

## **Inverted: A Screenplay Exploring Social Anxiety Disorder in Association with Online Dating Applications**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Online dating applications are one of the results of the advancement of technology and communication in the digital culture. The use of online dating applications, however, is bringing negative effects such as Social Anxiety Disorder or SAD to the users. SAD is known as a mental health problem that is marked by a persistent fear of being humiliated by others. One of the psychological effects of SAD is developing avoidance behavior which is marked by avoiding any social situations. This screenplay aims to explore how online dating applications may cause SAD, and how SAD will affect a person's mental health condition to the extent that it will influence their relationship with others. This work is using Social Anxiety Disorder theory to analyze the link of the cause and effect of SAD with the dating applications. In results, this screenplay presents a link between SAD and online dating applications as there is trauma of rejection for the users which triggers the appearance of SAD. Also, the development of avoidance behavior is shown when a person with SAD avoids the feared situations completely.

**Keywords:** avoidance behavior, online dating, Social Anxiety Disorder

### **INTRODUCTION**

The development of technology has taken control over people's everyday life, and it has turned into a new social culture called the digital culture. Digital culture is a concept of how the internet shapes interaction between people within a society (Bray, 2022). This concept also points out that people are living in a digital environment, and technologies are present in almost every aspect of their lives (Uzelac, 2010). The internet, as an important part of the digital culture, allows people to gain news and information that can be shared easily through social media like Twitter, Instagram, and online news and articles. Health and education can also be equipped through many online platforms in this digital environment. Some can even make money through e-commerce simply by staying at home. This kind of lifestyle allows the condition of the existing culture to change and "permitting certain practices to be rendered obsolete while placing other previously impossible practices within our reach" (Uzelac, 2010).

In fact, a research conducted by Data Reportal (2023) stated that "a total of 5.16 billion people around the world use the internet at the start of 2023, which is equivalent to 64.4 percent of the world's total population". In Indonesia, 69.7 percent of the population are using smartphones which makes it the fourth largest smartphone-user country in the world (Howarth, 2023). This number indicates that we live in a digital culture where technology and the internet are the ones that have control of our lives, giving us a new way to communicate with each other.

As the digital culture becomes a part of our lives, a way for us to meet people is also evolving, and one example of this is the birth of online dating sites or applications. Online dating applications are designed to bring people together as well as an alternative for dating. These applications are specifically used by those looking for a date or to find romantic relationships (White, 2021). A study shows that in 2022, there were over 366 million online dating service users, and by 2027, it is estimated that there will be 440 million people seeking

love through online platforms (Dixon, 2023). In addition, the presence of the COVID-19 pandemic these days has affected numbers of people using dating apps to increase. Based on a survey in April 2020 of Millennial dating app users in the United States, it is revealed that 31% of respondents were using online dating services more than prior to the pandemic (Dixon, 2023). In Indonesia, among 10.886 respondents, a total of 31 percent users of dating applications are young adults aged 16-24 years old, based on a survey by Rakuten Insight Center in 2022 (Ridwan, 2023). These numbers showed that young people, specifically those aged 18 to 24 years old tend to use dating apps more than people aged above them. Therefore, dating apps have become a phenomenon that our young generation has dived deep into, purposely catching up with the latest trend of technology in this digital era.

The online dating application phenomena then becomes a main concern in society because the excessive use of those apps in this era has affected young people's mental health as a user. In fact, psychiatrist and faculty member of New York University, Margaret Seide, MD (2021) said that "dating app users face three times the amount of stress in comparison to non-users". Seide (2021) also added that dating app users will be more likely to feel distressed, anxious, or depressed. This is because the use of dating apps is inseparable from the fact that people will get rejection from some other users. Based on the study conducted by *Datingmetrics.com*, 69 percent out of the 1.685 guys who asked a girl out for a date through online dating applications or sites got rejected (James, 2023). The feeling of rejection here, may lead to self-destruction that makes us feel insecure about ourselves and causes low self-esteem as it turns out that self-esteem is "known to play a role in social anxiety disorder (SAD) and general anxiety disorder (GAD)" (Cuncic, 2020a).

This screenplay is exploring the use of online dating applications and Social Anxiety Disorder as one of its effects on the users. The purpose of a screenplay in a movie is to tell the entire tale visually through speech and on-screen action without the need for narration or description for each and every thing that happens on screen (Jacobs, 2022). Therefore, this screenplay aims to make the audience see the visual representation of an individual with an anxiety disorder after using an online dating application.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO) and American Psychiatric Association, "social anxiety disorder is a debilitating condition characterized by a marked and persistent fear of being humiliated or scrutinized by others" (Leigh & Clark, 2018). As stated by Clinical Professor of Psychiatry at University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health, James Jefferson, MD, the key feature of social anxiety disorder according to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, Fourth Edition (*DSM-4*), is "a marked and persistent fear of social performance situations in which embarrassment may occur" (Jefferson, 2001).

As described by the newest edition of DSM (*DSM-5*; American Psychiatric Association, 2013), another criteria of social anxiety which includes the fear, anxiety, or avoidance is persistent, and typically lasting for 6 months or more. SAD can affect many aspects in a person's life such as social activities, relationships, work, and academic functioning (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). This is because people with social anxiety disorder generally "avoid social and performance situations wherever possible or endure them with considerable distress (Jefferson, 2001). As stated in *DSM-5*, most people who have social anxiety recognize that their fear is excessive or unreasonable.

## **THE CAUSES OF SOCIAL ANXIETY DISORDER**

The main risk factor that causes social anxiety disorder, according to experts at medical clinic Mayo Clinic (2021), is negative experiences. These negative experiences usually may

lead to a type of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), where social anxiety is a symptom (Higuera, 2022). However, researchers at Cleveland Clinic, a non-profit academic medical center (2022), are also looking into how stress and environmental factors could contribute to social anxiety. This also points out that the main risk factor that causes social anxiety disorder is when people are “being exposed to stressful events, either in childhood or adulthood” (Moore, 2021). These stressful or negative events in life include family conflict, trauma or abuse, which impacts on an individual’s psyche. These stressful events are also known as trauma which are categorized to be “life-threatening” and “deeply painful” experiences (Solis-Moreira, 2022).

This traumatic experience gives a feeling of fear and worry that causes someone to “be in a continuous state of hypervigilance (staying highly alert) because their sympathetic (fight, flight, or freeze response) nervous system expects more threatening situations” (Lovering, 2022). Based on an article on medical website *WebMD.com* (2021), hypervigilance is an elevated state of constantly assessing potential threats around an individual, and is often the result of a trauma. When the trauma is severe, an individual might develop a hypervigilance state to the level that impacts negatively on their daily life, causing them to develop anxiety or worsen their anxiety. This happens because they become anxious about making embarrassing moments which allows them to evaluate their flaws or mistakes in order to prevent future embarrassing moments.

Farmer and Kashdan also stated in *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* (2015) that social stress, such as rejection and neglect, is an example of dependent stress, the occurrence of which is likely to be influenced by an individual’s own behavior either directly or indirectly. In relation to online dating applications, there will be many rejections that are going through between users. Once there has been a rejection trauma, an individual will activate the amygdala, which is triggered by an emotional response to the rejection. This will later cause someone to experience hypervigilance (being very self-conscious) in front of other people, being afraid of eating in front of people or using public restrooms, and asking for help in public places, causing them to avoid people and thus relationships. In this case, being rejected leads to being afraid of further rejection, bringing other problematic behaviors to avoid it (Davis, 2022).

The self-discrepancy theory gives an individual a picture of their ideal-self and their actual-self. In the journal of *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* (1989), the basic premise of this theory is “the relations among different types of self-beliefs or self-state representations that produce emotional vulnerabilities” (Higgins, 1989, p. 94). Higgins, a researcher and psychology professor who developed this theory, is illustrating that “internal disagreements cause emotional and psychological turmoil” (Liu, 2022). Higgins also writes that the theory proposes how a variety of self-discrepancies represents a variety of types of negative psychological situations that are associated with different kinds of discomfort (Higgins, 1989, as cited in Schlechter et al., 2022).

Based on the journal, Higgins explains two parameters to distinguish between self-beliefs and self-state representations by dividing them into “domains of the self and standpoints of the self” (p. 94). Higgins wrote in his article “Self-Discrepancy Theory: What Patterns of Self-Beliefs Cause People to Suffer?” (1989), that in the domains of the self, the three types of self-domains are identified as the ideal-self, which is the type of self where an individual wants to create or achieve. Second is the actual-self, which is how an individual is perceiving themselves at the moment. The last type is the ought-to-self, where an individual feels an obligation to be or do something. So, when there is a contradiction between what they believe (ideal-self) and what they are experiencing (actual-self), there will be a gap that causes self-discrepancy.

The gap, or the “conflicting cognitive representations of desired versions of the self (ideal-self) and the actual self” is said to be causing emotional distress in an individual (Schlechter et al., 2022). This, in turn, might lead to a greater self-focus and bigger difficulties to adjust with the emotional distress, and may be linked to the development or maintenance of depression or anxiety (Schlechter et al., 2022). Therefore, when an individual is not able to fill the gap in the discrepancy, or they realize that it becomes too far to reach, they might feel pressured and have difficulty to adjust with the situation which leads to having problematic behaviors. In this case, the difficulty to adjust to the discrepancy and the large gap of the discrepancy (between actual and ideal-self) may be associated with high levels of depression or anxiety (Schlechter et al., 2022). In fact, it is stated that the actual versus ideal discrepancy was more strongly related to both depression and anxiety (Mason et al, 2019).

## **THE EFFECTS OF SOCIAL ANXIETY DISORDER**

People with social anxiety disorder will have difficulties coping with their daily lives because of its effects on their mental and physical behaviors. Physical and physiological effects of social anxiety disorder can include blushing, sweating, shaking, or feeling a heart race and being nervous to the point of feeling nauseated (Cleveland Clinic, 2022). These effects mostly happen when they are exposed to social situations as their brain’s response to fear and worry of being humiliated or rejected in front of others.

Social avoidance or avoidance behavior is one of the common effects from Social Anxiety Disorder. As one of the causes of SAD is rejection trauma, it is said that rejection trauma contributes to this avoidance behavior. In this context, avoidance behaviors are things that people do or do not do to reduce anxiety about being in social situations (Cuncic, 2020). According to a cognitive-behavioral therapist, Arlin Cuncic (2020), these behaviors are problematic because in the long run they only serve to increase fear.

There are three types of avoidance; true avoidance, escape, and partial avoidance. Cuncic (2020) wrote that in true avoidance behaviors, people are doing the complete avoidance of the feared social situation. The second type, escape, happens when someone finds it impossible to avoid social situations, therefore forcing them to leave or escape from the scene. The partial avoidance type (also known as safety behavior) generally limits or controls experience of a situation, such as avoiding eye contact, reducing verbal communication, or lowering one’s voice when speaking (Cuncic, 2020).

## **CONCEPT OF THE CREATIVE WORK**

The genre for this screenplay is psychological drama. The psychodrama genre in a film mainly focuses on the mental state of the main character who is facing different kinds of hardships in their life. One stand out characteristic of a psychodrama film is in its primary conflict that is usually internal or inside a person’s mind. Because of this unseen conflict, the problems that occur in a psychodrama influence someone’s life and their relationship with the people around them. The major element that contributes in this genre is “the slow peeling back of the internal defenses and growing intensity of certain unhealthy beliefs (the characters’ psychology)” (Powers, 2017). Different from delusional or hallucination, the psychological state of a person will be delivered step by step that will lead to destruction at the end.

There will be some literary devices used in this screenplay, and they are flashbacks, flash forward, and rhythmic montage. The first technique that is commonly used in writing a screenplay is flashback. In general, wherever a character is required to “recount a significant past event, it is likely a flashback will emerge” (Luchoomun, 2012). The use of flashbacks will provide clarity to the present time where a character is going through a certain thing. The next

literary device that will be used is flash forward. This technique is the opposite of flashbacks, which gives the audience an insight of what is going to happen later in the story. Flash forward provides a glimpse of some important details that will push the story along the way (Pascual, 2021). Basically, flash forward will make the audience wonder about what will happen along the story to build dramatic suspense and tension. The last literary device used in this screenplay is rhythmic montage. Montage is a series of shots that show a series of events from time to time (Himawan, 2018, as cited in Azizah et al., 2019). The audience is presented with the contradictory images of each scene that will let them interpret the meanings. The series of shots will be combined with a rhythmic cut which is focusing on time-based cuts. In a rhythmic series of shots, the tension can be obtained between the length of the film footage and the movement in the frame (Azizah et al., 2019).

There are two influential works that use psychological drama as their genre, *The Power of the Dog* (Campion, 2021) and *Blonde* (Dominik, 2022). The first work tells about toxic masculinity in the form of Phil, a homosexual rancher who denies himself until he believes in love after meeting his nephew. This work emphasizes on the emotional behavior of the characters that gradually changes after a series of continuous events. The second work, *Blonde*, tells the story of Marilyn Monroe and her struggles to find happiness in life. She appears to be a standard of beauty and a great actress in public, but she actually has undergone traumatic events since her childhood, such as abuse and abandonment. This shows the emotional damage of a person that affects their mental state and psychological behavior towards people and future experiences.

However, there will be some differences between these works and my work, and the first is the type of plot. Both films use a linear plot that presents events chronologically in a progressive way. This creates a slower pace for the movie which at times might bore the audience. In other hand, this work uses a flashback plot where it “allows the author to begin the story in the middle of a high-action point, and flash backward to provide back up to it” (Pardede, 2020). The events in this work are moving back and forth between past and present until they synchronize at a certain point.

### **Premise and Creative Principle**

A young college girl has to deal with the consequences of using online dating applications where she receives rejection from other users. Having to bear with those rejections, she starts questioning her self-worth and self-esteem that causes her to live under a stressful environment for a long time. Soon, the rejections become a traumatic experience for her that makes going into public places and meeting new people start to become her worst nightmare. Slowly, it consumes her, which worsens her mental health when she experiences a feeling of fear and worry in social situations that leads her to show signs of behavioral changes. Once her fear becomes a reality, she can no longer cope with her daily life and shows signs of withdrawal from others until she is left alone with social anxiety disorder. I want to show the negative side of using dating apps in affecting a person’s mental health and behavior.

### **Pitch**

- a. Bella is a third-year college student who seeks romantic relationships through online dating applications until it turns into a traumatic experience for her by getting repeated rejections that affect her mental health.
- b. Bella’s behaviors start to change drastically when she finds herself feeling extremely afraid of meeting people or being in social situations that makes it difficult to cope up with her daily life until her life turns upside down.

- c. Bella's unhealthy mind affects her behavior towards others until she chooses to disappear from society, including from her family and friends.

### **Synopsis**

Bella, a perfectly normal young college student, is experiencing traumatic events after using an online dating application. Bella is rejected by a guy that she met through the dating app, and that incident slowly consumes her healthy mind. Trying to get over the traumatic incident, Bella begins to meet a new stranger from the dating application. However, Bella's trauma controls her mind and it causes her to experience another rejection. Bella cannot get over the rejection and it turns into a trauma that makes her develop a severe social anxiety disorder where she feels extremely afraid of being around people. Bella is afraid of making embarrassing moments in front of people which causes her to withdraw from being in any kind of social situations. Her fear, however, turns into a reality where her anxiety affects her psychological condition that ruins her daily life as a college student. Bella starts to avoid meeting and talking with people, including her family and friends who try to help her. Since then, Bella starts to withdraw from society, including from her college life which causes her to lose her relationship with her family and friends. Bella realizes that she cannot receive help from anyone which leads to her decision to disappear from society. Eventually, she leaves her family and friends behind feeling worried about her while trying to overcome her battle on her own.

### **Characters**

Bella (21 years old)

Bella is a third-year college student majoring in contemporary art. Her dream is to have her own art exhibition where her works will be displayed and exposed to the public. As a student, Bella is diligent and clever. Bella grew up without a father and received less affection from her mother. This makes her want to feel secure of having a man figure by seeking relationships through dating applications.

Jane (21 years old)

Jane is a college student majoring in art and fashion, and she has been best friends with Bella since they were in high school. Jane is always optimistic about her future, and she is always on the bright side of things that happen around her. Jane knows how to make things right in terrible situations, and she never gives up on her goals. Even after Bella pushes her after suffering from anxiety, Jane never leaves her side.

Esther (47 years old)

Esther is Bella's mother, who was working as a lawyer, until she became the owner of a law firm, inheriting from her late husband, David. Esther is humble and kind towards her employees, and she volunteers a lot as a social worker. However, because Esther is a workaholic, she rarely spends time with her daughter, Bella. Sometimes, she feels distant towards Bella, but she really loves her. Esther often expresses her love to Bella in the wrong way, causing them to often be in love and hate relationship.

### **Conflict**

There will be one type of conflict in this screenplay, and that is *Man vs. Self* conflict. This type of conflict "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 *Man vs. Self* conflict is the main conflict that the main character has to face. In this screenplay, the

main character will have to face her fear of society as her biggest challenge after suffering from Social Anxiety Disorder.

## CONCLUSION

This creative work highlights how social media in digital culture, in particular online dating applications, can cause a person to suffer from Social Anxiety Disorder. As it has been discussed, the cause of SAD in general is the experience of having stressful events in a person's life. The negative effects of using online dating applications will perform as one of the stressful events that causes someone to experience trauma over rejections. In the story of this work, Bella develops her Social Anxiety Disorder after receiving a rejection through Tinder, an online dating application. That one rejection over another becomes a traumatic experience for Bella as she finds it an embarrassing moment for her. Because of the rejection, Bella starts to have low self-esteem and negative thoughts about herself since she does not have the confidence and courage to meet new people, and it slowly attacks her mental health. The trauma of being rejected becomes a stressful event for Bella which triggers the appearance of her anxiety disorder.

This work also highlights how the Social Anxiety Disorder affects a person's mental health and their relationship with others. One of the psychological effects of SAD that people might experience is called avoidance behavior. The avoidance behavior is common for people with SAD because it serves as their self-defense mechanism in facing their fear. This is because this behavior causes a person to avoid the feared social situations completely and in any way possible. In Bella's case, her avoidant behavior includes refusing to meet her friend and deciding to take a semester break from college because she develops fear of getting another embarrassing moment in front of others. Eventually, this causes Bella to withdraw from society that breaks her relationship with her friends and family as she can no longer control her fear and anxiety.

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