

A D M I T I T :

YOU LOVE YOURSELF

From garments emblazoned with their names (hello, Gigi) to self-centred Insta posts, the new fashionistas are all about moi. How did narcissism become cool?

BY AOIFE STUART-MADGE

Who's that sexy thing I see over there? That's me, standin' in the mirror,' croons bass-hooked popstrel Meghan Trainor. With those overtly braggy lyrics, you'd be forgiven for thinking the 22-year-old has confused self-worth with delusional self-importance. And she's not alone. From endless duck-faced selfies to reality-TV wannabes exposing their lives on camera, the selfie generation has made self-involvement into an art form.

Owning a tragedy or a celebrity death on Instagram, affected political posturing online, constantly talking about 'working on yourself' via self-conscious 'life-affirming' quotes or just singing about how flipping fantastic you are, à la Meghan ... in the age of Instagram, it seems we've never been so shamelessly self-involved. Just look at Kim Kardashian, whose recent social-media contributions include a close-up video of her bare behind bobbing in and out of water (yes, really)

and a video of her oiled-up cleavage. Then there's Justin Bieber, Kylie Jenner and Kanye West, routinely flooding the Internet with their pathologically self-obsessed posts. And it's not just celebrities who are indulging in digital narcissism: thanks to social media, showing off has never been easier, whether it's your dinner or your gym workout you want to shout about.

Research from San Diego State University psychologist Jean Twenge, author of *The Narcissism Epidemic: Living In The Age Of Entitlement*, supports the worrying theory that we're drowning in a tidal wave of self-importance. In a 2012 study, she found that, compared with previous generations, Millennials (born after 1981) were more concerned with goals relating to money, image and fame than with self-acceptance, affiliation and community.

Craig Malkin, clinical psychologist and author of *Rethinking Narcissism*, says our obsession with celebrity has a huge impact on our behaviour. 'Modelling – copying those around us – is the easiest way to adopt habits,' he says. 'We already know from research that celebrities are among the most narcissistic groups studied. There's no surer way to become a narcissist than to fashion yourself after one.'

But while the modern obsession with fame can be to blame for the onslaught of reality-TV shows bombarding the airwaves, he doesn't think that it can be used to indict an entire generation of Millennials as image-obsessed narcissists. 'I don't believe that Millennials are any more narcissistic than previous generations.'

However, with countless TV shows churning out famous-for-five-minutes celebrities at a rate of knots, the spotlight is on the narcissists among us like never before. 'Research has demonstrated that reality-TV stars are more narcissistic than just about any entertainer you can name – and that they started out that way,' says Malkin. 'They're drawn to the spotlight precisely because they're already narcissistic. What we are really seeing is that the tools of narcissism have proliferated.'

♥ There's no surer way to become a narcissist than to fashion yourself after one ♥

Narcissists have grander stages than ever before, which makes them seem much louder. They're certainly the easiest to spot on social media.'

Although show-off celebs have given us licence to disappear up our own bellies, it doesn't mean that we're all necessarily going to follow suit. 'If you want to call more attention to yourself, you have more ways than ever to do that. But it isn't clear that average people have become narcissistic,' he says.

So where did Kim et al take a turn from self-belief to self-obsession? 'As soon as we started celebrating the self – with the focus on discovering ourselves in the '60s and '70s

– we opened the door to elevating the self,' says Malkin. 'A focus on the self can be used for good or ill: to open up and expand our experiences and relationships, or to disappear into ourselves, like Narcissus, incapable of loving anyone but ourselves.'

Not that narcissism is always a bad thing. We can all benefit from a healthy dose of 'I rock!' – right? Malkin and two colleagues devised the Narcissism Spectrum Scale to distinguish between healthy and unhealthy narcissism. 'When [most people] are happy and healthy, they don't feel average; they feel exceptional or unique,' he explains. 'They feel more optimistic and happier; they're better able to give and receive in relationships and they're better able to persist in the face of failure. The benefits are myriad. This is healthy narcissism, a reflection of a universal human tendency – the drive to feel special.'

The danger is when that feeling becomes addictive, he says. 'When people become addicted to feeling special, and use it to soothe themselves instead of turning to those they love for mutual caring and support, it becomes negative. Much in the way substance abusers soothe themselves with alcohol or other drugs to get their high, narcissists will do anything to get their hand on their drug of choice: feeling special. Any behaviour that turns us away from caring and connection and community (and empathy) is destructive. It empties us out, turning us into a performance instead of a person.'

Something to bear in mind the next time you're thinking of posting that duck-faced selfie online, huh? ■



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