

## Psychological Effects of Ghosting andBreadcrumbing amongst Young Adults

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### ABSTRACT

Relationships are never been easy. Dating with the rise of dating apps, relationships have changed for good. New Age digital tactics to terminate the relationships have emerged. The present aim of the study is to examine the differences in four psychological constructs (Satisfaction with life, Loneliness, Helplessness and Self Esteem) among young adults experiencing ghosting and/or breadcrumbing. A sample of 45 victims and 45 non-victims was used to study the differences. The results indicate that suffering from ghosting or breadcrumbing will increase loneliness and helplessness and decrease satisfaction with life and self esteem.

**Keywords:** *Ghosting, breadcrumbing, SWLS, Loneliness, Self Esteem, Helplessness*

Since its initial release 20–25 years ago, online dating has radically altered the dating arena. Mobile applications have emerged into one of the most popular and preferred means of finding dates and romantic relationships. (Hobbs, M. et al., 2017). Individuals use online dating services as mediators to indulge in strategic performances in the quest of romance, physical intimacy, and closeness. Previously, heterosexual and homosexual folks found dating partners at pubs, bars and cafes, and also through acquaintances, co-workers, and family members. Interestingly, around 2009, the usage of more conventional modes of finding potential dates has declined substantially, while the use of online dating partners has surged. Males and females, both homosexual and heterosexual, have incorporated internet dating portals within their lifestyles in order to find romantic and sexual relations. While such dating apps are gaining popularity with various audiences such as elderly (>aged 65), the typical ages of these individuals vary somewhere around 24 to 31 years of age. However, amongst youngsters (13–18 years old), the Internet has not yet substituted in-person encounters (A. Anzani et al., 2018). Most genders have gravitated to dating apps to seek a suitable partner, a hookup, or maybe even a lifetime commitment. (Abramova, O. et al., 2016; Menking et al., 2015). New communication technologies focus on providing us accessibility to much more possible relationships, allowing us to cross paths with individuals we would not ordinarily meet in our everyday lives. It also allows us to use computer-mediated communication to acquire a multitude of details regarding prospective relationships prior to actually meeting them in person. It moreover makes things

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simpler to communicate love language or sexual inclinations, and also provide a combination of features for navigating different phases of their love/sex relationships. Both of the romantic acquaintances and compatibility matchmaking processes have indeed been affected by online dating. (Finkel, E.J. et al., 2012; Meenagh, J., 2015). Nonetheless, online dating sites entail drawbacks such as gamification of interactions, hazardous behaviour patterns (e.g., unsafe intercourse, exposing personally identifiable details, stalking as well as cyber harassment, sexual harassment), and being susceptible to “breadcrumbing,” “gradual receding,” “benching,” “haunting,” or “ghosting” (Fansher, A.K. et al., 2019; Cook, K. et al., 2020). Those kinds of actions show how many people use technology to entice, establish, sustain, and dissolve relationships. An investigation of most of these behaviours appears to be important in order for individuals especially young adults to comprehend and discover about how dating is practiced today, as well as the psychological repercussions of these digitized phenomenon.

### **GHOSTING AND BREADCRUMBING**

Ghosting is a technique for terminating a dating or romantic affair that emerged in the digital realm as a strategy to dodge straight confrontations and discuss the nature of the relation with the person. (LeFebvre, L.E. 2017). Ghosting is an expression used to designate situations in which the disengager (the partner who initiates the breakup) exits a romantic engagement by shunning physical and digital communication with the recipient (the partner who is broken up with) (Koessler, R.B. et al., 2019). The absence of an explicit justification or announcement of disintegration to the breakup recipient is what distinguishes ghosting from several other breakup tactics. As a consequence, the ghosted companion is unaware of what really transpired and is left alone to interpret what the lack of connection implies on their own. (Freedman, G et al., 2018). In other words, ghosting occurs without the ghosted partner becoming aware as to what has actually occurred, and the ghosted partner being left to navigate and comprehend what the partner's absence of engagement entails without even being able to receive closure (Freedman, G et al., 2019; LeFebvre, L.E. et al., 2019). There really is a scarcity of empirical findings on ghosting activities and behaviours. (LeFebvre, L.E. et al., 2019). Relationships that ceased due to ghosting were likewise discovered to be shorter-lived and far less committed than those who just dissolved compared to significant dialogue. (Koessler, R.B. et al 2019) According to Navarro et al., ghosting behaviours are associated with the use of online dating sites/apps, the amount of time spent on these sites/apps, online surveillance, and more relatively brief relationships.

In 2016, the dating landscape saw the emergence of a novel relationship pattern: “breadcrumbing” (The New York Times, 2016). Breadcrumbing, also known as Hansel and Gretelling, is defined by Urban Dictionary as “the conduct of sending flirty, non-committal text mails (i.e. “breadcrumbs”) in order to lure a sexual partner without exerting much effort” or “when the ‘crush’ has no true motive of taking things far beyond, but they crave attention.” So, they flirt here and there, send DMs/texts merely to keep the individual interested, despite the fact that they're still single.” (Urban dictionary, 2019). Breadcrumbers do not discontinue calling, but they do send text messages or DMs on an occasional basis, give the occasional grin, or leave likes on social media platforms like Instagram just often enough to keep the receivers interested, but not frequently enough for relationships to evolve. Regardless of the fact that breadcrumbing may occur when a relationship has ended, the initiator does not want to let his or her partner go, it is not as evident a breakup tactic as ghosting. It's also a technique of holding a date on pause, as well as a type of social dynamics in which breadcrumbers aren't primarily concerned in the other person, but are concerned with

remaining relevant/attractive to others. (New York Times, 2019). In any case, breadcrumbing, like ghosting, is a method of negotiating romantic or sexual interactions.

### **Psychological effects of ghosting and breadcrumbing**

Quality interpersonal relationships are correlated with fewer mental health issues and enhanced subjective well-being, and they are the most powerful determinant of lifespan and happiness. Poor-quality personal relationships and breakups, on the other hand, are frequently linked to feelings of rage, grief, psychosocial anguish, and depressed mood. (Waldinger, R. What Makes a Good Life?; Braithwaite et al., 2010) According to studies, social media and technology have diversified our social networks and boosted the amount of interpersonal engagements we have. (Belu, C.F. et al., 2016, Hampton, K.N. et al., 2011). Shifting our relationships to the digital realm and the expanding use of digital technology, on the other end, are correlated to a loss of authenticity in the relationships, a rise in solitude, and a decrease in life satisfaction. (Cook, K., Ed.; Palgrave Macmillan: London, UK, 2020; Song, H. et al 2014; Stepanikova, I., 2010). Given the lack of vocal and physical abuse, ghosting is a traumatic experience: It puts psychological needs (belonging, self-esteem, autonomy, and a purposeful existence) in jeopardy, triggering a slew of physiological, affective, cognitive, and behavioural repercussions. As a result, an upsurge in behaviours like breadcrumbing may raise the rates of alienation, despair, and dissatisfaction with life amongst individuals who experience them. Numerous views and opinions by psychologists and sociologists have been mirrored in the mainstream media, warning about the hazardous repercussions of these forms of cyber techniques to sustain or terminate relationships. "Ghosting has major effects," said Sherry Turkle, an MIT professor, in an appearance with The Huffington Post, "because when they treat us as if we can be ignored, we learn to assume that this is fine and we treat ourselves as people who don't have feelings. At the same time, we treat others as if they have no feelings in this situation, and empathy fades" (Why "Ghosting" Is Bad for Society, 2019). Ghosting, according to Jennice Vilhauer of Psychology Today, can have a negative impact on a person's mental health. "Ghosting is the ultimate usage of the silent treatment," she added, a strategy that mental health doctors have historically seen as a kind of emotional torment. It makes you impotent and prevents you from asking questions or receiving facts that would help you obtain closure" (This Is Why Ghosting Hurts So Much, 2019). Journalist Samantha Swantek in her article "Breadcrumbing Is the New Ghosting and It's Savage" conveys that "breadcrumbing can be especially infuriating if you're in search of a genuine connection. Breadcrumbers waste your time and introduce a sense of falsehood into a rapport that you may have conceived as real" (Breadcrumbing Is the New Ghosting and It's Savage AF, 2019). Even though no studies have specifically looked into the psychological effects of ghosting and breadcrumbing victimisation, it is reasonable to assume that people who have been ghosted or breadcrumbing will also have poor psychosocial effects, given that these digital strategies can bolster feelings of inadequacy and greatly affect relationships. Although no research has delved into the long-term effects of ghosting and breadcrumbing, we may look into the long-term effects of a different, but similar phenomenon: ostracism. One kind of social alienation is ostracism, which includes being ignored by an individuals or groups in a variety of settings, including family, social ties, the workplace, and the Online world. Ostracism is a stressful experience that frequently results in emotional discomfort and injured feelings, as well as increased despair, resentment, and alienation. (e.g., Williams, K.D. 2009; Riva, P. et al., 2011). The detrimental effects of being ostracized have been well studied. Ostracism jeopardises essential necessities like belonging, self-esteem, authority, and a meaningful existence, which can lead to feelings of isolation, depression, irritation, anxiety, and impotence. (Williams, K.D. 2019, 41, 400–408.). Cyberostracism (being ignored on the

## Psychological Effects of Ghosting and Breadcrumbing amongst Young Adults

internet) has been linked to psychosocial distress, emotional regulation, solitude, depression, and anxiousness. (Willner, C.J.; 2019; Trimmer, E.; 2017; Wirth, J.H.; 2011).

Ghosting is a method of ending connections, whilst breadcrumbing is a method of maintaining specific ties for various reasons. Moreover, because the people who are beginning to experience them may be waiting for replies (text messages, phone calls, likes, or replies to uploaded texts on social media), the absence of answers (with ghosting) or scattered responses (with breadcrumbing) may put them in a standby mode, causing them to feel isolated. (Vorderer, P. & Schneider, F.M., 2017). People who feel excluded on the Internet as a consequence of a relationship breaking up or not advancing can experience psychological distress, which can include feelings such as psychological agony, sorrow, and anguish.

### *Present Study*

The above literature review demonstrates the importance of studying the psychological correlates of ghosting and breadcrumbing victimization. However, apart from studies on ostracism and relationship breakups, no other study has examined the link between psychological discomfort and digital tactics to end or maintain intimate relationships (Ceglarek, P.J. et al 2017, Niu, G.F. et al 2018, Levy, G. A, et al 2017). This study is the first research to examine the psychological effects of ghosting and breadcrumbing victimization.

### *Purpose*

The purpose of this study is to assess the psychological effects of the digital phenomenon of ghosting and breadcrumbing in young adult (18-26).

### *Hypothesis*

Differences in satisfaction with life, loneliness, self-esteem and helplessness scores are expected among groups of ghosting and/or breadcrumbing victims and non-victim participants.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### *Sample*

A total of 86 young adults (43 victims of ghosting and/or breadcrumbing and 43 non-victim participants) from across India participated in the study. The age range of participants was from 18-26.

### **Measure**

#### **1. Satisfaction With Life Scale**

Developed by (Diener et al., 1985), satisfaction with life scale is a 5-item scale designed to measure global cognitive judgments of one's life satisfaction (not a measure of either positive or negative affect). On a 7-point scale ranging from 7 strongly agree to 1 strongly disagree, respondents indicate how much they agree or disagree with each of the 5 items.

#### **2. UCLA Loneliness Scale (version 3)**

Developed by (Ferguson, 1978), Loneliness scale is a 20-item scale designed to reflect how lonely individuals describe their experience. The respondents indicate how they feel about an experience with each of 20-items using a 4- point scale ranging from 4 always to 1 never.

#### **3. Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale**

Developed by Rosenberg, M. (1965), Rosenberg self-esteem scale is a 10-item scale that measure global self-worth by measuring both negative and positive feelings about it. The scale is believed to be uni-dimensional. All items are answered using a 4-point Likert scale format ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree.

#### 4. Helplessness

Helplessness was examined with the help of Multidimensional Fatalism Scale which was developed by Esparza et al. (2015). This subscale consists in six descriptive self-statements with a rating response ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much).

#### Procedure

The participants were informed the purpose of the research and the questionnaires were filled through google form. The participation of the participants was strictly voluntary and had the right to withdraw from the study at any point. They were assured confidentiality and thanked for their cooperation. Standardized tests were administered to the participants.

### RESULT

Participants were considered ghosting victims if they had been ghosted at least once. Participants were considered breadcrumbing victims if they had been breadcrumbing at least once. Participants who had both been ghosted or breadcrumbing at least once were considered victims of both digital tactics. This procedure resulted in 45 people being victims of ghosting and/or breadcrumbing victims and 45 people being not involved. Participants were also asked to answer whether they had been ghosted or breadcrumbing during the pandemic. This procedure resulted in 30 participants being ghosted and/ breadcrumbing during the pandemic and 60 being not involved in both digital tactics. The response of participants was analysed using T-test to assess the difference in satisfaction in life, loneliness, helplessness and self-esteem of those who had been victims of both digital tactics and those who were not involved. Mean and standard deviation is depicted in Table 1. Table 2 shows correlation between the variables. Table 3 shows the significant difference in facets of satisfaction with life, loneliness, helplessness and self-esteem among the sample.

*Table 1 showing N, Mean and SD*

	N	Mean	SD
Ghosted/Breadcrumbed	90	1.50	.503
SWLS	90	20.09	7.460
Loneliness	90	42.62	18.843
Self Esteem	90	23.08	8.201
Helplessness	90	25.59	11.314

(SWLS- satisfaction with life scale, SD- standard deviation)

*TABLE 2 showing correlation between variables*

	Ghosted/ Breadcrumbed	SWLS	Loneliness	Self Esteem	Helplessness
Ghosted/Breadcrumbed	-				
SWLS	-.827**	-			
Loneliness	.903**	-.819**	-		
Self Esteem	-.862**	.729**	-.786**	-	
Helplessness	.837	-.731**	.816**	-.803**	-

\*\* - Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

## Psychological Effects of Ghosting andBreadcrumbing amongst Young Adults

*Table 3 showing T-test for all variables*

	<b>Ghosted/ breadcrumb</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>t</b>	<b>df</b>	<b>Sig (2- tailed)</b>
SWLS	Involved	45	26.22	4.472	13.786	88	<0.001
	Not involved	45	13.96	3.954	13.786	86.701	<0.001
Loneliness	Involved	45	25.71	4.060	-19.659	88	<0.001
	Not involved	45	59.53	10.803	-19.659	56.185	<0.001
Self Esteem	Involved	45	30.11	4.863	15.979	88	<0.001
	Not involved	45	16.04	3.350	15.979	78.092	<0.001
Helplessness	Involved	45	16.18	6.076	-14.320	88	<0.001
	Not involved	45	35.00	6.389	-14.320	87.780	<0.001

### **DISCUSSION**

The objective of the current work was to analyse the difference in satisfaction with life, loneliness, self-esteem and helplessness scores among groups of ghosting and/or breadcrumbing victims and non-victim participants.

The results show that there is a positive correlation between getting ghosted/breadcrumbed and loneliness ( $r=0.903$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) and helplessness ( $r=0.837$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). There is negative correlation between getting ghosted/breadcrumbed and satisfaction with life ( $r=-0.827$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) and self-esteem ( $r=-0.862$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) as depicted in Table 2.

Since not a lot of research delves into ghosting/breadcrumbing and the variables used, we study about a similar phenomenon called ostracism. Whilst some form of ostracism is experienced by most people at some point in their lives, it is experienced far more often in individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Little is known about how this social exclusion is interpreted, experienced or managed. A study by Trimmer, Emily et al. (2017) aimed to explore the psychological (mood and social needs) as well as the physiological (arousal) effects of ostracism using a well-established paradigm, Cyberball. Results depicted that the group that was not ostracised felt a greater sense of control, a greater sense of meaningful existence, a greater sense of belonging and greater self-esteem when they were included.

In another study by Nie, G.F. et al. (2018), a scale with 14-item was developed to measure the cyberostracism experience of adolescents. Then, a survey was conducted among 1626 Chinese adolescents aged 12–18, and the results showed that: (1) cyber-ostracism was positively correlated with depression, while optimism was negatively correlated with depression, (2) optimism could moderate the influence of cyber-ostracism on depression, with a stronger association for adolescents with low level of optimism. The study found a positive correlation between depression and cyber ostracism. In addition, cyber ostracism endangers the basic need for belonging and social connection which plays an important role for individuals' health and wellbeing, thus it is painful and distressful experience, having a powerfully negative effect on individuals' health and wellbeing.

There is also a significant difference in the degree of satisfaction with life, helplessness, and loneliness among the two groups (ghosted/breadcrumbed and not involved.)

## Psychological Effects of Ghosting andBreadcrumbing amongst Young Adults

Study by Navarro et al. (2020) on psychological correlates of ghosting and breadcrumbing experiences also showed a significant difference was found in the degree of satisfaction with life, helplessness, and loneliness among the four groups (victims of ghosting, breadcrumbing, combined abuse, and those not involved).

The links between ghosting and psychological correlates can be explained by personal qualities. The instant repercussions of ostracism (e.g., emotions of loneliness) can come into the equation independently of individual traits, according to cyberostracism studies (Williams, K.D., 2009). Breadcrumbing may operate in a similar way to addictive behaviours, which could explain the link between breadcrumbing and psychological correlates. The main driver of behaviour in the anticipation of the reward, according to the Incentive Theory (Dickinson, A. & Balleine, B., 2002; Navas, J.F. & Perales, J.C., 2014). Breadcrumbing might have reinforcing qualities in this respect. It's probable that the anticipation of a potential reward for these behaviours, as well as their unpredictability (it's impossible to predict when the reinforcement will be received), induce tension in those who are breadcrumbing and, as a result, arouse negative psychological consequences.

### *Limitations to the study*

This study has a certain limitation. We simply asked one question to assess ghosting and breadcrumbing, and we did not inquire about the length of time since these behaviours began or the nature of relationships established with someone who engaged in ghosting or breadcrumbing. Future research should gather more precise information regarding such activities, as well as the type of relationship that was terminated by ghosting versus one that was preserved by breadcrumbing (e.g., casual sexual meetings, short-term relationships, committed relationships). This study only analysed the relation of ghosting and breadcrumbing victimization with three psychological correlates (satisfaction with life, helplessness, and loneliness) previously linked to other forms of ostracism. Future research must analyse other mental health-related variables like depression, anxiety, etc., as well as antisocial behaviors such as aggression.

## CONCLUSION

The current study adds to our understanding of the digital methods used to end and maintain relationships through Internet-mediated communication, including two little-studied phenomena: ghosting and breadcrumbing. It also aids in our better comprehension of the possibilities correlates with the psychological well-being of persons who are affected by them, and opens up new research avenues. This study encourages academics to look into whether other psychological wellbeing variables might be linked to these behaviours.

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## Psychological Effects of Ghosting andBreadcrumbing amongst Young Adults

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## Psychological Effects of Ghosting andBreadcrumbing amongst Young Adults

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### **Conflict of Interest**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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