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Are You a Social Media Narcissist? Good and Bad Ways to Love Yourself Online

By Dov Seidman

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For millions of people, a social media bubble inflates every day, as their key indicators—likes! endorsements! Klout scores! clickthroughs!—soar.

Unfortunately, these misguided measures exert great and growing influence on how we manage our lives and businesses while reflecting our social media *misuse*. If we don't pop our virtual personal bubbles, we can be in for a world of very real hurt. Too many of us will stare too intently at our highly curated images and plunge through our screens into a bottomless sea of inauthenticity.

One of the most common refrains about the explosive growth of social media is that it makes many of us "narcissistic." That's an understandable observation, but it is both imprecise and off-the-mark.

We all need a healthy dose of narcissism, of self-regard and self-love. We do, and should, seek to nurture self-worth in our children and colleagues. We need to have a sense that we matter, and we need to lean in and participate in the world by fostering new, meaningful connections. Given that the world will never be less connected, social and transparent, and that therefore we will never be less exposed, now is the time to reread the myth of Narcissus so we can avoid his fate – and leverage, rather than squander, the value social media offers.

According to the myth, the handsome young Narcissus was celebrated for his beauty. Although he attracted numerous admirers, he arrogantly spurned all of them. One of these spurned admirers prayed to a goddess for revenge, and the goddess too found Narcissus' self-love and arrogance overly extreme. She caused young Narcissus to become deeply infatuated with his own reflection in a pool. Eventually, he wasted away and transformed into the flower that bears his name.

Narcissus' problem was not the degree of self-regard he had, but the object of his self-regard: his image, reflected (and refracted) in the lake. Too many of us are committing the same costly mistake. We're curating social media images of ourselves. These blemish-free, idealized avatars are every bit as refracted as Narcissus' lake-dwelling alter ego. We sail further and further away from our true selves each time we polish or profiles, stretch our online resumes, or slap flattering Instagram filters on our pictures.

We've traded up from conspicuous consumption to conspicuous *expression*. Rather than buying more cashmere sweaters or luxury cars than our neighbors, people are actually buying social media followers!

Our social media misuse represents a dangerous irony. Social media platforms and their underlying technologies are erasing boundaries between our personal and business selves, between what is internal and external to a company, and even between competitors and partners. Yet by creating social media images that are distinct from our true selves, we are trying to force a duality – our authentic selves and our social media images – onto a platform that is eliminating the need, if not the possibility, for this division. Whether in person or online, what matters now is not the quantity of our connections, but their quality. And you can't forge deep, meaningful, mutually beneficial connections through an inauthentic avatar. Here's why:

1. **It's exhausting**: It takes a tremendous amount of work to be two people, or two companies. In fact, it's impossible to do this without one of our "selves" suffering from lack of attention. The more time we spend artificially strengthening our virtual images the weaker our true character becomes.
2. **It's transparent:** Everyone can see when we're putting forth a false image. We like to think of our social media profile as a mirror, an image that shows how rosy our lives are. In reality, it's a two-way mirror: everyone in the world can see and know when our true selves and our virtual images are inconsistent. And that inconsistency remains part of our permanent digital records.
3. **Its scoring system doesn't add up:** Social media users carefully track the number of their connections, "likes" and followers as a way to measure their success – just as conspicuous consumers keep score of their purchases. But the scoring system has changed; our success and happiness hinge on quality and depth, not quantity. The quality of our relationships hinges on the meaning and depth we derive from authentically connecting with others.

To be sure, we need the healthy form of narcissism more than ever. We need to thoughtfully participate in the interconnected world—and social media platforms and tools, used correctly, are an incredibly effective way to do so. But these tools only work if we use them as intended. This requires some narcissism, the self-regard necessary to express our authentic selves — but not the obsession with image that caused Narcissus' untimely end.