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ARTICLE/ARTÍCULO

Naming Harm: Mapping Narcissistic Abuse and Its Relational Grammar on Social Media

Nombrar el daño: cartografía del abuso narcisista y su gramática relacional en redes sociales

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ABSTRACT

This article examines narcissistic abuse as a form of symbolic violence within intimate relationships. Drawing on digital ethnography and critical discourse analysis, it analyses publicly available content on Instagram, TikTok and YouTube, where survivor communities and therapeutic practitioners have developed and stabilised a vocabulary for naming and interpreting relational harm. The study reconstructs the cycle of abuse through four phases: idealisation (love bombing), devaluation, discard and re-engagement (hoovering). It identifies recurring tactics such as love bombing, gaslighting, the silent treatment, intermittent reinforcement, breadcrumbing, ghosting and flying monkeys. The findings indicate that these categories constitute a relational grammar that renders visible an architecture of affective subordination grounded in the asymmetrical administration of recognition. The limitations of the research design are acknowledged, and avenues for future empirical inquiry are proposed.

KEYWORDS: narcissistic abuse; symbolic violence; intimate relationships; digital ethnography; discourse analysis; recognition.

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RESUMEN

Este artículo analiza el abuso narcisista como forma de violencia simbólica en relaciones íntimas. Mediante etnografía digital (Hine, 2015; Pink *et al.*, 2016) y análisis crítico del discurso, examina contenidos públicos en Instagram, TikTok y YouTube donde comunidades de supervivientes y terapeutas han estabilizado un vocabulario para nombrar el daño relacional. El estudio reconstruye el ciclo del abuso en cuatro fases: idealización (*love bombing*), devaluación, descarte y reenganche (*hoovering*). Identifica tácticas recurrentes como *love bombing, gaslighting*, tratamiento del silencio (*silent treatment*), refuerzo intermitente (*intermittent reinforcement*), *breadcrumbing, ghosting* y «monos voladores». Los resultados muestran que estas categorías configuran una gramática relacional que hace visible una arquitectura de subordinación afectiva basada en la administración asimétrica del reconocimiento. Se señalan las limitaciones del diseño y posibles vías de contraste empírico futuro.

PALABRAS CLAVE: abuso narcisista; violencia simbólica; relaciones íntimas; etnografía digital; análisis del discurso; reconocimiento.

1. Introduction

Narcissistic abuse is understood here as a form of relational affective domination. It does not refer to a clinical diagnosis or an individual psychological trait, but rather to a logic of power that unfolds within relationships characterised by intimacy, trust and the expectation of mutual recognition. It operates through repeated acts of intensified recognition, progressive devaluation and symbolic control over the construction of meaning. Its cumulative effect is the erosion of emotional autonomy and of the capacity to interpret one's own experience, together with a weakening of identity and a persistent sense of disorientation regarding 'what is happening' within the relationship. Empirically, this dynamic unfolds in a recurrent relational sequence organised around four functional phases: idealisation (love bombing), devaluation, discard and re-engagement (hoovering). These phases should not be understood as discrete episodes or isolated emotional fluctuations, but as interdependent moments within a single relational apparatus. Their repetition generates emotional dependency, guilt, cognitive confusion and emotional subordination. The cyclical character of this sequence constitutes a structural feature of the phenomenon and analytically distinguishes it from circumscribed relational conflicts or isolated communicative dysfunctions (Ainz-Galende and Rodríguez-Puertas, 2024).

This article adopts a sociological approach centred on the social form of the relationship. From this perspective, the pattern described may be interpreted as a mode of non-coercive power grounded in asymmetries of recognition and the differential management of affective resources (Ainz-Galende, 2026). In line with classical theories of symbolic domination, control is exercised not through direct imposition but

through relational mechanisms that operate upon expectations, subjective investments and the conditions that confer legitimacy upon the relationship itself (Weber, 1922; Bourdieu, 1998). Its distinctive feature lies in its operation within the realm of intimacy, where emotional proximity intensifies the effects of disavowal and the withdrawal of recognition (Campbell and Miller, 2011). To describe this relational architecture, one central idea is particularly useful: dependency arises not only through coercion but through the managed instability of recognition. According to Simmel, the relationship may be understood as a form of interaction marked by oscillations between closeness and distance, symbolic inclusion and exclusion through the withdrawal of recognition. Within this logic, it is not individual psychological content that defines the relationship, but rather the form taken by the interaction and the relative positions occupied by the actors within it (Simmel, 2002). Narcissistic abuse may therefore be interpreted as a relational form in which the intermittent provision of recognition intensifies attachment and renders exit increasingly costly.

The analysis is situated within the field of intimate relationships, understood not exclusively as formal partnerships but as relational configurations defined by trust, emotional investment and the anticipation of reciprocity (Giddens, 1992; Jamieson, 1999). This perspective encompasses heterosexual and homosexual relationships, non-conventional sexual-affective bonds and non-institutionalised forms of intimacy. It is also consistent with a sociology of personal life that has challenged the distinction between the public and the private as a stable analytical boundary (Smart, 2007). In contrast to this relational framework, dominant clinical approaches have tended to conceptualise narcissism as a diagnostic category or a relatively stable trait, as reflected in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) and in personality psychology more broadly. However, a number of studies have shown that narcissism functions as a socially mediated mechanism of self-regulation that is activated and reproduced through interaction with others, particularly in contexts where recognition occupies a central position (Morf and Rhodewalt, 2001; Campbell *et al.*, 2002a). This analytical shift from the individual to the relationship makes it possible to examine the structural and affective consequences of these dynamics without reducing them to subjective dispositions.

A significant feature of the phenomenon is that much of its contemporary identification has emerged alongside, and partly independently of, the academic field. Therapeutic communities and digital spaces have developed a vocabulary for describing recurring relational experiences. Terms such as love bombing, gaslighting, hoovering, stonewalling and flying monkeys are not employed here as theoretical categories in the strict sense, but as relatively stabilised semantic repertoires that make it possible to recognise narrative regularities and recurrent sequences of interaction. Their sociological relevance lies not in their epistemological status but in their value as empirical indicators of contemporary forms of relational suffering (Illouz, 2007a, 2012). The transnational circulation of these repertoires, visible across both Anglophone and Spanish-speaking digital spaces, points to a degree of convergence in the grammars through which affective harm is articulated. This suggests that narcissistic abuse is not merely an individual experience or one confined to a particular

cultural context. Rather, it may be understood as a contemporary form of affective violence linked to broader transformations in emotional economies, expectations of recognition and the precarisation of intimate relationships under late-stage capitalism (Berardi, 2009). Analysing these discourses does not imply endorsing them normatively; rather, it entails treating them as empirical material through which socially recurrent relational patterns can be identified.

Accordingly, this article proposes a conceptual mapping of narcissistic abuse as a form of relational affective domination structured around a recognisable cycle. To this end, it brings sociological theories of power and emotion into dialogue with the analysis of semantic repertoires emerging within digital environments. By shifting the focus from individual diagnosis to the architecture of the relationship, this study contributes to expanding the analysis of violence within intimate life and offers an analytical framework for addressing forms of relational harm that frequently remain socially invisible.

2. Theoretical Framework

As noted above, narcissistic abuse is not conceptualised in this article as a psychological anomaly or a stable individual trait. Rather, it is defined as a social form of relationship: an asymmetrical relational regime in which recognition, attention and withdrawal are strategically wielded as resources of power. The aim of the analysis is not to identify a clinical profile but to describe the interactive structure that takes shape when seduction, validation and affective intensity function as techniques for regulating the other. The analytical focus adopted is that of relational form. Following Simmel's formal sociology (2002), relationships are not explained through individual psychological content but through the structure of interaction that governs proximity and distance, inclusion and exclusion, engagement and withdrawal. Within this framework, narcissistic abuse may be understood as a stabilised form of ambivalence: intense proximity followed by punitive distancing; recognition followed by strategic withdrawal. Intermittence does not necessarily weaken the bond; it may strengthen it. When affirmation is irregular, the other becomes anchored in the expectation of its return.

This reading gives rise to a central proposition: the intermittence of recognition is not a by-product of conflict, but the structural mechanism through which affective dependency is produced. Dependency arises not from direct coercion, but from the unequal administration of access to recognition. This shift from the individual to the relationship situates the phenomenon within a sociological tradition that conceives of domination as a social relation rather than a form of explicit imposition. Within intimate relationships, power does not necessarily depend on physical violence. Its effectiveness lies in its invisibility. Control may present itself as love, sensitivity or poorly managed conflict, making it difficult to identify as a form of domination. The concept of symbolic violence helps to clarify this dynamic. In Bourdieusian terms, power operates through the imposition of schemes of perception that naturalise asymmetry and displace conflict onto the self-interpretation of the subordinated party (Bourdieu, 1999). What counts as affection, what counts as exaggeration and what counts as a personal failing are all redefined. The result

is not merely emotional suffering, but a destabilisation of agency understood as the capacity to interpret one's own experience autonomously.

While Bourdieu enables us to understand the structural internalisation of asymmetry, Norbert Elias' concept of figuration introduces a dynamic dimension that is equally crucial. A figuration is a network of interdependencies in which actors occupy relative positions that vary according to their control over resources and the degree of mutual dependency (Elias, 1982). Power does not reside in an individual as a stable attribute, but in the relational configuration that binds the parties together. In narcissistic abuse, asymmetry is not explained by any subjective essence, but by a progressive imbalance in the structure of dependencies: the party who controls the rhythm of recognition alters the very figuration of the relationship. This perspective makes it possible to understand the cycle not as a psychological trait but as a relational process in motion.

The dimension of legitimacy adds a further explanatory layer. Weber (1922) argued that all forms of domination require some principle of justification. In contemporary intimate relationships, this legitimacy is often constructed through a rhetoric of authenticity and affective exceptionalism. The idealisation phase, including what is referred to in vernacular vocabularies as love bombing, generates this initial legitimacy: it establishes the belief in the uniqueness of the relationship and accumulates symbolic capital that cushions it against subsequent episodes of devaluation. Goffman's theory of the presentation of self (1959) is particularly useful for understanding how this legitimacy is managed in specific situations. Unlike Bourdieu, who emphasises the structural internalisation of domination, Goffman demonstrates how impressions are produced and sustained through the distinction between front-stage and backstage areas. Initial idealisation may be interpreted as an intensification of the front stage, where consistency, availability and exceptionalism are displayed both to the partner and to third parties, while the backstage of the relationship harbours ambivalence and disavowal. This dissociation between public appearance and private dynamics protects the credibility of the abuser and makes it more difficult for the subordinated party to find an audience willing to validate their experience. These dynamics are embedded within broader cultural transformations of intimacy. Giddens (1992) describes the transition towards confluent love, characterised by reflexive and negotiable relationships, while Bauman (2003) emphasises the fragility and reversibility of ties in liquid love. Such transformations do not automatically produce narcissistic abuse, but they enhance its cultural plausibility by normalising ambiguity and shifting responsibility for relational failure onto the individual management of the relationship. Illouz (2007a, 2012) has shown how therapeutic and media culture transforms emotional life into a site of continuous self-evaluation and an object of symbolic consumption. Within this context, affective domination may be mistaken for intensity or complexity, while harm is privatised.

The psychological literature remains relevant insofar as it demonstrates that narcissism functions as a relational system of self-regulation sustained by external recognition (Morf and Rhodewalt, 2001; Campbell *et al.*, 2002a). From a sociological perspective, however, the key issue is not clinical diagnosis but interactive function: the other as an infrastructure of self-esteem. In this sense, the 'narcissistic' becomes

observable as a relational pattern: recognition as reward, withdrawal as sanction, proximity as capture and silence as control. A distinctive feature of the phenomenon is that part of its vocabulary has become stabilised within digital communities. Categories such as gaslighting, love bombing and hoovering are employed here not as clinical labels but as empirical indicators of recurrent relational sequences. These communities generate collective intelligibility and contest recognition in contexts where intimate suffering has historically been delegitimised (Fraser, 2009).

Digital environments do not constitute a mere setting; rather, they function as an infrastructure that amplifies these dynamics. Their logics of visibility, persistence and circulation favour intense narratives, condensed categories and the public exposure of private dynamics. The alternation between presence and absence acquires greater impact when inscribed within spaces where the audience is potentially vast and enduring.

Finally, the possibility of exit is not distributed evenly. Gender, social class, age, cultural capital and support networks condition both material and symbolic autonomy. Stark's (2007) concept of coercive control makes it possible to understand these dynamics as a regime sustained by structural inequalities. In this regard, an analytical proposition may be advanced: the lower the degree of structural autonomy, the greater the cost of exit; the greater the cost of exit, the more effective the relational apparatus becomes. Taken together, narcissistic abuse may thus be conceptualised as a contemporary form of affective domination organised around intermittence, ambivalence and the monopoly of meaning. It constitutes a relational architecture that articulates forms of interaction, dynamic configurations of dependency and affective legitimacy. Understanding it requires shifting the analytical focus away from individual diagnosis and towards the social structure of the relationship, as well as towards specific transformations in contemporary intimacy: the normalisation of ambiguity, the individualisation of relational failure and the digital amplification of affective exposure.

3. Methodology

3.1. Objective and Design Rationale

This study examines how a public grammar of so-called 'narcissistic abuse' is constructed and stabilised within digital environments. This grammar is understood as a relatively coherent repertoire of concepts, metaphors and narrative sequences through which experiences of relational harm are described, interpreted and communicated. The aim is not to estimate prevalence, establish causal relationships or assess individual clinical profiles. Rather, the objective is to map the vocabulary currently in circulation, identify recurring popular definitions and examine how these are articulated within a widely shared narrative sequence that organises the phenomenon into four functional stages: idealisation, devaluation, discard and re-engagement.

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The analysis is situated strictly at the discursive level. The focus is on identifying which categories are employed, how they are defined, how they are embedded within relational sequences and under what forms of authority they are presented as intelligible and recognisable within the digital public sphere. The unit of analysis is neither the individual case nor the singular biographical experience, but rather the relational pattern as narrated and stabilised through recurring semantic repertoires.

3.2. Methodological Approach

The study adopts a digital ethnographic design, defined here as the systematic observation of discursive practices produced on digital platforms, with particular regard to their situated, public and everyday character. Platforms are not treated merely as channels of dissemination but as sites of semantic production in which meanings are negotiated, definitions are consolidated and interpretive frameworks for relational harm are articulated.

The study also adopts a situated knowledge perspective, which requires the explicit acknowledgement of the conditions under which the corpus was produced, the selection criteria employed and the analytical decisions involved. This position does not replace methodological rigour; rather, it relocates it to the transparency of the research process and the explicit delimitation of the object of study. The analytical strategy takes the form of a discursive mapping exercise aimed at examining how a phenomenon becomes intelligible through language, which categories define its boundaries, which sequences structure it and which positions are assigned to the actors involved. The guiding question of the study is which concepts are used on social media to describe narcissistic abuse and how these concepts are organised into a recurrent relational cycle.

3.3. Corpus Construction and Digital Fieldwork

The corpus was constructed from publicly available material drawn from Instagram, TikTok and YouTube, platforms that play a central role in contemporary emotional and therapeutic discourse. Content published between January and April 2025 was analysed. Fieldwork consisted of the systematic and repeated monitoring of the selected profiles throughout the observation period, including the regular review of new posts, videos, descriptions and associated hashtags, as well as comments where these contributed definitional content or relevant conceptual reformulations. This process made it possible to document the recurrence of specific terms, their relative definitional stability, their contextual variations and their typical location within the narrative cycle outlined above. The sample comprised fourteen Spanish- and English-language educational profiles that systematically address dynamics of relational abuse. During the period under consideration, several hundred publicly available items produced by these profiles were recorded. From this broader corpus, an in-depth analysis was conducted of a subset of conceptually autonomous items, that is, units that explicitly and independently presented a definition, mechanism or stage of the cycle, until conceptual saturation was reached. Comments were incorporated only when they introduced explicit definitions or terminological clarifications relevant to the stabilisation of the repertoire. It should nevertheless be noted that a substantially larger number of comments were reviewed during the course of the analysis.

3.4. Selection Criteria

Sampling was purposive and theoretically driven. Its aim is not to provide a statistically representative account of individual experiences, but rather to identify relatively stabilised conceptual repertoires that circulate widely within the digital spaces under analysis. Profiles were selected on the basis of their sustained presence throughout the observation period, their recurrent production of explanatory content concerning dynamics of relational abuse beyond isolated personal accounts, and the recognisable circulation of categories replicated across accounts and communities. The decision to delimit the corpus to a defined set of profiles reflects the need to maintain internal coherence and analytical consistency.

Table 1
Profiles included in the analysed corpus

Profile	Main platform	Predominant language	Approximate volume reviewed (period)
@carolgonzalez_psicologa	Instagram	Spanish	30+
@psico.maxi	Instagram	Spanish	30+
@psicopsiquis	Instagram	Spanish	30+
@pinuelinaki	Instagram	Spanish	30+
@psicopatascotidianos	Instagram	Spanish	30+
@instintocriminal.science	YouTube	Spanish	30+
@orudiz	Instagram	Spanish	30+
@giapelleterapeuta	Instagram	Spanish	30+
@drramani	YouTube	English	60+
@therapyjeff	TikTok	English	60+
@shannonthomas	Instagram	English	60+
@narcissist_survivor	Instagram	English	60+
@selftalk	TikTok	English	60+
@apartados8km	Instagram	Spanish	30+

Source: own research.

The volume is presented as a descriptive estimate corresponding to the observation period. The figures do not constitute an exhaustive count, as content availability may vary according to format, including temporary stories, profile modifications and archiving practices.

3.5. Representativeness and Scope

Representativeness is not conceived in population terms but rather in discursive or semantic terms. The corpus is considered representative insofar as it captures an identifiable discursive current characterised by the recurrence of categories, the relative stability of popular definitions and narrative convergence across platforms and formats. The validity of the analysis rests upon conceptual recurrence and the internal coherence of the repertoire, rather than upon the exhaustive quantification of content or its statistical distribution.

3.6. Analytical Procedure

The analysis was conducted using critical discourse analysis (van Dijk, 2006) with a thematic-interpretative orientation. In an initial phase, open coding was undertaken to identify recurrent terms, metaphors, typical scenarios and narrative sequences associated with the relational cycle. In a second phase, the codes were grouped according to their relational function and their position within the four stages described above. Finally, a systematic comparison across platforms was conducted until a coherent interpretative framework had been established. Saturation was assessed in conceptual terms. It was considered to have been reached when the incorporation of additional items yielded no substantively new categories and did not alter existing definitions or functions within the cycle, but merely reproduced descriptive variations of the same repertoire. In the analysis section, concepts are accompanied by textual examples identified by platform and content type in order to ensure the traceability of discursive usage.

3.7. Ethical Considerations and Limitations

All material analysed was drawn from publicly accessible sources available without subscription or membership of closed communities. No private messages or restricted spaces were accessed. Where comment excerpts are cited, any information that could permit the direct identification of individual users has been omitted and sensitive information has not been reproduced. The design does not permit inferences regarding prevalence, nor does it ensure sociocultural diversity in a statistical sense. Nor does it incorporate triangulation through in-depth interviews or observation within closed settings, which limits the possibility of comparing public discourse with situated experiences beyond the digital environment. These limitations define the scope of the study, which is oriented towards conceptual mapping and the analysis of a specific discursive current rather than the quantitative measurement of the phenomenon or the clinical verification of individual cases. In this regard, concepts such as coercive control are employed as interpretative frameworks for understanding the relational regime and the conditions governing exit from it, rather than as instruments for classifying cases or deriving legal typologies.

4. Analysis: Mapping the Cycle of Narcissistic Abuse in Intimate Relationships

The analysis reconstructs the cycle of so-called narcissistic abuse as a relational architecture organised around four phases: idealisation (love bombing), devaluation, discard and re-engagement (hoovering). These phases are described by combining their most widely used designation with their function within the cycle: capture, disorientation and control of meaning, relational erasure and the reappropriation of access. They do not constitute discrete episodes or a rigidly linear sequence, but rather positions within a dynamic apparatus whose repetition produces affective dependency, interpretative erosion and asymmetries of power.

The terms circulating on social media are treated here as vernacular categories. They are not employed as clinical labels or psychological typologies but as relatively stabilised semantic repertoires that condense typical scenarios, popular definitions and narrative regularities. Their analytical value lies in the fact that they make it possible to observe how a specific form of relational harm becomes publicly intelligible and how the experience of the relationship is organised through a sequential narrative framework. To avoid a merely paraphrastic account, each mechanism is illustrated through textual excerpts drawn from the corpus analysed. These excerpts are identified by platform, content type (for example, carousel post, short-form video or livestream) and publication date. Where relevant to understanding the discursive context, a general characterisation of the profile is also provided (educational or therapeutic; Spanish-speaking or Anglophone). This form of identification ensures the traceability of the empirical material without shifting the analytical focus towards the individual attribution of specific accounts.

4.1. Idealisation and Love Bombing: Capture through the Intensification of Recognition

Across all fourteen profiles analysed, the initial phase of the cycle is referred to with remarkable consistency as love bombing. This convergence is not merely terminological: popular definitions reproduce highly similar formulations in both Spanish and English, describing it as 'extreme intensity at the beginning', 'rapid promises about the future' or 'a connection that feels too perfect to be real'. In a carousel post published by a Spanish-language educational profile on Instagram (March 2025), love bombing was defined as 'making you feel like the most special person in the world within a matter of days'. Similarly, a video published by an Anglophone therapeutic profile on YouTube (February 2025) described it as 'an avalanche of attention and promises that leaves you no time to think'. This definitional consistency across platforms makes it possible to treat the term not as a stylistic label but as a relatively consolidated narrative category within the digital grammar of relational abuse.

In vernacular accounts, love bombing is presented not as simple emotional enthusiasm but as an early saturation of recognition, attention and promises. The expressions most frequently encountered in the corpus – 'everything happened so quickly', 'they made me

 https://doi.org/10.54790/rccs.142

feel unique', 'no one had ever understood me like that', 'they seemed perfect' – share a recognisable structure: exceptionalism, acceleration and exclusivity. The relationship does not emerge gradually; it is declared extraordinary from the outset. The decisive structural feature is not intensity in itself but its concentrated and premature administration. The relationship begins already invested with a narrative of uniqueness and destiny. Sociologically, this phase may be interpreted as a form of capture through an excess of meaning: the promise precedes verification. Before the relationship has accumulated sufficient shared experience, it has already been morally legitimised as special and irreplaceable (Herman, 1992).

From the perspective of Simmel's formal sociology (2002), this intensification may be understood as a particular organisation of proximity and distance. Proximity is not constructed progressively but rather through a sudden fusion that eliminates the reflective distance necessary to evaluate the relationship. When the corpus describes prematurely anticipated milestones ('we were talking about living together after a week', 'they told me I was the love of their life within days'), what is observed is not simply emotional speed but a compression of the social time required for mutual acquaintance. This acceleration reduces opportunities for external comparison and limits the capacity of third parties to intervene as moderating influences.

Such temporal compression is systematically referred to as fast-forwarding or 'relationship acceleration'. In a short-form video published by an Anglophone TikTok profile (January 2025), it was stated that 'if they promise marriage in the first week, it's not romance, it's strategic speed'. The definitions collected consistently emphasise that the issue is not merely 'moving too fast', but rather the premature advancement of symbolic stages – commitment, shared life projects and total intimacy – before a sufficient relational foundation exists to sustain them. Another recurrent mechanism is mirroring, defined throughout the corpus as 'being exactly like you' or 'having the same wounds as you'. In a post published by a Spanish-language therapeutic profile on Instagram (April 2025), followers were warned that 'when someone agrees with you about everything from the very first moment, it's not magical compatibility, it's calculated reflection'. From a relational perspective, this technique produces performative similarity: if the other appears as a reflection of oneself, trust becomes automatic and doubt comes to be perceived as unnecessary.

The phenomenon commonly referred to as future faking – intensive promises about the future – serves a similar function. In the materials analysed, it is defined as 'making long-term plans with no genuine intention of fulfilling them' or 'using the future to secure the present'. The future functions as a moral guarantee for present investment. The expectation of future stability mitigates early signs of ambivalence. The relationship becomes anchored to a promise that has not yet been tested. A particularly revealing statement on this issue, found in the comments accompanying one of the posts analysed, reads as follows: 'We'd only been together for a month and we already knew the names of our children, the dog we were going to adopt and where we were going to get married. I believed every word of it, and it seemed as though he did too.'

Another frequently recurring mechanism is what is referred to as trauma dumping: the early disclosure of painful experiences as a means of accelerating intimacy. During a livestream hosted by an educational profile on YouTube (March 2025), it was noted that 'sharing deep trauma on a first date can create artificial intimacy'. Analytically, the issue is not to question the authenticity of the suffering being disclosed but to examine its relational function: activating care, accelerating trust and generating an implicit moral obligation. These mechanisms – acceleration, mirroring, future projection and strategic vulnerability – converge in producing the same effect: the establishment of an initial certainty. The person involved does not merely feel desired, but recognised in an exceptional way. In Bourdieusian terms (Bourdieu, 1999), this can be seen as a form of symbolic power that operates through privilege rather than coercion. Domination begins as distinction. Goffman's theory of the presentation of self (1959) helps to refine this point further. In the materials analysed, idealisation is accompanied by performative consistency: constant attention, immediate availability and visible demonstrations of care, including within public digital spaces. This coherence creates a robust façade that establishes a favourable definition of the situation. The initial impression functions as an interpretative framework through which subsequent phases are understood. When contradictions emerge, they tend to be interpreted as temporary deviations from an originally perfect essence rather than as indications of an underlying structural pattern. The most consequential effect of this phase is not the experience of falling in love but the establishment of a narrative of inevitability. The relationship ceases to be a contingent interaction and becomes a moral entity that demands coherence and loyalty. In Simmelian terms, a symbolic third party emerges that requires fidelity to the story that has already been told.

In summary, the convergence of these categories across platforms reveals not only a shared vocabulary but also a recurrent structural sequence: accelerated intensity, the promise of uniqueness and the moral reinforcement of the relationship. This early sacralisation constitutes the condition of possibility for the next phase. Capture does not consist merely in initiating the relationship, but in consolidating its legitimacy before experience has had the opportunity to test it. Once that legitimacy has been established, the subsequent withdrawal of recognition does not immediately dissolve the relationship; rather, it places it under strain. It is this structured tension that marks the threshold of devaluation.

4.2. Devaluation: Disorientation and the Monopoly of Meaning

If idealisation establishes an initial certainty, devaluation introduces a progressive instability that reconfigures the relationship without formally declaring its transformation. In the corpus analysed, this transition rarely appears as an explicit rupture. Rather, it is described as a shift that is difficult to date: 'I don't know when things started to change', 'suddenly they weren't the same person anymore', 'something broke, but I didn't know what it was' (Spanish-language educational profile, Instagram, carousel post, February 2025). The recurrence of this inability to identify a precise turning point is significant: devaluation does not erupt; it infiltrates.

The semantic core of this phase is organised around the distortion of reality and the unilateral redistribution of interpretative authority. The most frequently recurring term is

 https://doi.org/10.54790/rccs.142

gaslighting. In an English-language educational video (YouTube, February 2025), it is defined as 'systematically making someone question their memory, perception or sanity until they rely on you to define reality'. Similarly, a Spanish-language post (Instagram, March 2025) states: 'It's not arguing; it's making you believe you're crazy for feeling what you feel.' In both cases, the vernacular definition extends beyond deception itself and emphasises its cumulative effect on judgement and self-trust.

From the perspective of symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1999), this mechanism operates not only through the denial of facts but through the imposition of legitimate frameworks of interpretation. Conflict ceases to be located in the behaviour of the abuser and is instead displaced onto the supposed hypersensitivity, instability or exaggeration of the victim. Doubt becomes internalised. Interpretative agency is progressively eroded.

This process is frequently accompanied by what is referred to as the silent treatment or stonewalling. In a short TikTok video (Anglophone profile, January 2025), it is described as 'punishing you with silence when you ask for accountability'. A Spanish-language Instagram carousel (April 2025) formulates the same idea in similar terms: 'You tell them that something has hurt you, and they disappear. And in the end, you're the one apologising.' The narrative structure is remarkably stable: expression of a boundary → communicative withdrawal → confusion → self-attribution of blame. Silence functions as a relational sanction and reorganises the temporal rhythm of the relationship. The party who controls the reopening of communication controls the affective tempo of the bond. Another recurrent theme is intermittent reinforcement. During a YouTube livestream (March 2025), an English-language therapeutic profile described it as 'the emotional slot machine effect: just when you're ready to leave, they become who they were at the beginning'. The slot machine metaphor, repeated across several profiles, is not incidental. Irregular rewards do not extinguish investment; they intensify it. The alternation between emotional coldness and the selective return of affection generates a constant state of anticipation and makes disengagement more difficult. This phase also features categories such as breadcrumbing and triangulation. In an Instagram post (Spanish-language profile, March 2025), breadcrumbing is defined as 'giving you just enough crumbs to keep you from leaving, but never enough to build anything stable'. Triangulation, meanwhile, is described in a YouTube video (Anglophone profile, April 2025) as 'introducing real or imagined rivals to keep you competing for validation'. Both practices serve a common function: to reintroduce symbolic competition and transform recognition into a scarce resource.

What is analytically significant is not the diversity of terminology but the convergence of function. Distortion, withdrawal, alternation and comparison do not appear as isolated behaviours but as elements within a structured sequence. Idealisation generated certainty; devaluation introduces managed uncertainty. Drawing on Elias' concept of figuration (1982), it may be argued that the configuration of interdependencies gradually shifts, with one party increasingly concentrating control over meaning and affective access. Across the accounts analysed, the subjective effects are described with notable consistency: 'I no longer trusted my own memory', 'I felt small', 'everything was my fault' (Spanish-language educational profile, Instagram, April 2025). What is at stake is not simply sadness or interpersonal conflict but the erosion of the capacity

for self-affirmation. The relationship ceases to function as a space of mutual recognition and becomes a regime of conditional validation. At this stage, the difficulty of leaving cannot be understood solely in psychological terms. Various testimonies refer to economic dependency, isolation or fear of losing shared social networks as factors that increase the costs of confrontation and separation (YouTube, Spanish-language educational video, March 2025). The concept of coercive control (Stark, 2007) helps to explain how the accumulation of relational tactics, even in the absence of explicit physical violence, can progressively restrict autonomy.

The structural function of devaluation within the cycle is clear: to weaken the victim's interpretative capacity and displace authority over the meaning of the relationship. Once that axis has been eroded, discard no longer appears as an arbitrary rupture. It becomes plausible. And that plausibility is itself the outcome of a prior reorganisation of meaning.

4.3. Discard: Relational Erasure and Control of the Narrative

Across the profiles analysed, the discard phase is not described as a simple breakup but as an experience of erasure. The formulations are remarkably consistent: 'They disappeared without saying anything', 'they erased me from their life', 'they acted as if nothing had ever happened', 'I felt as though I had ceased to exist' (Spanish-language educational profile, Instagram, carousel post, March 2025). The recurrence of these expressions points not merely to emotional intensity but to a specific mode of relational termination characterised by the retrospective denial of the relationship's existence.

Unlike a reciprocal separation, in which a shared history is acknowledged and some form of closure established, discard is narrated as a form of symbolic dispossession. In an English-language educational video (YouTube, February 2025), discard is defined as 'cutting someone off in a way that erases the shared history and denies their emotional reality'. The definition emphasises not only the ending itself, but the erasure of the past. What is lost is not merely continuity but the legitimacy of the relationship as a shared experience.

From a sociological perspective, this may be conceptualised as relational erasure. It entails not only the withdrawal of affective access but also the denial of the other as a legitimate interlocutor in the shared history. The relationship ceases to be a common memory and becomes unilaterally rewritten. In Simmelian terms, the social form of rupture no longer produces mutual individuation, but pure asymmetry: one party redefines the meaning of the relationship, while the other is denied any equivalent capacity to determine its significance. Among the most recurrent vernacular categories is ghosting. In a short TikTok video (Anglophone profile, January 2025), it is defined as 'ending a relationship by disappearing and blocking all access without explanation'. A Spanish-language Instagram post (April 2025) expresses the same idea in similar terms: 'Blocked, silence, and no final conversation. That isn't closure; it's evaporation.' The constant element is the absence of an explanatory framework. The victim is left suspended in a state of narrative uncertainty, lacking a coherent account through which the ending can be understood and processed. What is termed quiet discard appears as a more gradual variant. In a YouTube livestream

 https://doi.org/10.54790/rccs.142

(Spanish-language profile, March 2025), it is described as 'slowly withdrawing until the relationship is empty, without ever naming what is happening'. The scenarios evoked – 'fewer and fewer messages', 'less presence', 'more distance without any conversation' – make it difficult to identify the precise moment of ending. Closure becomes blurred and, with it, the possibility of processing it symbolically.

Another recurrent modality is replacement, understood as the rapid and visible introduction of a new partner. In an English-language educational video (YouTube, April 2025), it is stated that: 'They move on in days as if you were interchangeable.' On Instagram (Spanish-language profile, March 2025), the same idea is expressed as: 'A week later they were already in another public relationship.' Here, the harm derives not solely from the breakup itself but from the public display of replaceability. The initial promise of uniqueness is contradicted by the speed of replacement. The wound is not merely one of loss but of discovering one's fungibility. This public dimension of discard is amplified through strategies of narrative control referred to as character assassination. In an Instagram carousel (Spanish-language profile, February 2025), followers are warned: 'Before you can tell your side of the story, they've already told everyone that you're the unstable one.' Similarly, a TikTok video (Anglophone profile, March 2025) defines the practice as 'preemptively framing you as the problem to protect their image'. Through the lens of Goffman's theory of the presentation of self (1959), this may be understood as the anticipatory management of the social façade: the situation is publicly defined before the other party has the opportunity to intervene. The asymmetry lies not only in the breakup itself but in the audience before whom it is narrated.

In some cases, the corpus also refers to what is termed discard rage: an outburst of contempt or aggression triggered when the victim seeks explanations. In a YouTube video (Anglophone profile, March 2025), it is described as 'anger triggered by losing control over the narrative'. Such reactions do not contradict the logic of erasure; they reinforce it. The implicit message is that the other party loses not only the relationship but also the right to question its ending. The sequence observed throughout the corpus is far from random. Abrupt or gradual withdrawal, retrospective denial, the public display of replacement and the pre-emptive control of the narrative together constitute a coherent pattern. Discard is not simply the end of the relationship; it is the unilateral reconfiguration of its meaning.

A qualification is nevertheless necessary, as it introduces a degree of analytical tension. Not every abrupt ending constitutes discard in this sense. The distinction, as suggested by the materials analysed, lies in the combination of denying the past and monopolising the narrative. When a breakup is accompanied by acknowledgement of the shared history and the possibility of closure, the pattern described in digital discourse does not categorise it as discard. The category becomes applicable when the ending entails both erasure and delegitimation (Fricker, 2007). The subjective effect most consistently reported in the testimonies is narrative rupture: 'I don't know whether it was real', 'it was all a lie', 'I feel as though I imagined the relationship' (Spanish-language profile, Instagram, April 2025). What is at stake is not merely affective grief but the destabilisation of the past as a legitimate source of meaning. The victim loses not only another person but also the interpretative coherence of their lived experience.

This narrative void is crucial for the next phase. Hoovering does not reappear on neutral ground but upon a subjectivity weakened by erasure and by the inability to bring the relationship to a close on its own terms. The cycle advances not through the accumulation of episodes but through the progressive reorganisation of meaning.

4.4. Hoovering: Reappropriation of Access and Reactivation of the Cycle

If discard produces erasure and symbolic dispossession, hoovering introduces an inverse yet complementary operation: the reappropriation of relational access without the restoration of reciprocity. Across the profiles analysed, this phase is consistently described as an unexpected reappearance following a period of silence. The formulations are strikingly similar: 'Just when I was starting to get over it, they came back', 'they messaged me as if nothing had happened', 'they reappeared with a simple "How are you?"' (Spanish-language educational profile, Instagram, March 2025). The scenario is not narrated as an exception but as a recognisable pattern within the cycle.

The term hoovering, derived from the verb 'to hoover', is defined in the educational materials as an attempt to 'suck' the victim back into the relational dynamic. In a YouTube video (Anglophone profile, February 2025), it is explained as follows: 'Hoovering is about pulling you back in without addressing the harm.' The definition highlights a constant feature: the reopening of the channel of communication without any acknowledgement of the preceding harm. A short TikTok video (Anglophone profile, March 2025) expresses the same idea in similar terms: 'It's not reconciliation. It's checking if you're still available.' The emphasis here is not on emotion, but on availability. The gesture functions as a test of continued access.

The discursive mapping reveals that, although the term is widely shared, its manifestations diversify into relatively stable subcategories. An Instagram carousel (Spanish-language profile, April 2025) explicitly distinguishes several forms: a friendly reappearance ('I just wanted to see how you're doing'), a vague apology lacking any specific acknowledgement of harm, an appeal to personal crisis ('I'm going through a difficult time'), the activation of shared memories or the use of sexual suggestion as a route to re-engagement. An English-language educational video (YouTube, March 2025) summarises this diversity as 'different doors to re-entry, same dynamic of control'. Despite their formal differences, all these modalities share a common structural function: reopening the relationship without assuming responsibility for the previous phase. Reopening does not imply repair; it implies reactivation.

A specific form of hoovering that appears recurrently throughout the corpus, although under less uniform terminology, involves the reactivation of the cycle through third parties, referred to within the vernacular grammar as flying monkeys. Across the profiles analysed, this figure is described as the use of friends, relatives, mutual contacts or even new partners to re-establish relational access without direct exposure on the part of the abuser. A Spanish-language educational carousel (Instagram, March 2025) illustrates the practice through typical scenarios: 'A friend of theirs messaged me to say they were in a terrible state', 'their mother called and asked me to respond to them', 'a mu-

tual friend told me they wanted to talk'. In a YouTube video (Anglophone profile, April 2025), the tactic is defined as 'outsourcing contact and pressure: sending someone else to test your boundaries and pull you back in'. In every case, the operation is more than merely communicative. It constitutes a form of soft coercive mediation that seeks to shift the conflict from the relationship itself to the surrounding network, transforming the decision to maintain no contact into a question of image, empathy or group loyalty.

From a relational perspective, flying monkeys fulfil a structural function: they reinstate asymmetry through the colonisation of the social environment as an infrastructure of re-engagement. Hoovering thus ceases to operate solely through the reappearance of the abuser and becomes a distributed reappropriation of access. Availability is tested, information is gathered through informal surveillance, pressure is exerted through moral appeals ('they're suffering', 'don't be cruel') and the narrative is reordered ('they say you misunderstood them'). Several sources associate this mediation with two complementary effects. On the one hand, it generates a form of social proof that normalises return ('everyone thinks you should talk to them'). On the other, it establishes a defensive reputational framework that recasts the victim's resistance as a failing (Instagram, April 2025). From the perspective of Elias' concept of figuration, the structure of interdependence ceases to be dyadic and instead becomes configured as a network of dependencies and alliances. Power is exercised not only through alternating presence and absence but also through the mobilisation of intermediaries who sustain the reopening of the channel without acknowledging the harm or restoring reciprocity.

What matters most is not the literal content of the message but its position within the cycle. Hoovering operates upon the narrative void left by discard. Following the abrupt interruption of the relationship and the retrospective denial of its significance, the victim is left with an unfinished story. In that context, reappearance may be interpreted as an opportunity for explanation or closure. In a testimony collected on Instagram (Spanish-language profile, March 2025), one individual states: 'I thought they were finally going to explain what had happened. I just wanted to understand.' The desire for meaning precedes the reopening of the relationship. From a sociological perspective, this phase illustrates particularly clearly that power resides not exclusively in presence or absence but in the capacity to alternate between them. The party who controls when they disappear and when they return also controls the temporality of the relationship. Alternation itself becomes a structural resource. Goffman's theory of the presentation of self (1959) further illuminates this dynamic. In several of the materials analysed, reappearance occurs through a tacit redefinition of the situation: contact is resumed as though no rupture had taken place, as though the intervening period carried no moral weight. A TikTok video (Anglophone profile, April 2025) illustrates this with the message 'Hey stranger :)', sent after months of silence. The banality of the gesture redirects attention to the immediate present and suspends the past without processing it. The situation is redefined without any acknowledgement of the preceding conflict. A further analytical qualification is necessary. Not every reappearance following a breakup constitutes hoovering. Within the corpus, the category becomes applicable when the reopening reproduces the pre-existing asymmetry: absence of accountability, minimisation of harm and an implicit expectation of continued availability. When

reappearance includes explicit acknowledgement of what occurred and a symmetrical negotiation of a possible return, the profiles themselves do not classify it as hoovering. The distinction lies not in returning, but in how one returns.

In numerous accounts, hoovering does not necessarily seek lasting stability. Its function may simply be to reaffirm power. In a YouTube video (Anglophone profile, March 2025), it is stated that: 'Sometimes it's just about proving they still can.' Re-appearance functions as a reminder that access remains controllable and available for reactivation. In this sense, re-engagement does not contradict discard; it completes it. When hoovering succeeds, it may generate a brief and selective re-idealisation. An Instagram carousel (Spanish-language profile, April 2025) describes the process as follows: 'They became attentive, affectionate, the person they used to be … but only for a few days.' This mini-idealisation does not reproduce the intensity of the initial phase, but it reactivates its underlying logic in condensed form. When it fails, it may give way to renewed punitive silences or an intensification of hostility.

Once again, the convergence of these descriptions across platforms confirms that hoovering is not an isolated category but the mechanism that ensures the cyclical reproduction of the process. Capture, disorientation, erasure and reappropriation are not independent episodes but functional moments within the same relational architecture. The cycle thus emerges as a structured relational pattern. The alternation between presence and absence, recognition and withdrawal, certainty and doubt produces a form of affective domination that operates without explicit coercion, yet exerts cumulative effects on interpretative autonomy and the capacity to leave. Power is exercised not only through direct control but through the strategic management of access to the relationship and to meaning itself.

5. Discussion

The set of concepts analysed does not constitute a scattered inventory of digital labels, but rather an integrated relational framework. Idealisation, devaluation, discard and re-engagement do not appear in the corpus as arbitrary moments but as a functional sequence that provides a coherent account of relational harm. The contribution of this article does not lie in validating a vernacular taxonomy but in demonstrating how this repertoire is produced, circulated and stabilised within digital environments such that it functions as a public architecture for interpreting intimate relationships.

The central analytical shift has been to move away from the search for the individual 'narcissistic trait' and towards an examination of the social form of the relationship. This shift is not merely terminological. It entails questioning a dominant tendency within the clinical literature to locate the problem in the deviant personality of the abuser. The corpus analysed suggests something different: what becomes stabilised is not so much a psychological profile as a relational sequence. The focus shifts from who the individual is to how the relationship is organised. This analytical reorientation does not deny the relevance of individual variables, but relocates explanation to the level of relational structure.

 https://doi.org/10.54790/rccs.142

From the perspective of Simmel's formal sociology, love is not a private emotion but a form of interaction shaped by structural tensions between proximity and distance, recognition and autonomy. The cycle mapped in this study may be understood as an abusive reorganisation of those tensions. Idealisation intensifies proximity to the point of producing fusion and premature certainty; devaluation introduces ambivalence and the conditionality of recognition; discard unilaterally redefines the boundaries of the relationship; and re-engagement reactivates oscillation and consolidates dependency. What is altered is not affective intensity itself, but relational symmetry.

In this sense, the core of the phenomenon lies not in a deviant personality but in a sustained asymmetry in the administration of recognition. Domination operates not through overt prohibition but through the unequal distribution of meaning. Here, Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence proves particularly illuminating: gaslighting inflicts harm not merely through the denial of facts but through the imposition of frameworks that transfer interpretative authority to one of the actors. The victim comes to doubt not only the relationship, but their own capacity for judgement. The violence proves effective precisely because it presents itself as correction, rationality or superior sensitivity.

Read through a Goffmanian lens, the initial phase of the cycle reveals the performative dimension of the process. Idealisation functions as an intensive production of façade: consistency, availability and exceptionalism are displayed as moral credentials that generate trust and accelerate commitment. The symbolic capital accumulated during this phase subsequently cushions the impact of devaluation. Domination begins in the guise of privilege: being chosen, understood or rescued. This initial investment makes it more costly to question the relationship once ambivalence begins to emerge.

At the same time, the analysis allows for a qualification that complicates this interpretation. Not all elements of the cycle appear with the same intensity or in the same sequence across all the materials analysed. In some cases, the discard phase takes the form of gradual erosion rather than abrupt erasure; in others, hoovering does not fully reactivate the cycle. This suggests that the sequence should not be understood as a rigid script, but rather as an ideal-typical pattern. Its analytical value lies in its capacity to organise recurring regularities, not in providing an exhaustive description of every empirical case. Recognising this variability prevents the category from becoming a closed or dogmatic framework.

Nor can the sequence be understood independently of contemporary transformations in intimacy. The transition towards more contingent, reflexive and individualised relationships has expanded the cultural legitimacy of ambiguity and the reversibility of commitment. Without positing simple causal relationships, one may suggest that these conditions facilitate the circulation and normalisation of practices such as withdrawal without closure, rapid replacement and affective intermittence. Far from serving merely as a backdrop, digital technologies amplify these dynamics. They intensify visibility, accelerate alternation and multiply micro-signals of inclusion and exclusion. Silence leaves traces; replacement becomes publicly visible; the reappropriation of access can be enacted through a minimal message. The technical infrastructure facilitates the intermittent administration of recognition.

One of the study's most significant findings is that the intelligibility of the phenomenon has not been produced exclusively within the academic field. Digital communities have stabilised a vocabulary that, irrespective of its clinical status, describes a recurrent relational sequence with remarkable consistency. These categories function as semantic technologies: they enable the identification of patterns, the stabilisation of narratives and the contestation of the trivialisation of affective harm when it leaves no physical trace. This gives rise to an important epistemic reversal: collective experience precedes academic formalisation. Knowledge does not flow exclusively from experts to the public; it also moves in the opposite direction. However, this digital production of intelligibility is not without risks. The rapid circulation of categories can encourage oversimplified interpretations and overgeneralisations. The corpus itself reveals expansive uses of the term 'narcissist' to describe relational conflicts that do not necessarily reproduce the full cycle. This internal tension forms part of the phenomenon itself: the same vocabulary that enables experiences to be named may also rigidify interpretation. The sociological task is not simply to adopt these categories but to analyse them critically as social forms of classification. The analysis also demonstrates that vulnerability to the cycle is not distributed evenly. The capacity to confront or leave the relationship is conditioned by structural resources, including economic dependency, social isolation, cultural capital and support networks. At this point, the concept of coercive control helps to explain how the accumulation of relational tactics can progressively restrict autonomy even in the absence of physical violence. The phenomenon is neither universal nor identical across all contexts; rather, it is mediated by specific social positions.

It is worth emphasising with conceptual precision that this study has neither estimated prevalence nor inferred psychological causality. Its contribution is descriptive and analytical in nature. It has demonstrated how a particular grammar is constituted and how that grammar organises a coherent relational architecture. When reference is made to the difficulty of naming these experiences, this does not denote an abstract epistemological problem, but rather a historically rooted semantic deficit surrounding forms of non-physical affective violence. The emergence of a stable repertoire suggests that this deficit is being partially addressed within the digital public sphere. The value of the analysis therefore lies in a dual translation: transforming an experiential vocabulary into a theoretical object while simultaneously situating it within a broader framework of social theory concerning power and recognition. In short, the article neither uncritically legitimises the digital repertoire nor dismisses it as a passing trend. Instead, it treats it as a sociological phenomenon: a set of categories that emerges, circulates, becomes consolidated and reshapes the collective understanding of intimate harm. If the cycle described is difficult to interrupt, this is not solely because of its emotional intensity, but because it reorganises recognition, temporality and meaning. And when recognition is administered asymmetrically, identity itself becomes vulnerable. So-called 'narcissistic abuse' may therefore be understood as the contemporary designation for a specific form of intimate domination grounded in the strategic alternation of proximity and withdrawal, whose power resides not in visible force but in the asymmetrical management of the meaning of the relationship.

 https://doi.org/10.54790/rccs.142

6. Conclusions

This article has shown that what is referred to within digital spaces as 'narcissistic abuse' can be understood as the public stabilisation of a specific relational form. The sequence of idealisation, devaluation, discard and re-engagement does not appear in the corpus as a dispersed collection of behaviours but as a recognisable and recurrent relational architecture. Its coherence derives not from diagnostic manuals but from the narrative convergence observed across different platforms and discursive contexts. The principal contribution of the study has been to reformulate the object of analysis. Rather than locating the problem in an individual trait, the study has shifted analytical attention towards the social form of the relationship. What is organised within the cycle is not simply an intense emotional dynamic but an asymmetrical administration of recognition, access and interpretative authority. Domination is exercised through the strategic regulation of proximity and withdrawal, producing cumulative effects on the agency and narrative stability of the person occupying the subordinate position.

This analytical shift broadens the sociological study of violence within intimate relationships to encompass forms that leave no physical trace and do not fit neatly within conventional legal typologies, yet nevertheless produce a sustained erosion of autonomy. The study makes it possible to understand intermittence as a structural mechanism of dependency, gaslighting as a reorganisation of legitimate interpretative frameworks, discard as the symbolic dispossession of a shared past and re-engagement as the reappropriation of relational access. Read sociologically, these categories describe transformations in the structure of the relationship rather than isolated psychological traits. Methodologically, the study adopts a conception of semantic rather than statistical representativeness. It neither estimates prevalence nor infers clinical causality. Instead, it maps an identifiable discursive current characterised by the stability of its categories and the recurrence of its explanatory sequence. This delimitation defines the scope of the study with precision: to describe how the public intelligibility of relational harm is produced and how this reshapes contemporary understandings of love, conflict and relationship dissolution.

The analysis also points to a significant epistemic transformation. Part of the knowledge surrounding forms of non-physical affective violence is being generated within hybrid spaces where lived experience, therapeutic discourse and media circulation intersect. Digital categories do not replace expert knowledge, but neither can they be dismissed as a passing trend. They function as technologies of naming that stabilise previously fragmented experiences and situate them within shared interpretative frameworks. Finally, the effectiveness of the cycle described cannot be separated from broader structural conditions: the precarisation of recognition, the increasing contingency of intimate relationships and the digital amplification of alternations between presence and absence. The form of affective domination analysed here finds in the contemporary cultural and technological infrastructure an environment that facilitates its visibility, narratability and, in certain cases, its reproduction.

In sum, the contribution of this study lies in transforming an experience frequently lived as private confusion into an analysable social form. By shifting the analytical focus from the individual to the relational architecture itself, the article invites us to consider intimacy as a domain in which power assumes subtle yet structured forms. Making that structure visible does not exhaust the phenomenon, but it opens a conceptual space from which it can be discussed, problematised and, potentially, transformed.

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