



**“Social Media as a Mode of Attachment and Facilitator of a Narcissistic Agenda in Young Adult Romantic Relationships”**

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**The Undergraduate Research Writing Conference**

**• 2020 •**

**Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey**

Rutgers University

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Love and Sex: College Writing and Research 301  
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December 9, 2019

Literature as old as time parallels the stories of sweeping infatuation littered with red flags and eventual disaster as the Twitter feed of a heartbroken millennial in 2019. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* tells the tale of the devastating love affair of Narcissus and Echo, in which the lovely Echo pines for Narcissus, a handsome hunter beloved by many. Though Narcissus took pride in his legion of lovers, he also held them in disdain for their unworthiness of his body and mind. As her name suggests, Echo was cursed with a lack of free expression, and could only mimic the last words of others. The crescendo of her infatuation with Narcissus peaked upon finding him lost in the woods and attempting to embrace him and show him the way out of the brambles. Narcissus violently rejected her, exclaiming, "hands off! May I die before you enjoy my body." A humiliated Echo fled, her heart broken. As a punishment for his arrogance, Nemesis, goddess of revenge, placed a spell on Narcissus so he would fall in love with whomever he saw next. Much to Echo's dismay, Narcissus noticed his reflection in a nearby pool of water, immediately falling hopelessly in love with himself. Echo spent her years loving Narcissus from afar, dying all-consumed with depression and obsession. Narcissus lived in constant internal strife, detached himself from the world around him and ended his life in suicide, overtaken by his own futile love. *Metamorphoses* was written in 8 A.D., and tells the tale of generations of failed love affairs since, maintaining relevance as narcissism has maintained prevalence.

As forest nymphs and hunters have become friends, coworkers, and regular passersby, so has narcissism adapted to its modern environment. Narcissus flaunted his work as a hunter, boasting of his courageous kills and technical skills. Social media and modern technology act as Narcissus's contemporary bow and arrow, making it easy to target and discern victims while

putting on an enviable display of confidence and attractiveness. This essay will begin with an exploration of the nature of narcissism, then hone in on grandiose narcissists, much like Narcissus, and why they are so attractive to potential mates. It will then elaborate on modern technology, specifically that of Snapchat, and how its characteristics cater to narcissistic tendencies and even promote them. The Social Information Process Theory will elaborate on the nature of the impact of Snapchat's infamous disappearing messages and their ability to create relationships, destroy them, and elicit jealousy, another important tool in the narcissist's pocket. In conjunction, the Uses and Gratifications Theory will confirm that users are self-aware in their online agendas and utilize certain features of social media communication pointedly to produce an emotional impact. Communication via Snapchat comes in the form of temporary messages, pictures or text that last at absolute longest 24 hours, lending a hand to the temporary relationships it breeds. Because of the fleeting nature of Snapchat messages and how quick and easy it is to send them, one might send 100 snaps in a day, perhaps sending the same message to multiple different people to gauge their reactions. A receiver who sends maybe 15 snaps a day themselves might be excited to receive the message and eager to start a conversation; unbeknownst to them, the very same message thoughtlessly went to 10 other users. Though the ratio of number of snaps sent to received is not necessarily related to the attachment one feels to snap messages, it is tracked within the app, called a "Snap Score," offering itself up as a metric of a user's Snapchat activities. Thus, there are a variety of elements that are contributive to one's perception of a snap message or user. The Social Information Process Theory describes the human tendency to "learn to adapt to develop emotional bonds with others using the tools of language and even develop new cues like emoticons" and implies that different people have

different ways of interpreting the unspoken emotional language we have created to accommodate new technology (Cigelske). These points will culminate in a discussion on our culture of detachment, and how narcissistic abusers of social media are contributive to it. Ultimately, modern technology has facilitated narcissistic tendencies in romantic and sexual relationships by allowing its users the choice of attachment or detachment in their online relationships yet promoting detachment as a means of self preservation; the choice to attach oneself and believe in the genuineness of an online interaction simultaneously risks it being ingenuine. This idea is largely behind our tendency to self preserve, as we'd prefer to be safe in our endeavors of the heart rather than risk getting hurt, perpetuating our growing culture of detachment.

## **I . THE NARCISSIST**

The nature of narcissism is often confused with psychopathy, and although the two can be closely linked, it is important to note that a narcissist demands to be liked, while a psychopath often remains unfazed by others' conception of them. Psychologists and researchers agree that although DNA imprints much of our future personality traits on us, we also have the ability to consciously or subconsciously create and nurse our characteristics. Narcissism is acknowledged as a disordered trait that develops in our behavioral repertoire post-birth but pre-speech. There are a variety of different theories as to the cause of this narcissistic programming, but ultimately, narcissists are made, not born. In their *Grandiose and Vulnerable Narcissism: Self-Construal, Attachment, and Love in Romantic Relationships*, Rohmann and Elke define narcissism as a concoction of “self-love, inflated self-views, self-serving bias, and demanding display[s] of entitlement” (Rohmann and Elke). In decades of research and field studies, psychologists

discovered a dichotomy in the narcissistic behaviors of their patients and field study participants, which reveals itself in the duality of grandiose and vulnerable narcissism. Rohmann and Elke characterize

grandiose narcissism [as] includ[ing] a desire to maintain a pretentious self-image, an exhibitionistic tendency, and a strong need for the admiration of others. Vulnerable narcissism, in contrast, is characterized by preoccupation with grandiose fantasies, oscillation between feelings of superiority and inferiority, and fragile self-confidence.

Whereas grandiose narcissism is equated with the social-personality conceptualization of narcissism, vulnerable narcissism resembles the clinical conceptualization.

When discussing narcissism, it is likely grandiose narcissists are the first archetype that comes to mind, (think every overtly arrogant, smooth talking player with irritatingly perfect hair strewn about chick flicks and dramas). Grandiose narcissists are known for their “extraversion, dominance, self assurance, exhibitionism, and aggression” and an extremely independent self-construal (Lamkin). Rohmann and Elke’s characterization of grandiose narcissism as the “social-personality” division of narcissism lends itself to the flamboyance of grandiose narcissistic traits, like pomposity, manipulateness and overt leadership, which are often more visible in the surrounding environment. These externalizing behaviors tend to do more damage to others, whereas the vulnerable narcissist’s tendency toward internalization inflicts more self-harm through the insatiable pull of unfulfilled grandiose fantasies. This reflects its label as the “clinical” division of narcissism, as vulnerable narcissists may be more likely to seek clinical help for their inner conflicts. The pull of a grandiose narcissist is not just the stuff of Hollywood scripts and tailored plot lines, in fact, research provides evidence as to why we find ourselves

falling for narcissists, to be elaborated upon in the following section of this study. Grandiose narcissism will be the primary focus of this analysis.

## **II. WHY DO WE FALL FOR NARCISSISTS?**

From the story of Narcissus and Echo, to personal experience or that of a friend or family member, to tales of heartbreak told on late night social media feeds, nearly everyone has likely heard of the destruction a narcissist leaves in their wake post honeymoon phase. So why do we do it? Why do we move forward with relationships doomed to fail despite the warnings from our mothers and skeptical friends? The expansive presence of grandiose narcissists makes them visible, and should alert others to the potential danger, which it often does to observers of the relationship. It's people's tendency to ignore the signals and even, counter-intuitively, be attracted to and fall for the grandiose narcissist's guise that perfects the recipe for heartbreak (Dufner). Narcissists are deceptive by nature, and hook their prey by presenting as something else, the target's ideal mate. Narcissists often tailor their approach according to their target, so each experience feels grandly romantic and unique (Campbell). W.K. Campbell's *Narcissism and Commitment in Romantic Relationships: An Investment Model Analysis* and Michael Dufner's *Are Narcissists Sexy? Zeroing in on the Effect of Narcissism on Short-Term Mate Appeal* reveal that narcissists are attractive to potential partners because of their closely linked qualities of physical attractiveness, social boldness, and propensity for Admiration and Rivalry, to be elaborated upon by the NARC Model.

The evolutionary tendency of human beings to reproduce with physically attractive partners is pronounced in the case of a narcissist. As narcissists highly value their physical

appearance and often view it as a personality trait, they are often well groomed and have a high self-perceived attractiveness (Campbell). According to Dufner, “narcissism leads to high physical attractiveness, [which] in turn, leads to high mate appeal” (Dufner). Narcissism emphasizes the human draw to physically attractive potential partners, which contributes to the sexual success of narcissists, especially in the short-term dating field. Closely linked with the value of physical appearance are the concepts of Admiration and Rivalry, which coincide with the narcissist’s infamous arrogance.

The NARC Model, or Narcissistic Admiration and Rivalry Concept “proposes that narcissists strive to inflate their self esteem in a two dimensional way. The Admiration dimension involves the desire to seek approval from others and receive the positive social outcomes of being liked while the Rivalry dimension refers to the tendency of narcissists to want to out-do others or protect oneself from a negative self-view by derogating others. (Whitbourne)

The primary goal of a grandiose narcissist is the maintenance of a grandiose self view. This desire manifests itself in “self-assured, dominant, expressive, and charming behaviors,” all of which tend to elicit positive social outcomes, i.e. Admiration (Wurst). Subsequently, in the context of short term dating, these behaviors that characterize Admiration (a charming and likable demeanor as well as a self-assured appearance) lead to a high romantic appeal (Wurst).

Furthermore, physical attractiveness and admiration are contributive to overall confidence and social boldness. Narcissists are known for their

high confidence, high capacity for status, as well as little fear of romantic rejection, and thus the tendency to readily and unrestrainedly approach members of the opposite sex.



Consequently, individuals with high scores on narcissism are perceived by the opposite sex as likable, physically and sexually attractive, and having high mate appeal.

(Campbell)

Over time, these characteristics coalesce into a tendency to objectify targets. Like objects, targets are easily replaceable and in the case of the grandiose narcissist, often elicit the same feeling of victory or validation regardless of who a target is as a person; it's the simple act of conquest that reinforces their egotistical nature. This lends itself to the use of media like Snapchat, which is almost entirely superficially based, (though can lead to eventual genuine connection) and will be elaborated upon in the following portion of this essay. Furthermore, a narcissist's "agentic characteristics, like self-enhancing cognition and approach orientation" lend a hand to their impulse to exhibit socially bold interactions, often taking leadership roles in every aspect of their lives (Dufner). As a result of these behaviors, narcissists have claimed that they are able to meet romantic partners easily and have received fewer rejections and more phone numbers from the opposite sex, more casual sex, and more one night stands (Dufner). The aspect of rejection, or seemingly the lack thereof in the love/sex life of the narcissist, breeds two opposite reactions. When their advances are rejected, while some narcissists might thoughtlessly move on and tell themselves it was a flaw on the other person's part that accounts for the rejection, others may view it as a challenge. The allure of a challenge often better suits the covert or vulnerable narcissist but also has the potential to make the victory that much sweeter for the grandiose narcissist, if it is still achievable in a relatively timely fashion, of course. According to a study conducted by Tinder, the most appealing qualities in a mate are "confident, attractive, successful and charming" (Kam). These traits perfectly parallel the description of the grandiose narcissist;

thus, these classically alluring characteristics may be indicative of the slippery slope of entanglement with a narcissist. Though these qualities may seem like the perfect combination and the ideal recipe for a relationship, when the surface layers of charm and blissful infatuation wear away, the crucial flaws of the grandiose narcissist inevitably reveal themselves.

### **III. SOCIAL MEDIA AS A TOOL IN THE NARCISSIST'S ARSENAL**

It would be remiss to discuss the nature of the modern narcissist without mention of the immense role technology plays in the development of the narcissist's vicious web of interdependence. As more and more relationships occur online, the more we have to base what we know of a person off of their social media, making the online aspect of relationships hugely important, especially in the last ten years. Some relationships take place almost totally online, where narcissists thrive on detaching themselves while winding others around their finger with constant contact and love-bombing techniques that can be easily misconstrued as infatuation or excited affection instead of the beginnings of narcissistic abuse (Vaterlaus). Social media provides the perfect environment for a narcissist to showcase their most desirable traits and hide the ugly side behind a calculated feed. In his *The Highest Form of Like: Snapchat, College Students and Hyperpersonal Communication*, Timothy Cigelske discusses the nature of hyperpersonal communication and its function in modern relationships within the context of Snapchat, which he regards as a form of Computer Mediated Communication (CMC).

The Social Information Processing Theory predicts that the limited social context cues of CMC and frequent changes over time creates a Hyperpersonal Model of Communication. Hyperpersonal communication is Computer Mediated Communication that is more

socially desirable than we tend to experience in parallel Face to Face (FtF) interactions because it surpassed the level of affection and emotion of the parallel Face to Face interaction. (Cigelske)

This study views the frequent exchanges and vanishing messages as evidence of the Social Information Processing Theory in action, which describes the human tendency to build new emotional languages to accommodate developments in communication technology. Hyper personal communication has become increasingly common in the last decade, some going so far as to value it more highly than face to face communication, as aforementioned. Because of its convenience and ease as a result of technology, hyper personal communication occurs more frequently than face to face communication, lighting pleasure centers in our brains when we see certain notifications flash across our screens and weave their way into our hearts.

Snapchat is an application run by Snap Inc., which asserts its mission to “contribute to human progress by empowering people to express themselves, live in the moment, learn about the world, and have fun together” (Cigelske). Snap Inc.’s advertising emphasizes Snapchat’s “sharing in the moment” feature, noting especially that “your best friends are always at your fingertips with just a tap” (Cigelske). Cigelske argues that CMC has the potential to outweigh FtF communication in terms of emotional attachment because of the “rate and duration” of online messages, contributing to the ever-evolving emotional language of technology (Cigelske). In his “‘Snapchat Is More Personal’: An Exploratory Study on Snapchat Behaviors and Young Adult Interpersonal Relationships”, Michell Vaterlaus et. al conduct an investigation on the social cues and implications of the emotional language of Snapchat on interpersonal relationships. Vaterlaus’ study is grounded in the Uses and Gratifications Theory, which

“purports that media and technology users are active, self-aware, and goal directed” (Vaterlaus).

This research was incredibly revealing especially in terms of the aspect of jealousy, which is a narcissist’s forefront tool of manipulation in the acquisition of a target. Vaterlaus’ work revealed

higher rates of young adult jealousy present in Snapchat use when a young adults’ romantic partner added a previous romantic partner to their network or their partner was communicating with someone of the opposite sex that was unknown to the young adult, which makes sense in the context that snaps can be made to disappear in a matter of seconds, leaving little evidence of extra-relational communication. (Vaterlaus)

Snapchat rewards “ frequent bursts of interpersonal communication over a long period of time” with its features like “streaks” and “best friends” (Cigelske). The app tracks how many days in a row two users have been sending snaps to one another via the “streak” feature, indicated by an emoticon with the number of days next to it. One’s “best friends” list refers to the users they exchange snaps with the most. It is possible for someone to be on one’s own personal best friends list, but one not appear on theirs. If two users are number one best friends with one another, it is indicated with a yellow heart. With its emojis and streaks, best friends lists and stories, the features of Snapchat have imposed indicators of emotional language on us, still subject to individual interpretation. Yellow hearts must have a lot of meaning, and a streak must indicate friendship, right?

Applications like Snapchat make it easy for a narcissist to operate under false assumptions and feel little remorse courting multiple victims at once. Some may find themselves hurt when someone is on their best friends list but that person does not reciprocate enough for one to show up on their best friends list. Others might be hurt by another person breaking their

streak by not responding, or leaving their snaps on “opened”, meaning they were seen and not reacted to. It should be noted that there is not necessarily a malicious intent when users do not reciprocate online communication, i.e. leaving snaps on opened, not maintaining streaks etc., but the idea that these interactions are all subject to interpretation opens the door for disappointment and jealousy. A 19 year old female participant in Vaterlaus’ study stated “I’ve blocked people on Snapchat if they send me snapchats like 12 times a day and I just don’t really care”, indicative of one of the various ways the emotional language of Snapchat is interpreted; it isn’t. According to a 19 year old male participant in Vaterlaus’ study, “Snapchat becomes competitive—Who’s your top snapchatters and stuff like that. And some people get pretty upset” (Vaterlaus). Participants also indicated that jealousy in relation to the Snapchat best friends list is particularly prevalent in young adult romantic/sexual relationships; jealousy arose when partners were not at the top of their partner’s best friends list (Vaterlaus). The pseudo privacy Snapchat offers in its vanishing messages may also be contributive to this emotional attachment, as some feel more at liberty to express themselves with the reassurance they could never be held to their words; privacy is necessary for self-disclosure and intimate communication processes, and Snapchat offers a somewhat private communication channel (Vaterlaus). Narcissists manipulate this feature to encourage emotional intimacy and vulnerability on the target, which works in their agenda seamlessly; eliciting jealousy, confusion, and often a follow-up when, for example, the target reveals something personal to be met with an unattached response, if any at all (Cigelske). Another 19 year old male participant in Vaterlaus’ study reported ‘I would definitely say people feel [Snapchat is] safer than texting. I would definitely say Snapchat would be the way you would go about [cheating]’ (Vaterlaus). The different features of Snapchat invite different

avenues of interpretation, some electing to care whether they receive a response, about the nature of that response, and where they are positioned on another person's best friends list, and others elect to not. The characteristics of a grandiose narcissist facilitate dissociation from their social media/Snapchat interactions; they will share information about themselves without a second thought to gain a target's trust and maintain a guise of vulnerability while a neurotypical user may find themselves more easily attached to their online engagements.

#### **IV. THE TARGET**

This study asserts the era of constant contact as a mode of manipulation, allowing narcissists to conceal the true nature of their relationships to targets, making it all the more painful when targets inevitably discover the truth. The hyper personal communication bred by social media is contributive to why targets are often unsuspecting, and don't recognize the narcissist for what they are until they are too far in to remove themselves without heartbreak. The narcissist's display of perfection is so practiced, so deliberate, it is usually enough to silence the apprehensions of a target, at least until the narcissist can mark the conquest and move on. It can be argued that a narcissist would not be successful if not for complacency or lack of awareness contributive to deception on the part of the victim. The only way to combat narcissism is being aware of it, which unfortunately for victims in narcissistic relationships usually only comes with time. This phenomenon is demonstrated by the chocolate cake model, which states

once the relationship becomes more settled... more communal character traits seem to increase in importance for romantic success (e.g. low selfishness, a propensity to forgive,

sensitivity, supporting and caring qualities), because a lack of them ... provokes serious romantic problems in the long run. (Whitbourne)

In her “The Two Faces of Narcissism in Romantic Relationships”, Susan Whitbourne describes the disparity in relationship satisfaction among individuals with narcissistic partners at the beginning versus the end of the relationship. The results of Whitbourne’s investigation are telling, “those who those who were dating narcissistic individuals endorsed a larger reduction in satisfaction than those who were not dating narcissistic individuals” (Whitbourne). This model parallels the idea that targets are initially submissive to the narcissist’s pursuit, often as a result of deception, then later become dissatisfied with the qualities that made the relationship so enjoyable short term. Thus, in this model, “chocolate cake serves as a metaphor for a relationship with someone who is narcissistic: initially, eating chocolate cake is enjoyable, but it comes with long-term costs (e.g., weight gain, discomfort) that lead to dissatisfaction” (Lamkin).

Whitbourne’s analysis does not explore if long term relationship dissatisfaction with a narcissist translated to a breakup, or simply continued relationship dissatisfaction. This bolsters the idea that targets are somewhat complacent, especially those who elect to stay with their narcissistic partner in spite of their ego and manipulative tendencies.

## **V. OUR CULTURE OF DETACHMENT**

The fact that the significance of communication via technology is up for interpretation opens the door for narcissists to take advantage of it. To attach oneself to the perceived genuineness of an interaction simultaneously risks it being ingenuine, which promotes detachment as a form of self-preservation. Among the adult population, “young adults (18-29

years old) are the age group with the largest number (41%) of Snapchat users” (Vaterlaus). Vaterlaus affirms that youth culture has formed around new media like Snapchat, “including shared rules, beliefs, and meanings around media use [that] are often invisible to adults” as previously evidenced by the statements given by young adults about the unwritten rules and beliefs in regards to Snapchat etiquette (Vaterlaus). Participants in Vaterlaus’ study describe how communication via Snapchat could become annoying if used too frequently in relationships and that jealousy could arise based on who was on the snaphatter’s best friends list. Snapchat is established as a main platform of communication for young adult users, subjecting them to membership in a detached youth culture consistent with this study’s application of both the Social Information Processing and Uses and Gratifications Theories. An entire culture has formed around the emotional language hyper personal communication technologies have created, the intricacies and features of which present the choice to attach or detach from interactions.

This study utilized the NARC Model to elaborate upon why targets fall to the narcissist’s pursuits, emphasizing that the narcissist’s confidence, charm, and simultaneous ability to covertly undermine the efforts of others makes them naturally more attractive in short-term hook-up/dating contexts. Narcissist’s manipulate the features of modern communication technologies like Snapchat to their will, exploiting their ease of detachment to weave a web of interdependence with a target, often more than one at a time. The Social Information Process Theory provided a theoretical framework for the implied emotional language associated with Snapchat, especially among young adults and within youth culture, coloring the nuances of online communication with emotions like jealousy and sadness. The Uses and Gratifications Theory affirmed the self-aware nature of users, reflecting how the seductive features of Snapchat



especially can be used to inflate a narcissistic ego, allay a target's suspicions, and overall draw an emotional reaction out of another user. This study has woven the aforementioned analytical foundation to highlight the contributions narcissists make to a youth culture of detachment via social media manipulation. So much of modern communication occurs on platforms like Snapchat, it is human nature to develop a language to accommodate it, opening the door for interpretation on the part of the user. Detachment lends itself to self-preservation in that it ensures emotional safety in online interactions, and also presents the opportunity for the narcissist to nurse faux attachments to other users. The presence and linear growth of our culture of detachment is troubling for the future of communication technology and quite simply for how we treat one another as human beings. Researchers might continue to explore how applications like Snapchat have diversified and contributed to the growth of relationships in spite of narcissism, or if the detachment bred by social media is necessarily detrimental to how we communicate. As social media and technology take on emotional languages of their own, we are reminded of the tale of Narcissus and Echo; though it bears a centuries old time stamp, its grapple with communication amid narcissism has certainly withstood the test of time and will continue to adapt to our ever-changing environment for years to come.

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