’, with instances of vanity, self-aggrandisement and self-promotion evident in all aspects of cultural interaction (McLuhan & Powers, 1992:100). ‘Seen to be at the root of everything from the ill-fated romance with violent revolution, to the enthralled mass consumption of state-of-the-art products, and [infatuation with] the “lifestyles of the rich and the famous”’ (Tyler, 2007:343) arguably, the most recent manifestation of this growth of narcissism has been society’s use of, and reliance upon, new media technologies (Baldwin & Stroman, 2007; Buffardi & Campbell, 2008; Orlet, 2007). Social media, in particular, has been criticised for actively fostering the growth of narcissism, by encouraging an extreme fixation on the self, an exaggerated sense of self-importance, hyperbolic egotism, and pronounced feelings of entitlement. Accordingly, as prominent media theorist Lev Manovich (2001:235) points out, ‘most new media activates a “narcissistic condition”’, whereby the promotion of the self becomes a ubiquitous endeavour.

In relation to this, this research paper examines the role of the popular social networking site Facebook in the promotion of an acutely narcissistic subjectivity among those individuals who utilise

¹ Unlike the Baby Boomers who only started to focus on the self later in life, Jean Twenge argues that today’s ‘Generation Me’ (GenMe) has been born into a world that already celebrates the individual, where the self is already at the top of the agenda. In her book, *Generation Me* (2006), she suggests that GenMe does not need to ‘polish’ the self, because its members take for granted that it is already shiny. Indeed, the importance of self-esteem and loving oneself has become an everyday aspect of GenMe life, with children being taught from an early age always to put themselves first (Twenge, 2006:49).

this medium. By investigating the promotion of narcissism as a means of escaping the isolation and anxiety commonly experienced in contemporary capitalist society, this article explores the potential of Facebook to engender cultural and commodity narcissism. Furthermore, this article will argue that, by encouraging a movement away from direct interpersonal interaction towards more mediated forms of social connection, new media technologies – for example Facebook – not only promote an environment in which self-absorption takes precedence, but they also encourage a withdrawal from both the community and from democratic citizenship. Arguably, this withdrawal stands to be particularly problematic for the contemporary era, insofar as it exacerbates experiences of loneliness and isolation, and militates against direct social connectedness.

1. NEW MILLENNIUM NARCISSISM

Of the numerous qualities of narcissism, today's culture of vanity, materialism, entitlement and antisocial behaviour tends to stand out because of its exaggerated parameters. Indeed, these traits have increasingly come to characterise society, each one adding to the narcissism of the next generation. Lasch (1980:50) maintains that the growth of narcissism in the 1970s was largely connected to how society dealt with the mounting tensions and anxieties of modern life. Indeed, the uncertainty and discontent following the stagflation and oil crises of the seventies acted to increase disquiet and uncertainty. According to Lasch (1980:50), the prevailing social conditions therefore tended to bring to the fore existing narcissistic personality traits already present in everybody. However, unlike the tensions experienced in the seventies, societal conditions for GenMe (those born between 1970 and 1990) have been relatively free of traumatic historical events. Notwithstanding a few recessions, there has been general economic stability, there have been no world wars, and GenMe has never been drafted.² Despite this, however, anxiety and depression have continued to grow and are often considered commonplace in contemporary society. In this regard, in a study of data collected from 40 192 college students, Twenge (2006:107) found that 'the average student in the 1990s was more anxious than 85% of students in the 1950s and 71% of students in the 1970s'. Following this, analogous surveys in the new millennium posed the following question: If there is no better time than now to be alive, then why

² Although commonly referred to as GenMe, Mark Prensky describes the generation of people born from the 1980s onwards as *digital natives*. To Prensky (2001:1), *digital natives* are people who grew up in the digital age, one in which the Internet, video games and new media technologies have had a significant impact on their lives. He argues that 'technology [is] essential to these young people's existence – depicting young people as now being constantly "surrounded" and "immersed" by these new technologies in ways that older generations were not' (Selwyn, 2009:365). More recently, Prensky has highlighted the role of this immersion in, and dependence on technology in the development of an upcoming generation, namely the 'i-kids' (2008). These 'i-kids' he argues, are constantly connected or 'plugged in' to their technologies, be they MP3 players, portable gaming devices, smartphones, computers, etc. Seen as an extension or intensification of GenMe, digital natives have also been accused of self-involvement and entitlement. In this regard, Keen maintains that '[M]ySpace and Facebook are creating a youth culture of digital narcissism, open-source knowledge-sharing sites like Wikipedia are undermining the authority of teachers in the classroom; the YouTube generation are more interested in self-expression than in learning about the insider world; the cacophony of anonymous blogs and user-generated content is deafening today's youth to the voices of informed experts and professional journalists; kids are so busy self-broadcasting themselves on social networks that they no longer consume the creative work of professional musicians, novelists, or filmmakers' (2007:xiii-xiv).

does today's society seem to be increasingly unhappy? One part of the answer relates to the growth of neoliberalism as the 'political economy of insecurity' (Smart, 2003:32), while another points to the growth of narcissism.³

Indeed, with neo-liberal consumerism and cultural narcissism at an all-time high (Twenge, 2006:70), society's focus on the self may actually be perpetuating the growth of anxiety. In relation to this, Twenge (2006:109) argues that society's 'growing tendency to put the self first leads to [a sense] of unparalleled [economic] freedom, but it also creates an enormous amount of pressure on us to stand alone'.⁴ In other words, although capitalist society provides citizens with a freedom to choose between consumer goods, pressure to make it on one's own and a focus on the self can often lead to loneliness and isolation. The sadness that frequently comes from being alone is often the flip side of this freedom and of putting oneself first (Twenge, 2006:115). Another downside to this increased focus on the self is that although society is increasingly becoming independent and hyper-specialised, personal disappointments can become all encompassing in that we have nothing else on which to focus. Furthermore, high expectations – often instilled in childhood and promoted through the media in response to the false needs of the culture industry – have become increasingly difficult to obtain and becoming 'anything you want to be' and 'having everything you want to have' are not always attainable.⁵ The focus on the self and the all-encompassing need to fulfil narcissistic designs – informed by neoliberalism, together with the immense obstacles that

³ The political economy of neoliberalism has also been used in cultural studies to define an internationally recognised social, cultural and political-ideological agenda that is based on the language of markets, consumer choice, transactional thinking, efficiency and individual autonomy (Singh, 2010:10). In this regard, Barry Smart asserts that 'our way of life is one in which emphasis is placed on the calculating, rational self-interested subject and a commercialized competitive individualism that is increasingly constitutive of thought and conduct in private and public life' (2003:7). Indeed, he further notes Bourdieu's contention that 'the extent to which our culture has become economized is exemplified by the degree to which existence has been "accommodated to division of labour, class, commodification and instrumental rationality" and homo capitalisticus has become universal' (cited in Smart, 2003:8). In short, accordingly, the market deregulation of the Thatcher-and-Reagan era and the ensuing rise of neoliberalism as the global economic ideology led to the commodification of all forms of cultural activities.

⁴ Strinati (2004:54) explains this idea when he discusses this economic freedom within capitalist societies. He asserts that people within capitalist society who think they are free, are not actively free in terms of being autonomous, independent and consciously thinking human beings. Rather, he argues, 'their freedom is restricted to the freedom to choose between different consumer goods and different brands of the same goods'.

⁵ According to the Frankfurt School, every human being has a set of true or real needs, which include the need to be autonomous, social and creative, and related to the need to be free, to live and to think for oneself. They argue, however, that these true needs cannot be realised within modern capitalist society, because they are constantly being overshadowed by the false needs imposed by the economic system. In this regard Kellner (1991:xi) asserts that 'advanced industrial society create[s] ... false needs, which integrate ... individuals into the existing system of production and consumption via mass media, advertising, industrial management, and contemporary modes of thought'.

often stand in the way of such fulfilment – may indeed be adding to the anxiety and depression increasingly being experienced in contemporary society. Thus, by pursuing narcissism as a means of relieving the pressures of contemporary life, today's generation may instead be unwittingly exacerbating their levels of anxiety. And in a vicious circle, the more anxious they become, the more they pursue narcissism in the hope of finding security – especially within the online context.

2. RESEARCH PROBLEM

The problem on which this paper focuses is related to the potential of the structural features of the social-media phenomenon Facebook – being indissociable from the broader economic and sociocultural developments of late/advanced capitalism – namely to engender the development of an acutely narcissistic subjectivity among those individuals who utilise this medium in a way that stands to problematise the efficacy of the democratic process. The study seeks to analyse the relationship between social media and narcissism within the context of late/advanced capitalism.

3. METHODS

In terms of methodology, this study is based on information obtained from both primary and secondary academic sources, and from the Facebook home page and Timeline. In using qualitative data, this research took an interpretative approach and provided an in-depth analysis of the investigated data. Primarily this entailed a discourse analysis of texts related to the topic. According to Fowler, 'discourse is speech or writing seen from the point of view of the beliefs, values and categories which it embodies: these beliefs ... constitute a way of looking at the world, an organisation or representation of experience – ideology in the neutral, non-pejorative sense' (cited in Deacon, Pickering, Golding & Murdoch, 2008:152). Hence, this research has attempted to analyse the role of the mass media in the emergence of narcissism in mainstream culture. In effect, Norman Fairclough's explanation of discourse analysis 'as an attempt to show systematic links between texts, discourse practices, and socio-cultural practices' (cited in Deacon et al., 2008:152) constitutes the methodological point of departure of this paper. Accordingly, in what follows, Facebook is understood as a textual manifestation of the discourse of commodity narcissism – a manifestation that, in turn, perpetuates and indeed propagates such discourse, particularly through the home page and Timeline. As such, this paper investigates how the structural features of the social media phenomenon Facebook – indissociable from the broader economic and sociocultural developments of late/advanced capitalism – have the potential to engender the development of an acutely narcissistic subjectivity among those individuals who utilise the medium. That is, the structural components (links/pages/functions, etc.) that make up every Facebook home page and Timeline are analysed and discussed in relation to their possible promotion of narcissistic tendencies. In particular, an examination of how the characteristics of new-millennium narcissism – namely identity and security – are expressed within the online parameters of the Facebook social-networking site is undertaken. In the process, we not only analyse how Facebook panders to the associated narcissistic needs of these characteristics, but also argue that it nevertheless ultimately fails to fulfil such needs and that, moreover, far from being a remedy for the problem of contemporary alienation, it consequently is part of the problem.

4. UNDERSTANDING FACEBOOK'S NARCISSISTIC FOCUS

With approximately 700 million unique monthly visits, Facebook has been rated the second most visited website on the Internet, and, to date, the most popular social networking site available online (ebizMBA, 2013). Founded in February 2004, Facebook was created by Harvard University student Mark Zuckerberg and his roommates and fellow computer science students Eduardo Saverin, Dustin Moskovitz and Chris Hughes. The name of the site was based on printed handbooks known as 'face books', which are given out to students at the beginning of the year to help them to match their fellow classmates' names with their faces. Thus, the idea behind the Facebook website was to create an online version of these directories, one enabling students to produce, personalise and update their own profiles (Awl, 2009:4). Initially available to college and then to high school students, by 2006 the social networking site was open to anyone over the age of 13 who had a valid email address. Today, Facebook has over one billion active users around the world. The popularity of Facebook arguably derives from the dynamic possibilities for social interaction that it affords its subscribers. In short, Facebook allows one, among other things, to create a personal profile, list personal information, interests and contact details, invite friends, communicate by using private or public messages and chat features, add photos, send gifts and join groups (Anon., 2010). Logging on to Facebook has become part of many users' daily routines, with Facebook reporting that 76% of its 1.15 billion users log on to the site at least once a day, spending an average of 20 minutes on the site per visit – adding up to 20 billion minutes spent on the platform worldwide everyday (Smith, 2013). In South Africa, Facebook is the fastest growing social network with approximately 100 000 users joining the current 6.1 million members every month (Meier, 2013). Like most social networking sites, however, Facebook has also been connected with the promotion of the narcissistic self. In this regard, Mueller (2008) maintains that 'like that eternally distracting pool of Greek lore, the Facebook profile can become an abyss of self-love that consumes one entirely'. Thus, the present study focused on Facebook's narcissistic characteristics by conducting a discourse analysis of the structural components of the site.

5. THE STRUCTURAL COMPONENTS OF FACEBOOK: THE NARCISSISTIC PURSUIT OF IDENTITY AND SECURITY

By examining certain structural features of the social networking site, this section highlights the role of Facebook in the promotion of narcissistic identity formation, as a means by which to gain security in an increasingly isolated world. It has been suggested that contemporary capitalist society's adoption of instrumental reason (together with the emergence of consumer-orientated 'pseudo-individuals') has resulted in an increased state of deep uncertainty, isolation, alienation and insecurity (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1947).⁶ This uncertainty and insecurity is arguably

⁶ According to Adorno, instrumental reason is a form of reason that promises calm and endurance in an increasingly antagonistic world. Yet, despite its promise to provide comfort and safety, instrumental reason does little to give individuals the sense of security that they so greatly desire. Instead, unlike objective reason, which deals with universal truths, instrumental reason is unable to speak to the human need for meaning and purpose, and, consequently, it perpetuates and propagates humans' increasingly painful feelings of insecurity. To this end, modern capitalist society's rejection of idealistic reason, together with the emergence of consumer-orientated individuals and their domination of nature via instrumental reason, has resulted in an increased state of deep uncertainty, isolation and alienation.

increasingly evident today as society attempts to find meaning, inclusion, unity and freedom amid the ambiguity and self-interest of neo-liberal capitalism. This focus on 'personal ambition', narcissistic self-expression and aggrandisement as a means of escaping the isolation and alienation of contemporary capitalist society and of gaining feelings of security is very apparent in the present use of Facebook. That is, the adoption of narcissism in an attempt to relieve the anxiety and uncertainty of life can be found in a variety of activities, applications and structural components of this popular social networking site. In relation to identity and security, the 'About', 'Profile Picture and Cover Photo', 'Friends', 'Photos' and 'What's on your mind', along with the 'News Feed' and 'Friends' sections are all good cases in point.

5.1 Timeline

Created as an updated version of the personal profile page, the Facebook Timeline has been described by Facebook developer Mark Zuckerberg as 'the story of your life' and 'a new way to express who you are' (Zuckerberg, in Gayomali, 2011). According to Van Dijck (2013:204), '[T]imeline is much more than a glitzy new interface feature: it is a complete architecture overhaul that smartly disciplines its user into combining self-expression – in this case memory and emotion – with self-promotion in a uniform format'. The Timeline provides a narrative of the user's life in chronological order, and encourages the user to 'tell the whole story of ... [their] life on a single page', to express their identity, and show people who they really are (Zuckerberg, in Crum, 2011). According to Erving Goffman (Miller, 2011:166), identity can be seen as a social *front* that is 'put on' by an individual depending on the context of his/her interactions with others. He sees these 'fronts' as a 'performance' of self-presentation, one that is dependent on the particular observers. That is, depending on the context, these performances reveal or hide as much as the individual is willing to present. Thus, since these performances 'vary among different sets of observers ... everyday life is made up of different types of role playing within different contexts or "frames"'. Based on this premise, identity in contemporary capitalist society is a discursive object that is created directly, as an end-in-itself, and in a way that is influenced by a number of politico-economic and sociocultural factors, including the mass media (Côté & Levine, 2002:1). Because identity is often 'constructed rather than societally imposed' (Bosma, De Levita, Graafsma & Grotevant, 1994:70), the ability of Facebook users to construct an inflated virtual identity – one better than their actual identity in the 'real' world – becomes an enticing feature. This is because the feeling of power and control that the user is given in relation to the ability to project a particular image and self-styled identity through this structural feature, acts as an opiate that reduces the anxiety and uncertainty often associated with contemporary identity formation. Early studies on online identity formation focused on the construction of identities in largely anonymous chat rooms, MUDs (Multi-User Dungeons) and Bulletin Boards (Rheingold, 1993; Surratt, 1998; Turkle, 1995). However, recent studies related to the production of online identities are increasingly focused on the construction of identity on online social networking sites, such as Facebook. In their analysis of identity on Facebook, Zhao, Grasmuck & Martin (2008) highlight three of the most popular modes of identity construction. Firstly, they suggest that identity is expressed explicitly through description or biographies of the self, such as those found in the 'About' section (Zhao et al., 2008:1826). Secondly, they maintain that people construct

their identities based on the visual self, or the 'self as social actor' (Zhao et al., 2008:1825). Thus, through photographs and visual images, Facebook users are able implicitly to claim a certain identity. Thirdly, they argue that identity is expressed by means of a 'cultural self' who presents individuals' partiality towards certain consumer and lifestyle products (Zhao et al., 2008:1825). Accordingly, Van Dijck (2013:203) asserts that 'following the examples of celebrities' self-promotion, many users ... shape their online identities in order to gain popularity and hopefully reach a comfortable level of recognition and connectedness'. In relation to the first mode of identity construction mentioned by Zhao et al., the role of the 'About' section in the production of narcissistic identities becomes apparent. Indeed, in the 'About' section users are given the opportunity to post their personal details and other information about themselves. By answering a questionnaire, users are able to give details relating to their current location, sex, date of birth, political and religious views, sexual orientation, and what they are 'looking for' in terms of 'friendship, dating, a relationship, networking,' and so forth. They are also given the opportunity to write a biography of themselves and to draw attention to their favourite quote. This structural feature is available to every Facebook member and gives users the opportunity to construct his/her identity, based on who they believe they are, and who they want other people to believe them to be. However, at the same time, this ability to aggrandise aspects of one's identity and focus on the positive and appealing parts of one's self-image points towards the promotion of narcissism within this online platform. Consequently, the adoption of narcissistic tendencies may be related to the user's need for acceptance, freedom of expression and security within this social construct.

The 'Profile Picture' and 'Cover Photo' are additional features of Facebook that can be directly related to individual identity formation on the site. As the two major structural components found at the top of the Timeline, the 'Profile Picture' and 'Cover Photo' say a great deal about who users think they are in terms of visual identity. When uploading these respective images, users are able to choose the exact picture they want to present, and they are able to edit, cut, crop and manipulate the images in order to project the identity that they want their online friends and other Facebook users to see. This feature gives users the opportunity to express the aspects of their physical identity that they deem most appealing. According to Uimonen (2013:124), 'by visually expressing their selves through profile photographs, users engage in the social construction of reality, crafting their digitally mediated identities in interaction with their online social relations'. Furthermore, it has been argued that the use of glamorous, self-promoting photos as main profile pictures is indicative of a narcissistic means of identity construction (Twenge & Campbell, 2009:110). The extent to which users change and update their Profile and Cover pictures can also be related to the impermanence and premeditated nature of the identity that the user attempts to construct. Furthermore, the use of such images allows users to reflect on their own image and identity while they are on their own Timeline. That is, they come to see themselves as the expression of their image in the 'mirror of the machine' (Turkle, 1995:9). This reflection results in users seeing themselves as they hope other people see them (via Facebook), and this may result in a progressive visual confirmation of the grandiose self. The use of the 'Profile Picture' and 'Cover Photo' in the creation of an online persona may feed contemporary capitalist societies' promotion of a culture of narcissism.

The 'Photos' feature performs an analogous function. As an element of the user's profile, the 'Photos' feature allows users to upload photos to their Timelines. These photos are visible to both the user and other members of Facebook based on the privacy settings that the user applies.⁷ Once photos have been uploaded, users (and also other Facebook members) are able to 'tag' (nametag) the people in the photo. For example, if you were to add a photo of yourself and your two sisters, you would be able to click on yourself and tag yourself as 'me'. You would also be able to tag your sisters by clicking on them in the photo. These 'tags' will show up under the photo and will be visible on your Timeline and on the Timeline of the people that you have tagged. Adding photos to a Facebook profile not only provides the user with an opportunity to show other people what they have been up to and where they have been, but it also helps to establish a sense of social adequacy, group connectedness and popularity. Indeed, images of people going to the latest concerts, dressing in the latest fashions and visiting the most popular holiday destinations, among many other things, help to solidify the user's identity as part of the 'capitalist in-group' and therefore serves to reduce the unease and disconnection experienced in contemporary society. This structural appeal to the narcissistic needs of individuals to be part of the better and more important 'in-group', highlights the role that Facebook plays in the promotion of cultural and commodity narcissism as a means of fulfilling society's growing needs for unity and security – even if this fulfilment is only temporary.

5.2 Home

An important aspect of Facebook – one that is available on both the Timeline and the home page, is the 'What's on your mind' status update tool. This tool provides a constant opportunity for the expression of thoughts, ideas, activities, beliefs, opinions and general day-to-day highlights of users' lives. This tool not only allows users to deliver a continuous stream of information relating to what they are doing, where they are and who they are with, but also allows other members of Facebook to 'comment' on, 'share' or 'like' their statuses. The ability of other members to comment on, share and like an individual user's status acts to confirm their interest in what the other person is doing, saying or with whom she/he is associating, and may also help to fulfil the need for attention that is so actively pursued by many Facebook users. The recent inclusion of the Emoticon feature that allows users to express feelings or indicate activities in a visual format adds to the 'self-expression' capabilities of the site. Each Emoticon coincides with an emotion (happiness, sadness, excitement, etc.) or an activity (reading, watching, listening to, eating, etc.) and Facebook encourages users to share how

⁷ The privacy settings that are available to Facebook users are based, for example, on access to content including photos, videos, wall posts, 'likes', 'shares', and friends. Users are able to select various options related to whom they want to give access to their information, with options ranging from 'public', to 'friends', 'custom' and 'only me'. Although these privacy settings are available, users are responsible for ensuring that their information is protected against unwanted viewing. However, with the recent implementation of the Graph Search tool, which allows users to search for and quickly access vast quantities of personalised information, the progressive reduction of privacy on the site has become a point of concern (Kosner, 2013).

they are feeling and what they are doing with other members of the site. In the process of expressing aspects of their identity through the 'What's on your mind' and Emoticon tools, many users may gain a sense of recognition and importance insofar as their banal, everyday preoccupations become elevated to the level of grandiose proclamations. Furthermore, comments by other users may act to bolster these feelings of grandeur and to enhance identification with the grandiose self. In this regard, the ability of users to say what they want to say, when they want to say it, together with the realisation that people are reading and relating to what they are saying, may offer the recognition and related security that users so deeply desire. This security may also derive from the self-censorship that is indissociable from such a process; that is, the parameters of what is acceptable and expected by one's group of friends emerge rapidly and they become implicitly instantiated, which provides guidelines for one's behaviour and speech.

Connected to the status update tool is the 'News Feed' feature on the home page. According to the Facebook website, 'News Feed' is the 'center column of your home page' and 'is a constantly updating list of stories from people ... [groups and pages] that you follow on Facebook' (Anon., 2010). In relation to the information that appears on the 'News Feed' feature, the site maintains that 'in addition to posts from friends and Pages you follow, you'll see photo tags, friend requests, event RSVPs and group memberships in the Top News and Most Recent streams on your home page' (Anon., 2010). Kelsey (2010) relates the 'News Feed' feature to watching the news. He suggests that

a news show is made up of little segments that tell different stories about a variety of people. So when you log in to Facebook and view your Home page, the News Feed gives you a live update of what people are up to, with the most recent news first (Kelsey, 2010:38).

This constant update of information on the 'News Feed' allows users to remain connected to what is going on in the lives of their online friends, keeps them knowledgeable of upcoming events, groups and important dates, and assists in the development of a sense of community in this virtual space. Moreover, not only does the 'News Feed' wall provide the user with updates from other people on the network, but all changes and updates made by the users to their own profiles are also broadcast on this 'News Feed' wall. This means that while the user is able to gain an insight into the lives and activities of other members of the site, so too do the other members gain an insight into the life of the user. This sharing of data and information and the users' perpetual connection to the lives of their online friends and acquaintances, may act to satisfy what Alford (1988:107) refers to as narcissistic needs for fusion – the need to feel part of a powerful and important in-group. As such, the feeling of unity, inclusion and fusion experienced within the constructs of this social networking site through the often narcissistic expression of identity, provides the user with the feelings of acceptance and refuge that they crave.

5.3 Friends

The final feature that can be related to identity and security can be found in the role that 'Friends' play within the social structure. Making friends and attaining online acquaintances is the core purpose of the Facebook social network. Adding friends to their profile allows users to express their identity online. This means that the more friends users have, the more they are able to communicate the ideals of the grandiose self. Without these friends, the whole act of identity formation and expression would be useless, and all attempts to engage in the fulfilment of narcissistic desires would be futile. In order to find friends on Facebook, users can either search the network or search existing email contacts.⁸ Once users have found those for whom they have been looking, they send them a friend request and wait for responses. As people respond positively to these friend requests and accept invitations of friendship, the numbers of friends gained are recorded. This record of the number of friends is displayed on their users' Timelines, and is updated as the number of friends increase or decrease. Within the context of Facebook, the more friends one has, the more socially equipped and popular one tends to appear, and many users have online friends that extend into the thousands. In relation to this, online communities (such as Facebook) and their support of the maintenance of large numbers of 'friendships,' may be particularly conducive to the engenderment of narcissism. According to Buffardi and Campbell (2008:1304), since 'narcissists function well in the context of shallow ... relationships', social networking websites provide the perfect platform for the expression of narcissistic tendencies, in that they 'are built on the base of superficial "friendships" with many individuals and "sound-byte" driven communication between friends' (i.e. the News Feed and Wall posts). In this regard, Buffardi and Campbell (2008:1304) assert that

narcissists do not focus on personal intimacy, warmth, or other positive long-term relational outcomes, but they are very skilled at both initiating relationships and using relationships to look popular, successful and high in status.

⁸ The latest 'Graph Search' tool, introduced in March 2013, allows users to 'enter keywords in a search field, and the people, groups, and pages that are using ... [their] keyword(s) will show up in the list' (Porterfield et al., 2012). This means that if a user is looking to find new friends who share similar interests, they can simply type in 'friends of friends who like body building and live in Cape Town' and a list of people relevant to this search will appear on the user's screen. Furthermore, searches such as 'my friends who have been to Italy' will yield a list with the search results. This new tool has brought Facebook privacy issues into the limelight with particular attention being paid to 'the extent to which the tool makes it easier for people [especially advertisers] to unearth content or information about others who do not want that content to be seen' (Miners, 2013). In this regard, Kamdar (2013) argues that 'Facebook's Graph Search presents the problem of discoverability. One can have a good balance of privacy and openness if information is available, but not easily discoverable. You might not mind if people specifically interested in you look at your Likes, but you may not want to have a market researcher pull the list and add it to an ad targeting profile'. He goes on to assert that this tool 'has rolled everyone, by default, into a dating service ('Single females in San Francisco who like Radiohead') and a marketing database ('People under 25 who like Coca-Cola')' (Kamdar, 2013). In addition to this, the recent removal of the setting that allowed people to restrict who could find them in a search of this nature has been found to be equally worrying.

This dynamic of self-construction via online relationships can act to affirm narcissistic esteem and endorse the validity of the grandiose self, that is, the attainment of online friends acts to legitimise the user's self-perception and identity. This validation of the grandiose self therefore results in the stabilisation of the user's self-image and, in turn, reduces feelings of anxiety and thereby gives the user an enhanced sense of security.

Based on this analysis, it is plausible to suggest that this social network may encourage and promote a narcissistic expression of the self, as a means with which to diminish the feelings of anxiety and isolation commonplace in contemporary society, and as a way artificially to bolster people's longing for individual identity, freedom and security. These needs, however, cannot be fulfilled since Facebook, as an element of the culture industry, does not satisfy the 'false' needs imposed on society by the capitalist system, but rather indefinitely increases the urgency of such needs. Thus, since Facebook's 'profit models ... are based on the utilization of an efficient creation of value by an unpaid workforce', its promotion of such 'false' needs acts to safeguard the solidity of the ideology of which it is an expression (Ritzer, 2010:168).

5.4 Pseudo-individuality and capitalist pseudo-security

The connection that Facebook has to the culture industry and the capitalist system can be seen in the invisible power and control that the site has over its users' identities and actions. In relation to this, although users are encouraged to express their self-identity, and although individuality seems to reign supreme, 'the profiles that individuals create on Facebook ... are clearly constrained by the structural features of the site' (Hesmondhalgh & Toynbee, 2008:205). Arguably, since each user profile is limited to the specific structural features and components provided and controlled by Facebook, individuality on the site is not absolute, and instead a type of pseudo-individuality – similar to Adorno's pseudo-individuation – exists. George Ritzer (2010:168) explains this pseudo-individuality when he maintains that 'identity is chosen from selecting from Facebook-determined options and checkboxes, with the result that the profile pages look very similar'. Although each Facebook profile appears to offer a platform for the expression of uniqueness and individuality, structurally and purposefully they are thus exactly the same. As a result, Westra (2012) argues that 'identity on Facebook is not a reflection of one's actual being', but rather 'an outcome of both decisions made by users and Facebook's software'. To this end, since pseudo-individuality and standardisation have been adopted and enforced by Facebook, the desires for individuality and freedom can never be achieved. Similarly, there can be no security insofar as one is always beholden to the whims of the capitalist market. Moreover, by appealing to the 'false' needs of capitalist society, Facebook, through its encouragement of narcissism, is able to exert considerable influence and control over the individuals within its reach. In this regard, Ritzer (2010:168) argues that

Facebook ... exerts control, and in fact constitutes an unprecedented intrusion of technology into socialising and selfhood, through the application of nonhuman technologies to these processes. Facebook, for instance, structures social networking

through dictating the look and behaviour of the profiles. Interaction itself ... follows preset and centrally controlled principles and structures.

This manipulation and control can also be related to the user's pursuit of narcissism in the hopes of finding freedom and security. As mentioned earlier, freedom in capitalist society is often restricted to the freedom to choose between varying options of the same thing (Strinati, 2004:54). This type of 'pseudo-freedom' can be seen in the structural standardisation of Facebook and the concomitant pseudo-individuality that it engenders. Moreover, as discussed earlier, this can lead to the development of feelings of profound isolation and powerlessness, which, in turn, fuel further narcissistic expressions on such social networking sites. Thus, by promoting narcissism as a means of relieving the pressures and anxieties of contemporary life, Facebook may instead be intensifying their users' levels of anxiety, this resulting in an increase in feelings of alienation and isolation. Consequently, the more anxious they become and the more alienated they feel, the more they pursue Facebook's offer of narcissistic self-expression in the hopes of finding security. To this end, it can be argued that the constant reliance on Facebook to provide its users with a temporary sense of security helps to ensure the instrumental passivity of contemporary society and consequently, the stability of the capitalist system.

Based on the above analysis of some of the structural components of the popular social networking site Facebook, it is plausible to assert that this social networking website may be responsible for the promotion of an acutely narcissistic subjectivity among its users. By investigating the promotion of narcissism as a means by which to escape the isolation and anxiety commonly experienced in contemporary capitalist society, this study has illustrated Facebook's engenderment of cultural and commodity narcissism. Indeed, by examining the ideas of identity and security that are associated with new millennium narcissism, this research has found a profound connection between narcissistic identity construction and capitalist insecurity. It has been suggested that Facebook's promotion of the pursuit of narcissism as a means of reducing anxiety and isolation and of gaining security has instead resulted in increased anxiety and diminished security. Moreover, it has been argued that the more anxious and insecure people become, and the more alienated they feel, the more they chase after narcissistic identity construction – as promoted by Facebook – in the hope of finding security. The users' inability to satisfy the desire for the stability that they so desperately seek results in a renewed pursuit of narcissism in the hope of achieving such security, in an ever more vicious and self-defeating circle. To this end, the constant reliance on Facebook by its users to provide them with a temporary sense of security acts to ensure the instrumental passivity of contemporary society and, along with this, the stability of the capitalist system. Yet, despite the immense proportions of the problem, some tentative solutions have been offered over the last half a century. While, admittedly, these solutions each have their weaknesses, a careful consideration of them, with a view to developing upon their conceptual bases a solution that addresses the nuances of the problems that plague the present era, remains one of the most important intellectual tasks to undertake. In what follows, the solutions proffered by Adorno, Marcuse and Lasch are reviewed before a new remedial strategy for the future is proposed.

6. POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS: NEGATIVE DIALECTICS, NEGATIVE THINKING, AND A RETURN TO BASICS

In his book, *Negative dialectics* (1990), Adorno offers a possible solution to the narcissistic reliance on the culture industry as a means of addressing feelings of isolation and alienation. He suggests that a reconciliation with nature – through the practice of ‘negative dialectics’ – is the only way in which people are able to become liberated from the alienation and isolation endemic to the capitalist order. He argues that individuals’ tendency to apply a method of ‘positive dialectics’ results both in their acceptance of the totality of the ideas imposed by the capitalist system and the culture industry, and in the loss of their ability to think critically. This, he suggests, causes individuals to become isolated and alienated from those around them, from nature, and – most importantly – from the inner nature of the self. In order to prevent this isolation, Adorno suggests adopting a practice of negative dialectics – the interminable practice of questioning and never assuming, of searching constantly for contradictions and of looking for an affinity with human nature. To this end, suggests Adorno, society should resist the urge to dominate nature by constantly questioning the positive dialectics of capitalism, consumerism and the culture industry. He suggests that increasing identification with nature will allow for the diffusion of the urge to dominate and manipulate nature, since, through such a process of identification, self-interest becomes indistinguishable from the interests of nature. He argues that this reconciliation with nature will, on the one hand, lead to a breaking of the illusions of totality and perfection promised by the positive dialectics of the culture industry, and, on the other, allow for a movement away from the concomitant narcissistic condition of the isolated self. Adorno holds that this form of negative dialectics is the most effective means of escaping the alienation of capitalism and the domination of narcissism and is therefore the most effective means of gaining security.

Similar to Adorno’s idea of negative dialectics, is Marcuse’s idea of ‘negative thinking’ in terms of which he argues that in order to escape the domination of capitalist alienation, society needs to adopt a type of critical and oppositional thinking and behaviour. Negative thinking refers to the ability to envision entirely different ways of living and entirely alternative modes of discourse; that is, as Kellner (1991:xv) notes, ‘negative thinking negates existing forms of thought and reality from the perspective of higher possibilities’. Marcuse maintains that because of ‘one-dimensional

⁹ In his book, *The philosophy of revolt* (1975), Eduard Batalov offers the following explanation of Adorno’s idea of positive dialectics: Humans always feels the need for an ideal reproduction in their minds of the world around them as an integral whole, within whose framework they might find their own place, lend their activities and existence meaning and purpose and glean confidence from the expediency and effectiveness of their activities. Moreover, the more alienated and divided the world appears to them, the stronger their spontaneous urge to reproduce that integrated whole. After deliberately rejecting the approach to the world as an integral whole and finding themselves left with nothing but a collection of ‘factors’ while at the same time feeling an inner compulsion to create an integrated concept of the world, individuals construct their own arbitrary picture of the world, which can easily lead them astray into a world of grotesque fantasy or utopian illusions (Batalov, 1975:84–91). In relation to this psychological dynamic, Adorno asserts that the idea that human existence is reduced to a world of ‘fantasy’ and ‘illusion,’ is encouraged and promoted by the positive dialectics of capitalism and the culture industry.

man's' preoccupation with the fulfilment of the false needs created and provided for by the technology of advanced capitalist societies, his ability to participate in the critical act of 'negative thinking' is progressively being eradicated. Marcuse moreover asserts that unless society begins to practice negative thinking, security will never be achieved.

As regards the culture of narcissism that became so pervasive during the 1970s, Lasch 'proposed a return to basics: self-reliance, the family, nature, the community, and the Protestant work ethic' as a means by which to escape the alienation and despair associated with late/advanced capitalist societies (Vaknin, 1995). This 'return to basics' coincides, to a certain extent, with Adorno's suggestion of a reconciliation with nature via negative dialectics and comprises a manifestation of Marcuse's negative thinking – insofar as it involves an escape from the manipulation of the capitalist system through imagining an alternative situation. All three of these solutions point to a movement away from instrumental reason and towards a more critical way of thinking and acting, that is, towards a rejection of the manipulation and control of the capitalist system by means of the practice of alternative thought, constant questioning, a (re-)connection with human nature and a recognition of humankind's relationship with nature.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Yet, though pertinent to the politico-economic and sociocultural dynamics of the eras in which they were articulated, the above solutions do not, as they stand, constitute ready-made remedial measures suitable for the technologically advanced 21st century. Because the Internet and social media have become such integral parts of everyday life, contemporary society arguably requires a contemporary version of these solutions; in other words, one which re-articulates them in a way that takes into account these latter technological developments and their effects on subjectivity and social interaction. Indeed, given the current impact of social media and similar new media technologies on the lives and identities of individuals in contemporary society, it is for the most part unreasonable – if not impossible – to suggest that the use of these media simply be drastically reduced or rejected out-of-hand. However, recent research on the possible relationships between environmental involvement, democratic practice and the Internet indicates that social media may yet be co-opted for the betterment, rather than to the detriment, of society. Thus, in line with the argument trajectories of Adorno, Marcuse and Lasch, and with a view to further building on their ideas of reconciliation with nature, criticality, and a return to basics, a possible solution to contemporary isolation, alienation and insecurity may be found in such an alternative use of social media.

In short, instead of using social networking and social media as a means of bolstering the needs and desires of the grandiose narcissistic self, this technology could rather be used as a means of achieving something akin to Adorno's 'negative dialectics', to Marcuse's 'negative thinking' and to Lasch's return to 'community' and 'basics'. In this regard, Schlosberg, Shulman & Zavestoski (2006) explore the use of social media and social networks in their article, *Virtual environmental citizenship: web-based public participation in rulemaking in the United States*. They investigate the 'move to online participation in environmental rulemaking with a particular emphasis on

discursive democracy and citizenship' (Schlosberg et al., 2006:208). By exploring the discursive benefits and dangers of virtual participation in the online rule-making process, they consider 'current uses of the Internet as a public participation mechanism ... [for] expanding democratic practices' (Schlosberg et al., 2006:215).

Since the Internet entered the public domain in the early 1990s, various opinions relating to the potential of this media to transform democracy and citizenship have emerged. On the one hand, some scholars have argued that web-based participation could be the answer to recent declines in interest in democratic citizenship. Indeed, it has been argued that the 'emergence of computerised ICTs have prompted less hierarchical discourses, characterised by the prospect of more intense democratic participation, visible-ness, public-ness and open-ness' (Malina, 1999:23). In his book, *The virtual community*, Howard Rheingold (1993:279) promotes such a vision of the potentiality of digital democracy and asserts that new media technologies, 'if properly understood and defended by enough citizens, ... [have] democratising potential in the way that alphabets and printing presses had democratising potential'. Similarly, Papacharissi (2010:104) suggests that online digital media, like the Internet, 'could bring about a resurrection of contemporary citizenship'.

Despite some concerns, Schlosberg et al. also look forward to realising the vision of the above optimists. That is, they argue that media such as the Internet should rather be used as a community platform that encourages discussion, reasoning, participation and engagement with local social, political and environmental issues. In effect, this type of media use would allow participants to 'make proposals, attempt to persuade others, listen to the responses of those others and determine the best outcomes and policies based on the arguments and reasons fleshed out in public discourse' (Schlosberg et al., 2006:216). This form of discursive or deliberative participation in public discourse would offer opportunities to move away from involvement based on self-interest and to move towards participation based on discussions for the common good. Local environmental concerns are particularly valuable in this regard, because unlike a problem such as global warming – which does not encourage involvement and social cohesion because of its enormity and generality – local environmental issues impact on the lives of community members in palpable ways and can be addressed directly through group action (Schlosberg et al., 2006:218, 225). Thus, by using social networking as a means of bringing to light and acting upon such local issues, users would be able to gain that very sense of community and unity that is so greatly desired within contemporary capitalist society. In effect, this use of social media could assist people to detach themselves from their selfish individual consumerist needs and desires – ones promoted by the capitalist system and, instead, to focus on interests in alignment with the public good.

Conceivably, this increase in participation for the public good via community-centred online activity could thereby contribute significantly to the dissolution of those feelings of isolation and alienation that are otherwise so prevalent and powerful in contemporary society. Moreover, if social networking sites such as Facebook were to be used to this end, they could contribute positively to the efficacy of the democratic process by encouraging participation and the development of community ideals. Such an increased focus on issues related to public rather than personal well-being has the potential to instil a sense of criticality in contemporary society, in a way that

encourages a progressive move towards Adorno's idea of negative dialectics and a reconciliation with nature, towards Marcuse's idea of negative thinking and of imagining alternative ways of being, and towards Lasch's idea of a return to basics and community.

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