

The Changing Face Of Narcissism In Young Adults

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Narcissism in Young Adults and the Contemporary Debate

Narcissism among young adults has become an important topic in psychology, education, family studies, and popular culture. Many people argue that contemporary young adults are more self-focused, image-conscious, and attention-seeking than previous generations. This view is often connected to social media, changing parenting styles, consumer culture, and the increased importance of personal branding. However, scholars disagree about whether there is truly a “narcissism epidemic” among young adults or whether this idea has been exaggerated. Some studies suggest that narcissistic traits are more common in young adulthood but tend to decline as individuals mature. Other studies challenge the claim that recent generations are more narcissistic than earlier generations. Therefore, the issue requires a balanced understanding.

The research article selected to support the argument that there is a narcissism epidemic among contemporary young adults is titled “You’re Still So Vain: Changes in Narcissism from Young Adulthood to Middle Age,” written by Wetzel et al. The article provides important insights into narcissism across the life span. It suggests that narcissism is often higher in young adulthood but tends to decrease as individuals move into middle age (Wetzel et al., 2020). This finding is important because it shows that narcissistic behavior may not remain stable throughout life. Instead, it may change as people gain experience, build relationships, enter careers, and take on responsibilities.

Wetzel et al. (2020) examine three major facets of narcissism: leadership, vanity, and entitlement. Leadership refers to the desire to take charge, influence others, and be seen as powerful or capable. Vanity refers to excessive concern with appearance, admiration, and self-image. Entitlement refers to the belief that one deserves special treatment or privileges. These three features help explain why narcissism can appear in different forms. A young adult may show narcissism through confidence and leadership, through concern about appearance and social approval, or through entitlement and unrealistic expectations from others.

The study also connects narcissism with later-life outcomes, such as supervisory positions and relationship patterns. This is important because narcissism is not always simple. Some narcissistic traits, such as confidence, ambition, and leadership, may help young adults succeed in competitive settings. For example, a young person with high confidence may be more willing to take risks, apply for leadership positions, or promote personal achievements. However, other traits, such as

entitlement and vanity, may create problems in relationships, teamwork, and emotional development. Therefore, narcissism can have both adaptive and maladaptive effects depending on the situation.

Developmental Explanations and Age-Related Decline

The argument that young adulthood is a period of higher narcissism can be connected to developmental factors. During young adulthood, individuals are often focused on building identity, gaining independence, choosing careers, forming romantic relationships, and establishing social status. These life tasks naturally require self-focus. Young adults may spend more time thinking about who they are, how others see them, and what kind of future they want. This self-focus can sometimes appear narcissistic, especially when it becomes excessive or when it involves a strong need for admiration.

The article also suggests that narcissistic traits tend to decrease as people age. This decline may happen because adult life brings responsibilities that reduce self-centered behavior. Family relationships, marriage, parenthood, career duties, and social obligations can encourage people to become more mature, cooperative, and realistic. As individuals gain experience, they may become less entitled and less focused on external admiration. They may also learn that long-term success depends on empathy, patience, responsibility, and emotional stability. In this way, narcissism may be more visible in young adulthood but may gradually fade as people move toward middle age.

Challenging the Narcissism Epidemic Thesis

However, the article selected to refute the argument is titled “The Narcissism Epidemic Is Dead; Long Live the Narcissism Epidemic,” also written by Wetzel et al. This article challenges the idea that there is clear evidence of a narcissism epidemic among contemporary young adults. The authors suggest that claims about rising narcissism over generations may be weaker than previously believed. According to Wetzel et al. (2017), there is no strong evidence that young adults today are consistently more self-absorbed than earlier generations. This challenges the common belief that recent college students or younger cohorts are more narcissistic than previous ones.

The study is especially important because it examines measurement equivalence across cohorts. Measurement equivalence means that a psychological test should measure the same thing in the same way across different groups or time periods. If test items mean different things to different generations, then comparing scores across cohorts becomes problematic. Wetzel et al. (2017) argue that some items in the Narcissistic Personality Inventory may not be equivalent across college cohorts. This means that previous studies may have overestimated generational increases in narcissism because they did not fully account for changes in how people interpret test questions.

This refuting article is significant because it warns against making broad claims about young adults without strong evidence. Popular discussions often describe younger generations as selfish, entitled, or obsessed with themselves. However, such claims may be influenced by stereotypes rather than reliable research. Every generation tends to criticize the one that comes after it. Older adults may view young people as irresponsible or self-centered simply because youth culture is different from their own. Therefore, the idea of a narcissism epidemic should be examined carefully rather than accepted without question.

Measurement, Social Media, and a Balanced Interpretation

The article also shows that narcissism is difficult to measure. It is not enough to say that young adults take selfies, use social media, or focus on personal success. These behaviors may reflect cultural changes rather than clinical or personality-based narcissism. For instance, social media encourages self-presentation, but not everyone who posts online is narcissistic. Some people use social media for communication, creativity, business, activism, or personal expression. Therefore, visible self-promotion does not always prove the existence of a narcissism epidemic.

In my view, narcissistic behavior does exist among many young adults, but the idea of an epidemic should be used carefully. Young adults may become increasingly self-absorbed because modern culture often rewards attention, appearance, personal branding, and individual success. Social media platforms encourage people to display their lives, achievements, beauty, opinions, and lifestyles. This can increase the desire for admiration and comparison. As a result, some young adults may develop unrealistic self-views or become overly concerned with how others perceive them.

Maturation, Responsibility, and Healthy Self-Regard

At the same time, narcissism among young adults may eventually fade with time because people mature through life experiences. As young adults enter long-term relationships, careers, parenthood, and community responsibilities, they often learn that life cannot revolve only around the self. They must cooperate with others, accept criticism, manage failure, and care for people beyond themselves. These experiences can reduce entitlement and increase empathy. Therefore, narcissism in young adulthood may be partly developmental rather than permanent.

I also believe that childhood environment and parenting style can influence narcissistic traits. Excessive leniency, overpraise, lack of discipline, and unrealistic encouragement may lead some young adults to develop inflated self-views. If children are repeatedly told that they are superior without being taught responsibility, humility, and empathy, they may grow up expecting admiration

and special treatment. However, harsh criticism or emotional neglect can also contribute to narcissistic defenses because some individuals may use grandiosity to hide insecurity. Therefore, narcissism can emerge from different developmental experiences.

While some self-focus is normal, excessive narcissistic behavior can lead to problems. Young adults need confidence, ambition, and self-belief to succeed in education, careers, and relationships. However, when self-focus becomes extreme, it can damage mental health and social relationships. Narcissistic individuals may struggle to accept criticism, show empathy, maintain healthy friendships, or build stable romantic relationships. They may also become anxious or depressed when they do not receive the admiration they expect. This shows that narcissism can be harmful when it becomes excessive or rigid.

Social Values, Visibility, and Conclusion

The changing face of narcissism in young adults is also connected to society's changing values. Modern societies often emphasize competition, personal success, visibility, and achievement. Young adults may feel pressure to present themselves as successful even when they are struggling. This can create a culture where image becomes more important than emotional honesty. Social media can intensify this pressure because people constantly compare themselves with others. However, these social pressures do not necessarily prove that young adults are more narcissistic than previous generations. They may simply show that narcissistic behaviors are more visible today.

A balanced view recognizes that both sides of the argument have value. Wetzel et al. (2020) support the idea that narcissism is often higher in young adulthood and declines with age. This suggests that young adults may show more narcissistic traits than older adults because of developmental factors. On the other hand, Wetzel et al. (2017) challenge the claim that younger generations are increasingly narcissistic compared with earlier generations. This means that young adults may be more narcissistic than middle-aged adults, but not necessarily more narcissistic than young adults from previous generations.

In conclusion, narcissism among young adults is a complex issue. The article "You're Still So Vain" supports the idea that narcissistic traits are more common in young adulthood but tend to decrease with age due to family relationships, career pathways, and increasing maturity. However, the article "The Narcissism Epidemic Is Dead; Long Live the Narcissism Epidemic" challenges the claim that contemporary young adults are more narcissistic than earlier cohorts. In my view, narcissistic behavior does exist among young adults, especially in a culture that rewards attention and self-promotion, but it should not be described too simply as an epidemic. Some self-focus is normal during young adulthood, and many narcissistic traits may decline as people gain responsibility and life experience. Therefore, the most accurate position is that narcissism changes across development and social context rather than simply increasing across generations.

References

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