Teddy's use of social media was, if anything, amplifying his condition.

Dr. Aboujaoude argues that the number of people with narcissistic disorder has increased in recent years as the Internet fosters some of the characteristics that typify the personality disorder. Whether it is due to something inherent in our psychology or to our nonstop use of social media, most of us post and tweet and update seeking admiration and affirmation. We yearn for—and expect—others to look at us, to comment on our posts and reply to our texts. This never-ending loop feeds self-obsession; we *require* the attention to satisfy our narcissism, and so we share more, becoming even more infatuated with our display and how others will see us.

I said good-bye to my quick stint on reality television in 2005, but in some ways I feel like I'm still living on a reality show. This time, however, we're *all* contestants. Sure, one could say our lives have always been a performance—adjusting our behavior in school, at work, with family and friends—but never before have we had our thoughts, actions, and images aired in a public place, preserved for posterity. Suddenly we're rewarded for acting on impulse, and that impulse is to share—and we do, in a constant stream of texts, status updates, Vines, tweets, Snapchats, and Instagram posts. Now, more than ever, we want people to pay attention to us—to follow us, like us, comment on our posts, and retweet our thoughts. We gauge what is appropriate and acceptable by what we see on television and our overflowing social media feeds. Like reality TV contestants,

we wheedle and overshare in our desperation to stay in the limelight. We reveal more and consider consequences less.

Social media makes us hyperaware of where we stand in the sphere of social competition, and we're constantly trying to calculate according to unwritten, ever-changing rules who is the most popular, how we're getting along with our significant other, or if we're good people—because just like the television version of this reality competition, we can get kicked off, lose friends, and alienate people. In a strange electronic version of survival of the fittest, the social media reality game show we're all playing is about not necessarily how many friends we have but how we rank in our own minds and how secure we are in our relationships. We may have scores of friends but still feel lost and lonely (as many do), also so many of us ramp up our attention-grabbing revelations just to feel like we're still doing okay.

One of the advantages (and disadvantages) of being on a reality television show is that you suddenly become part of a little club. Whenever you see another person who has been on reality television, for better or worse, you are instantly connected. I had a brief but intense "friendship" with a girl who'd starred on a popular reality show. We'll call her Nikki. We traded stories, tweeted at each other, and talked about the opportunities we had or hadn't gotten since our stints on reality TV. As time passed and our friendship developed, I began noticing some red flags.

She met most of her friends on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. They were all her "fans" who constantly tagged and @-ed her. They made her feel famous and didn't mind

being the minions who trailed behind her as she swanned into restaurants or bars. The minions felt special for hanging out with someone who had been on television, and she felt popular, but more important, she "looked" popular to everyone else. As weeks turned into months, the revolving door brought an onslaught of new "friends," none staying more than a month at a time. (It's tough being a minion!) New week, new posse. Her ability to make a brand-new acquaintance look like her best friend on social media was astounding, even impressive.

We were on the Lower East Side one night when Hotel Chantelle had just opened. We were walking by after leaving a dive bar on the corner and heading to the deli to get sandwiches before going our separate ways. We walked past the long line to get into Hotel Chantelle, where some people recognized Nikki from television and asked to take a photo. Neither she nor I was a stranger to this occurrence, but I was surprised at what happened next. My phone started buzzing in my pocket. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram alerts abounded! "Just leaving @HotelChantelle with my girl @KimmyStolz and met a fan on the way out!" Nikki had fabricated our night right in front of me. Our trip to get a sandwich had suddenly become a glamorous escapade. And then came more buzzing from Nikki's phone. Her fans were tweeting back and Instagramming comments like "OMG I LOVE NIKKI" and "OMG how do I get to be in your shoes for a day."

As time went on, I began noticing that when we hung out, she would suggest we do strange things for photos

so that we could "post" them. We stood on cars (why? I looked kind of cool), we rented scooters but barely rode them anywhere (so many photos, so little time!), and we went to recently opened, exclusive restaurants where I ate half the menu and she barely touched the food but made sure to photograph my food and then Instagram it and tag it so that people knew she had been there. I stopped talking to Nikki a few weeks later. I understood the desire to pump up your life on social media to make it look like you're having a better time than you are or to post a photo of yourself and a celebrity you love because you want to tell the story to your friends. But Nikki had taken it to levels that made me cringe.

Years later, she was arrested for drinking and driving (I literally mean drinking and driving: she was holding a beer while driving her car over the Manhattan Bridge). How did she get caught? A nearby cop noticed five or six flashes in the car (Nikki always made sure to take five or six or twenty photos before posting anything—it was important to look her best). The cop pulled her over and arrested her for drinking and driving, and texting and driving. She had it all! She tried to take down the photo of her holding the beer while driving a day later (after her release from jail) but it was too late. She had uploaded it just before getting pulled over and all of the bloggers she had friended on Facebook (to enhance her public image, of course!) had already uploaded it to their own sites.

We may not all have the same kind of platform or aspirations as Nikki had, but whether we realize it or not, we

are *all* putting on a show, using social media to expand our social circle or mold how the world sees us. We revamp our online personas with selective status updates, check-ins, and Instagram photos, in order to control how we are perceived by those in our digital circle. We try to prove that our lives are *amazing*, that we go on *amazing* adventures and eat *amazing* food with our *amazing* friends. The goal is to appear as happy and successful and good-looking as possible. Bit by digital bit, we have become obsessed with and addicted to sharing so as to get any reaction that proves people are interested in what we have to say. We have become a generation of oversharers, hyperaware of what we post and desperate for acknowledgment and affirmation.

Five years ago, I might have been compelled to share with a friend approximately one out of every one hundred thoughts passing through my head. Today, I find myself wanting to Instagram (which links to my Twitter and Facebook and Foursquare) about almost every experience or "interesting" place I go. But I also try to filter. I take a few seconds to read what I type and imagine how it will appear on someone else's feed. I try to share only what I think will make my followers happy—what is funny or interesting or strange—but I am aware as I do this that I am considering my image and the persona I want others to see. I am also aware that I fail at this "filtering" more than not. I fall victim to the desire to show off my amazing vacations or how amazing my weekend is out in the Hamptons with my family or how amazing my friends are. I hope some of my followers and

friends have read up to this point in the book so I can apologize for some of my most shameless posts. I'm sorry, guys.

I always assumed that those who were not raised with all these digital tools would not feel this same urge. I was wrong. Since my mother joined Facebook, I've seen how it's grown to be a larger part of her life. One day, on a beach in Florida, we were watching in awe as spinner sharks swam just ten feet from the shore. "This is so amazing. Oooh, I wish I had my phone on me so I could put it on Facebook!" my mother said to me. I found it fascinating that Facebook had infiltrated the way she perceives the world and processes her experiences, just as it had mine eight years before. As the years have gone on, I've watched my mom become more and more immersed in Facebook and her desire to post the best photos of me, my wife, my dad, and our dogs. She commented recently that she had a lot of longtime friends over for a yearly get-together. And she noticed with some sadness that whereas in years past, they'd spent time gossiping and catching up over cocktails, a lot of the time they spent together, they were immersed in their phones, their various Facebook accounts, and respective games of Words with Friends.

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Sharing as much as we do fosters the belief that our lives are just as interesting and compelling as those of people who are paid to be interesting and compelling—and that people want to hear our every thought and see pictures of our every meal. (How else to explain the innumerable

mind-numbingly mundane tweets?) Our lives online give us a skewed sense of self-importance and a faulty perception of what's interesting about who we are, what we do, and what we think. If I see one more Instagram of a cartoon kitten, I'm going to have a breakdown. And please don't get me started on the inspirational quotes people are now posting instead of photos. Posting a photo of Bob Marley or snippet from a Robert Frost poem does not inspire me. It makes me hate you.

People believe they are projecting the best aspects of their personality when they post, upload, and tweet. But in real life, you are exposing yourself for what you really are: a puddle of raw and desperate insecurity. For instance:

- Picture of yourself with a celebrity? *I am in the "in" crowd and I'm at the highest social tier.* This translates to the reader as: you have never been friends with a celebrity and it took a great deal of awkwardness to get this photo.

- Any quote about achieving your dream? *I am in touch with my emotional side and I am successful because I believe in myself.* When I see these, I think: *You're unemployed.*

- Bob Marley quote? *I'm a hippie and I'm laid-back and very cool.* More like: you're a white kid who smokes weed.

- Robert Frost quote? *I'm highly educated and I "get" poetry.* Reads as: "The Road Not Taken" is the most overquoted poem in the history of mankind and you probably have never read the whole thing.

Dr. Aboujaoude explains that the virtual world changes how we see ourselves, so that we have "an exaggerated sense of our abilities, a superior attitude toward others, a new moral code that we adopt online, a proneness to impulsive behavior, a tendency to regress to childhood states when faced with an open browser." We post every thought that crosses our minds, resulting in a constant dialogue with the outside world and a relinquishment of the filters that once stopped us from embarrassing ourselves or boring others. The need to cultivate an audience—to win more followers—that social media facilitates, the delusion that we can all be stars, the pressure to share, the ability to do so instantaneously, along with the dissociation from reality—all of this fuels the making of our celebrity in our own minds.

Was it the advent of Facebook and Twitter (or even Myspace and Friendster, RIP) and the photo-based Instagram and SnapChat that ignited a narcissistic need to make our lives an open book (or news feed) for all to see? Or do these sites merely allow us to unleash the exhibitionistic, attention-seeking animal that until now has lain dormant inside of us?

Who knows the answer to this chicken-egg conundrum? One thing's for certain: my generation is the first one to come of age with the ability to Google ourselves and create online footprints. In a sense, the Internet made us all microcelebrities, and as much as some of us claim to despise it, it makes us feel special, because someone—anyone—has been paying attention.

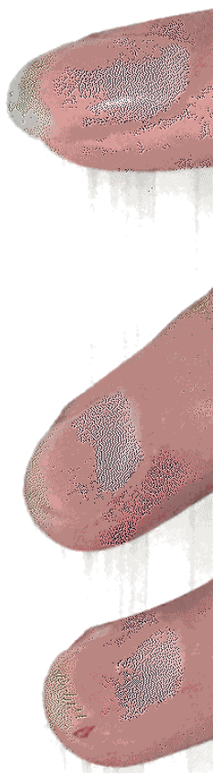
We have always been obsessed with celebrity, but the

steady stream of blogs, gossip sites, and celebrities' own Twitter mumblings exacerbated the preoccupation. Then, as reality television shows became popular in the late 1990s and took over the television industry in the 2000s, we watched our peers grow (almost) rich and (very temporarily) famous from Myspace pages and YouTube videos. Slowly but surely, all of us—celebrities included—became our own mini reality-show machines, addicted to checking texts and tweets, sharing too much in order to gain any sort of affirmation that people cared. Nobody wanted to be left out. We may not be clinically diagnosed narcissists, but as Dr. Aboujaoude noted, the Internet is bringing many of us closer to it every day. And the more we're online, the more narcissistic and fame-obsessed we get.

Our social media feeds grant us a platform. The more people retweet or comment on our posts, the more entertaining and interesting we think we are. Coupled with the onslaught of reality television—where normal people become famous for just being themselves—we now all believe that we can be stars.

With the constant audience comes the pressure to perform. There's an art to being a social media star—there's a fine line that we have to walk, between giving the audience exactly what they want and becoming either a laughingstock that people want to forget or the boring or annoying character no one wants to be. You must be open to sharing but not weak enough to overshare. You want to post just enough so that people are intrigued by what you have to say and keep coming back, but not say too much or say

things so often that they can predict what you're going to write or get bored and think, *Oh my God, not another tweet from Kim about her dog or another rant about being stuck in traffic on the way to Bridgehampton*. Ugh, I hate myself just typing this.



It used to be that when my friends and I were getting ready to go out, as we tried on outfits, put on our makeup, and discussed how we looked, we'd talk about who we hoped to see or hook up with that night and whether or not we looked good enough for the girls and guys we had crushes on. Today, however, the subject of the conversation has shifted. We talk about how we will look in the *photos* that will no doubt be posted onto Instagram or Facebook that night or the next day. We grab each other's phones, reserving the right to reject bad photos and unabashedly begging for an immediate upload and tag of the good ones. We used to want to look good for our potential hookups, our friends, and even ourselves. Now we strive to look good for Facebook or Instagram and just hope the people we *want* to see it are checking their feeds. If we are going to a party with paparazzi, we pray that some official photographer will be there to record it so that we can screenshot their photo the next day and upload it to our own Instagrams. If we think we look horrible, our mantra for the night will become, "Please don't tag me!" We are now more consumed with how the online world will view us than we are with the opinions of those whom we spend time with in person.

Since we're all just one viral video away from our own show and line of hair care products, we've not only become

more self-obsessed, but we're also getting more judgmental about how other people are stacking up. We gauge others' looks, personality, wits, talent, and style compared to our own because, God forbid, they might make it before we do. I was once close with a girl who was on *The Real World*. She was very popular on her season and she and I had just about the same number of followers on Twitter and Instagram. We were both somewhat "edgy"-looking to the passerby and (you guessed it) we were both gay. It was just a year or two after I had been on *America's Next Top Model* and I was working as a model signed with Ford and as a VJ at MTV. She was just finishing her stint on *The Real World* and already had a contract to sign with CAA, a top acting agency, and she was talking to Fuse, MTV's competitor, about hosting a show for them. Remaining popular and in the public eye were massively important for both of our careers. I remember checking my Facebook and Myspace and feeling a lump in my stomach and a brush of panic every time I saw her post a photo of herself on a red carpet or with other celebrities. It was wrong and it reminded me of being one of the best players on the basketball team in sixth grade and being secretly angry and jealous every time my best friend scored. (Sorry, Liz!) Every move was competitive and we were vying for . . . well, I don't know what, but it certainly felt like we were vying for something major. I remember judging her outfits and being ecstatic when she finally got the job at Fuse. If it wasn't going to be Fuse, her next stop could have been MTV! MTV was *mine*. The truth is, of course, deep down I was always proud of

her when she accomplished something, but it also struck a negative and panicked chord with me. We weren't close enough friends for me to feel selfless. I wanted to win, to have the better image, to get the appearances, and if she had to lose in order for me to achieve that, then so be it. I know she felt the same about me. So we judged each other silently (or sometimes with our friends—okay, fine, or sometimes with the entire MTV newsroom). But we were judging each other for things that we were guilty of doing as well.

This happens to all of us each day on Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, Vine, and all other forms of social media. We judge other people for their annoying, boring, oversharing, irrational, angry, or embarrassing posts, when most of us are writing the same kind of thing. We are judging everyone else, so we must be aware that people are judging us, and yet we drop ourselves in the fishbowl so willingly.

We are so desperate to succeed in our social media reality game show, and part of doing that is showing our best side—even if that means we have to lie. One night, I was composing a tweet about being out with my friends, choosing every word carefully. Of course, I knew that the tweet was for one purpose only: to make the ex who had broken up with me (but who I knew was still obsessively looking through my Facebook and Twitter feeds) think that I was doing okay—better than okay. She wasn't very good at hiding the fact that she compulsively perused my social media. I would post a photo of me and a friend (who happened to be extremely good-looking), and I would get a passive-aggressive text within thirty minutes; I would upload a

song and she would tweet lyrics from the same artist. We were absolutely terrible at masking our inability to get over each other. But still, she had broken my heart and I wanted to show her that I had moved on, so I tried to make my night sound exciting and free. In reality, I was sitting at a dive bar with two friends, all of us bored and trying to figure out where to go next. I was actually planning my escape so I could go home and watch *Arrested Development*. Moments after I sent the post—something provocative like "another crazy night with the girls"—into the Twitterverse, the friend to my left pointed her phone at me and called me out on my pathetic lie. "Really, Kim?" I was embarrassed. Nothing shamed me more than coming across as the desperate girl attempting to contrive a tweet for someone who had cheated on her more than three months before. But a week later, I caught the same friend in a lie herself: she got into a fight with her boyfriend and tweeted that she was going out late, even though I had really just driven her home at eleven thirty P.M. This childish behavior is easy to cast aspersions on from the outside but surprisingly hard to avoid when it comes to our own online avatars.

No matter the motive—romantic, professional, or otherwise—we are increasingly turning to our social media sites and profiles to influence the world's perception of who we are. We can't help but tweet little lies and exaggerations, irrational in the belief that we will not get caught. We continue to share, attempting to convey one persona or project one emotion, even—or especially—if we are feeling the complete opposite.

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So back to our favorite narcissistic hairstylist, Teddy. For three years I watched him on his quest for reality-show fame. I observed how he tried to become friends with every celebrity whose hair he touched. His record wasn't altogether bad actually: he generally became "friends" with one out of twenty and badgered several of them into tweeting at him at least once, a major accomplishment for him because it led to more followers, and the more he gained, the higher his chance of success—or so he told me. He tweeted at least fifteen times per day, and no less than fifteen of those tweets were either at a celebrity, an upload of a photograph of him standing with a celebrity, or the mention of a celebrity he had just "worked with," was about to see, or was "in touch" with. Judge Teddy as you may (I did), but he's not the only one doing this kind of thing. Of those I spoke with, around one out of every five people said they had a fifty-fifty chance of getting famous online. Fifty-fifty!

Our perception of our ability to achieve fame—and sustain it—is extremely skewed. *So You Think You Can Dance, The X Factor, America's Got Talent, American Idol, The Voice, Project Runway, America's Next Top Model* . . . there are vast TV empires that are built around the conceit that anyone can make it. As we share more and more online in an infinite attention-seeking loop of display and interaction, we're all producing our own little reality shows. Who's the hottest? Who has the most friends? Who did the

best, most original thing last weekend? The judges are our friends. They've got the power to "like" or retweet a post. And as we keep the tally of the tens or twenties or hundreds of people who like what we're doing, what we're wearing, how we wore it, how we said it, where it happened, our egos become larger, and we delude ourselves into thinking that our lives are worthy of 24/7 documentation—and even worse, that our self-worth is based on the attention we receive online. In reality, very few of us will garner lasting fame by way of the Internet.

I found a list (online, of course) of ten people (and one cat) who became famous on the Internet in 2010 thanks to YouTube videos, tweets, or blogs. The amazing thing was that in spite of the fact that only a few years had passed, I recognized only two names—Antoine Dodson and Justin Halpern, who writes *Shit My Dad Says*. By the time I finished the final draft of this book, neither of those names rang a bell either.

If there are ten people who became famous through their Twitter account, and only two of them have name recognition that has lasted more than a year, then isn't it irrational that so many of us think that there is greater than a fifty-fifty chance that we will make ourselves famous simply by writing a blog, creating a YouTube channel, or putting an @ sign before our name? We convince ourselves that we can get famous through YouTube because Justin Bieber did it—ignoring that he not only had some talent but also *serious* luck when Scooter Braun came across his page.

Whether we yearn for actual fame or are just playing

at it through social media, we must be aware that the emotional and mental benefits we might potentially achieve from this exposure are not sustainable and not necessarily real. Unlike actors or musicians, who enrich people's lives with their talent and whose fans grow with their careers, reality television stars are generally famous because they did something insane or silly or even idiotic. They have a different fan base, perhaps a less sophisticated one than the likes of Jack Nicholson or Meryl Streep. The fame comes quickly and is concentrated in social media. It feels overwhelming and exciting but it ends just as quickly because there is generally no "talent" to carry one's career (and thus fans) any farther. According to Dr. Wicker, "The self-esteem boost that one gets from instant fame is artificial and externally based. It is not the individual discovering his or her own worth through self-exploration . . . It is an emotionally dangerous place to find self-worth." When the reasons we value ourselves are not based on our true accomplishments or true relationships, we can find ourselves in a precarious place if the attention ultimately slips away. In one year we can go from red carpets, $5,000 appearance fees, and constant looks and stops on the street to having trouble getting into the same parties and clubs we were once paid to appear at. I remember in 2006 when not a day went by without someone saying something like "OMG top model!" or "You were my *favorite*" to me, and today there are sometimes weeks in between occasions when someone spots me, and the intervals get longer and longer. When you're famous for a minute (or fifteen minutes), you think

social media fame + its dangers