

## **CYBER DESPAIR: A Screenplay Raising Awareness of Social Media Addiction**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This thesis is created with the purpose to raise awareness in social media addiction and how it affects the people we are close with. Social media is commonly used by everyone in this modern era, but not a lot of users are aware of the danger and risk it can bring to us and social media addiction is an unhealthy reliance on online platforms. By using Erik Erikson's psychological development theory, this thesis will explore the reasons, causes and effects on why an individual is addicted to social media. It will emphasize using the fourth, fifth, sixth as well as the final stage of Erikson's psychological development stages to support the story building. Using modern tragedy as its genre, this thesis will show the story of Nathan and Sydney's social media addiction and how eventually the two characters end up crossing paths in the real world.

**Keywords:** Social Media; Internet; Addiction; Screenplay; Modern Tragedy.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Many of us still use social media to interact, spread information and pass the time (Hilliard, 2022). Social media these days are more expanded not only for the entertainment industries but also many other industries. For example, the gaming industry is using video game platforms similar to social media websites to communicate, strategize and forge relationships (Schmidt, 2021). With that being said, social media is an outlet for society to put themselves out there and to promote what they want society to see them as.

Social media can appear like mindless entertainment that is comforting and relaxing. However, it actually has a big impact on the human's brain such as an addiction (Wigmore, 2019). Similar to addictive drugs, social media likes and contents can cause the dopamine-producing chemical to be released, which may help to explain why some users feel addicted to them (Hilliard, 2022). Thus, once the dopamine feeling wears off, they tend to go back to the source of their addiction for more, in this case, social media as its source (Cherney, 2022).

I have decided to do scriptwriting as my creative form for my thesis. Scriptwriting allows me to emphasize the issue at hand by expressing it directly through the voices of the characters. The idea of this screenplay will be visualized in a shared-screen lookalike for most of the parts. As the story also involves emotional and tragic scenes, the screenplay will give the freedom to express these moments in multiple levels of characterization and conflict to occur at once, which works really well in a third-person point of view and base to build a suspenseful storyline. Inspired by films that fit the category of raising awareness in addiction as well as

social media such as; Sam Levinson's *Euphoria* (2019), Aneesh Chaganty's *Searching* (2018) and Spike Jonze's *Her* (2013), I will use tragedy as my source of genre inspiration.

The screenplay is about the tragic stories of Nathan and Sydney on their journey in social media addiction. This genre fits with their stories since they are discussed from their character development starting from their backgrounds until the part where the addiction plays a huge part in their lives which leads to their tragic ending. Nathan struggles with an inferiority complex growing up and it affects his marriage life. Sydney has always struggled with financial issues and it causes her to have identity problems. In the end, they will cross paths which then leads to a twisted ending.

Most of us are using social media as a part of our daily routine. Users of social media can be within any age, whether they are teenagers, young adults, or even kids. Social media has blurred the lines between public and private life since they are, to some extent, now one in the same. With that being said, I hope the readers will understand and are aware about the possible danger and risks of becoming a social media addict and to understand what is acceptable to post on such platforms. I would like to at least bring awareness towards the Indonesian community through Sydney's story about Indonesia's canceling culture. It is an important thing to not only focus on building awareness globally, but to also give attention to social media issues in Indonesia since many people have been canceled or became the target on social media. Lastly, the idea of this screenplay is to create a film on how social media can be highly addictive in today's generation and by raising an awareness from now might be set as a reminder for the younger generations in the future.

Many psychological development theories can be applied to social media usage. One of the many examples is Erikson's Stages of Development, a study that explains social experiences throughout a person's life. The framework of his thinking assesses the context of relationships in human's life according to these eight stages. Erikson maintained that personality develops in a predetermined order through the eight stages of psychosocial development, from infancy to adulthood (McLeod, 2018). Successful completion of each stage results in a healthy personality and acquisition of basic virtues. Failure to successfully complete a stage can result in a reduced ability to complete further stages and therefore a more unhealthy personality.

Through that, I apply the issue of stage 4's failure to my first character, Nathan Grey, who struggles with an inferiority complex growing up. Erikson's stage four of development, Industry vs. Inferiority occurs during childhood between the ages of approximately six and eleven years old. School and social interactions play an important role during this of a child's life as the child's social world expands considerably as they enter school and gain new friendships with peers. Furthermore, at this stage, it is important for both parents and teachers to offer support and encouragement in order to successfully achieve this stage (Cherry, 2022). To be specific, Nathan grew up in a family that was not always there for him. His parents were often ignoring his presence and were not attentive in his school years as they were constantly arguing and debating over getting a divorce. With that, Nathan struggles a lot with low self-esteem and insecurity as most of his classmates did not want to befriend him after knowing his problems at home. This situation results in many negative impacts that affect himself as he grows older by having chronic feelings of inadequacy and will eventually be shown most during his marriage with Alaia. He often feels the need to withdraw from social situations and therefore, it leads to his addiction in social media.

**Tanusudiro: CYBER DESPAIR: A Screenplay Raising Awareness of  
Social Media Addiction**

On the other hand, I apply the issue of stage 5's failure to my second character, Sydney Liu, who struggles with an identity crisis during her teenage years in school. Stage five is the transition from childhood to adulthood as teens may begin to feel confused or insecure about themselves and how they fit into society (Cherry, 2022). Through that, Sydney has always been struggling with financial issues related to her father's addiction in gambling and she was bullied in high school with her friends coming from a stable background. Therefore, Sydney has an identity issue as to where she should belong. Sydney belonged to the upper-middle class before her father's bankruptcy due to gambling. She tries to maintain her identity in social media by faking through her posts or exaggerating as if she was living a rich life. She uses her social media skills to scam people online using her role as a social media darling. Failing to belong to the upper-middle class in real life, she tries to maintain her identity in social media by faking through her posts or exaggerating as if she was living a rich life. Therefore, as she is older, that trauma still remains in her but after her father's passing, she uses her social media skills to scam people online using her role as a social media darling in order to get money which then leads to her addiction.

Intimacy vs. Isolation is a theory that explores a segment of a person's young adulthood where people are traversing their personal relationships. Erikson believed that a strong sense of personal identity was important for developing intimate relationships (Cherry, 2022). Studies have shown that those with a poor sense of self tend to have less committed relationships. Both Nathan and Sydney experience the downfall of not being able to establish intimate relationships. This leads them to become addicted to social media platforms as an escape to face their problems in reality. Sydney fails at successfully establishing an intimate relationship with her mother and therefore, demonstrating the failures of not doing so resulting in her social media addiction. Alongside the same issue for Nathan, he fails to successfully establish an intimate relationship with his wife and therefore, demonstrates the failures of not doing so resulting in his social media addiction. To get out of their addiction in social media, they need to form intimate relationships to resolve their feeling of isolation.

As Nathan and Sydney grow older, they start to regret their decisions in life. This is the final stage of Erikson's psychological development, Integrity vs. Despair. Integrity refers to a person's ability to look back on their life with a sense of accomplishment and fulfillment while despair refers to looking back on life with feelings of regret, shame, or disappointment (Cherry, 2021). In the end of the story, Nathan and Sydney will cross paths when Sydney moves to the United States for a job opportunity. Eventually, the two characters start to develop feelings for each other, but because of their past and problems in social media addiction, it plays a huge impact in their relationship which causes them to argue a lot. Unfortunately, the two characters decide to part ways to take a break from each other and that is when they start to reflect on their life decisions and feeling regretful about being together. When they decide to be together again later on in life, they happen to get involved into a big fight inside the car while Nathan is the one driving. Unfortunately, that caused them into an accident and Nathan did not survive. That even led to their tragic ending and in conclusion, they have been living in despair and regret.

## **CONCEPT OF CREATIVE WORK**

I will be writing a creative work in the genre of modern tragedy. In tragedy stories, usually murders, deaths, insanity and pain are among the most common ideas in this sub-genre where the main characters usually have some kind of weakness or defect that causes their downfall (Jolayemi & Attah, 2021). The main difference between classical and modern tragedy

is that classical tragedies have a unified plot with one royal or noble protagonist whereas modern tragedies feature ordinary people with realistic problems (Hasa, 2017). Since my screenplay will be telling the story of two characters that come from a difficult and tough background in their childhood, it affects their adulthood which causes them to feel isolated and lonely. As they are going through their addiction in social media, they become ignorant of the real world and it starts to affect their relationship with the people around them. Without realizing it, their addiction worsens up their life by facing painful situations like divorce and the death of a close one. With that in mind, the genre modern tragedy fits in my creative work.

In this creative work, I will be using parallel plot as my writing style. A parallel plot is a structure that enables an author to combine or weave two or more dramatic plots in a story (Pardede, 2020). The essential characteristic of a story with parallel stories is that it is nonlinear. As I have mentioned above, the plot of my screenplay will talk about two different characters that are facing their own issues in life and come from different backgrounds, but have similarities in terms of their issues as well as being addicted to social media. These two characters will crosspaths each other and develop feelings for each other, but it does not work out and yet causes more issues in their life. In the end of the story, they decide to take a break from each other and once they are back together, they get into a car accident which leads to one of the main character's death, making it a tragic ending. With that, a parallel plot suits my screenplay because it has two storylines from two different characters that run on their own up to their rising events, but then crash together at the climax.

I am influenced by several creative works that rhyme with similar style and genre like *Euphoria* (2019), *Searching* (2018) as well as *Her* (2013). *Euphoria* is a drama series on HBO that talks about a group of high school students that faces and struggles with love, sex and drugs. Although the plot of the story is more focused on episodic writing, the issue that is brought up in the story inspired me to write this creative work because it discusses the effects of being an addict and how it changes and influences the people around you. In addition, *Searching* is a film that tells the story of a father trying to find his missing daughter through the media. The reason why I find this film inspiring and might be a great influence for my screenplay is because not only do they use a lot of media as their resources to solve a crime, but it shows how powerful social media can be. To be more specific, the pop-up style or virtual-style editing is what influences me the most from this movie and how I can see it being applied in my screenplay. Last but not least, *Her* is a drama movie which tells the story of Theodore, an introverted writer, that fell in love with Samantha, an Artificial Intelligence system who was built to help him with his writing. What really influences me specifically from *Her* is when Theodore finds out the ability of Samantha to learn and adapt as the two slowly start to gain deeper connection.

However, my screenplay will have some key differences from these works. First of all, *Euphoria* may use an episodic writing style that tells the story of each character's background and plots in their own episode in the series, but the story is brought up from the narration of the protagonist's eyes and monologues. For my story, there will be no narrator in the plot, but focuses on each character one by one starting off with Nathan and then Sydney. Second of all, *Searching* may be another thriller film where they use the internet as their key element of the film. The movie was filmed entirely through a computer screen. Meanwhile my screenplay will not be using the same kind of style, but still will have some scenes where it will be recorded through the phone or computer. Lastly, *Her* may use Artificial Intelligence instead of social media, but it still sits in the same boat whereas the two categories are included in the virtual world.

## Synopsis

**Tanusudiro: CYBER DESPAIR: A Screenplay Raising Awareness of  
Social Media Addiction**

The story follows Nathan Grey as he struggles with low self-esteem and insecurity. He struggles with an inferiority complex growing up as his family was not always there for him during his childhood and struggled through bullying when he was in school. His wife, Alaia, never really supported what he is into especially when it comes to gaming. Since he is drawn to social media through gaming, he meets a girl in-game who shows signs of interest towards him. As the story progresses, Sydney Liu is the second main character of the story. She belonged to the upper-middle class before her father's bankruptcy due to gambling. She tries to maintain her identity in social media by faking through her posts or exaggerating it as if she was living a rich life. She struggles with an identity crisis as she keeps on trying to fit in both the offline and online world, although she seems to be successful in getting her achievements in the online world. Therefore, as she is older, the trauma still lives through her but after her father's death, she uses her social media skills to scam people online using her role as a social media darling in order to get money which then leads to her addiction. In the end of the story, Sydney tries to move out of her country and decides to have a fresh start in the US. With that, she crosses paths with Nathan and the two characters start to develop feelings for each other. However, the relationship starts to fall off as they keep on fighting and the ability to understand each other is tearing them apart.

### **Characters**

#### 1. Nathan Grey

Nathan is a Caucasian, born and raised in California, who is in his mid-late 20s years old. He grew up in a rough environment where his parents were going through a divorce. Whenever his parents would start fighting, he always finds comfort in video games and it makes him interested to be a game developer when he grows up. In college, he met Alaia and they both fell in love quickly. They got married at a pretty young age as soon as they finished college and not too long after that, their relationship started to fall out.

#### 2. Sydney Liu

Sydney is a Chinese-Indonesian who is in her early 20s. A college dropout student who comes from a financially unstable family. She only lives with her mother, Linda, ever since her father passed away from a heart attack and left them under many debts. Ever since she was in high school, she has struggled with an identity crisis. Sydney may be shy in-person, but she is more confident when she is in front of the camera.

#### 3. Alaia Kennedy-Grey

A Caucasian 24-year-old girl from the US who went to college together with Nathan and is now married to him. She comes from a well-off family and works in her family's company. Can be a bit too pushy and harsh to someone which causes them to be overwhelmed around her.

#### 4. Vixen

A gamer girl who happened to queue in with Nathan in one of his games. She has a sweet and soft voice with a caring personality. Although she can be nosy at times and tends to

ask many personal questions to someone. Is able to make people comfortable around them and feel safe to let their hearts out.

#### 5. Lois Levine-Grey

A Caucasian woman in her late 30s who appears during Nathan's childhood part of the story. She is the biological mother of Nathan Grey and the wife of Johnson Grey. Throughout their married life, they were never happy and always had issues with cheating. They both got married because she is pregnant with Nathan.

#### 6. Johnson Grey

A Caucasian man in his late 30s who appears during Nathan's childhood. He is the biological father of Nathan Grey and the husband of Lois Levine-Grey. He flirts a lot and would have issues with his loyalty and never wanted to commit to a married life.

#### 7. Linda Wu

A Chinese-Indonesian 55 year old woman who is a family person and likes to keep her loved ones close to her. Ever since her husband passed away, she has been quieter and distanced herself from everybody. She misses her family as a whole, but is unable to express her frustration.

#### 8. Benny Liu

A Chinese-Indonesian man in his mid 50s who used to work as a businessman but lost his job due to his gambling addiction. Benny only wanted to provide a great life for his daughter, Sydney. He died from a heart attack and left his family under a lot of debt.

#### 9. Madison Chandra

Madison is a Chinese-Indonesian girl. Her parents own a tobacco company in Indonesia and they are one of the richest people in the country. She is a social butterfly and the diva of the school. Madison is dramatic, perfectionist and also materialistic.

#### 10. Ms. Lia

An Indonesian teacher and also a counselor that works in Sydney's high school. An observant and also empathetic person. She has been a counselor for almost 10 years so she knows a lot when it comes to her students. The age range is around the age 31-35.

#### 11. Sophia Chen

Sophia is an asian girl who is around 30 years old. She started her own support group in LA to help people in all sorts of support they need. Her motivation is to contribute something in the community and help the world to be a better place.

### **Conflict**

There will be two conflicts that I will be using for my creative work, Man vs Self and Man vs Man. Man vs Self. refers to the main character's inner struggle and often involves a character choosing between two conflicting obligations, facing their flaws and fears or coming to terms with their own nature (Yang, 2022). This is because the main characters are struggling

**Tanusudiro: CYBER DESPAIR: A Screenplay Raising Awareness of  
Social Media Addiction**

with their inner problems coming from their trauma and the environment they grew up in. Meanwhile, Man Vs Man involves two characters struggling against each other (Brown, 2021). The driving force of the conflict is how these two interact, and how the antagonist keeps the main character from achieving their goals (Craiker, 2022). The main antagonist in this screenplay is social media and their addiction. However, Nathan and Sydney will also have their own struggles later on in the story where they will clash with each other's opinion once they have met in real life.

## **CONCLUSION**

The purpose of this creative work is about the exploration of the reasons, effects and results of someone going through an addiction, specifically, social media addiction. The screenplay tells how social media addiction begins from how we were shaped and developed psychologically in this life and how it will affect the people we are close with in real life. The main characters Nathan and Sydney struggle in an inferiority complex, identity crisis, troubled childhood and trauma of losing a parent.

Nathan came from a troubled and broken childhood. Growing up, his parents would always be fighting everyday and his only distraction was video games. His mother would often blame his existence and punish him for not doing as he is told to. All of these issues that Nathan experienced growing up led him to have an inferiority complex. Meanwhile, Sydney comes from a middle-upper class family and struggles with identity crisis. Her father is addicted to gambling and she cannot go to her dream university in Los Angeles. She cared too much about what others think of her instead of caring about her own happiness. These inner conflicts of Sydney being confused of who she really is and also her external conflicts of her family having a crisis financially, gave her a hard time on figuring out her true-self and to express herself which then leads to her comfort in utilizing social media.

This creative work shows how social media addiction can affect the relationship with the people around them in real life. When Nathan was married to Alaia, we can see the effects from his trauma through his childhood is more shown. As a result, he starts to forget real-life events which include important dates or anniversaries. The same similar thing that affected Sydney after her father passed away from a heart attack right before she entered university and left his family under a lot of debt. This made her forget who she really was and caused her relationship with her mother to get even more distant.

The final purpose of this screenplay is to show the results and consequences of being a social media addict. Our first character, Sydney, decides to move to California to have a fresh start after her huge backlash on the internet. Because of that, she meets Nathan. The two characters were able to find a connection within each other due to their addiction and because of that, they started to develop feelings romantically. However, this did not last that long until they finally realized that with them undergoing the same issue, it did nothing but make them relapse. Nathan, on the other hand, wants to take a break from the relationship with the intention to

"save" the relationship. However, Sydney does not want to take the break and argues back at Nathan and this leads to a big fight for the two characters. In conclusion, once they decide to settle down and have a meet up after a month of not talking, it comes back to a full-on circle whereas they still hold resentment towards one another. This is the effect from their traumas which causes them to have a hard time being vulnerable. The results lead them to feeling regretful and live a life of disparity.

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**Tanusudiro:** CYBER DESPAIR: A Screenplay Raising Awareness of  
Social Media Addiction

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