



Introduction

Over the past several decades researchers have amassed an impressive body of empirical data that characterizes narcissism and explores its consequences. In contrast, data on the origins and causes of narcissism remain limited. Mental health professionals have long contemplated narcissism's origins, often implicating family of origin dynamics. However, increasing attention is being paid to environmental influences other than parents in the genesis of narcissism.

TV has become an increasingly popular form of entertainment, with 96.7% of average US households owning at least one set (Nielsen, 2011). Reality TV as it is currently understood can be linked to several shows that began in the late 1980s and saw an explosion of global popularity starting in the summer of 2000.

Reality TV is supposed to portray "real life"; however, in many ways it simply serves as a showcase for narcissism. America's youth - the main consumers of Reality shows - are still in the process of forming their world view. The author postulates that high Reality TV viewership, particularly at a young age, can lead to a phenomenon in which narcissism begins to seem like "normal" behavior.

This study employed a novel data collection method, social networking (which presents its own unique twist on "reality"), to examine the impact of Reality TV upon the American psyche.

Methods

Subjects

- Visitors to Facebook pages of the author (>400 friends), the author's sister (>500 friends), the author's male cousin (>600 friends), and associated networks
- Inclusion criterion for analysis: 1) Active Facebook account, 2) Age range 18-60, and 3) History of Reality TV viewership

Materials

- Three web based surveys:
 - 1) Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI)
 - 2) Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE)
 - 3) A demographics and reality television viewership questionnaire
- Questionnaire assessed the quantity and types of reality TV shows viewed, and obtained basic distinguishing information (age, gender, education, etc.)

Procedure

- Survey links were posted to Facebook pages
- Subjects were encouraged to share the survey link with their Facebook friends, creating a viral spread throughout Facebook
- Link directed subjects to Survey Monkey, maintaining anonymity of participants

Data Analysis

Correlation and multiple regression analysis were the primary tools employed to assess the following relationships.

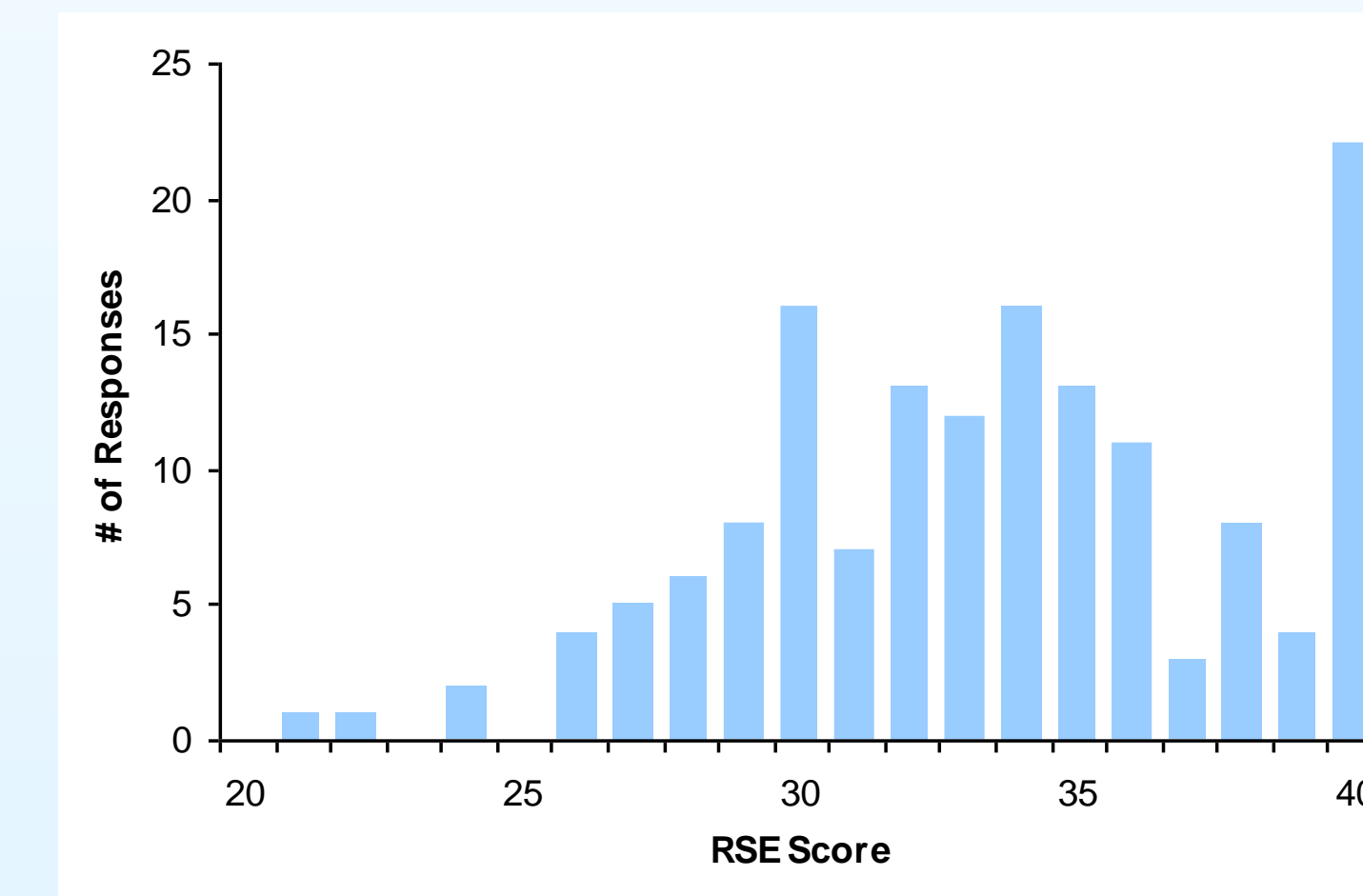
- NPI score and RSE score vs. total # of reality shows watched
- Subscales of reality show categories ("Purely Voyeuristic", "Skill/Challenge/Competition", and "Educational") vs. NPI sub-factors ("power", "exhibitionism" and "special person").
- RSE scale vs. subcategories of Reality shows

Data

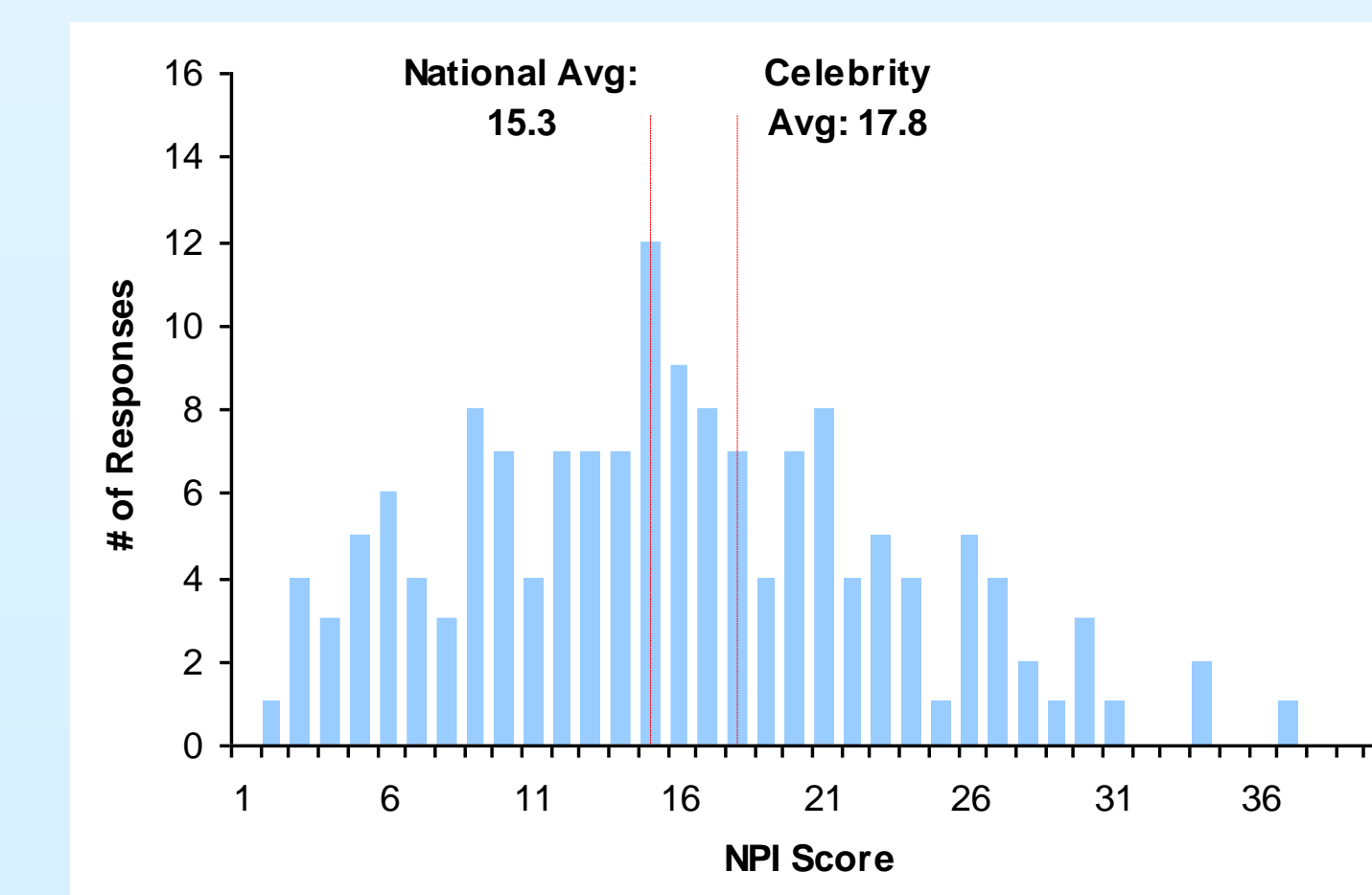
Demographics

Demographics	Female		Male		Total	
	Frequency	Valid Percent	Frequency	Valid Percent	Frequency	Valid Percent
Valid						
under 18	0	0	1	0.6	1	0.6
18-39	84	53.5	36	22.9	120	76.4
40-60	17	10.8	13	8.3	30	19.1
over 60	5	3.2	1	0.6	6	3.8
Total	106	67.5	51	32.5	157	100
Missing System					2	
Total					159	

RSE Scores Show a Strong Upward Skew



NPI Scores Relatively Consistent With National Norms, But With a Wide Skew



Reality TV Show Category Groupings

Purely Voyeuristic	Skill/Challenge/Competition	Educational
The Real World	Survivor	Intervention
Blind Date	The Bachelorette	Hoarders
The Girls Next Door	The Bachelor	American Chopper
Keeping Up With The Kardashians	Are You Smarter than a 5th Grader?	Anthony Bourdain: No Reservations
Extreme Makeover: Home Ed.	American Idol	Celebrity Rehab with Dr. Drew
Extreme Makeover	America's Got Talent	Deadliest Catch
Big Brother	Dancing with the Stars	Dirty Jobs
16 & Pregnant	Trading Spaces	Dog Whisperer
18 Kids & Counting	The Amazing Race	Little People, Big World
Jersey Shore	America's Next Top Model	Man vs. Wild
Bridezillas	The Apprentice	
Taxi Cab Confessions	The Celebrity Apprentice	
The Hills	The Biggest Loser	
Kirstie Alley's Big Life	The Biggest Loser: Couples	
The Real Housewives	The Biggest Loser: Families	
	Celebrity Fit Club	
	Deal Or No Deal	
	Dinner: Impossible	
	Hell's Kitchen	
	Iron Chef	
	Project Runway	
	Top Chef	

Results

RSE and NPI Sub-Factors Show Significant Relationships With Reality Television Show Viewership

Key Factors	NPI		Power		Exhibitionism		Special Person		RSE	
	Coeff.	p-value	Coeff.	p-value	Coeff.	p-value	Coeff.	p-value	Coeff.	p-value
VIEWERSHIP										
Pure	0.4027	15.40%	0.2636	3.43%			0.0702	9.97%	0.4925	0.02%
Skill	0.2575	16.40%			0.1119	0.79%	0.0547	7.18%	-0.0746	38.98%
Educational	-0.2302	50.40%	-0.0320	84.76%	-0.1044	18.11%			-0.1549	32.20%
DEMOGRAPHICS										
Age	-0.0358	57.53%	0.5334	42.69%	0.0290	93.22%	-0.7098	0.96%		
Male	1.7151	25.10%	1.7707	1.94%	0.4470	22.60%	0.0806	78.55%		
Income	0.0160	39.58%	0.2845	8.72%	-0.1768	3.96%			0.4178	0.70%
Ethnicity: Asian	-4.8808	13.20%	-3.4340	4.49%						
Ethnicity: Black	-4.5326	17.90%	-2.8692	8.56%						

Note: Green: statistically significant at $\alpha = 5\%$. Yellow: statistically significant at $\alpha = 10\%$.

Social and Demographic Factors

Income: Higher incomes tend to be associated with lower exhibitionism scores and higher self-esteem (as indicated by RSE scale scores). While not as statistically significant, income also showed a strong trend with feelings of power.

Sex: Males tend to show greater feelings of power.

Ethnicity: A statistically significant factor in power scores, but the sample was likely too small and skewed to draw definitive conclusions. However, the mere presence of a relationship suggests cultural and ethnic influences are worthy of further study.

Age: Appears to have an inverse relationship with special person scores and RSE. NPI seems to decrease with age, but wasn't statistically significant.

Education: NPI seems to decrease with increased education, but wasn't statistically significant.

Reality Television Viewership

Overall viewership: Total reality TV viewership did not have a statistically significant relationship with overall NPI score, after adjusting for other factors

Purely Voyeuristic: Increased viewership of purely voyeuristic shows is associated with greater feelings of power and higher self-esteem (as measured by the RSE score). Less significant, but statistically relevant, viewing purely voyeuristic shows is associated with higher "special person" scores.

Skill/Challenge/Competition: Viewing skill-based shows is associated with modestly higher exhibitionism scores. Higher "special person" scores also tend to follow greater skill-based viewership, although the relationship is not as strong as exhibitionism.

Educational: Educational show viewership did not have any statistically significant relationship with NPI sub-factors or RSE, but the consistently negative coefficient suggests there may be an mild inverse relationship.

Conclusion

Narcissism is the result of a number of complex factors. The intent of the study was to understand the ways in which rapidly changing social and environmental factors may be influencing behavior broadly. Although a number of important indicators for narcissism were uncovered, the study reaffirmed that no single factor is sufficient to predict the development or existence of narcissistic traits. If anything, our study may have been too small in scope by focusing solely on reality television and narcissism.

The study did not dismiss reality TV viewership as a potential environmental factor or indicator for narcissistic traits. Although not a statistically significant factor in aggregate NPI scores, trends emerged suggesting a potential relationship between narcissism and reality TV viewership, even if it is not a major determinant.

Specific types of reality television seem to be associated with particular narcissistic traits, even when adjusted for other social and demographic factors. It is difficult to determine if viewership is a cause of narcissism or a symptom. Nevertheless, understanding an individual's TV viewing patterns could be an important behavioral indicator for clinicians.

Social and demographic factors seem to be important variables to consider when assessing narcissistic tendencies and warrant additional study. If social and environmental factors are important indicators for narcissism, then further study of our rapidly shifting environment and behaviors - whether it is TV viewership or the rise of social media - is also warranted.

Suggestions for Future Studies

Larger sample: A larger and more balanced sample that more closely represents the overall population in terms of demographics and TV viewership is needed to better assess the significance of relationships between narcissism and Reality TV viewership.

Stratified analysis across various demographic groups: The small sample size and skews within the data limited such analysis in this study. Analyzing trends within groups may yield stronger and more conclusive relationships.

Deeper study of social, environmental and behavioral factors: Given the significance of social and demographic factors, not accounting for other behavioral and social factors that may influence NPI scores may reduce the efficacy of this study.

Quantifying viewership: Future studies should seek to quantify the ongoing intake of various sub-categories of reality TV rather than simply analyzing viewership.

References

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