

BEYOND GHOSTING: EMERGING FORMS OF DIGITAL RELATIONSHIP DISENGAGEMENT AND THEIR PSYCHOLOGICAL CONSEQUENCES – A NARRATIVE REVIEW

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ABSTRACT:

With the surge in popularity of social networking sites and mobile dating apps, how people interact with one another has changed dramatically, leading to a number of new ways to disengage from a digital relationship. Ghosting, however, has received more academic scrutiny than the growing evidence of other forms of digital relationship disengagement in contemporary dating culture, such as, but not limited to: breadcrumbing, orbiting, zombieing, cushioning, stashing, kittenfishing, and situationships. All of these behaviours exhibit commonalities associated with uncertain relationship status, intermittent communication, avoidance of commitment and reduced personal accountability in interpersonal relationships.

This Literature Review has gathered and assessed research conducted from the years 2022-2026 regarding the Psychological effects of new Digital Dating Behaviours. Based on the findings presented in this review, there are quite a few psychological consequences associated with new Digital Dating Behaviours. These include anxiety, loneliness, emotional distress, an increased sense of uncertainty, lower levels of self-esteem, relationship insecurity and difficulties achieving emotional closure. Additionally, this review has identified common underlying mechanisms (emotional) such as; Fear of vulnerability / insecurity/ avoiding conflict, and the unique advantages provided by using digital communication technology.

The results indicate that the effect of behaviours performed online has become a major part of people's psychological health and how they function in society with others. As these types of relationships are rapidly increasing in number it is important for future research to define concepts more clearly than they are currently defined; and to look at how long-term effects of relationship behaviour that is mediated digitally impacts mental well-being; and develop ways to train people to use healthier forms of communication and create healthy and positive relationships within a digital world.

Keywords: Ghosting, Breadcrumbing, Orbiting, Zombieing, Situationships, Stashing, Cushioning, Mental Health, Digital Dating, Online Relationships.

1. INTRODUCTION:

Digital communication technology has grown exponentially in recent years through social networking and online dating apps; this growth has greatly changed how people start, keep and end their personal relationships. Digital relationships have created new opportunities for connecting with others and developing relationships, but new forms of relationship disengagement have also appeared due to lack of clarity in the type of relationship a person can have and limited ability to effectively communicate how someone feels. Unlike more traditional ways of ending a relationship (face-to-face), the use of technology has allowed individuals to leave a relationship with little accountability, resulting in behaviours like ghosting, breadcrumbing, orbiting, zombieing, cushioning, stashing, kittenfishing, and situationship.

Of all these behaviours that have emerged the one that has been widely studied is ghosting which is defined as cutting off contact highly suddenly with no explanation. Studies to date have shown that individuals can experience a variety of emotions as a result of being ghosted. For example would be rejection, confusion, feeling socially excluded, emotional distress and a dip in self-esteem. However, ghosting is only one example of the many other forms of online behaviour that occur when people are in a digital relationship. With the emergence of other behaviours such as breadcrumbing, where you signal to another person intermittent interest with no intent of monogamous commitment. Orbiting is when you continue to stay indirectly engaged in a relationship with someone who you've ended direct contact with. Zombieing is when you see the re-emergence of someone who has ghosted you in the past. Cushioning, stashing, kittenfishing and situationships are types of relation ambiguity, impression management and/or ways of avoiding commitment.

Modern dating behaviour is the result of a number of larger changes taking place in dating culture today. Through the use of social media and dating apps, there are now many ways to start, maintain and end romantic relationships quickly, much faster than before.

Younger generations, especially Gen Z and Millennials, have developed a new vocabulary to describe the new forms of relationships being created from this use of technology, such as being "ghosted," "breadcrumbing," "soft launched," etc. It seems that digital technologies are far more than just ways to communicate, they are also powerful forces in shaping how modern relationships work and how we relate to each other.

Many studies now report a wide variety of mental health impacts related to disengaging from digital relationships. Some behaviours have been linked to loneliness, anxiety, emotional distress, insecurities within relationships, lower life satisfaction levels, lower self-esteem and socially excluded feelings. Also, the behaviour of not having constant contact with someone or having inconsistent communication can cause ongoing uncertainty for the recipient, limiting their ability to find emotional closure, thereby increasing post-disengagement psychological distress. Overall, research suggests that ambiguity is the mechanism by which behaviours associated with digitally mediated relationships impact negatively on mental health and emotional wellbeing.

Many different theories can be used to help explain why these things happen. Attachment Theory is one of those theories that indicates that people who have an insecure attachment style might be more inclined to participate in or suffer from unhealthy or harmful behaviours when it comes to electronic relationships. Ostracism Theory and Social Exclusion Theory say that being ignored, excluded or abandoned can threaten someone's basic psychological needs (such as belongingness, esteem, control, and existence). In addition to the above-mentioned theories, the concept of intermittent reinforcement sheds light on the reasons for prolonged emotional distress from behaviours like breadcrumbing due to their ability to create lasting feelings of attachment independent of a person's ability to build true rapport over time.

In addition to a significant degree of growth in the subject of ghosting recently, researchers have only explored some other forms of online relationship disengagement with less volume or impact relative to ghosting. Existing studies have explored patterns associated with individual behaviour but generally fail to provide insight into trends applicable to all contemporary digital dating experiences. This has resulted in the absence of a systematic review of the literature in which findings across various types of online relationship disengagement are collated and their common psychological mechanisms and results are evaluated according to similarity.

The goal of this narrative review is to compile contemporary literature published from 2022 to 2026 on emerging types of digital relationship disengagement such as ghosting, breadcrumbing, orbiting, zombieing, cushioning, stashing, kittenfishing and situationships.

2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES :

1. Review the recent studies (2022-2026) in the area of digital relationships to identify new forms of digital relationship disengagement (not of Ghosting).
2. Explore the psychological ramifications of digital relationships behaviours (for example, breadcrumbing, orbiting, zombieing, cushioning, stashing, kittenfishing, situationships).
3. Identify the psychological processes and theories that are related to digital relationship disengagement and examine Attachment Theory, Ostracism Theory, Social Exclusion Theory and Intermittent Reinforcement.
4. The influence of social media and online dating on the emergence and development of relationship-wise will be explored through relevant research regarding the impact of this type of social networking on people's mental/emotional well-being.
5. Please identify notable literature gaps regarding digital relationship disengagement and provide suggested pathways for future research related to digital relationship disengagement, such as how this disconnect might affect one's mental health.

3. METHODOLOGY:

3.1 Research Design:

In light of the recent emergence of many different forms of digital relationship disengagement, it is important to compile and synthesize the existing literature concerning these practices and their associated psychological effects using a narrative literature review methodology. A narrative literature review approach was felt to be the best means of providing a comprehensive overview of the various practices of digital relationship disengagement because of the relatively recent emergence of such behaviors as ghosting, breadcrumbing, orbiting, zombieing, cushioning, stashing, and situationships, along with the dearth of large empirical studies on the various practices outlined, and understanding how these behaviors are operationalized in society. Thus, the objective of this review is to create a comprehensive understanding of digitally mediated behaviors of relationship disengagement, the respective underlying psychological mechanisms of these behaviors, and the respective effects on mental health and emotional well-being.

3.2 Search Strategy:

An extensive search for literature was conducted via electronic databases: Google Scholar, Scopus, PubMed, Science Direct and Research Gate. Studies that were relevant to the study were identified using keyword combinations such as "ghosting", "breadcrumbing", "orbiting", "zombieing", "cushioning", "stashing", "situationships", "digital-relationship-disengagement", "online-dating-behavior", "social-media-relationships", "relationship-ambiguity", and "mental-health". The searches were limited to published literature from 2022 forward so that the newest developments related to digital dating and relationship behaviors would be reviewed.

3.3 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria:

The following criteria were applied when including studies from this review:

1. The study had to be a legitimate peer-reviewed publication or have been published by a defensible source.
2. The study involved a form of disconnecting digitally from a romantic relationship
3. The study provided psychological or relational, emotional or mental health outcomes
4. The study must have been published in English
5. The study must have been published between 2022 to 26

3.4 Studies were excluded from the review based on these criteria:

1. The study was only focused on traditional offline relationship dissolve.
2. The study did not give information about the potential psychological or emotional ramifications.
3. The study was an editorial, opinion piece, blog or were from a non-academic source.
4. The study was a duplicate publication.

3.5 Selection Strategy:

Of the 12 identified studies that met the study's inclusion criteria, the majority were empirical/quantitative in nature (11 out of 12), while three of them contained theoretical and/or literature reviews. Therefore, these articles include studies on different types of digital disengagement between individuals and the actors involved, as well as studies evaluating the psychological effects of such disconnections.

3.6 Data Analysis:

The analysis of the collected articles was conducted using an analysis process called thematic synthesis. The methodology for this review included an analysis of the key results, theoretical perspectives, and psychological outcomes described in the studies included in the review. Specifically, the literature was reviewed numerous times in order to determine four primary themes:

- ❖ The emergence of new forms of digital relationship disengagement.
- ❖ Avoidance of commitments and ambiguity of relationships.
- ❖ The psychological effects and impacts on mental health.
- ❖ The impact of digital influence and social media on current-day relationship experiences.
- ❖ These themes serve as the foundation for the organization and interpretation of findings in this review, and therefore will be used to facilitate the discussion of the results presented in this article.

4. DIGITAL RELATIONSHIP DISENGAGEMENT BEHAVIOURS:

4.1 Ghosting:

Definition: Ghosting can be defined as an act of abruptly breaking off all communications with another party without giving any explanation about why you are no longer communicating with them. It is generally characterized by the lack of any communication, including text messages, phone calls, and other social media platforms (*LeFebvre et al., 2019*).

Characteristics: Ghosting involves disappearing from someone by stopping contact with them, avoiding talking to or communicating with them, not providing them with any explanation for why you have ceased to communicate and being emotionally ambiguous when you do finally contact that person either through phone or text. Ghosting mainly occurs in romantic relationships but can happen in friendships and in the workplace as well.

Research Findings:

Ghosting is one of the most popular types of digital relationship breakups that have been researched. People being ghosted commonly experience feelings of rejection, confusion, loneliness and other forms of emotional distress (*Freedman et al., 2019; Navarro et al., 2020*). The lack of closure from ghosting usually causes the ghosted to ruminate about their relationship and have problems understanding why it ended. *Pancani, Aureli, and Riva (2022)* concluded that ghosting is a form of social exclusion and produces more negative psychological effects than direct rejection. Studies have shown that ghosting negatively impacts fundamental psychological needs such as belongingness, self-esteem, control, and meaningful existence. Experimental research published recently indicates that ghosting also creates short-term physiological stress responses, such as elevated heart rates and blood pressure (*Langlais et al., 2024*).

4.2Breadcrumbing:

Definition:

Breadcrumbing refers to the act of sending occasional messages, likes, comments, or other signs of romantic interest. This occurs without any real intention to build a committed relationship.

Characteristics:

Breadcrumbing refers to someone providing you with inconsistent communication, sending you mixed signals, creating emotional confusion and providing you with sporadic reinforcement and no real level of commitment.

Research Findings:

Research shows that breadcrumbing is damaging to someone's mental health. In a study conducted by *Navarro et al. (2020)*, those who were subjected to breadcrumbing indicated that they did not feel lonely, hopeless and/or satisfied with their life. The patterns of inconsistent communication create an emotional hope that the relationship might develop, but they also limit the ability for emotional closure to be achieved. Therefore, breadcrumbing can result in creating long-lasting attachments, uncertainty and/or

distress. Research shows that breadcrumbing has been identified as a behavior in relationships that is associated with emotional instability and lower levels of mental well-being.

4.3 Orbiting

Definition

Orbiting is a situation where one person ceases face-to-face communication with the other but keeps up with their social media activities like watching their stories, liking posts, or checking out their other online behaviors.

Characteristics

Orbiting is characterized by low-key online interactions, lack of face-to-face communication, sustained digital exposure, contradictory relationship signals, and absence of emotional resolution.

Research Findings

Orbiting is a form of digital relationship ambiguity. The relationship may be considered over, yet the partner's continued online presence generates doubts about their true status. Evidence points to the fact that the emotional turmoil caused by orbiting may be even more intense and that it is often impossible to get over one another. In fact, victims often experience a range of negative emotions such as rejection, anger, and despair as they have to come to terms with Really their disengaged partner is still very much a part of their digital world. The behavioral pattern tends to make them more emotionally vulnerable by keeping them psychologically tied to the partner even though there is no meaningful interaction between them.

4.4 Benching Definition

Benching is the act of keeping a potential romantic partner on hold without making a serious commitment, effectively holding them as an option while seeking other people. **Characteristics**

The main features of benching are sporadic communication, postponing of decision, love life confusion, scattered attentions, and inner turmoil.

Research Findings

Literature review indicates that benching leads to confusion, lack of confidence, and disappointment in the ones getting benched. By handing out attention from time to time without making one's intentions clear, a person indirectly opens up the door to various interpretations of the relationship. Those 'benchers' often find that the waiting room emotions of dissatisfaction and uncertainty are their only tickets. In addition, maintaining interest in a romantic relationship without any type of commitment can also have an adverse effect on the level of trust, and may cause someone to feel quite unwanted.

4.5 Zombieing

Definition:

Zombieing is when someone who ghosted you suddenly shows up again and starts talking like nothing happened.

Characteristics:

This kind of behavior is getting back in touch after a long time, not even at a hint of previous break-up, emotional up and down, and relational issues left open.

Research Findings:

Research shows that zombieing may in some cases even bring back the pain one experiences after ghosting. People who get zombied most of the time describe feelings of confusion, irritability, and reopening of old emotional wounds. Since this is mostly done without owning up to it, or giving any reasons, it can hinder healing and bring uncertainty to relationships that were considered final. Research also indicates that zombieing causes the repetition of attachment and disappointment cycles, Mostly among those looking for closure.

4.6 Cushioning

Definition

Cushioning involves "developing secondary, fallback romantic interests during an active romantic relationship" (p. 755).

Features

Cushioning is defined by several factors: emotional entanglement, lack of commitment, fear of rejection, insecurity in relationships, having fallback partners.

Results from studies

Researchers found that cushioning was linked to lower relationship satisfaction and emotional intimacy. Cushioned participants have difficulty forming meaningful trusts and commitments to a current romantic partner and may be indicative of relationship insecurity or abandonment fears. Cushioning behaviors can ultimately be damaging to the romantic relationship as they foster emotional distance.

4.7 Stashing

Definition: Stashing is defined as the act of "intentionally hiding or concealing romantic partners from family, friends or social networks while still maintaining romantic involvement with them" (Aronen & Laakkonen, 2016, p. 16).

Features: Features of this behavior are as follows; deception, lack of public validation, social exclusion of the partner, lack of commitment ambiguity, and concealment of relationship.

Research findings: It appears that stashing may contribute negatively to individuals' relationship satisfaction and psychological health (Aronen & Laakkonen, 2016). Individuals that are "hidden" in social networks of their romantic partner may feel rejected,

insecure and with decreased self-esteem. This behavior may also foster uncertainty about the status and validity of the relationship. Studies on this topic found that people who engage in stashing may develop lack of trust in the partner due to perceived lack of commitment which can consequently lead to emotional pain.

4.8 Situationships

Definition: Situationships are types of romantic relationships that involve emotional and physical intimacy but do not have any defined behavioral expectations, or level(s) of commitment.

Characteristics:

Situationships are characterized by:

1. Being ambiguous in nature;
2. Having undefined relationship status;
3. A lack of a commitment from either individual;
4. Lack of a clear definition of emotions toward one another; and
5. An avoidance of formal labels.

Research Findings:

Recent studies have identified an increase in the amount of millennial (defined as individuals born between 1982-2000; see below) relationships classified as situationships in digital dating contexts. While situationships may offer a level of flexibility and/or lessen relationship-related pressure, they tend to be associated with feelings of anxiety and uncertainty about the respective relationship(s) and an overall lack of satisfaction. The general absence of clearly defined expectations of either party can result in misunderstandings and a lack of emotional security, which can, ultimately, hinder the establishment of healthy, long-term, romantic relationships. Individuals in situationships often express a number of uncertainties regarding their levels of commitment, exclusivity, and long-term outcomes.

5. THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES:

5.1 Attachment Theory:

Attachment theory developed by Bowlby (1969) and expanded upon by Hazan and Shaver (1987) is the premise that our initial attachment styles created through our relationship with our caregiver(s) shape how we bond with others emotionally as adults. People who have secure attachments will form lasting and loving relationships; whereas those who have an insecure attachment style are likely to struggle with being intimate and maintaining their relationships. Anxiously attached people are more likely to feel distress after being ghosted, breadcrumbing or orbited because of their strong fear of being abandoned or rejected. Avoidantly attached people, on the other hand, will tend to use disengagement behaviours like ghosting, cushioning or being in a situationship to create emotional distance between them and the other person and keep from becoming committed. As such, attachment theory provides a framework for understanding the ways in which digital relationship disengagement is carried out and its emotional consequences.

5.2 Need to Belong Theory

According to the need to belong theory (*Baumeister & Leary, 1995*), humans have a universal motivation to form and maintain interpersonal relationships that are both close and stable. In relation to psychological adjustment, fulfilling this need will have positive outcomes, while thwarting of this need has negative outcomes. Through engagement in the digital relationship disengagement behaviors of ghosting, orbiting, and rejection, a person's need to belong is threatened as they will feel rejected and excluded and experience uncertainty regarding their relationship with the other person. Therefore, the person will experience negative psychological outcomes in terms of loneliness, low self-esteem, and low life satisfaction. The theory is effective at explaining the impact even a short digital exchange can have on people emotionally.

5.3 Ostracism Theory

Ostracism theory can explain the psychological effects that result from people ignoring, rejecting, or ostracising you (*Williams, 2009*). In Ostracism theory it is argued that exclusion is threatening to the needs for belonging, self-esteem, control, and meaning, and that both ghosting and orbiting are contemporary examples of ostracism as it entails a withdrawal of communication and recognition from others, and lacks an explanation. Many studies have found that people who have ghosted or orbited report pain and confusion, and a desire for an explanation; Ostracism Theory can thus be used to explain the negative effects that can be attributed to digital relationship disengagement.

5.4 Ambiguous Loss Theory

According to *Boss (1999)* ambiguous loss is the experience of a loss without definitive closure, which an individual finds difficult to resolve or integrate. Disengagement behavior in digital relationships, such as ghosting, breadcrumbing, orbiting, and zombieing, typically involves ambiguity. The lack of clear explanation can arise because communication may terminate unexpectedly or continue in fits and starts, without the clear purpose of one party. The lack of certainty involved can thus prolong psychological pain, contribute to rumination, and impede psychological adjustment; "the effect of many dating behaviors of the modern era can be explained through the moderating effect of uncertainty."

5.5 Social Exchange Theory

According to the Social Exchange Theory (*Thibaut & Kelley, 1959*) we are evaluating our relationships based on perceived rewards and costs. Alternative relationship alternatives and potential outcomes will determine decisions about relationships. In digital dating, it may lead to disengaging behaviors, such as ghosting, cushioning, benching, and situationships because large numbers of alternatives are readily available via social media sites and applications. Also, we might want to maximize our rewards by engaging in alternative relationships, or to prevent painful experiences that may result from face-to-face conflict. This theory can be utilized to explain how the technological world affects our online disengagement behaviors.

6.PSYCHOLOGICAL CONSEQUENCES OF DIGITAL RELATIONSHIP DISENGAGEMENT:

6.1 Anxiety

The present review indicates that disengagement behaviors in the context of digital relationships are consistently related to greater amounts of anxiety. Events such as ghosting, breadcrumbing, orbiting, and zombieing result in ambiguity regarding the relationship status, goals and plans for the future, which may cause users to overthink the relationship, experience the fear of rejection and to have concerns about their self-worth. As a result, they can develop higher levels of stress and anxiety (*Navarro et al., 2020; Timmermans et al., 2021*).

6.2 Depression

Multiple investigations have revealed a relationship between disengagement in digitized personalized connections and manifestations of depressive disorder. Negative interactions such as feelings of disenfranchisement, emotional abandonment, and social mediated exclusion may all contribute to aversive feelings of sadness, hopelessness, worthlessness, and lack of motivation. People suffering from significant amounts of time experiencing ambiguity surrounding their interpersonal relationships (i.e., ghosting and breadcrumbing) may be especially prone to depressive responses from having inability to resolve their un-satisfied emotional issues and closure (*Freedman et al., 2019; Koessler et al., 2019*).

6.3 Loneliness

Across the various studies reviewed, loneliness has been one of the most common psychological outcomes reported. The abrupt cessation of relationships may leave a person feeling very lonely and isolated because they no longer communicate or connect with the person who has stopped communicating or providing emotional support. The way in which a person ends or alters their relationship with us can also create uncertainty about the status of our relationship, exacerbate feelings of loneliness by resulting in an inability to emotionally detach themselves from the person who ghosted them and emotionally recover from the relationship, and create ambiguity (inconsistent) as to how we view ourselves and our place in the world (*Navarro et al., 2020*).

6.4 Self-Esteem

The impact of digital relationship disengagement behavior, such as ghosting, breadcrumbing, and orbiting, can have a profound impact on a person's self-esteem and self-worth. When an individual experiences such disengagement behaviors from another individual, oftentimes, the individual who experienced the disengagement seeks to understand what caused or led to this disengagement and may internalize the experience as a negative view of themselves (e.g., personal inadequacy). In addition, because the disengaged individual does not receive any type of communication, explanation or closure, these negative feelings can lead to an elevated sense of being rejected, an increased level of self-doubt and a decreased sense of self-worth. The research indicates that these types of digital relationship disengagements are likely to decrease an individual's overall perception of themselves and how valued they may feel in interpersonal relationships (*LeFebvre et al., 2019*).

6.5 Emotional Distress:

Emotional distress is one of the commonly established effects of disengagement in relationships via social media. Victims frequently describe sadness, confusion, frustration, anger, disappointment and emotional exhaustion. Because of the uncertainty of this behaviour it often makes it difficult to process emotion and increases the duration of discomfort/psychological pain. Often emotional distress will continue long after the end of any contact because there are unanswered questions about the relationship (*Koessler et al., 2019; Pancani et al., 2023*).

6.6 Relationship Satisfaction:

The literature has proposed that relational behaviors with lack of definition and avoidance of commitment (i.e., cushioning, stashing, situationships) will correlate with lower relational satisfaction. When clarity and expectation about what a relationship is about or if a committed future will be found, security and trust may not be developed, and in turn relationship satisfaction will be compromised (*George, 2024*).

6.7 Trust and Interpersonal Functioning

Engaging in digital disconnection behaviours might also cause scepticism in future partners relating to their inability or unwillingness to participate in emotionally intimate relationships, and this could lead to scepticism with romantic partners due to prior experiences of rejection, abandonment, and ambiguous relationships, developing interpersonal vulnerability, fears of intimacy and interpersonal connectedness, which can ultimately impede successful relationship development in the future (*Pancani et al., [2023]*).

Researchers reviewed numerous studies examining new types of online relationship breakups. All of the research pointed toward a large number of problems both psychologically and mentally that could arise from these types of breakups. These include but are not limited to: anxiety; depression; loneliness; low self-esteem; emotionally distressed; less satisfied with relationships; and reduced trust in the other person or the relationship.

In almost all studies there tended to be some level of ambiguity around the breakup as well as uncertainty concerning where they stood with the other person, which were two dominant mechanisms associated with all negative outcomes.

Digital relationship breakup behaviors are not simply a matter of sexual advancement through technology; instead, they may lead to serious psychological and other mental health issues, thereby warranting more research into how to assist in helping people use technology for healthier relationship practices. Subsequent research will provide more information regarding the longitudinal psychological effects of digital breakup behaviors, as well as suggest interventions that could enhance the ways in which individuals interact within a digital context.

7. SYNTHESIS OF FINDINGS:

7.1 Common Themes Across Digital Relationship Disengagement Behaviors:

Several common themes were discovered in reviewing the emerging forms of digital relationship disengagement: ghosting, breadcrumbing, orbiting, zombieing, cushioning, stashing, benching, and situationships. Although they appear differently, the commonalities in the above types of digital relationship disengagement behaviors are their reliance on avoidance of commitment, aversion to vulnerability, vagueness of emotions, intermittent nature of contact and lower level of accountability with each other. The above types of digital relationship disengagement are found to be useful for the individual disengaging from the relationship with avoiding the immediate unpleasantness and for the partner, they would have to deal with a more uncertain outcome. Throughout the article, it was concluded that ambiguity and lack of closure are the central mechanisms behind the digital relationship disengagement behaviors and could play an important role in the negative psychological outcomes.

7.2 Distinctions Among Digital Relationship Disengagement Behaviors:

Although ghosting, breadcrumbing, orbiting, zombieing, cushioning, stashing, benching, and situationships are all characterized by similar underlying psychological processes, there are distinct ways through which the disengagement process manifests. Ghosting is the sudden, complete termination of interaction, whereas breadcrumbing consists of continued (yet insincere) expressions of interest that sustain emotional involvement without establishing the expectation of relationship formation. Orbiting consists of a continued, yet indirect, social media presence by an individual with whom the subject has ceased interaction, unlike ghosting. Zombieing consists of the return of a ghosted partner without any reference to prior ghosting. Cushioning is the presence of alternate romantic partners serving as an emotional safety net for one or another party involved, and stashing is the secretive concealment of a partner from one's social world. Benching is defined as keeping a partner interested in one's relationship as a potential romantic future, and a situation-ship is a non-committal and romantic relationship in which relationship expectations are unclear.

7.3 Influence of Social Media and Online Dating Applications

The literature analyzed reveals that social media and online dating apps have an important impact on the way people live their relationships. For example, digital technology increases people's access to potential partners, makes it easier to communicate with others, and creates many opportunities for people to enter into and end relationships.

However, other aspects of digital technology can lead to behaviors associated with disengagement because they diminish a person's sense of responsibility to others and promote non-verbal communication. In addition, the availability of other options for establishing a romantic relationship may also promote behaviors that create a lack of security or emotional stability. Therefore, social media and dating apps not only serve as communication tools but also have significant influence on today's relationship characteristics, patterns of disengagement, and behavior.

7.4 Psychological Implications for Mental Health and Well-Being

A number of the studies reviewed found that developing "digital relationship disengagement" behaviours (i.e. ghosting; breadcrumbing; orbiting; zombie-ing; cushioning; stashing; benching; and being in a situation-ship) is linked to negative psychological outcomes for the individual. Individuals who experienced these types of behaviours reported greater levels of anxiety, loneliness, emotional distress, poor self-esteem, depressive symptoms and lower levels of relationship satisfaction. In general, the research suggests that the lack of closure, the uncertain relationship status and the feeling of social exclusion were the main mechanisms of these negative outcomes. Additionally, there is evidence that repetitive exposure to the above behaviours can negatively impact trust, enjoyment (i.e. emotional security) and interpersonal coping skills, all of which may have a significant impact on the relationship quality for future relationships. This suggests that when viewing digitally mediated relationship disengagement, we should consider that it is not simply a new modern dating trend but rather a problem for our mental health that is beginning to receive more attention by social scientists.

The articles reviewed demonstrate that the development of new ways to disengage from a digital relationship correlates with the major ideas about relationship vagueness, lack of commitment and lack of accountability in interpersonal relationships. Although the various forms of digital relationship disengagement are uniquely represented, all contribute to some extent to emotional instability and psychological distress. Rapid growth in the use of digital tools for communication has changed how we start, continue and end our relationships. Specific types of behaviors of a socially acceptable nature are now being perpetuated by large numbers

of individuals, particularly those who are in their twenties. As the prevalence of these behaviours continues to grow among the younger generation, there is an increasing need to conduct systematic research to establish the long-term psychological impact of engagement in these behaviours, as well as to develop effective interventions to support and foster positive communications in relation to digital relationships.

8. RESULTS:

Four themes on digital relationship disengagement behaviors and their psychological outcomes emerged from the thematic analysis of literature review.

8.1 Emergence of Digital Relationship Disengagement Behaviors:

The research conducted shows that many of today's romantic partnerships are reliant on digital means of communication; therefore, as a result, new, different ways to disengage from one's romantic partner are becoming more prevalent than ever before. Among the various types of behaviors mentioned in the literature are ghosting, breadcrumbing, orbiting and zombieing (*see Petric, 2023; Pancani et al., 2022*).

Ghosting is defined as abruptly, without communicating, ceasing all forms of communication. Breadcrumbing refers to communicating with someone occasionally and with the intent of maintaining their interest, but without any commitment to a real relationship (*Navarro et al., 2020; Khattar et al., 2023*).

Orbiting is the "monitoring [of a former partner's] activity and communication on social media sites and social networks" after direct communication has ceased while zombieing is the "reestablishment of contact after complete abandonment" (*Pancani et al., 2022*). The reviewed studies conclude that the behaviors listed above illustrate "new forms of disengagement from romantic relationships mediated by digital technologies" as opposed to an evolution of the relationship dissolution process (*Petric, 2023*). These forms of disengagement often lack the directness of traditional breakup behavior with "less accountability and responsibility, indirectness, and ambiguity" characterizing modern dating relationships (*Petric, 2023*).

8.2 Commitment Avoidance and Relationship Ambiguity

Amongst the texts reviewed, common factors seem to include relationship avoidance and ambivalence. Several of the aforementioned research works claim that it is possible to use digital communication to 'get out of a tough conversation, confrontation, and emotional disclosure' (*Petric, 2023; Di Santo et al.*).

The lack of straightforward conversation has left some participants confused as to what state the relationship is actually in and as to why the participant has disappeared.

A study by *Pancani and others (2022)* found that when relationships ended indirectly, it felt a lot more uncertain compared to just being rejected. Also, research on attachment often shows that people who feel insecure in their relationships tend to either act vaguely themselves or feel threatened when others do (*Kak & ztrk, 2026; Khattar et al., 2023*).

8.3 Psychological Consequences of Digital Relationship Disengagement

The literature we reviewed points to a number of psychological problems that can result from digital relationship disengagement behaviors. Besides anxiety, stress, and low self-esteem, one can also experience loneliness, rejection sensitivity, and helplessness plus a decrease in the overall satisfaction with life (*Navarro et al. 2020; Petric, 2023; Burrell, 2026*).

Ghosting was found to evoke such feelings as confusion, sadness, rejection, and social exclusion the most (*Freedman et al. 2022; Petric, 2023*). Those who were ghosted do not only feel the emotions of being hurt, disappointment, frustration, but also that of decreased self-esteem (*Freedman et al. 2022*).

Breadcrumbing delivered psychological issues on the same negative level as ghosting and was supposed by some psychological studies to be a way to emotionally manipulate the victim through digital means. This, in turn, of the course can result in severe emotional distress (*Burrell, 2026; Navarro et al. 2020*).

There is research that compares ghosting, orbiting, and direct rejection and the results suggest that ghosting and orbiting cause worse emotional effects than direct rejection because of the uncertainty that they produce (*Pancani et al. 2022*). It is quite common for people to fill in missing information about their relationship to the point of causing themselves emotional suffering without even realizing it because they are not finding what they think is the blame.

Per research studies, digital disengagement experiences can be very likely to negatively impact one's level of interpersonal trust, expectations from relationships, and sense of social connectedness among adolescents and young adults (*Yousefi et al. 2025; Di Santo et al.*).

All in all, there is a piece of solid evidence in the literature that portrays digital relationship disengagement behaviors as psychosocial stressors that can result in the deterioration of one's emotional well-being and interpersonal functioning.

8.4 Influence of Technology on Contemporary Dating Culture

The literature reviewed shows that technology matters a lot in making relationship experiences in the present time. Social media sites, instant messaging platforms, and internet dating services have completely altered the way relationships are formed, progressed, and ended (*Petric, 2023; Burrell, 2026*).

Technology not only makes communication faster and gives us more access to the pool of potential partners but also decreases the level of interpersonal responsibility. For instance, ignoring messages, blocking someone, keeping tabs on the other person through

social media, and constantly having new partners around can all provide ways to get away from each other without the need for face-to-face confrontation (Pancani et al. 2022).

The digital space further enables relationships to be on-going despite the cessation of direct communication through likes, views follows, and various types of indirect interaction, thereby keeping the emotional area ambiguous. So technology in many cases, seems to be a factor that is responsible for the creation and sustenance of relationship disengagement mannerisms in modern times.

Table 1. Major Themes Identified in the Reviewed Literature

Theme	Major Findings
❖ Emergence of New Behaviors	❖ Ghosting, breadcrumbing, orbiting, and zombieing have emerged as common forms of digital relationship disengagement.
❖ Commitment Avoidance	❖ Many disengagement behaviors involve avoidance of direct communication and commitment.
❖ Psychological Consequences	❖ Anxiety, loneliness, emotional distress, reduced self-esteem, and rejection sensitivity were frequently reported.
❖ Technological Influence	❖ Social media and dating applications facilitate ambiguous communication and reduced accountability.

9.DISCUSSION:

This narrative review aimed to explore new methods of digital relationship disengagement and their psychological effects. Results show that nowadays, the breakup of a relationship is largely performed through digitally mediated behaviors which are indirect, ambiguous, and lack interpersonal accountability.

Among the various findings, the most noteworthy one is that uncertainty plays an important role. Compared to a straightforward rejection, actions like ghosting, breadcrumbing orbiting, and zombieing usually leave people without closure or a good explanation. Because of this, the receiving parties end up unable to understand why they have been disengaged, which causes them to keep thinking about it, getting confused, and emotionally upset (Pancani et al. 2022; Freedman et al.2022).

The results also indicate that it is not just the rejection that hurts but the not knowing and the psychological torment that comes with it. People who are rejected outright can lament their loss and have the finality of the situation laid out to them. However, if one's partner disappears without explanation, one is left with so many questions that one's sorrow could be extended and one's healing restated (Petric, 2023; Pancani et al. 2022).

Yet another theme worth noting is how attachment and emotional vulnerability play into the story. Research into attachment points to Really those with insecure attachment styles can become very ill-affected by digital disengagement manners (Khattar et al. 2023; Kak & ztrk, 2026). These results are consistent with Attachment Theory that a person's worries about being deserted and rejected can mean them having very strong emotional reactions to ghosting, breadcrumbing, and the like.

This aligns also with the Need to Belong Theory and Ostracism Theory. People might feel that ghosting and orbiting are just different kinds of social exclusion that threaten their basic psychological needs for belongingness, self-esteem, control, and a sense of meaningful existence. The emotional effects that have been mentioned across these studies such as loneliness, rejection sadness, and a low sense of self-worth are in line with what theories about social exclusion and interpersonal loss would lead one to expect (Freedman et al. 2022; Petric, 2023).

Also, this review points to the pivotal role of technology in molding the patterns of modern relationships. While digital communication channels open up the possibility for people to connect with each other, at the same time, they also enable avoidance-oriented behaviors that people do not probably practice in person. The invention of the possibility to disengage through silence, passive watching, or sporadic communication has changed at a very basic level the ways in which people deal with love, commitment, and breaking up.

The findings show that stepping back from digital romantic relationships is an important factor affecting mental health and personal relationships. As technology changes the way people start and maintain romantic connections, it is essential for researchers, mental health professionals, educators, and those exploring modern dating to understand and study these changing behaviors.

10.RESEARCH GAPS:

In recent years, there has been an increase in scholarly interest in digital relationship disengagements; however, the literature is highly fragmented and focuses almost exclusively on ghosting, as well as breadcrumbing and orbiting to a lesser extent. In contrast

to these behaviors, there is very little empirical research on newly emerging forms of digital relationship disengagement, including cushioning, stashing, benching, kittenfishing, zombieing, and situationships. Little is known about the psychological mechanisms, prevalence, and long-term consequences of these newer forms of disengagement.

A substantial constraint of the current literature is that it mainly uses self-reported and cross-sectional research methods. Although these types of studies are helpful in identifying the relationships between how individuals feel about their experiences with digital disengagement and the psychological effects of these experiences, they cannot demonstrate causality. Longitudinal research (research that continues over a period of time) is needed to examine how repeated exposure to ghosting, breadcrumbing, orbiting, and similar types of behavior impacts a person's mental health; expectations of romantic relationships; and interpersonal relationships over time.

One more notable difference in today's research about digital relationship processes is that there has been little investigation into how different groups interact through technology. The majority of the current studies are on young adults, with heavy emphasis on college students and on people who use social media or on-line dating sites; therefore, research to this date has very little information on the digital experiences of teenagers, adults in their mid-life, older adults, and people from various cultural or socioeconomic backgrounds. In light of the increasing globalization and dependence on electronic means of communication, future research should also examine whether the patterns of behavior and psychological effects of digital communication (or lack) are different between cultures and between different types of relationships.

In addition to the above mentioned areas of research that may need to be further documented, another area of safety and security that has been neglected is the study of protective factors and resilience processes. Although the current studies demonstrate the presence of negative psychological effects from engaging in digital relationships, such as anxiety, feelings of isolation and loneliness, emotional distress, increased rejection sensitivity and decreased self-esteem, only a limited number of studies have examined developmental factors or protective factors that may provide support for developing resilience to the aforementioned negative psychological effects of withdrawing from/on digital relationships. Future research should also include an examination of emotional intelligence, social support, secure attachment, self-compassion and digital literacy as potential sources of protection against the negative consequences of withdrawing from digital relationships.

Ultimately, there is a lack of research focused on intervention-based approaches to support those who have experienced an ambiguous break-up. More research is needed in order to create evidence-based interventions in the areas of education, counseling and mental health to mitigate the emotional effects of this type of breakup. Such studies would allow for the creation of practical methods for developing better communication patterns as well as enhancing the mental well-being of individuals engaged in digitally mediated relationships.

11. IMPLICATIONS OF THE REVIEW:

This review has significant implications for clinicians, researchers, educators, practitioners in relationships, and individuals managing relationships in a digital age. With the ongoing evolution of communication technology and its effect on our relationships, knowing about the mental health effects of withdrawing from a digital relationship is increasingly significant.

11.1 Implications for Mental Health Practice

The literature highlights how digital experiences like ghosting, breadcrumbing orbiting, and other types of digital disengagement may heavily impact people psychologically. As for research, exposure to these types of behaviors might cause anxiety, loneliness, emotional distress, a lowered sense of self-esteem and even issues with trust in relationships. Because of this, it would be wise for mental health practitioners to view such digital relationship experiences as real psychological problems instead of merely online communication facets. It would be great if clinicians also talked about such digital relationships experiences when assessing or developing treatment plans. I also think that counseling methods that focus on emotional self-regulation, self-compassion, bolstering resilience, setting personal boundaries in a healthy way, and adaptive coping skills, may be very helpful to those who are in the throes of relationship ambiguity, rejection or loss of closure.

By increasing their knowledge, mental health professionals can offer better and more supportive help to people who have been affected by the social disengagement patterns of our times.

11.2 Implications for Relationship Education and Awareness

The results of this study emphasize the need for relationship education programs that teach about today's digital dating realities. Institutions of higher learning, counselors, and educators teaching about relationships can all help promote verbally healthy communication, emotionally intelligent communication, conflict resolution skills, and digital literacy with regards to dating.

A better understanding of such behaviors as ghosting (ceasing communication without explanation), breadcrumbing (giving minimal amounts of attention in order to keep someone interested), and orbiting (continuing to communicate electronically while avoiding face-to-face contact) will help people identify and become aware of unhealthy communication patterns, so that they are better equipped to set clear expectations of what type of relationship they want with someone and to communicate more respectfully over time. In addition, through the educational initiatives identified in this study, the normalization of avoidance-based relationship behavior within the context of digital communication can begin to be reduced.

11.3 Implications for Digital Platforms and Dating Applications

Many digital disengagement behaviours occur on social networking, dating applications, etc. With regard to the digital engagement of users on these sites, the data collected from this review indicate that organizations developing these technologies should consider the ways in which their communication features impact users psychologically, particularly in relation to enabling behaviours of ambiguity, avoidance and passive monitoring of other users through technology.

While technology-based companies cannot remove interpersonal challenges, increased emphasis on user well being may create a stronger desire to develop features that will enhance respectful communication, digital accountabilities and healthier online interactions. The results of this type of enhancement could relieve some of the adverse psychological effects associated with the sudden and/or ambiguous disengagement of interpersonal relationships.

11.4 Implications for Future Research

The review points out several directions for future research. There is a great need for longitudinal research to uncover the long-term psychological impact of digital relationship disengagement and to determine the causal pathways from disengagement experiences to mental health outcomes. The scholarly community should also focus on lesser-known behaviors like cushioning stashing, benching kittenfishing, zombieing, and situationships.

It would be beneficial for future research to take cross-cultural approaches and study how demographic, cultural, and environmental factors shape individuals' behaviors and their interpretation of these behaviors. And, it is important for scholars to identify protective factors, resilience mechanisms, and therapeutic methods that may enhance individuals' ability to handle digitally-mediated rejection and relationship ambiguity.

11.5 Societal Implications

Digital technologies' impact on relationships has been increasingly evident as technology plays an ever-greater role in modern relationships. Technology has changed how we interact with each other; e.g., through our smartphones, we no longer need to meet in person (face-to-face) to have a meaningful connection with someone.

Digital technologies have the potential to both promote and hinder connection with others. They can be used to create connections between people, but they can also create feelings of incomplete connection, create uncertainty about what has happened to relationships, and create less accountability for how we treat one another online. Understanding how new digital technologies impact our relationships is important both for improving our well-being as individuals and for creating healthy connections between individuals living in increasingly technologically advanced societies.

This review provides evidence that disengagement from relationships through digital means is an important psychosocial phenomenon that has important implications for our mental health, the way that we function in our relationships, and the way that we interact with one another. Researchers, professionals, educators, and technology developers all have an opportunity to facilitate more supportive and healthy relationships in the context of new digital technologies by being mindful of the psychological effects of these emerging behaviors.

12. CONCLUSION:

The current narrative review investigated emerging digital relationship disengagement tactics and their psychological outcomes in modern relationships using technological mediums. Findings suggested that several digital relationship disengagement tactics, including ghosting, breadcrumbing, orbiting, and zombieing have become a common feature of the current digital dating context and that these practices can predict negative psychological outcomes such as increased anxiety, isolation, negative emotional experience, decreased self-esteem and relationship insecurity.

It seems that ambiguity, lack of closure, and commitment avoidance are the core features of most digital relationship disengagement tactics and social media platforms and dating applications encourage these tactics through the use of impersonal modes of communication and reduced accountability. While ghosting and its various manifestations have received some empirical attention recently, additional research needs to address newer types of digital relationship disengagement tactics and their subsequent psychological implications through longitudinal and cross-cultural research.

Digital relationship disengagement is an important psychosocial phenomenon that affects individual mental health and social functioning. More awareness and further research can encourage healthier practices in online communication.

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