OPEN ACCESS JOURNALS
Indiana Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences
Abbriviate Tittle- Ind J Human Soc Sci
ISSN *(Online)*- 2582-8630
Journal Homepage Link- https://indianapublications.com/journal/IJHSS
INDIANA PUBLICATIONS
PRODUCTIVE AND QUALITY RESEARCH

Research Article

Volume-03|Issue-02|2022

Misplaced Messages? Social Media Promoting Self-Love

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Article History
Received: 25.01.2022
Accepted: 09.02.2022
Published: 28.02.2022

Citation
Jerrentrup, M. J. (2022). Misplaced Messages? Social Media Promoting Self-Love. *Indiana Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, *3*(2), 62-68.

Abstract: Numerous studies have been able to show that social media tend to exert negative effects on mental health. However, there are also social media accounts dedicated to self-love – a fundamental aspect of mental health – so that the questions arise which aspects of self-love they treat, whom they address, and how the phenomenon can be evaluated. In this study, after defining the term self-love and differentiating it from narcissism, a sample of corresponding Instagram posts is analyzed on a visual and textual level. It is noticeable that the posts seem to be directed primarily at women and that independence, growth and strength are the main themes. However, contradictions between posts can also be identified, which should actually lead to cognitive dissonance, but apparently, the Instagram framework is favorable for a multitude of very different messages. The study shows that even in an environment like Instagram, posts promoting self-love have a place and may be particularly relevant here.

Keywords: Self-Love, Narcissism, Social Media, Cognitive Dissonance, Instagram.

INTRODUCTION

"For men shall be lovers of their ownselves" (Timothy 3:1-2), "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (second commandment) – self-love has a long tradition and even appears in the Bible as an important theme. Yet, it seems to be a relatively modern topic: "Today I hear a great deal about self-image, self-love, self-esteem, and positive mental attitude – all variations on a theme and all topics rarely mentioned fifty years ago and virtually never discussed one hundred years ago" (Faulconer, 1993), writes the missionary James Faulconer in the 1990s and apparently, the trend continues.

Instagram is arguably a medium that leads to negative consequences for the psychological well-being (e.g. Dror & Gershon, 2012; Garcia-Navarro, 2021; Lee Won *et al.*, 2020; Primack *et al.*, 2017; & *Weber et al.*, 2021), of which self-love is an important part. However, there are also social media accounts purely dedicated to self-love. Here, the questions arise which aspects of self-love they treat, whom they address, and how the phenomenon of "self-love accounts" can be evaluated. This study aims to add to the literature that addresses the impact of social media and aims to provide a new perspective on social media criticism.

The Concepts of Self-Love and Narcissism – A Bibliographic Review

Obviously, there is "self-interest necessary for survival" (Makujina, 1997) which makes self-love an essential feature, even though there are situations in which humans as well as animals sacrifice themselves for others. Self-love as a fundamental force is found in writings all over the world from various disciplines (Maharaj & April, 2013) and is associated with survival, enlightenment, growth, elevation, etc., but selfishness, narcissism, and egoism seem to be close by. Sometimes these terms are even used interchangeably and create confusion. Many philosophers and psychologist have worked on self-love, among them Thomas von Aquin, who wrote in his *Summa theologica* (1485) that self-love would be the root of friendship and charity, whereas, some centures later, Immanuel Kant saw self-love in his *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft* (1788) as the natural tendency to choose maxims according to one's own inclination and thus stopping people from taking ethical decisions. Kant's understanding of self-love is thus close to egocentrism.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, on the other hand, offers a complex theory of self-love in *Discours sur les sciences et les arts* (1750), in which he stresses the strive for approval, admiration, and recognition of fellow humans: "It is no exaggeration to say that for Rousseau this distinctively human passion is the most consequential feature of our species and that without it human existence would be unrecognizable as such" (Neuhouser, 2008).

In this tradition, Erich Fromm sees love as undividable, as a loving attitude towards other would condition selflove (1947, 84) and offers the "most holistic theory of love" (Maharaj & April 2013) in which he identifies self-love as the deepest of all the currents driving man onward, upward and forward. Along with Abraham Maslow, Fromm acknowledges that the ability to love and the ability for self-love are necessarily connected – a fact that is supported by

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various empirical studies (see Maharaj & April, 2013). Thus, even though self-love "is easily prone to overindulgence" (Makujina, 1997), it is not to be confused with selfishness or narcissism, which are often seen as a result of insecurity or a lack of genuine self-love. Self-love, therefore, should be a feature of every psychological healthy person, according to Fromm, whose definition of self-love provides the basis for this analysis. In this context, occasionally, self-love has been interpreted as synonymous with self-esteem, self-importance, and self-respect and seen as a stable trait (see Minev *et al.*, 2018). While born with a natural admiration for themselves, throughout their lives, people are subjected to self-esteem threats throughout their lives and consequently have to learn its regulation (Hannush, 2021).

Recently, self-love became associated with the body-positivity movement (Lazuka *et al.*, 2020). On Instagram, the platform that will be treated in the following, the hashtags #selflove and #bodypositivity are frequently used together, often accompanying pictures that show physical flaws. Apparently, self-love is specifically admired when seen in connection with imperfections, because it stands for independence (Jerrentrup, 2021): the person is self-confident enough not to let his/her psychological well-being depend on other people's perception which is also linked to the coolness (see Lauer, 2018).

In Christian tradition, self-love may even be seen as the overcoming of the physical body which is regarded as "a sign of shame, a reminder of original sin" (Blanshard, 2011). However, the Christian religion apparently plays a lesser role in this context, as self-love is more often seen connected to other spiritualities, associated with meditation, yoga, and spiritual growth. This should help to transcend the physical body, to find rest and peace, instead of struggling for impossible perfection – a fundamental goal in various religions and spiritualities: "Self-transcendence is discussed as comprising two main elements. Transcending the ego; and enjoying a sense of connectedness to others" (Maharaj & April, 2013).

Close to "self-love" is "narcissism," a term that is often used in an unreflective and moralizing way to exclude and label people (Stein & Wiegand-Grefe, 2019). In psychology, a certain degree of narcissism is considered a personality trait in healthy people, but there is also a narcissistic personality disorder, which is associated with serious interpersonal problems and an increased risk of suicide (Vater *et al.*, 2013). A distinction is often made between grandiose and vulnerable narcissism (Pincus & Lukowitsky, 2010). Grandiose narcissists a.o. need admiration, have an exaggerated sense of importance, tend to take advantage of other people, and show a lack of empathy, whereas vulnerable narcissists a.o. are often introvert, hyper sensible, defensive, and blame others for their mistakes.

Sedikides et al. report on the evaluation of five studies that subclinical narcissism can indeed have positive effects on mental health, namely it is "(a) inversely related to daily sadness and dispositional depression, (b) inversely related to daily and dispositional loneliness, (c) positively related to daily and dispositional subjective well-being as well as couple well-being, (c) inversely related to daily anxiety, and d) inversely related to dispositional neuroticism" (Sedikides 2004, 400). This is attributed to the relationship between self-worth and narcissism: there is significant overlap between self-esteem and narcissism. Individuals who score high on both dimensions have a higher opinion of themselves (Hovrath & Morf, 2010). More pronounced narcissistic individuals, however, show lower scores on implicit measures of self-worth (Zeigler-Hill, 2006). Furthermore, it can also be argued that self-esteem is more of an intrapersonal trait, while narcissism is mainly expressed in interpersonal behavior (Zeigler-Hill, 2006).

METHODOLOGY – THE FRAMEWORK

In the following, attention is paid to the framework in which the posts analyzed can be found. Instagram is a social medium that, like many other, is mostly used as accompanying medium (Eisenegger, 2009; & Görland, 2018). Correspondingly, its use is less rationally reflected, so that its effects also may take place rather unconsciously. Unlike other social media such as Twitter, Instagram is based on image postings. Texts can only be posted if they have been turned into images, that is, if conscious decisions have been made about their layout, for what the limitations of the medium have been considered. For example, one cannot fit very long texts on an image in Instagram format, which will be primarily shown on mobile phones. Thus, the messages have to be short and catchy, in line with the general aphorism principle. An image needs to catch the user's attention, which means it should be visually interesting. Pure text images, like many images in the sample, can stand out because of their colors and layouts.

As the Instagram thread allows infinite scrolling down, it can lead to the user experiencing a large number of different inputs or distractions. Thus, it can be assumed that very different topics are lined up – at least, if users are not exclusively subscribed to accounts in a single, very homogeneous topic area. Consequently, the user is probably confronted with quite different topics. According to Trackalytics (2021), celebrities are among the most popular topics, followed by sports, beauty, and others. This means that posts dealing with self-love issues are often in a very diffuse environment. The questions now are how posts related to self-love fit into the Instagram framework, to what

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extent self-love differs from narcissism in this context, and what kind of messages are actually communicated.

In the public perception, Instagram is strongly associated with narcissism – or more generally, with negative consequences for psychological well-being (Garcia-Navarro, 2021). This public perception is supported by numerous studies that have found negative consequences of (intensive) social media use: "These findings call for attention to how seemingly innocuous technological features may pose a significant threat to the wellness" (Lee Won *et al.*, 2020). Lippl & Wohler (2011) point out that photographs, which are central to Instagram, usually stress physical attributes – thus, one may conclude that a community based on photographs must be "superficial" and unable to fill an inner emptiness (Geiger, 2008). In this context, it is often about social comparison: even though "comparisons can be motivating, with positive outcomes for well-being" (Meier & Schäfer, 2018), in most cases, the opposite was shown: Silvana Weber et al. deal with cognitive interventions regarding upward comparisons on social media and "report that neither an authoritative disclaimer, nor educating users about cognitive biases or mindsets significantly reduced the negative consequences of social comparisons" (Weber *et al.*, 2021).

Another aspect concerns the reinforcement effect of social media that arises in the filter bubbles created by algorithms (Pariser, 2011). Lee Won *et al.* (2020) describe how anorexic individuals are further encouraged in social media to continue striving for their unhealthy and too often lethal ideal: filter bubbles can narrow the view of the individual and reinforce existing misperceptions, e.g. regarding one's own figure and health under the hashtag #thinspiration (Marcus, 2016). In addition, loneliness and isolation caused by frequent social media usage is a recurring theme in research (Hu, 2009; Dror & Gershon, 2012; & Primack *et al.*, 2017).

If we look more specifically at the topic of "narcissism," Paramboukis *et al.* (2016) see only weak evidence for the relationship between Instagram use and narcissism. In a more detailed study, Sheldon and Bryant have found out that in reference to narcissism, there is a positive relationship between using Instagram to be cool and for surveillance (2016), but less with other motivations like documentation and creativity.

Furthermore, a cross-temporal meta-analysis suggests that narcissism levels have risen over the generations, which complements previous studies of the increase of individualistic traits such as assertiveness, agency, self-esteem, and extraversion (Twenge *et al.*, 2008). It is obvious that social media exert an – perhaps indirect – influence on our behavior and culture (Bergman *et al.*, 2011).

Whereas narcissism and social media is a recurrent topic in social research, there are fewer studies dealing with self-love and social media, and if, they mainly focus on the body-positivity movement (Cwynar-Horta, 2016; & Caldeira & De Ridder, 2017), not on accounts dedicated to the topic.

SAMPLE AND CONTENT ANALYSIS

The study considered the 10 most popular accounts on Instagram that are dedicated to self-love and carried the term "self-love" in their name. As all accounts were open, i.e. (with the intention to be) visible to everyone, ethical dilemma could be avoided. The accounts had up to some million followers and usually posted daily. The sample – for each account the last 9 posts – was collected in November 2021, deliberately before December, as it is conceivable in the Christmas month to have specific messages in the sample, for example, more focus on charity. However, it should be considered that the data were collected at a time when the corona pandemic was a major issue worldwide. As people have been more on their own due to restrictions, this may have made the topic of self-love even more relevant.

The business models underlying the accounts often included blogs with advertising, marketing of e-books, journals, promotions for coaches, or collaborations, such as for the software used to create the posts.

The following accounts were considered, the number of followers at the time of the survey is indicated in each case:

- Myselflovesupply, 3.2 mio.
- Selflovehealer, 646 k
- Selfloveblossom, 486 k
- Selflovesupply, 252 k
- Selflovemantras, 134 k
- Selflovecaree, 115 k
- Selfloveclubblog, 74 k
- Selflove.diaries, 32.2k
- Selflovegxng, 29.3 k
- Bianca.selflove, 28.6 k

With the exception of bianca. selflove, the accounts do not represent individual persons. Accounts that merely serve to market products that are not closely related to self-love, such as the fashion brands Selflove_official or selfloveclub_indumentaria, as well as the make-up brand Selflove9597, were not considered.

Using a thematic content analysis (Joffe 2001), the topics were divided into different clusters. The following topics were covered by the accounts in the sample:

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Independence: independence and focus on the own person is stressed in 16% of the posts, e.g. "I'm out here loving me wyd" (selflovegxng), "Make yourself a priority" (selflovemantras).
Growth and strengh: these aspects are prominent in 12%, e.g. "Stop doubting yourself. Work hard and make it happen" (selfloveclubblog).
Endings and beginnings: 12% treat endings and beginnings, e.g. "For a peaceful life, learn the art of letting go." (selflove.diaries).
Positivity, happiness, trust: 9% of the posts stress these aspects, often with the focus on what is rightfully one's own, e.g. "You deserve to be in spaces and relationships that make you happy" (selfloveclubblog).
Friendship and love: 9% emphasize friendship and love, sometimes with a focus on reciprocity e.g. "The secret to being loved is to love. And the secret to being interesting is to be interested. And the secret to having a friend is being a friend" (selfloveblossom).
Change of perspective: a change of perspective is highlighted by 7%, e.g. "Maybe one day you'll be happy you didn't end up with what you thought you wanted" (myselflovesupply).
Distance from others: 6% deal with distance from other people, usually connected to rest and peace: "Sometimes you have to make yourself unavailable to heal" (selflove.diaries), "Celebrating the parts of myself that confuse people" (selflovegxng).
Affirmation: Affirmation, usually in the context of worthiness, is the topic of 6%, e.g. "Reminder. You are worthy, you are enough, you are loved" (selflovegxng).
Fun: Humor can be found in 6%.
Gratitude: 3% mention gratitude.
Looks: 3% deal with the outer appearance, either as affirmation or with the stress on inner instead of outer beauty.
Coping with anxiety: Coping with anxiety is thematized in 2%.
Others: 6% have other topics, such as zodiac advice, checklists or a note on reaching a certain number of followers.

Evaluation of the Textual and Pictorial Level

Formally, it is noticeable that numerous statements are written in the "you"-form and can be interpreted as requests or commands. In addition, there are some statements in the third person that seem more factual. First-person accounts, which could encourage the reader to adopt a perspective, are relatively rare; self-love is thus presented as an imperative: for a happy and successful life, one must love oneself. Moreover, it is suggested that self-love can be learned and trained, which corresponds to psychotherapeutic principles (Jochims, 2020).

Looking at the content – what self-love is about – it is initially surprising that in the photo-centric medium "Instagram," which is often accused of being superficial and primarily about beautiful photos of beautiful people (Muenter, 2017), self-love accounts rarely address the topic of "appearance." In the social media literature, the topic of "appearance" and Instagram has been treated quite frequently, such as by Baker *et al.* (2019), who found that young people on Instagram strive to adhere to beauty standards, compare their looks or number of likes/comments with others, and expressed concern about their appearance. Furthermore, feelings of anxiety because of beauty stereotypes have been reported (Verrastro *et al.*, 2020), as "women, in particular, learn that their bodies and appearance are important factors; what a woman observes in a mirror is a measure of her worth" (Ryan, 2013).

With body-positivity, however, a movement has emerged that "challenges the unrealistic standards of beauty present in the media by the promotion and acceptance of diverse body sizes and appearances" (Lazuka *et al.*, 2020). Thus, one might have assumed that the concepts of body-positivity and self-love, which are definitely related in terms of content, would overlap more – precisely because we are in the context of an image-centered social medium. Instead, the inner is clearly emphasized before the outer: "focus on the shape of your mind rather than the shape of your body" (selfloveclubblog). It is not about being content with the body, but rather about overcoming the body. Despite the Instagram framework, self-love is thus viewed rather independently of the body. This is also reflected in the images, which are often text images. When people are depicted, they are usually only shown from behind. Instead of focusing on the physical, the emphasis is on self-reliance, strength, growth, and happiness, and the assumption that these very things can be influenced by the recipient him/herself by following the advice given or considering the statements.

These advice and statements may be useful, but do not necessarily represent the most adaptive ways to respond to self-esteem injuries which would include altruism, humor, and sublimation (Cabaniss, 2013), as well as mindfulness (Germer, 2010) – all of them being rarely addressed. In addition, concrete exercises dealing with self-love (Stelzig, 2018) are seldom considered in the posts – exceptions are the posts on "beginnings and endings" and "change of perspective," which can more clearly be seen in the context of therapeutic approaches.

Furthermore, some of the posts contain contradictory messages. For example, independence is often emphasized, up to distance from other people. Some posts even suggest egocentrism by focusing solely on oneself, for example "Don't feel guilty for doing what's best for you" (selflovesupply). On the other hand, friendship and love are also addressed. Thus, one would have to assume that some posts create cognitive dissonance – not only when looking at the whole range of self-love posts, but also when looking at the posts of a single account. According to the theory of cognitive dissonance it is experienced as unpleasant

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when cognitive elements that are perceived as mutually relevant are not in harmony with each other (Raffée *et al.*, 1973), however, Leon Festinger, the founder of the theory, already states that the cultural framework would have effect on what is understood as consonant and what is not (Festinger, 2012). Accordingly, it can be concluded, that the Instagram framework facilitates inconsistencies, as it offers very disconnected bits and pieces and thus encourages a flexible, situational view, considering each time primarily these messages that seem useful at a given moment.

Looking at the visual dimension, light and pastel colors predominate in the text images – the texts are shown either against a colored or white background. Some of the fonts chosen are playful, such as 60s style or cursive script. Bright colors also predominate in the photographs, but there are also images of sunsets and silhouettes. Overall, the result gives a bright, friendly impression.

Sometimes, texts are displayed on walls or posters, a common practice to give text statements more visual dimension. This embedding usually involves images taken in sunshine and also tends to include light or occasionally bold colors.

As mostly stylized symbols, one sees hearts, flowers or smileys in some images – but overall, they are used rather rarely.

When people are depicted, they are usually shown from behind, which can promote the adoption of their perspective due to the anonymity and at the same time due to the perspective of the recipient being identical to that of the person in the picture. The situation is similar with simply sketched figures, which also offer more potential to identify with the figures due to the lack of detail. Consequently, it is not about concrete persons or characteristics, e.g. being old or young, beautiful or ugly, but it is about messages that everyone can identify with, that have a claim to general validity – which may be quite surprising in the context of the contrary messages noted above.

The people depicted are almost always women, which also fits in with the rather feminine connotations of the colors used. However, this is particularly surprising given that another study showed that accounts on the topic of "mindset" almost exclusively feature men. Yet, accounts dedicated to the topic of "mindset" may post almost identical statements, and here, too, the focus is on independence, growth and strength, and perspective-taking is promoted. Apparently, the term "mind" with its focus on cognitive abilities appears to have rather masculine connotations, while "love" with its focus on an emotion has rather feminine associations.

CONCLUSION AND OUTLOOK

In line with findings from research and therapy, self-love is presented not only as a feeling or attitude, but as a thoroughly learnable practice (Jochims, 2020). The posts mainly deal with independence, self-reliance, strength and growth, and focus on the own, but at the same time there are contrary messages that should create cognitive dissonance. As the photos and graphics suggest, the theme of "self-love" seems to be directed primarily at women, while accounts that deal with "mindset," which contain very similar messages, are addressed more to men. However, it cannot be determined whether more women follow accounts dedicated to "self-love" and more men accounts that deal with "mindset", which could be subject to further research.

Furthermore, it could be interesting to investigate the extent to which these self-love accounts on Instagram can actually help people experience more self-love or even encourage more narcissism. It is now considered proven that certain apps can be psychotherapeutically useful: some apps, such as "Selfapy," have already been reviewed by health insurance companies, and since they are considered effective, the costs are even covered by insurances (Matera 2020). Symptomatic improvement is facilitated even with apps that do not offer any personal support such as "Deprexis" (Meyer *et al.*, 2015).

However, as illustrated, the messages on Instagram are in a fundamentally different framework than therapy-related apps. Yet, this could have positive implications: Instagram is a context that is often about presenting oneself in the best possible way and recipients consequently face numerous very positive representations of other people. In social comparison, they would therefore probably perform negatively. In this context in particular, it could be valuable to see messages in between that are intended to promote self-love and to focus, as in many of these posts, on one's own person rather than on the approval of or comparison with others. Even though there could also be a danger that self-love messages on Instagram fizzle out all too quickly or that selective attention is paid to messages that tend toward egocentrism, accounts dedicated to self-love may help users to become more happy and better cope with the medium "Instagram" and its implications.

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