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Love-bombing: a narcissistic approach to relationship formation

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Abstract

The current study examined the relationship between attachment style, self-esteem, and narcissism as they pertain to behavioral tendencies, termed love-bombing behaviors, among a sample of young adult millennials. Love-bombing was identified as the presence of excessive communication at the beginning of a romantic relationship in order to obtain power and control over another's life as a means of narcissistic self-enhancement. Millennials have shown a drastic increase in narcissism compared to generations prior, and the need for psychological services on college campuses has also increased. This study sought to establish empirical evidence for the presence of love-bombing behaviors amongst millennials as a gateway for further research to address the problem facing young adult relationships today. The sample consisted of 484 college students from a large southern university who ranged in age from 18 to 30. Results indicated that love-bombing was positively correlated with narcissistic tendencies and insecure attachment styles (lack of trust or value in self and others), and negatively associated with self-esteem. Secure attachment was a positive indicator of love-bombing behaviors. Lastly, love-bombing was also associated with more text and media usage within romantic relationships. In conclusion, love-bombing was found to be a logical and potentially necessary strategy for romantic relationships among individuals with high displays of narcissism and low levels of self-esteem. This is the first study to empirically examine love-bombing behaviors; thus, future research should address the impact that these behaviors may have on young adult relationships. The potential for negative psychological impact on both love-bombers and the subject of their attacks are discussed.

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Meet the Student-Author

Claire Strutzenberg

I am from Des Moines, Iowa, and graduated from Urbandale High School in 2012. After graduation, I attended a gap year program in Branson, Missouri for one year, and then participated in an internship in Branson the following year. After having fallen in love with the Ozarks, I applied to the University of Arkansas and began my degree in Human Environmental Sciences in the fall of 2014. While pursuing a major in Lifespan Development and a minor in Communications, I was given numerous opportunities to learn from the excellent faculty of Bumpers College in a number of ways. I am immeasurably grateful for those experiences, but especially to Dr. Jacquelyn Wiersma-Mosley for the countless hours she put into helping me with my honors thesis project. Her effort and passion for research showed me a whole new side of academia, and allowed me to learn about the process of conducting research studies that further our understanding of the world around us and the people within it. Additional thanks expressed to Dr. Kristen Jozkowski and Dr. Jennifer Becnel for their direct contribution to this project. After graduating from Bumpers College in December of 2016, I began a graduate program at the University of Arkansas in order to earn my Master of Arts in Communication.

Introduction

The rise in narcissism among millennial generation college students (i.e., those born between 1980 and 2000; Twenge et al., 2008a; Twenge et al., 2008b), has resulted in a trend that has been termed "love-bombing" by internet users. Anecdotal bloggers have described love-bombing as the tendency of narcissistic individuals to "bomb" their significant other with constant communication via texts, emails, phone calls, and social media sites. The praise from the narcissist to their relational partner may be flattering at first, but over time, becomes overwhelming and sometimes debilitating. It is assumed that whether consciously or not, the narcissist is making an effort to secure their place as the most important person in their significant other's life. Narcissists ultimately praise themselves by way of praising their significant other in hopes that their partner will return the praise, but eventually the narcissist's excessive flattery and need for affirmation will result in the end of a relationship when it becomes apparent that the misplaced affection reaches no further than the narcissist's affection for him/herself (Campbell and Foster, 2002).

Millennials have been described as optimistic, team-oriented, and high-achieving rule followers in many of the studies conducted by generational specialists (Broido, 2004); yet millennials simultaneously show a higher likelihood of mental health problems compared to generations

prior (Watkins et al., 2012). When surveyed, more than one in three undergraduate students reported experiencing depressive symptomology and nearly one in ten students expressed that they had contemplated suicide (American College Health Association, 2008). Depression, coupled with low self-esteem often leads individuals to engage in reassurance-seeking behaviors; a need for affirmation that coincides with the definition of narcissism (Campbell et al., 2002). A study that compared reports of college students in the 1980s to similar data collected in 2008 found a significant gradual increase in narcissism (Twenge et al., 2008a). This increase in narcissism, along with other mental health disorders could, as Bennett (2006) suggests, be the result of the influence of attachment patterns on the internal working model of the individual, which could lead to the display of more severe personality disorders later in life. The current study examines the connection among attachment styles, self-esteem, and narcissism with love-bombing tendencies.

Attachment Theory

Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1958) is a widely held view in the field of human development that suggests the security of an individual throughout the lifespan stems from the interactions between a child and their caregiver (Bowlby, 1980). The child's expectations of others develop based on their understanding of how the world operates, and

is the basis of an internal working model that will determine the individual's view of self and of others in infancy, adolescence, and adulthood (Bowlby, 1980; Lee and Hankin, 2009). Those with secure attachment feel protected, and they know that they can depend on others, including parents and romantic partners. Insecurely attached individuals develop an internal working model of themselves as unworthy and of others as unreliable (Thompson and Zuroff, 1999) and are subcategorized as being either avoidant or anxious. Avoidant attachment is characterized by a tendency to view others as unreliable and holding a high resistance to emotional attachment (Bowlby, 1980). Alternatively, anxious attachment is characterized by a strong desire for emotional attachment, while simultaneously doubting the reliability of others to reciprocate this affection (Bowlby, 1980).

Roberts et al. (1996) found that individuals with insecure attachment view their self-worth according to an "if… then" contingency, basing self-esteem on accomplishment or success/failure. For instance, an individual with insecure attachment may think, "If my partner doesn't respond to my text message, they must not love me" or "If they cared, then they would call." When these contingencies affirm the insecurity the individual already feels, the result is a significant decline in self-esteem (Roberts et al., 1996).

Self-Esteem

Self-discrepancy theory, developed by Higgins (1987) and expanded by Ogilvie (1987), suggests that there are four domains of "self": actual-self, ideal-self, should-self, and undesired/feared-self. Self-discrepancy theory postulates that the "self" portrayed to others is based on not only self-concept, but also the interpretation of what others expect. The "actual" self represents the attributes one actually possesses (Higgins, 1987). The discrepancy lies in the differences between the attributes we actually possess, the attributes we wish we could display (ideal-self), the things that we believe we ought to display (should-self), and the attributes we fear displaying (feared-self; Carver et al., 1999; Higgins, 1987). These views of self are the standard to which we compare our actual-self, and represent the valence, or the extent of positive or negative value, with which we hold our view of self.

A study addressing the self-discrepancy theory conducted by Barnett and Womack (2015) explored the association between self-esteem and narcissism: "Pathological narcissism is a duality; a deep insecurity shrouded by grandiosity … Narcissism does not flow from excessive self-love as much as it does from fear of being an undesired self". This indicates that narcissism is more strongly correlated with low self-esteem, or the fear of being undesired, than self-confidence. Out of the urgency to resist an undesirable representation of self, individuals with low self-

esteem will engage in reassurance-seeking behaviors (Higgins, 1987). This reassurance may be sought in the form of seeking excessive feedback that affirms others' care, or by expressing high needs of dependency in relationships (Katz et al., 1998), as in love-bombing behaviors.

Narcissism

Narcissism is defined by the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (5th ed., 2013) as holding beliefs about being special or unique and the assumption of only being understood by special or high-status people or institutions, as well as requiring excessive admiration, experiencing frequent envy, and displaying arrogant or haughty attitudes and behaviors. Narcissism can present itself in multiple different ways such as "one who aims to enhance ego, pursues success, acts autonomously and chooses short-term goals that will result in admiration from others" (Rogoza et al., 2016). Narcissism has also been described as being characterized by entitlement in relationships, self-indulgence, self-assuredness, and disrespect for the needs of others, which leads to both aggressive behaviors and the generalized devaluation of others (Brown et al., 2009; Paulhus, 1998; Rogoza et al., 2016).

The narcissist's ideal mate is someone who is highly positive, admires them, and enhances their self-worth either directly through praise, or indirectly by association as in that of a "trophy spouse" (Campbell et al., 2002). Narcissists often see relationships as a "forum for self-enhancement" (Buffardi and Campbell, 2008). There are attributes of narcissists that make them attractive to those whom they may seek out and ultimately victimize via love-bombing behaviors. Narcissists are generally perceived as exciting (Foster et al., 2003), socially confident (Brunell et al., 2004), and likeable in initial interactions (Oltmanns et al., 2004). Though these attributes are attractive in the beginning, they fade throughout the course of the relationship, revealing the tendency of narcissists to use relationships as a means of self-enhancement (Campbell, 1999). In turn, the "victims" of relationships with these initially likable narcissists find themselves stuck with psychologically controlling, non-committal partners, often characterized by "game-playing" in relationships (Campbell and Foster, 2002).

Researchers have identified that narcissists consistently use social relationships for three main purposes: to regulate their personal self-esteem, to create a positive self-concept, and to produce a self-gratifying personal construct (Buffardi and Campbell, 2008; Campbell, 1999; Campbell et al., 2006; Morf and Rhodewalt, 2001; Raskin et al., 1991). Essentially, narcissists rely on their interactions with others to determine how they feel about themselves. For that reason, individuals with low-self-esteem will engage in reassurance-seeking behaviors in romantic relationships,

especially when they are depressed (Campbell et al., 2002). This desire for reassurance sought through romantic relationships is more than likely to involve love-bombing behaviors, because of the narcissist's desire for affirmation by means of association.

It has been asserted by Buffardi and Campbell (2008) that social networking sites such as Facebook act as a low-risk, high-reward resource for narcissists to self-regulate through social connectivity. Social networking sites allow individuals to feel connected by promoting high numbers of "friendships," while simultaneously protecting themselves from the necessity of emotional disclosure (Buffardi and Campbell, 2008). The current study is not assessing romantic relationships through social networking sites, and instead seeks to understand how narcissistic tendencies in romantic relationships will reflect a high usage of mediated communication, primarily via text messaging, in order to maintain the same level of self-presentation control.

Current Study

Although there have been anecdotal assertions made regarding the existence of "love-bombing" tendencies among millennials, no empirical study has assessed this form of narcissism within the context of romantic relationships. The current study addresses this gap via three main goals: 1) identify love-bombing behaviors among millennial young adults; 2) correlate love-bombing behaviors with other similar construct scales, such as attachment, self-esteem, and narcissism; and 3) identify characteristics of love-bombers in order to better understand their behaviors within romantic relationships concerning texting and social media usage. The current study's hypotheses include: love-bombing behaviors would be positively associated with insecure attachment styles (i.e., avoidant, anxious) and narcissistic tendencies, while negatively associated with secure attachment styles and self-esteem; and love-bombers would be more likely to use texting to communicate with their romantic partners as compared to non love-bombers.

Materials and Methods

Participants and Procedure

A survey was constructed to measure attachment, self-esteem, narcissism, love-bombing, and text message use in young adult romantic relationships. The survey was distributed online to graduate and undergraduate students recruited from predominately social science classes at a large southern university. Participants were given the chance to enter their name for a drawing for a $50 gift card, and some participants were offered extra credit by their professors for their participation. Of 499 total participants, those who failed to complete the questionnaire,

or did not take adequate time to thoughtfully answer each question (total duration 2 minutes or less) were dismissed from the analysis (n = 15), resulting in a final sample of 484. The final sample had a mean age of 20.36 (SD = 1.38; range 18–30; 86% female). In the sample, 84% of the participants identified as Caucasian, 5% as Hispanic/Latino, 4% as African American, while 9% identified as other.

Measures

Attachment. Participants completed the Adult Attachment Scale (AAS; Collins and Read, 1990). The AAS contains 18 statements on a five-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree). After reverse coding five items, responses were summed and grouped according to a subscale as secure (6 items, mean (*M*) = 17.95, SD = 2.67), anxious (6 items, *M* = 17.98, SD = 5.06), or avoidant (6 items, *M* = 17.20, SD = 4.18). Higher scores indicated higher secure, avoidant, and anxious attachment styles.

Self-Esteem. Participants completed the Rosenberg Self-Esteem scale (RSES; Rosenberg, 1965). Each of the ten items were measured on a five-item Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree). After recoding 5 items, all items were summed, and higher scores indicated higher self-esteem (*M* = 36.93, SD = 6.56).

Narcissism. Participants completed the Hypersensitive Narcissism Scale (HSNS; Hendin and Cheek, 2013). The HSNS is a 10-item scale to measure an individual's tendency towards narcissism. Participants were asked to answer to each item on a five-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree). Level of agreement was summed, with higher scores indicating higher levels of narcissism (*M* = 28.67, SD = 5.66).

Love-Bombing. A set of 8 items regarding specific love-bombing behaviors was created for the current study, based on previous literature regarding the tendencies of narcissists in romantic relationships (Campbell, 1999; Campbell et al., 2002; Campbell and Foster, 2002; Foster et al., 2006; Oltmanns et al., 2004) as well as assertions made by anecdotal accounts published to internet blogs. These items (shown in Table 1) were measured on a five-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree). Items were summed, with higher scores indicating increased display of love-bombing behaviors (*M* = 22.26, SD = 4.75, Range: 8–37). The created items were reliable (α = 0.74).

Texting. An adapted 21-item scale was created to examine text message usage between romantic partners rather than friendships (Hall and Baym, 2011). Participants were asked to answer each item on a five-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree). One item was reverse coded, and items were summed with higher scores indicating higher levels of text usage between romantic partners (*M* = 66.17, SD = 11.41; α = 0.89; see Table 2 for scale items).

Statistical Analyses

The current study sought to identify characteristics of love-bombing behaviors in millennial college students. First, correlations were run among love-bombing behaviors and measures of attachment, self-esteem, narcissism, and millennials' use of texting in romantic relationships. Next, in order to examine group differences among "love-bombers" and "non love-bombers", participants with scores from the 8-item love-bombing scale greater than the mean (22.26) were placed into the group "love-bombers" (n = 230, 48%), and those participants with scores less than the mean were placed in the group "Non love-bombers" (n = 254, 52%). Finally, a *t*-test was conducted to compare the two groups on text message usage.

Results and Discussion

There were significant correlations in most of the predicted directions (Table 3): love-bombing tendencies were not only positively associated with insecure attachment styles (i.e., avoid, anxious), but also positively (not negatively, as predicted) associated with secure attachment style ($r = 0.17$, $P < 0.001$). Self-esteem was negatively correlated with love-bombing behaviors, and narcissistic tendencies were positively associated with love-bombing behaviors. love-bombing items (higher scores indicating higher love-bombing behaviors) were significantly and positively correlated ($r = 0.32$, $P < 0.001$) with the total summed response of texting habits. This correlation supports the hypothesis that love-bombing behaviors are correlated with higher text message expectations within romantic relationships. Next, a *t*-test was run to examine whether the two groups (love-bombers and non love-bombers) dif-

fered significantly on text message usage within romantic partnerships, indicating a significant group difference ($t = 5.08$, $P < 0.001$). Love-bombers reported significantly higher text usage within their romantic partnerships ($M = 68.95$, SD = 10.75) as compared to non love-bombers ($M = 63.69$, SD = 11.43).

The current study demonstrated that love-bombing behaviors are prevalent among young adult millennials. By identifying items to describe love-bombing behaviors, it was found that individuals who display love-bombing behaviors are likely to act from an insecure attachment, perhaps leading them to rely on the affirmation of another person to determine their self-worth and value within society. Contrary to the hypothesis, the current study also found that love-bombing was positively correlated with higher secure attachment. While attachment as a scale may not be a clear indicator of love-bombing tendencies, it is likely that further research would display categorical attachment styles having a direct correlation to the presence of love-bombing behaviors in romantic relationships. Further research is needed to identify developmental processes that might lead individuals to engage in love-bombing behaviors. Perhaps the use of qualitative methods could provide further insight as to the establishment of attachment, and disentangle the presence of secure attachment in these individuals.

There was also a significant negative correlation between self-esteem and the display of love-bombing behaviors. The contingency of self-esteem placed on another individual is inevitably going to cause one's view of self to waiver. When an individual's self-esteem is high, there is no need to look for affirmation in another individual. However, when an individual's self-esteem is low, it is like-

	M	SD
1. When past relationships have ended, I have realized that I was more invested in the relationship than my partner was.	3.19	1.05
2. I desire praise/appreciation/ affirmation to be communicated by my partner.	3.90	0.80
3. I feel as though the presence of my partner increases my social standing.	2.97	0.95
4. I feel more confident and secure when I am in a relationship.	3.04	1.07
5. I am insecure with the idea of being single.	2.38	1.04
6. I am only content in a relationship until I find another, better option of a partner.	1.93	0.91
7. I view relationships as a means to feel better about myself.	2.16	0.99
8. When I feel insecure, I like to turn to another person to assure me of my worth	2.69	1.14

Table 1. Love-bombing items.

Note: These are items asked in questionnaire with means and standard deviations ($N = 484$).

Table 2. Text message usage items.

		M	SD
1.	Texting plays an important role in my dating life.	3.51	0.93
2.	I usually ask someone out through the use of text/phone, rather than in person.	2.47	1.00
3.	Texting is a good way to flirt or get to know someone.	3.46	0.97
4.	I enjoy texting my partner.	3.89	0.76
5.	Texting is my partner and I's primary form of communication.	2.95	1.14
6.	I would like it if my romantic partner used texting more to communicate.	2.60	0.94
7.	I share many of my day-to-day activities through texting with my partner.	3.48	0.99
8.	Texting is an ongoing conversation that I usually have with a dating partner.	3.94	0.93
9.	I expect my dating partner to call/text throughout the day to keep me posted on how their day is going.	3.35	1.00
10.	I like it when my partner keeps me informed as to what they are doing and who they are with throughout the day through texting.	3.42	1.00
11.	I feel disconnected from my dating partner when I have not heard from them via text.	3.10	1.02
12.	When my partner does not text me throughout the day, I often question how important I am in their life.	2.59	1.08
13.	When my partner takes longer than usual to respond, I often feel forgotten about or insignificant to them.	2.58	1.05
14.	I respond to texts immediately when I receive them from my partner.	2.98	0.94
15.	When my partner or significant other texts me first, I feel as though I have a level of significance/importance in their lives.	3.45	0.90
16.	I immediately text my partner when I want to tell them something, rather than waiting until we could talk about it in person.	3.40	0.89
17.	I prefer to communicate with my dating partner mainly through text/social media.	2.12	0.89
18.	I get upset when I can't get ahold of someone I'm dating/seeing.	3.28	0.97
19.	I often send my partner texts to express my affection for him/her.	3.33	0.96
20.	When I express my feelings for my partner via text or social media, I expect my partner to reciprocate by expressing their feelings for me.	3.18	1.00
21.	I find it annoying when a romantic partner texts me multiple times an hour, multiple times throughout the day.	3.44	1.07

Note: These are items asked in questionnaire with means and standard deviations (N = 484).

ly, as suggested by the current study, that they will engage in love-bombing behaviors in order to increase the feeling of being valued in a relationship and reduce the potential of becoming an undesired self. This fear of becoming an undesired self is often what pushes individuals to pursue behaviors in which they are displayed as their ideal-self (Barnett and Womack, 2015). So if it is assumed that individuals with low self-esteem partake in love-bombing behaviors as a means of confirming the fact that they are not, actually, undesirable, then it could be assumed that they are simultaneously seeking to become the ideal form of themselves by engaging in narcissistic behaviors which aim to increase their self-esteem, thereby producing a positive self-concept and a satisfactory personal construct (Buffardi and Campbell, 2008; Campbell, 1999; Campbell et al., 2006; Morf and Rhodewalt, 2001; Raskin et al., 1991). Narcissists of the millennial generation are facing relational problems that are ultimately ultimately increasing the number of romantic partners an individual may have, while decreasing the level of significance of these relationships, and increasing the average age of first marriage compared to generations prior (Kaya, 2010; Twenge et al., 2015). The current study supports these assumptions by indicating a strong correlation between narcissism and the likelihood that an individual would partake in love-bombing behaviors.

Love-bombing was also positively associated with excessive expectations for communication through texting in romantic relationships. This correlation, though not surprising, indicates a need for self-regulative protection and a desire for control in a relationship. The root of this need for security and power is not easily identifiable to those affected by the love-bomber's attacks, but is an obvious consequence of a psychological need for affirmation. It could be assumed that narcissistic individuals not only require more control in a relationship, but simultaneously increased affirmation. Because there is a strong correlation between self-esteem and narcissism (Barnett and Womack, 2015), we see that narcissists, by engaging in love-bombing behaviors, seek reassurance in their ro-

mantic relationships. This may involve a lack of trust in their partner's fidelity as expressed by the expectation that they would want to know their partner's whereabouts at all times, as is implied by an insecure-anxious attachment style. Additionally, narcissistic individuals with an insecure-anxious attachment style may doubt that their partner's feelings for them are truly as strong as their own. In the case of a narcissist with low self-esteem, love-bombing is a potential means of survival for a romantic relationship, especially within the early stages. These feelings are only increased when the individual holds an insecure attachment. For that reason, love-bombing may continue to present itself in romantic relationships of individuals who display higher than average levels of narcissism, and low levels of self-esteem.

Limitations and Implications

The sample was collected from mostly female college students on one campus at a public university. Thus, it would be fruitful to increase diversity in order to obtain a more generalizable sample; data from additional college campuses would also increase generalizability. Perhaps, with an equal balance of participants identifying as women and men, future analyses could identify whether love-bombing behaviors differ by gender within romantic relationships. Additionally, the range of ages sampled was between 18 and 30, however, the study aimed to look at the entire population of "millennials"; this group's age ranges from 16 to 36 (Beaton, 2016). Thus, there is a substantial segment of this demographic unaccounted for in the sample.

The current study identified that love-bombing is a sometimes psychologically necessary means by which relationships are formed for the narcissistic individual; however, there is no data regarding the characteristics of those affected, or the long-term effect of love-bombers' narcissistic displays on their victims. Future research should examine the characteristics of those prone to experiencing love-bombing attacks in romantic relationships, and the impact of these failed relationships on the individual's mental health. Additionally, love-bombing behaviors could be a

Table 3. Correlations of love-bombing behaviors.

Variables	LBOMB	SECURE	AVOID	ANXIETY	SELFEST	NARCISSISM	TEXT USAGE
LBOMB		0.167**	0.126**	0.357**	-0.279**	0.482**	0.320**
SECURE			0.129**	0.217**	-0.062	0.244**	0.052
AVOID				0.580**	-0.430**	0.351**	0.095*
ANXIETY					-0.514**	0.527**	0.235**
SELFEST						-0.458**	-0.108*
NARCISSISM							0.307**
TEXT USAGE							

Note: LBOMB = Love-bombing behaviors; SECURE = secure attachment; AVOID = avoidant attachment; ANXIETY = anxious attachment; SELFEST = self-esteem; NARCISSISM = narcissistic behaviors; TEXT USAGE = texting behaviors. N = 484. * $P < 0.05$; ** $P < 0.001$ (2-tailed).

gateway into more serious behaviors such as psychological abuse/control or intimate partner violence, which warrants further research.

In conclusion, the current study suggests that narcissists, driven by their low self-esteem, are likely to engage in love-bombing behaviors as well as excessive text messaging in romantic relationships. For this reason, it is important that researchers develop a means of recognizing these maladaptive behaviors early, in order to prevent problems from escalating into harmful interpersonal relationships.

Acknowledgements

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