




# Psychoanalytic Explanation of Key Personality Traits of Instagram Micro-celebrities: A Qualitative Study

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## Abstract

**Background:** With the growing use of social networks, a large number of studies have investigated their psychological effects. Previous research has demonstrated that virtual networks, especially Instagram, negatively affect users' mental health and make them vulnerable to mental disorders. However, the studies have been descriptive and provide descriptive statements; hence, they do not contribute to in-depth understanding of such vulnerability. Accordingly, qualitative studies should be conducted to delve into this phenomenon.

**Objectives:** This article aimed to understand the key personality traits of popular Iranian Instagram users, assuming that the networks make individuals psychoanalytically vulnerable to clinical outcomes.

**Methods:** Regarding the research method, the deductive content analysis was adopted for the data extracted from semi-structured in-depth interviews with users having > 10,000 followers. Psychodynamic diagnostic manual, PDM-2 second edition, and the structured analysis matrix were considered to make sense of the collected data.

**Results:** The results demonstrated that the dominant key personality traits in popular Instagram users were narcissism with three subcategories (namely narcissistic central tension, pathogenic belief about oneself, and pathogenic belief about others) and depression with two subcategories (namely depressive pathogenic belief about oneself and pathogenic belief about others).

**Conclusions:** According to the findings, the structures and categories underpinning our experiences by Instagram are inherently narcissistic. Rather than changing individuals' dynamics, Instagram promotes this intellectual and communicative style inversely by normalizing it and reinforcing the narcissistic personality disorder established by the family and cultural structure of society.

**Keywords:** Depression, Narcissism, Personality, Psychoanalysis, Social Media

## 1. Background

We live in a world increasingly dominated by images, as if images now have a far more significant effect on us than words. Under such a condition, the popularity of image-centered social networks such as Instagram with more than eight hundred million users can be realized (1). It can be claimed that virtual networks, as the modern age phenomenon, have a significant effect on developing individuals' personalities and that the offline life of people is also associated with their online presence. With the growing use of such networks, many studies have addressed their psychological effects on individuals (2). In general, research has indicated that such networks harm individuals' mental health and make youth and adolescents vulnerable to clinical disorders such as depression, anxiety,

and body dysmorphic disorders (3-6). In this regard, the research has been descriptive, providing descriptive statements and not helping us to understand such vulnerability deeply. Accordingly, there is a need for research with a qualitative nature, emphasizing key personality traits arousing such issues.

To understand vulnerability, one has to study the meanings constructed on Instagram. The meanings are constantly produced and exchanged during each personal and social interaction in which we are involved to regulate and organize our behaviors and actions as they regulate rules, norms, and conventions at an individual subjective level (7). Accordingly, meanings affect the behaviors and personality of Instagram users via discourses. The process of making meaning via discourse forms individual subjectivity at a general level by defining the individual's identity,

ideal ego, and viewpoint towards the world, the future, and others. From the psychoanalysis point of view, Fenichel argues that the personality is socially determined, and each environment imposes particular failures on each person, limits how he/she can respond to the failures and facilitates some reactions and other satisfactions. This process offers particular ways to face the conflict between instinctual demands and the fear of failure and even constructs desires by creating specific ideals. Accordingly, different societies and environments encompass various anomalies by highlighting different values (8). Individuals' personality traits are the result of the interaction between unconscious instinctual demands and environmental forces, and psychoanalytic characterology explores how environmental effects convert instinctual demands into ego attitudes. In other words, the character and ego are used almost interchangeably. If we consider the character as a whole representing one's evolutionary history, the surface layers represent the individual's recent acquisitions (8).

## 2. Objectives

The present research aimed to understand the psychopathology of Instagram by studying the superficial layers of personality that represent recent acquisitions and environmental effects. Inspired by PDM-2, we have focused on the three areas of (1) the belief about self; (2) the belief about others; and (3) the central tension/preoccupation, and have considered them as key personality traits (9).

## 3. Methods

### 3.1. Research Design

The present research was a directional qualitative content analysis examining the experiences of the popular Iranian Instagram users using the method proposed by Elo and Kyngas (10). The researchers analyzed the users' experiences by using in-depth interviews and field notes and reviewing the evidence retrieved from the interviewer's page.

### 3.2. Participants and Research Setting

Participants were selected by the purposive sampling method. Considering the research objective, a sample of users with over 10,000 followers, who were popular for their activities on Instagram, was selected. Due to their widespread activities and involvement with the Instagram algorithm, the most followed users were considered as the Instagram representatives.

The participants were selected from those who agreed to participate in the study, provided the most relevant data, were good at communication, and were satisfied to share their information with the interviewer. Interviews were conducted at a location approved by the participants. In this regard, interviews with those residing in other cities but Tehran were conducted virtually. The sample selection was stopped when data saturation was reached, and the three last interviews provided no additional information for categorization.

### 3.3. Data Collection and Analysis

In this study, data were collected from April to August 2019, and they were analyzed during the collection process. Prior to the interviews, a matrix was developed as a theoretical framework using PDM-2, and the research team prepared a topic guide according to PDM-2. Moreover, three interviews were conducted as a pilot study, and then the questions were revised based on the pilot study. Initially, the conversations started with several open-ended questions about users' daily emotions and experiences in the Instagram environment. The unstructured nature of the interviews allowed users to form their narratives. Then, regarding the context of the narratives, the interviewer asked some explorative questions. According to the participant's responses, the interviewer asked further exploratory questions as follows: "Can you please provide an example?", "Could you explain more?" or "do you mean...?" The questions aimed to clarify the comments. Such process allowed interviewers to use free association method suggested in psychoanalytic research. The interviews lasted for 60 - 80 minutes, depending on the conversation process.

Following the interviews, the audio files were transcribed verbatim. Then, according to Elo's strategy (10), the transcripts of the interviews were studied several times to reach a deeper understanding. In the next step, the semantic units were detected with regard to the research question. The researcher then proceeded to analyze the original texts obtained from the interviews by taking notes of his/her first impressions and thoughts about interviewees. As the process went on, the labels of the codes appeared, which reflected the most remarkable ideas. The resulting codes were categorized based on their similarities and differences in subcategories of the personality traits matrix. The features were determined by adopting psychoanalytical approaches.

### 3.4. Ethical Considerations

The proposal of this study was reviewed and approved by the Ethics Committee of the Iran University of Medi-

cal Sciences (code: IR.IUMS.REC.1398.385). Before each interview, the research objective and procedures were explained to the participants, and only those who signed informed consent forms participated in the study.

### 3.5. Rigor

During the study procedure, the recommended criteria for the assessment of qualitative data were followed by the researchers (11, 12). The main researcher spent about a year to collect and analyze the data and was involved in the analysis to ensure the credibility and acceptability of the data. Member check, expert check, and peer check were used to ensure the credibility of the data. For this purpose, the interview transcripts were coded by two of the researchers (NS and AA), and the differences were discussed in open dialogues among researchers. The interview validation was ensured by restating and summarizing the implied concepts and asking the participants to confirm their accuracy. To gain conformability, the procedure is described in detail in order for others to follow up the research phases. Moreover, transferability was improved by describing the participants' demographics to allow the audience to select how to implement the results.

## 4. Results

The study sample encompassed seven women and seven men participating in the 14 interviews. The participants' mean age was 30 years. It was attempted. The researchers spared their efforts to observe the maximum diversity in sampling. In this regard, the users who were popular for different reasons were selected.

The two main themes derived from the data were narcissistic and depressive-masochistic personality disorders. The first theme encompassed three subcategories: inflation versus deflation of self-esteem (central tension/preoccupation), the need to be perfect to feel fine (characteristic pathogenic belief about oneself), the popularity of rich, beautiful, and influential people, and efforts to reach these features to feel better (characteristic pathogenic belief about others). The theme "depressive personality trait" also consisted of two categories: a sense of inadequacy and loss about oneself (characteristic pathogenic belief about oneself) and rejected by others if they really get to know the person (characteristic pathogenic belief about others). These two categories were derived from 13 subcategories (Table 1).

### 4.1. The Central Tension/Preoccupation of Narcissistic Personality: Inflation Versus Deflation of Self-esteem

This category consists of two subcategories' superego projection mechanism' and 'addiction to receive the external self-esteem regulation'. It seems as if the interviewees use Instagram to regulate their self-esteem externally.

P (3): "It is like the injection of heroin... when you are involved in number of likes and followers as if you indeed inject the drug... it arouses a very temporary joy inside you... for example, you see that 100 comments make a fuss of you. After a while, the pleasure disappears..."

The interviewees' words indicate that Instagram leads to self-esteem inflation by facilitating the process of getting approval from others so that inflation is sometimes used to cover their past and present problems. As if Instagram somehow fills the gap resulting from the lack of intra-mental structure of the superego to fulfill this function. Like narcissistic individuals, users' subjective experience is posed by a sense of inner emptiness and absurdity so that they repeatedly need external approval to experience a sense of worth.

### 4.2. The Pathogenic Belief of Narcissistic Personality About Oneself: The Need to be Perfect to Feel Fine

This category comprises three subcategories of considering normality as something worthless, non-representation of the self in case of "inadequacy", and normality as a weakness. The interviewees seemed to believe that they should be constantly approved by their followers in all cases and gain a specified number of likes to feel inner credibility.

P (1): "It is also so interesting for people to know what the room of a person like me with these thoughts looks like... While it is quite ordinary... and I'm ashamed to share my room..."

The interviewees also needed to exhibit a feeling of difference in the external environment.

P (6): "If I feel ordinary, my self-confidence is reduced instantly in a catastrophic way... instantly, very instantly... I always have to be okay... that's why I like Instagram".

### 4.3. Pathogenic Beliefs of Narcissistic Personality About Others: Popularity of Rich, Beautiful, and Powerful People and Efforts to Obtain These Features to Feel Better

The two subcategories forming such a belief are the immediacy of feedback on Instagram and the valuableness of pretending. These subcategories refer to a mental perspective as the users act in line with popularity and the values in this space to experience an inner sense of credibility. The

**Table 1.** Key Personality Traits of Instagram Micro-Celebrities

Themes and Categories	Subcategory
<b>Key features of narcissistic personality</b>	
Inflation versus deflation of self-esteem (central tension/preoccupation)	The mechanism of the superego projection
	The pattern of addiction to receive the external regulation of self-esteem
The need to be perfect to feel fine (characteristic pathogenic belief about self)	Considering normality as something worthless
	Non-representation of the self in case of "inadequacy".
	Normality as a weakness
The famousness of just rich, beautiful, and powerful people and striving to obtain these features feel better (characteristic pathogenic belief about others).	The immediacy of receiving feedback on Instagram
	The valuableness of pretending
<b>Key features of depressive personality</b>	
Having a sense of inadequacy and loss about the self (characteristic pathogenic belief about self)	The experience of jealousy as a result of the comparison
	A sense of loss
	Comparing oneself with "ideals of society".
They are being rejected by others if they get to know the person (characteristic pathogenic belief about others).	Not credibility of the real self
	Concealment of normality
	Attempts to prevent rejection

Instagram algorithm with immediate feedback motivates this feature and drives individuals towards this cycle.

P (6): "See, there are some ways to increase your followers and become popular, one of which is to share so many pleasant photos... at least you need to know how to edit your photos. Your appearance doesn't really matter. You should not share a bad photo because an unpleasant photo decreases the number of your followers".

#### 4.4. Pathogenic Beliefs of Depressive-Masochistic Personality About Oneself: A Sense of Inadequacy and Loss About the Self

This belief consists of three subcategories, namely the experience of jealousy aroused, by comparison, sense of loss, and comparing oneself with "ideals of society". The belief refers to the conditions created by Instagram, which are associated with jealousy in most cases and facilitate a sense of comparison. People compare themselves to the ideal figures of society, who are often celebrities. Accordingly, a sense of lacking experience is aroused, which can be the source of many clinical disorders.

P (3): "It promotes comparison among individuals, a sense of comparison that leads to a sense of jealousy... and this cripples you... you can't continue anymore, you cannot stand up that day ... and you think continuously that, for example, this person lives in a way that you can't... it is useless... for example, you think that I never reach where he/she has reached ... a sense of jealousy... anger... grief ...".

P (9): "Yeah, before logging into Instagram... you have a good time with yourself... you say that I am so good...but when you log into Instagram, your self-confidence decreases, and you think that the other individuals are better than you... in terms of both financial conditions... and appearance... and purportedly, there are more girls surrounding him... sometimes, I lose my self-confidence to a large extent".

#### 4.5. The Pathogenic Belief of Depressive-Masochistic Personality About Others: Rejected by Others if They Really Get to Know the Person

This belief is one of the generators of the negative emotions experienced by the users and consists of three subcategories, namely, not the credibility of the real self, concealment of normality, and attempts to prevent rejection. These subcategories refer to conditions where individuals seek to conceal and censor themselves to be approved by others, and they are afraid of being revealed.

P (1): "It has always been difficult for me to communicate with those who express their positive feeling to me on Instagram... because I always share my positive aspects there... and I never share a lot of my bad behaviors... I'm afraid... I usually ask myself what happens if they see me in the real world ... and what if they don't like me any more...".

To sum up, the terms "dark aspects", "room", and "tidiness" seem to play key roles.

“... I never share the dark aspects of my life. For example, my room is very tidy... I have never shared any photo or video of my room”.

## 5. Discussion

The study results indicate that the key narcissistic and depressive-masochist personality traits are dominant among the popular Instagram users, and the interviewees' major concern or preoccupation was associated with self-esteem inflation or deflation. To understand the critical features of the users' personality traits, self-esteem should first be considered. Self-esteem is traditionally defined as an individual's evaluation or understanding of one's value (13). In this regard, Cruikshank (14) believes that self-esteem includes no personal component, and that those who interact with us affect how we perceive ourselves. Accordingly, Cooley (15) presents the concept 'looking-glass self', indicating that social interaction acts as a looking-glass. As if others are a looking-glass through which we see ourselves, they show us their attitudes by the modes and reactions they exhibit and the modes they refuse (16). During such a process, one's sense of self and his/her self-esteem are formed according to others' reactions (17). The growth of virtual networks has had a profound effect on the mechanism of the looking-glass self, and different forms of these networks provide different looking glasses. In general, there is no need to daydream about others' judgments in virtual networks, including Instagram. Others' opinions are easily expressed in the form of comments, likes, and followers, forming our perception of ourselves. Accordingly, our decisions about the content we share on Instagram are affected by environment, social expectations, and people's attitudes (18). In other words, the existing norms and values play an essential and fundamental role in regulating our self-esteem, mainly as an ethical concept (19). Such concepts as the norm, value, and ethics in psychoanalytic thought lead us to the concepts 'superego' and 'ego-ideal'. An individual's self-esteem reflects the harmony or the difference between one's understanding of himself and his ego-ideal (20). If one fails to move in line with his ego-ideal, he will face the collapse of one or more parts of the ego's self-esteem. Under such a condition, as a sign of depression, the weak ego cannot endure narcissistic disorder and returns to a state of oral dependence, during which the initial rage returns to the self. (21). In the Instagram space, where people share the best moments of their lives, beliefs, values, and ego-ideals are defined as only a few individuals can achieve them, and others are considered as losers. The aesthetics in this system is costly, and expectations, pathogenic beliefs, and the

content of ego-ideal imposed by Instagram impose on its users are unrealistic. In this regard, those who fail to reach such ideals will suffer a narcissistic disorder resulting in narcissistic rage (22), and the difference between the ego-ideal constructed by hegemonic discourse in this network and one's existing self is one of the main factors leading to shame, humiliation, discomfort, and clinical symptoms in individuals (23). In this process, the transition from narcissistic to depressive beliefs can be noticed. To understand the interaction between the critical features of narcissistic and depressive personality traits, the dynamic explanation of these two types of traits and their relationship with self-esteem are presented below.

The narcissistic individuals' mental experience is characterized by a sense of inner vacuum, which often requires others to acknowledge their value via external approval. When the environment fails to provide such approval, individuals feel empty and become jealous of those with higher status (9). Given that narcissistic individuals are strongly motivated to receive approval from others, narcissism can be regarded as a pattern of addiction to receive esteem and approval from others. This claim is also evident in Instagram. Three main features of addiction can be examined in these individuals. Desire for approval is so strong in these individuals that it overshadows their other motivations and diminishes their wise behaviors. Accordingly, they face problems in their relationships because they see others as merely a source of approval. Low tolerance can also be noticed in these people, and they are continually seeking to receive more and more approval. The low approval manifested by the number of likes and followers on Instagram is not satisfying. The withdrawal symptoms can also be noticed directly in these individuals. When they receive something different from what they are looking for, they experience indifference, criticism, disrespect, and considerable psychological distress (24). In other words, depression can be described as the illness of the narcissistic self, which faces reality and the inaccuracy of its unrealistic criteria. In the depressed, there are also backgrounds of addiction and pathological impulses, and they are stabilized under a condition where external factors regulate their self-esteem. If their narcissistic needs are not satisfied, their self-esteem reaches a dangerous point. They are prepared to do anything to prevent such a condition to induce others to approve them. Given their perpetual need for an external source, Fenichel (8) considers the users addicted to love. In this process, individuals' personality is not important, and meeting the needs is merely important so that the need can be met by other ways such as drugs or obsessive entertainment (8). In other words, narcissistic and depressive personality traits



are two sides of the same coin, and this is fully consistent with the structure of Instagram. In this regard, Kernberg (25) argues that both depressive-masochist and narcissistic personalities are abnormally vulnerable to frustration posed by others”.

In addition to the subjectivity, understanding how this subjectivity arises in the Instagram environment is also of paramount importance. To this end, we should detect whether the narcissistic subjectivity is constructed and formed by Instagram or individuals with narcissistic personality traits are absorbed into this network. Instagram provides an appropriate ground for this personality trait to emerge. To answer the aforementioned question, we first need to select our approach to the relationship between technology and society on a larger scale. There are three approaches to this issue, namely technological determinism, the social construction of technology, and the dialectic of technology and society. The theorists of the first approach believe that machines have changed us and use statements such as "Google is making us stupid," and "social networks have made us narcissistic" (26). They believe that technology as an external factor has influenced us and has changed society and that the users are being more exploited by the technology instead of exploiting it (27). The theorists of the social construction approach focus on how technology growth is affected by social processes and believe that technological determinism provides inadequate and misleading explanations since humans, not machines, are the agents of change. They have changed individuals' lives by inventing new systems (28). In contrast to the first approach, these theorists address the design of new technologies and how they are affected by social factors (28-30).

According to the finding, a two-step longitudinal approach was considered in the present study, indicating that the approach 'the social construction of technology' was accepted at the first level. It is believed that the inventors of the technology, i.e. Instagram, are affected by the existing social context and the spirit of the time. The programming paradigm adopted by Instagram designers and developers to promote the program reproduces the social context in a planned or unfamiliar way and fosters narcissistic subjectivity in which the designers have grown. To justify this claim, one can study the commonality between the subjectivity resulting from the socio-economic discourse of neoliberalism hegemony, which Zizek (31) interprets it as the pathological narcissist, and how Instagram and its dominant subjectivity are designed. The dialectic approach of technology and society was considered at the second level. It is believed that there is a mutual relationship between Instagram (technology) and the key personality traits of the most-followed users (society). The

latter approach can be called social shaping, according to which Instagram includes a mechanism or logic derived from the society's spirit of times affecting how it is used but not specifying it (32). Future researchers are recommended to detect how social trends lead to technology growth, what opportunities and limitations technology offer individuals, and what social and personality practices they facilitate or inhibit in individuals' daily lives.

## Footnotes

**Authors' Contribution:** Study concept and design: AA. Data analysis and interpretation: AA, and NS. Manuscript drafting: AA. Critical revision of the manuscript for further intellectual content: AM and MA.

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