The culture of narcissism: between individualism and social alienation

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The article explores the phenomenon of modern culture of narcissism, which is increasingly manifested as an individual trait and a social phenomenon. Particular attention is paid to the impact of this phenomenon on young people in the context of the digital age, where social media, visual culture and digital communication tools have become an integral part of identity formation. The author analyzes how phenomena such as selfies, the cult of popularity, and the constant need for self-affirmation affect young people's sense of belonging to society and at the same time contribute to emotional and social isolation.

The article reveals two main forms of narcissism - grandiose and hypersensitive - and their impact on the behavior of the individual. It also explores the typology of narcissistic personalities, such as elitist, seductive, unprincipled, and compensatory, and highlights their characteristics. The role of social media in shaping the culture of narcissism is also considered, in particular through the phenomena of "narcissist surfing" (constant management of one's own image on the Internet) and selfie culture. The author emphasizes that a modern person is turning into a "brand," and his or her value is measured by the number of likes and comments.

The article also discusses the psychological consequences of narcissism for young people, including problems with self-acceptance, depression, and social anxiety. The author emphasizes that the pressure to succeed and present oneself perfectly puts an additional strain on young people's psyches. The conclusions suggest possible ways to counteract the negative cultural and psychological consequences of this phenomenon.

Keywords: narcissism, culture, youth, media, social isolation.

Introduction

The space of human activity is culture. Culture surrounds man, it is like a horizon that draws the boundaries of the human way of life [13, p. 64]. Through a constant

relationship with it, the individual gives the conditions in which he or she functions a unique status. Michael Fleischer points out that "we are constantly dealing with and being confronted by culture" [15, p. 19].

Clifford Geertz, on the other hand, argues that "Man is an animal suspended in a web of meanings that he has woven himself. This web is precisely culture" [17, p. 5]. Culture and man thus form a closely connected, compatible whole, in which the existence of one half presupposes the existence of the other. Man is in culture, but culture is also in and out of man [3, p. 13]. A process known as cultural narcissism is intensifying in contemporary culture [29, p. 31]. It manifests itself in the strong orientation of the individual to his own attractiveness, self-promotion, control over others [49, p. 186]. One of the most striking features of postmodernity is the peculiar pressure to achieve success and construct an ideal self-presentation in virtual reality. These dominant patterns and values create a certain framework in the identity process of the individual, putting the "I" in the center of attention. Cultural narcissism is reinforced by the development of technology and the growing popularity of social media. Its direct consequence is a sense of confusion for the individual, who is unable to create a coherent identity [2, p. 29]. At the same time, Wojciech J. Burszta and Michal Rydlewski note that "Today it is common to confuse ego identity with Self identity, i.e. with personality. (...) this is even a deliberate procedure, since only such a shift in meaning allows identity to exist as a particularly desirable commodity, just as it happened with the concept of lifestyle" [8, p. 176].

According to Alexander Lowen, the individual shapes culture in his image and likeness and at the same time is himself formed by culture [31, p. 13]. Similarly, Robert McCrae points out that culture can shape personality, but personality can also shape culture. Personality traits are personal tendencies, biologically determined, which are determined by external factors, including culture [34]. According to Magdalena Szpunar, it is difficult to really say what is primary and what is secondary, "whether it is narcissistic culture that shapes individuals in its image, or whether individuals infect culture with their narcissistic condition" [49, p. 184].

In the considerations presented here we will focus on the phenomenon of narcissism in cultural terms. Its most symptomatic manifestations, dimensions and individual and social consequences will be characterized.

The phenomenon of narcissism. In the most general sense, narcissism is defined by a strong sense of grandeur, uniqueness and entitlement [25]. Narcissistic people tend to consider themselves better than others, overestimate their own qualities and abilities, and value community values such as interpersonal contacts and trust to a lesser extent [6]. The very concept of narcissism derives from a mythical young man named Narcissus, who fell in love with his own reflection as a result of the gods' punishment.

The goddess Echo loved Narcissus, but was unable to tell him and was forced to watch him fall in love with his own reflection in the pond. Narcissus is arrogant, imposing and self-loving, while Echo is shy, sensitive and interested in others only to regulate her fragile self-esteem. The myth of Narcissus and Echo shows the paradox of narcissism and the two levels of this phenomenon: Narcissus' unhealthy defense of his own image of perfection (impressive, arrogant and overt narcissism) and Echo's failure to love herself (sensitive, shy and covert narcissism), together leading to an inability to love one another [24].

Research on narcissism indicates that it is not a homogeneous construct, but comes in two distinct types: grandiose and hypervigilant. Grandiose narcissism is based on an exaggerated sense of one's own size and worth, self-confidence, aggression, and a tendency to dominate. In hypersensitive narcissism, on the other hand, the manifested sense of uniqueness and superiority is more of a defense mechanism against an inner sense of inadequacy, fear of rejection, low self-esteem, lack of confidence in one's own competence [22, p. 1600]. Another typologization distinguishes between causal narcissism and antagonistic narcissism, which include various sets of intra- and interpersonal strategies to maintain high self-esteem [1]. Causal narcissism is more adaptive and involves extraversion and leadership, encompassing self-improvement strategies to gain social approval through assertive, sociable behaviour [42]. Antagonistic narcissism, on the other hand, expresses strategies focused primarily on preventing violations of one's self, through aggressive and derogatory behavior. People with high levels of antagonistic narcissism tend to be distrustful, deceitful and less empathetic [36, p. 525].

Despite the explicitness of these characteristics, a number of similarities and idiosyncrasies can be found between narcissism and self-esteem. Their common feature is positive self-esteem, but in the case of narcissism and self-esteem it is qualitatively different. Narcissistic self-esteem is unrealistically inflated, while the positive self-image resulting from self-esteem is more encoded in objective reality and is characterized by self-acceptance and self-respect [39, p. 382]. Unlike narcissists, people characterized by high self-esteem do not necessarily feel superior to others, instead they value causal and communal values and recognize the value of significant others [30, p. 89]. Pathological narcissism involves distorted and maladaptive self-image regulation. Those affected by it rely excessively on admiration or grandiose fantasies to feel accepted and adjusted.

This disorder is also associated with interpersonal and psychological suffering [27], maladaptive regulation of emotions [4], a tendency to aggression [7]. For the consideration undertaken in this article , the classification of narcissism, which is cited by Theodore Millon and co-authors, will be crucial [37]. They distinguish between the following personalities: elitist, seductive, unprincipled and compensatory [38, p. 109].

The elitist personality is most similar to the classic pattern of narcissistic behavior. It is usually presented by people who believe they are entitled to special rights and privileges, who are morbidly ambitious and desire success and the approval of others at all costs. As Andrzej Mirski notes, many of such people may represent modern, media-pampered elites [49, p. 107]. These elites - called celebrities - are people "known for being known" [5, p. 57]. They often have no special skills or qualifications, are not experts in any field, while media exposure alone determines their success. Dariusz Piórkowski defines as a celebrity an individual who enjoys the constant attention of the mass media, regardless of his profession. Such individuals for many young people can become an authority, at the same time they themselves recommend themselves as role models. This is a worrying phenomenon in terms of the credibility of the message and its impact on young people [41, p. 37]. It should also be noted that the development of social media is causing an escalation of undesirable, harmful content on the Internet. One example of socially destructive online behavior is the phenomenon of patho-celebrities, whose popularity is determined by pathological behaviour [28].

The seductive personality realizes the basic characteristics and behaviors of narcissism in the erotic dimension. The following are considered to be important features of sexual narcissism: self-centered pattern of sexual behavior, low self-esteem, an inflated sense of sexual prowess, a demanding attitude towards sexual activities [20, p.27]. Narcissism is correlated with a style of love described as ludus (game playing), where love is treated as a game, satisfaction of one's own pleasures, unwillingness to depend on a partner [9]. The phallic-narcissistic type of narcissism in personality psychology is described as a behavior that intensifies during adolescence, when the individual overexposes his sexual image, takes an exaggerated interest in external appearance, wanting to seduce as many people as possible and arouse the admiration of others [51, p. 149]. Studies on narcissistic personality have found that narcissism is a significant predictor of motivation for choosing profile pictures [26, p. 17], and narcissistic users are more likely to post erotic photos of themselves on social media [54].

The unprincipled personality is the most dangerous form of narcissistic disorder. This type of personality is characterized by vindictiveness, lack of moral principles and a tendency to deceive combined with contempt for people, especially the victims of their actions. Narcissists act according to the principle: Qui non est mecum, contra me est - "He who is not with me is against me" [49]. Otto F. Kernberg calls this type malignant narcissism, considering it the most difficult to treat. Compensatory personality is an example of functioning in isolation from facts, in the illusion of reality. Narcissistic individuals are immersed in fantasies of success, power, love. A prominent feature of the compensatory personality is the belief in one's own uniqueness, the desire for

exaggerated admiration and also the belief in jealousy from others. Narcissism is a self-reinforcing process in which self-promotion and self-confidence elicit reactions from others, which further reinforce the idealistic self-concept [33, p.132]. The findings made are part of the concept of the relational coexistence of narcissism as a property of the human psyche and narcissistically oriented culture. In the next part of this discussion, the dimensions of narcissism culture will be theoretically analyzed.

Selected dimensions of narcissism culture. According to Magdalena Szpunar, narcissism is an important tool for describing the condition of postmodern man [49, p. 183]. In modern culture, mobile device screens have become both a mirror and a window to the world for individuals. Social media every day accepts into its data reservoir thousands of photos and posts, a significant part of which presents an idealized vision of professional and private life [2, p. 31]. The intensification of time spent online, among the idealized self-presentations of friends and celebrities, makes the individual feel subjectively low quality of his or her own life, lowered self-esteem, exposed to stress, experiencing lowered mood and even depression [45, p. 157]. In this context, it is significant that a narcissist online compulsively shares his image, seeks the opinions of others about himself, which has become known as narcissurfing. He also manages his image, building self-confidence around mere mediocrity. In the culture of narcissism, a person has ceased to be a person, and has become a brand, whose quality is based on recognition. In the case of social networks, its measure is the number of likes, shares and comments [49, p. 18].

According to Rafal Sowinski, social networks are a space of constant creation and surveillance. The main principle of image creation remains authenticity, but it is posed, tailored to an illusory viewer. The need for a wide audience becomes a priority, hence the need to collect hundreds or thousands of Facebook friends, with whom the individual is connected only by the occasional exchange of "likes," posts or photos. Two strategies of self-presentation coexist on Facebook. The first is essentially marginal and manifests itself in ostentatious "exposing oneself to the limits," while the second - the dominant one - consists in idealizing one's own image. Self-affirmation strategies refer to the idea of a "socially desirable image" and manifest themselves in the presentation of such a set of qualities that are highly likely to gain the approval of others. On Facebook, as a rule, the biggest sensation is caused by posts containing photos, according to the principle of too long, didn't read, no one has time to read elaborate texts [47]. On Snapchat, photos and videos can only be displayed once, then they quickly disappear. YouTube has become a platform where anyone can create their own channel, and one of the more popular genres is the vlog, a short diary-like video. All these media share a common trait - the narcissism of users, admiring others and expecting admiration for themselves [21, p. 192].

One of the primary dimensions of narcissistic culture is selfie culture. Selfies are usually defined as "self-portraits uploaded and shared on social media" [19, p.99].

Such photos taken with a smartphone and shared online have become a powerful means of self-expression, encouraging users to present the most intimate and private frames of their lives. As Jenny W. Ma, Yusheng Yang and Jonathan A.J. Wilson note, taking photos of oneself and sharing them with a wider audience refers to the phenomenon of using these photos to realize aspirations for perfection [32, p. 140].

Instagram allows users to share photos and videos by adding the hashtag #, so other users can easily find a photo that interests them. This visual platform offers a number of special filters that allow you to change the color or resolution of a photo before publishing it. According to English-language data from January 2018, more than 343 million posts on Instagram were tagged with the #me hashtag, while more than 331 million posts were tagged with the #selfie hashtag. The paradox of digital narcissists is manifested in the selfie culture in the conflict between self-love and loneliness in the social media environment. According to the theory of discrepancy, the "real self" is the mental presentation of the attributes that an individual actually possesses, while the "ideal self" is the mental presentation of the attributes that an individual desires to possess [4, p. 285]. Narcissistic individuals' online loneliness refers to "the unpleasant experience that occurs when a person's network of social relationships is inadequate in a way that is meaningful to him or her" [40, p. 31]. The consequence is that they engage in activity on Instagram, viewing it as a way to increase social recognition and validation from others [12, p. 9].

According to Lukasz Tomczyk and Katarzyna Potyrała, selfie culture is intrinsic to online interaction and serves social communication and "the negotiation of meanings regarding body, identity, gender and lifestyle [53, p. 16]. The authors also point out that selfies show viewers (recipients) a controlled view of an ideal self (often imagined). What distinguishes them from other self-portraits is their rapid and wide distribution through social networks, that is, the Internet, where the image can be shared with everyone instantly. In summary, modern narcissists prefer online communities where shallow relationships are maintained, because they can have full control over their ideal presentation. They simultaneously use the strategies of "mirroring" - seeking admiration from others and idealization - associating themselves with an ideal standard p. 89].

A relatively little-known variant of digital narcissism is hipster narcissism. A characteristic feature of hipsters is their independence from the mainstream and their desire to express themselves through unconventional behavior and a unique lifestyle. They are often accused of being overly concerned with their image, wanting to pose as original and lacking authenticity. The form of photoblogs kept by hipsters is the result of a strongly established conformist attitude, which is an expression of satisfying the need to belong and accept group norms and symbols. According to Marek Jezinski and Lukasz Wojtkowski, the digital, narcissistic hipster is a nostalgia- and irony-oriented

individualist. His individualism creates a barrier to other trends in culture, causing a narcissistic tendency toward authenticity and uniqueness. At the same time, they enter a small set of cultural interactions, determined by the normativity of media activity. Hipster narcissism is part of the currently dominant culture of individualism, in which the individual, his individuality, personality, self-reliance and disconnection with the world are the most important point of reference and criterion for valuing events [23].

The next paragraph will present the individual and social effects of cultural narcissism.

Consequences of the culture of narcissism. Cultural narcissism realistically affects the choices and attitudes of young people, which, following Amy Mc Cready, can be considered a consequence of the "epidemic of egoism" [34]. As Miroslawa Ściupider-Mlodkowska points out, on the one hand, modern youth is even "infected" with the need for adoration, self-adoration and admiration in social media, on the other hand, cultural narcissism causes in them a sense of emptiness, loneliness and lowers their subjectively perceived value and self-confidence [34]. A prominent feature of cultural narcissism is the lack of authenticity and the need to make public the exaggerated, retouched and untrue scenes from private life. These patterns of action are not just reserved for self-centered individuals, but are a global trend of modern times. Narcissism is described as a psychocultural epidemic, which is associated with making hundreds of pieces of information public online that are meaningless to anyone [14, p. 15]. The developed patterns of self-promotion of seekers and seekers of attentions from other users of social networks have reversed a certain established order of functioning. The consequence has been that what is real has turned into an illusion, what is virtual has become real, while what was intended to be light and pleasant has turned into an overwhelming burden). As a result of browsing for three hours a day on Facebook, Instagram and other online venues, a significant percentage of young girls fall into a lowered mood, followed by severe depression, lack of self-worth, nostalgia for something they can't have [51, p. 57-58].

Modern culture is saturated with the "excess of choices" offered to man. This results in his helplessness and confusion. Anthony Giddens notes that an essential dimension of man's everyday life is choice [18, p.114]. No culture eliminates everyday choices, but it is a culture characterized by narcissism that presents man with a diverse range of options, without providing guidance as to which one he should choose. Faced with too many options, he is aware of his responsibility for the course of his life, but wants to avoid this responsibility. This is because, on the one hand, he seeks greater control over his life, while on the other, he wants his life to be simpler [10]. As a result, as Barry Schwartz notes, sooner or later a person tired of choosing, analyzing and comparing options, will look over his shoulder to see what choice others have made [44]. Out of the

multiplicity of choices comes an escape into a kind of bondage, in order to gain peace, certainty and support [11]. A person's enslavement can thus be rooted in his seemingly unlimited freedom. Delight in the successful escape from external authority results in the displacement from consciousness of the existence of internal enslavements, fears and compulsions [16, p. 111].

Choices rooted in the culture of narcissism result in identity chaos and lack of maturity. In the global perception, adolescents caught up in the culture of consumption and adoration live prosperous lives, have everything they want, are physically attractive, and lead perfect lives tailored to their tastes. Inwardly, however, she is deeply confused, fearful, unstable, easily criticized and does not take responsibility for her life, treating it in terms of a mere momentary adventure. Very often she falls into the trap of enslavement to pleasure and excess, satisfying her hunger to be admired. Admiration and appreciation do not stay for long, because they depend solely on consumer behavior devoid of meaning and redirecting attention only to indulging oneself and living exclusively in one's world [51, p. 59].

The mere feeling of happiness or leading a satisfying life, is no longer the subjective opinion of the individual. Only approval from significant others allows one to feel happiness, and in fact indicates that an individual in the situation presented on the Internet could feel that way. Zbyszko Melosik believes that the individual then falls into the pattern of thinking "I am happy when others perceive me as such" [35, p. 102-103].

Summary. Constructed on a network foundation, culture appears on the one hand as full of possibilities and opportunities, while on the other hand, as a threat, in which any "loss of face" is observed by a much larger audience than would be the case in face-to-face interactions. Any successes and failures are also collected in databases of portals or applications, in accordance with the well-known principle that "the Internet does not forget." Constructing a stable sense of self-esteem, establishing close relationships that offer emotional support, and the very process of creating a healthy identity, appear today as an exhausting effort, at the end of which the expected happiness does not appear [2, p. 33].

Modern culture is increasingly saturated with narcissism, which is becoming an important element of individual identities. According to Magdalena Szpunar, the reality in which we come to live and function specifically revives narcissistic behavior in individuals. The type of disorder prevalent in society reveals hidden cultural processes as if through a lens. Analysis of these trends allows us to understand what is really happening to society, becoming an excellent barometer of the overall condition of culture [49, p. 183]. In the context of considering the culture of narcissism, it is worth emphasizing that the characteristics of a given era are not determined solely by economic, technological variables, breakthroughs, but also the somewhat more difficult

to grasp changes observed within the human psyche, which are an indicator of how individuals cope or, on the contrary, fail to cope with the challenges of a particular time.

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Культура нарцисизму:
між індивідуалізмом і соціальним відчуженням

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У статті досліджується феномен сучасної культури нарцисизму, який все частіше проявляється як індивідуальна риса і соціальний феномен. Особлива увага приділяється впливу цього явища на молодь в умовах цифрової епохи, коли соціальні медіа, візуальна культура та засоби цифрової комунікації стали невід'ємною частиною формування ідентичності. Автор аналізує, як такі явища, як селфі, культ популярності, постійна потреба в самоствердженні впливають на відчуття приналежності молоді до суспільства і водночас сприяють емоційній та соціальній ізоляції.

У статті розкриваються дві основні форми нарцисизму - грандіозний і гіперчутливий - та їхній вплив на поведінку особистості. Також досліджується типологія нарцисичних особистостей, таких як елітарна, спокуслива, безпринципна та компенсаторна, і висвітлюються їхні характеристики. Розглядається також роль соціальних медіа у формуванні культури нарцисизму, зокрема через явища «нарцисичного серфінгу» (постійного управління власним іміджем в Інтернеті) та селфі-культури. Автор підкреслює, що сучасна людина перетворюється на «бренд», а її цінність вимірюється кількістю лайків та коментарів.

У статті також обговорюються психологічні наслідки нарцисизму для молоді, включаючи проблеми з самоприйняттям, депресію та соціальну тривожність. Автор підкреслює, що тиск на досягнення успіху та ідеальну презентацію себе створює додаткове навантаження на психіку молодих людей. У висновках пропонуються можливі шляхи протидії негативним культурно-психологічним наслідкам цього явища.

Ключові слова: нарцисизм, культура, молодь, медіа, соціальна ізоляція.