



Artículo de revisión

**Consequences of Ghosting on the Mental Health of
Adolescents and Young Adults: A Systematic Review**

**Consecuencias del ghosting en la salud mental de
adolescentes y adultos jóvenes: una revisión sistemática**

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Abstract

Introduction: Ghosting is a common practice in technology-mediated interpersonal relationships that raises concerns regarding its impact on the mental health of adolescents and young adults.

Objective: Synthesize available scientific evidence on the consequences of ghosting for the mental health of adolescents and young adults.

Methodology: A systematic review was conducted of articles published between 2016 and 2026 in Scopus, WoS, and ProQuest, including Open Access texts in Spanish and English. Thirty-nine records were identified, of which only two met the eligibility criteria.

Results: The studies showed that ghosting had a negative effect on mental health and on aspects of the social dimension, such as the need for belonging, social comparison, and social identity. However, no significant effect was found regarding aspects of the emotional dimensions such as life satisfaction, helplessness, and loneliness—although an effect was observed when analyzed in conjunction with other variables.

Conclusion: Ghosting is associated with various aspects of mental health, although its effects vary across cases, and available evidence remains limited, particularly regarding adolescents and young adults.

Keywords: adolescents; interpersonal relations; young adult; mental health; systematic review

Resumen

Introducción: el *ghosting* es una práctica común en las relaciones interpersonales mediadas por la tecnología que genera preocupación por su impacto en la salud mental de adolescentes y adultos jóvenes.

Objetivo: sintetizar la evidencia científica disponible sobre las consecuencias del ghosting para la salud mental de adolescentes y adultos jóvenes.

Metodología: se realizó una revisión sistemática de artículos publicados entre 2016 y 2026 en Scopus, WoS y ProQuest, incluyendo textos de acceso abierto en español e inglés. Se identificaron treinta y nueve registros, de los cuales solo dos cumplieron con los criterios de elegibilidad.

Resultados: los estudios mostraron que el *ghosting* tenía un efecto negativo en la salud mental y en aspectos de la dimensión social, como la necesidad de pertenencia, la comparación social y la identidad social. Sin embargo, no se halló un efecto significativo en aspectos de la dimensión emocional, tales como la satisfacción vital, la indefensión y la soledad, aunque sí se observó un efecto al analizarse en conjunto con otras variables.

Conclusión: el *ghosting* se asocia con diversos aspectos de la salud mental, si bien sus efectos varían según los casos y la evidencia disponible sigue siendo limitada, particularmente en lo que respecta a adolescentes y adultos jóvenes.

Palabras clave: adolescentes; relaciones interpersonales; adulto joven; salud mental; revisión sistemática

Introduction

In recent years, mental health has gained increasing importance within the field of psychological research, as various mental health problems may emerge during the early stages of life and have detrimental consequences for both personal development and the way individuals relate to their environment and regulate their emotions. ^(1, 2)

According to the World Health Organization, ⁽³⁾, mental health problems, such as depression and anxiety, may begin during childhood and become more pronounced throughout adolescence and young adulthood as individuals encounter new experiences and develop increasingly intimate relationships with family members and friends. Interpersonal relationships therefore begin to occupy an important place in an individual's life.

Several studies indicate that the quality of interpersonal relationships, whether with friends or romantic partners, contributes to individuals' emotional stability. ^(4, 5) However, the growth of digital technologies and communication platforms has changed the way these interactions occur, giving rise to new ways of initiating, maintaining, and ending relationships. ^(6, 7)

One practice that has gained greater visibility within this new digital landscape is ghosting, a term used to describe the abrupt and unilateral cessation of all communication with another person without providing any explanation or prior notice. ⁽⁸⁾

Ghosting differs from other ways of ending a relationship because, rather than providing an explanation or communicating the decision to end the relationship in advance, one person simply stops responding and disappears. This may leave the person who experiences ghosting feeling confused, as they are unable to understand what happened or what led to the end of the relationship. ⁽⁹⁾

This behavior is common among young people. Studies conducted in the United States have reported that more than 20% of young people have experienced ghosting in romantic relationships, friendships, and workplace settings, ^(10, 11) with similar proportions reported in Italy, Canada, Belgium, and Spain. ^(12, 13)

In Latin America, however, the available figures vary. In Ecuador, more than 41% of adolescents have been reported to experience this type of situation, while Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay have recorded higher rates within the region. ^(14, 15)

In Peru, research on this phenomenon remains limited and is still in its early stages. Existing studies are restricted exclusively to psychometric research and explorations of associated variables, with no published systematic reviews integrating the available evidence, particularly among young populations.⁽¹⁶⁾

Ghosting can be a difficult experience for individuals who involuntarily assume the role of the victim. Several academic texts suggest that it may cause emotional pain, low self-esteem, feelings of rejection, guilt, shame, and difficulties accepting the end of a relationship, which may leave the grieving process following the breakup unresolved.^(4,17) Consequently, feelings of uncertainty, confusion, rejection, and concern may also arise, as well as anxiety or stress.^(7, 18, 19) Although these effects have been mentioned in several studies describing ghosting, few studies have provided empirical evidence demonstrating how this phenomenon is associated with experiences characterized by poor mental health.

The way ghosting affects an individual may vary from person to person, as not everyone interprets the sudden disappearance of someone with whom they maintained a relationship in the same way. Several theories in scientific literature help explain these differences. One of them is implicit theories of relationships, which proposes that the way individuals interpret ghosting depends on their beliefs about how relationships should develop and end. Therefore, some people may perceive it as an acceptable way of ending a relationship, whereas others may experience it as a form of betrayal or rejection.⁽⁹⁾

Another way to understand why ghosting is not experienced in the same way by everyone is through attachment theory. This theory suggests that the way individuals relate to others is associated with their attachment style. Thus, individuals with an avoidant attachment style may be more likely to distance themselves or cut off contact, whereas those with an anxious attachment style may experience greater concern and distress when they no longer receive a response.^{(5).}

Complementarily, ostracism theory suggests that being ignored or excluded can produce emotional pain similar to that caused by direct rejection. This perspective helps explain why many young people experience a strong emotional impact after going through this situation.⁽¹²⁾

Despite the growing interest in ghosting, the current scientific evidence still presents limitations that justify the need for the present systematic review. Studies addressing ghosting and mental health remain limited and are dispersed across different databases and fields of knowledge, making it difficult to establish an up-to-date body of evidence that systematically and critically integrates and analyzes the available findings.^{(4, 17).}

Furthermore, a large part of the scientific literature does not examine whether the effects of ghosting vary according to the type of relationship, such as romantic, friendship, or work-related relationships, nor does it consider sociodemographic variables, such as sex or age group within young populations. Consequently, there is still limited clarity regarding the factors that may make individuals more vulnerable to its psychological consequences. ^(8, 13).

It is also important to note that scientific production on ghosting in Latin America remains limited, revealing a considerable gap between the magnitude of the phenomenon and the scientific evidence available to understand it. ^(14, 15) Considering these limitations, the present systematic review aims to integrate and analyze the scientific evidence on the relationship between ghosting and mental health among adolescents and young adults in order to answer the following research question: What scientific evidence exists regarding the consequences of ghosting on the mental health of adolescents and young adults, according to indexed literature published between 2016 and 2025?

In response to this question, the general objective of the present study is to analyze and synthesize the available scientific evidence on the consequences of ghosting for the mental health of adolescents and young adults. Specifically, the study aims to: a. identify scientific studies addressing the relationship between the aforementioned variables that were published in indexed databases between 2016 and 2025; b. describe the methodological characteristics of the included studies, considering research design, sample characteristics, geographical context, and assessment instruments used; and c. synthesize the main findings regarding the psychological and social consequences of ghosting for the mental health of adolescents and young adults by identifying patterns of convergence, moderating factors, and remaining gaps in the available evidence.

Methodology

Design

This systematic review was conducted in accordance with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines. ⁽²⁰⁾ In accordance with these guidelines, eligibility criteria were established, the search strategy was defined, relevant keywords and Boolean operators were identified, and procedures for study identification, screening, assessment, and data extraction were developed. ⁽²¹⁾ These steps enabled a structured, systematic, and transparent process for identifying and selecting relevant studies. The retrieved information was subsequently organized, analyzed, and synthesized to integrate the available scientific evidence on ghosting. This process provided an overview of the existing literature on the main social and emotional consequences of ghosting for the mental health of adolescents and young adults. ⁽²²⁾

Eligibility Criteria

Inclusion and exclusion criteria were established to identify studies examining the impact of ghosting on the mental health of adolescents and young adults. The inclusion criteria were: (a) articles examining the consequences of ghosting for mental health; (b) studies involving adolescent and young adult populations; (c) studies published between 2016 and 2026; (d) articles published in English or Spanish; (e) full-text articles available through open access; and (f) studies indexed in high-impact databases.

Article Search and Selection Procedure

Based on the previously established inclusion criteria, a search strategy was developed and applied across the Scopus, Web of Science, and ProQuest databases. The literature search was conducted between June 1 and June 22, 2026. The search strategy combined relevant keywords using the Boolean operators AND and OR to identify studies aligned with the objective of the review. The following search string was used: ("ghosting") AND ("mental health" OR "anxiety" OR "depression" OR "low self-esteem" OR "psychological well-being") AND ("teens" OR "adolescents" OR "students" OR "young").

The study selection process is presented in the PRISMA 2020 flow diagram (figure 1), which illustrates the sequential stages of study identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and final inclusion in the systematic review.

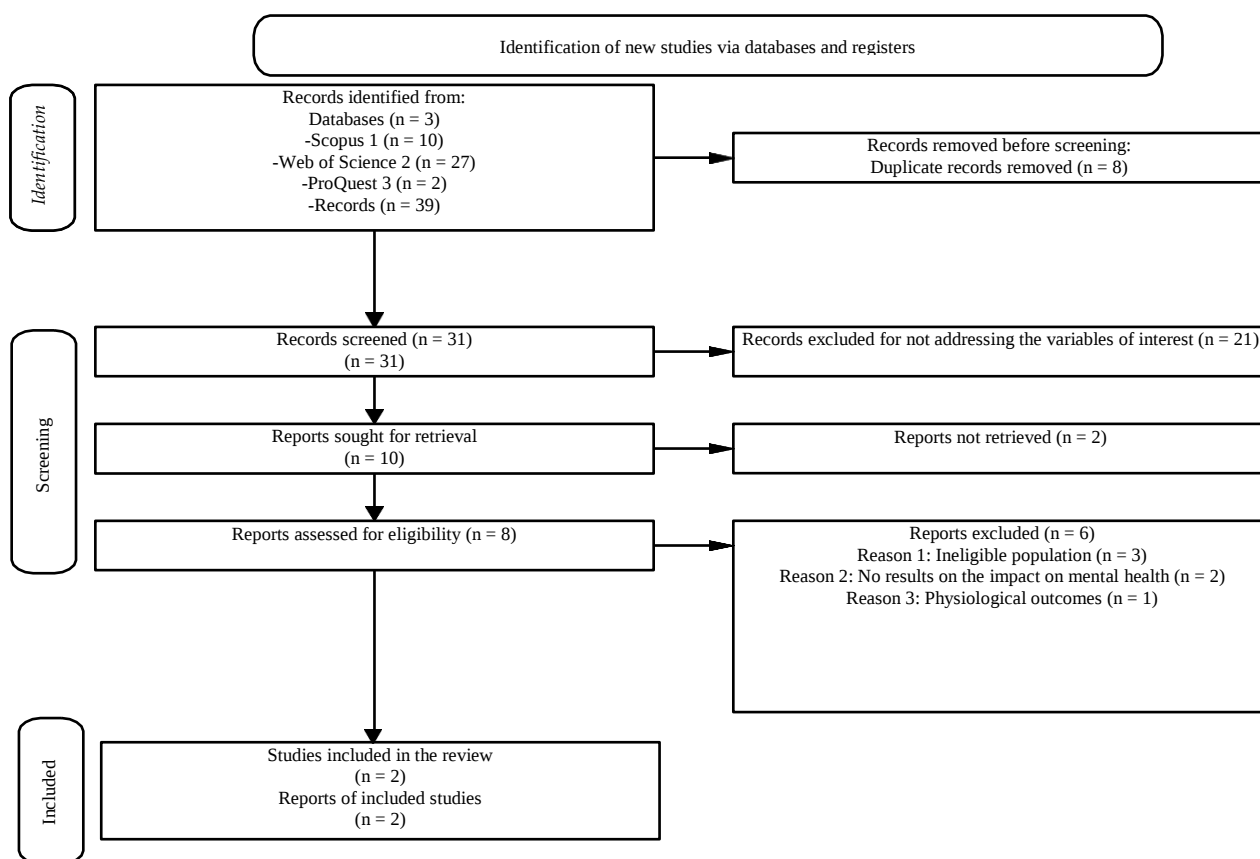


Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram of the study selection process

Note. Prepared by the authors using the PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram template available at [PRISMA Statement](https://www.prisma-statement.org/)

Figure 1 presents the PRISMA flow diagram illustrating the study selection process for research examining the consequences of ghosting on the mental health of adolescents and young adults. During the identification phase, 40 records were retrieved from three databases: 10 from Scopus, 27 from Web of Science, and 3 from ProQuest. Following a thorough review of the retrieved records, 8 duplicate documents were removed, leaving 32 records for further screening.

During the screening phase, the remaining records were assessed, and 21 were excluded because they did not address ghosting as the primary topic of investigation. Although these studies examined aspects related to mental health, they focused on other variables unrelated to ghosting, such as family dysfunction and school violence.

Subsequently, the full-text retrieval phase was conducted, during which the full texts of eight studies were successfully retrieved. Two reports could not be retrieved because they did not meet the open-access eligibility criterion. During the eligibility assessment, the eight retrieved reports were examined in greater detail to determine whether they met the

established inclusion criteria. At this stage, three articles involving adult populations were excluded; two described ghosting without addressing mental health; and one examined the relationship between ghosting and physical symptoms rather than psychological variables related to mental health.

Following the selection process, two studies met all the established inclusion criteria and were therefore included in the analysis of the present systematic review.

Ethical Considerations

As this study consisted of a systematic review, ethical considerations were guided by the principles established in the Research Ethics Code of César Vallejo University. ⁽²³⁾ Specifically, the study adhered to the principles of intellectual honesty, methodological rigor, objectivity, transparency, respect for intellectual property, and responsibility in the communication of research findings.

In addition, the principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki were considered, particularly the importance of maintaining scientific rigor, conducting research responsibly, disclosing any potential conflicts of interest, and reporting findings in a complete and responsible manner, including results that may not support the expected outcomes. ⁽²⁴⁾

Results

The selected studies were examined to extract the most relevant information and data from each study. The extracted data included the study location, research design, participant characteristics, variables examined, measurement instruments, and main findings. To facilitate a clear and systematic presentation of this information, the data were organized and summarized in table 1.

Table 1. Characteristics of the studies included in the systematic review

Author and year	Place	Design	Sample	Variables analyzed	Measurement instruments	Conclusions
Astleitner et al. (25)	45 countries, mainly in Europe, including Austria, Germany, the United Kingdom, Spain, France, Sweden, Italy, Portugal, the Netherlands, and Finland, as well as countries in the Americas, Asia, Oceania, and Africa.	Cross-sectional study.	995 adolescents and young adults aged 18 to 29, with an average age of 22.93 years.	-Social media use -Need for belonging -Social comparison -Social identity -Histrionic personality -FoMO -Ghosting -Vaguebooking -Mental health	-Belonging Need Scale -Social Comparison Scale -Social Identity Scale -Brief Histrionic Personality Scale -FoMO Scale -Ghosting Victim Scale -Vaguebooking Scale -Mental Health Scale.	Ghosting was associated with poorer mental health ($r = -.44$, $p < .01$). It was also associated with the need for belonging ($r = .25$), social comparison ($r = .44$), social identity ($r = .37$), histrionic personality ($r = .44$), social media use ($r = .26$), FoMO ($r = .47$), and vaguebooking ($r = .60$), all with $p < .01$. The effect of ghosting on mental health was significant and negative, with a beta coefficient of $\beta = -.29$.
Navarro et al. (26)	Spain	Cross-sectional study.	626 young people and adults aged 18 to 40, with an average age of 29.64 years.	-Ghosting - Breadcrumbing -Life satisfaction -Helplessness -Loneliness.	-A question about the experience of ghosting. -A question about the experience of breadcrumbing. -Satisfaction With Life Scale -Multidimensional Fatalism Scale -UCLA Loneliness Scale.	Ghosting did not show a significant relationship with life satisfaction ($\beta = -.023$), helplessness ($\beta = .071$), or loneliness ($\beta = .061$). However, when it occurred alongside breadcrumbing, significant differences were found in life satisfaction ($F = 4.961$, $p < .001$), helplessness ($F = 6.134$, $p < .001$), and loneliness ($F = 8.336$, $p < .001$), indicating lower levels of life satisfaction and higher levels of helplessness and loneliness.

Table 1 presents the main characteristics of the two studies that met the established eligibility criteria and were included in the analysis. An examination of the reported data shows that the studies were conducted in different geographical contexts. The study by Astleitner et al.⁽²⁵⁾ included participants from 45 countries, primarily from Europe, including Austria, Germany, the United Kingdom, Spain, France, and Italy, as well as countries from the Americas, Asia, Africa, and Oceania. In contrast, Navarro et al.⁽²⁶⁾ conducted their study exclusively in Spain. Thus, the two studies provide insights into ghosting across different sociocultural contexts.

Regarding the methodological characteristics of the studies, both employed a cross-sectional design, as data were collected at a single point in time through online surveys. Furthermore, based on the methods used to collect and analyze the data, both studies followed a quantitative, non-experimental approach, as no intervention was implemented with the participants.

Another relevant aspect concerns the study populations. Astleitner et al. ⁽²⁵⁾ examined a sample of 995 adolescents and young adults aged 18 to 29 years, with a mean age of 22.93 years. In contrast, Navarro et al. ⁽²⁶⁾ included 626 young adults and adults aged 18 to 40 years, with a mean age of 29.64 years. Although the age ranges differed between the studies, both focused primarily on young populations.

It is also important to note that ghosting was not examined as an isolated phenomenon. In the study by Astleitner et al. ⁽²⁵⁾ ghosting was analyzed alongside fear of missing out (FoMO), vaguebooking, social media use, social comparison, social identity, and other individual characteristics. Conversely, Navarro et al. ⁽²⁶⁾ examined ghosting in conjunction with breadcrumbing and its relationship with variables such as life satisfaction, helplessness, and loneliness. This approach suggests that ghosting is often investigated within a broader set of experiences associated with social interaction and the use of digital media, which is particularly relevant in a context where technology plays an increasingly prominent role in everyday life. ⁽²⁷⁾

In addition, table 1 highlights an important difference between the findings of the two studies. Astleitner et al. ⁽²⁵⁾ found that ghosting had a negative effect on mental health and was also directly associated with the need to belong, social comparison, social identity, and histrionic personality traits, all of which may be related to individuals' psychological well-being. In contrast, Navarro et al. ⁽²⁶⁾ found no significant effects of ghosting alone on emotional aspects of mental health, including life satisfaction, helplessness, and loneliness. However, when ghosting was examined in conjunction with breadcrumbing, significant variations and differences were observed in these variables.

Discussion

During adolescence and young adulthood, personal changes and the intrinsic need to experience new situations encourage younger individuals to seek new ways of relating to others. ⁽²⁸⁾ Currently, a substantial proportion of these interactions takes place through digital media, which have become an essential part of everyday life. Technology offers numerous benefits across different domains when used appropriately; however, its other side also reveals situations that may place younger individuals at risk. ⁽²⁹⁻³¹⁾ Phenomena such as ghosting, which involves abruptly cutting off contact with another person without providing

an explanation or prior notice, often leaving the other person unable to understand what happened or why the relationship ended, ^(8,9) have given rise to a range of adverse experiences that may result in emotional difficulties and psychological instability. Despite the potential consequences of this phenomenon for adolescents and young adults, scientific evidence regarding its demonstrated effects on mental health remains limited. Therefore, it became necessary to examine which adverse outcomes can genuinely be attributed to ghosting and which have been supported by empirical evidence and scientific research.

Astleitner et al. ⁽²⁵⁾ found that ghosting, FoMO, and vaguebooking were associated with poorer mental health, as well as with other aspects related to psychological functioning, including the need to belong, social comparison, social identity, and histrionic personality. In contrast, Navarro et al. ⁽²⁶⁾ approached mental health from a different perspective by examining how ghosting and breadcrumbing accounted for variations in life satisfaction, helplessness, and loneliness. When ghosting was examined independently, no significant associations were found with these variables. However, when it was analyzed jointly with breadcrumbing, notable changes were observed in the aforementioned outcomes. These findings suggest that adverse effects on emotional aspects of mental health may emerge when ghosting co-occurs with another negative relational experience.

This analysis is important because it shows that, when examining the consequences or effects of ghosting on different aspects of mental health, the phenomenon is generally not studied in isolation but rather alongside other experiences that commonly occur in digital relationships. This may be explained by the fact that ghosting is not the only negative experience present in the interactions of adolescents and young adults. Navarro et al. ⁽¹⁵⁾ for example, reported the occurrence of practices such as breadcrumbing in approximately three out of every ten participants. Likewise, FoMO and vaguebooking have been identified in social media contexts, and their effects on mental health and well-being have been described by Sikandar et al. ⁽³²⁾ and Guzmán-Brand and Gélvez. ⁽³³⁾ Based on these findings, it is understandable that these experiences, which are common among younger populations, are considered jointly when examining the effects of ghosting on mental health.

Another aspect that may explain the differences observed between the studies is the way mental health was assessed. Mental health encompasses different aspects of an individual's psychological state and cannot be reduced solely to the presence or absence of a disorder. According to the WHO, ⁽³¹⁾ mental health can be understood as a multidimensional construct involving emotional and social capacities, as well as aspects related to how individuals think and act. In the study by Astleitner et al. ⁽²⁵⁾ in addition to assessing mental health at a general level, the authors considered variables such as the need to belong, social comparison, social identity, and histrionic personality, which represent aspects of the social dimension related to how individuals establish relationships, integrate with others, and perceive themselves as

part of their social environment.⁽³⁴⁾ In contrast, Navarro et al.⁽²⁶⁾ focused on life satisfaction, helplessness, and loneliness, which are more closely related to the emotional dimension and involve the way individuals experience emotions, cope with life events, and respond to environmental demands.⁽³⁵⁾ Therefore, differences in the way mental health was assessed may have influenced the findings of the studies, as ghosting may not affect all these domains in the same manner and its effects may be more evident in one dimension than in another.

Another aspect worth discussing is whether the differences observed may also be related to the sociodemographic characteristics of the participants, particularly their geographical location and age range. Astleitner et al.⁽²⁵⁾ used a more diverse and heterogeneous sample consisting of participants from 45 countries, whereas Navarro et al.⁽²⁶⁾ conducted their study exclusively with participants from Spain. These differences may have influenced the findings because the ways in which individuals understand and experience ghosting are not necessarily the same across countries. Indeed, Freedman and Powell,⁽³⁶⁾ when comparing perceptions of ghosting among participants from 12 countries, identified differences in how the phenomenon was perceived, the extent to which it was considered acceptable, and individuals' intentions to use or previous use of ghosting in their relationships.

Similarly, although both studies included young participants, the age ranges differed. Astleitner et al.⁽²⁵⁾ examined adolescents and young adults with a mean age of 22.93 years, whereas Navarro et al.⁽²⁶⁾ included young and adult participants with a mean age of 29.64 years. These differences in age may help explain the variation in findings between the two studies, as the ways individuals socialize, establish relationships, and experience them may change as they transition into adulthood. This interpretation is supported by González et al.⁽³⁷⁾ who found that experiences in romantic relationships changed considerably as individuals progressed from adolescence into young adulthood and adulthood. Therefore, based on the evidence discussed above, it is reasonable to consider that age and cross-national differences may have influenced how participants experienced ghosting, although this interpretation should be approached with caution and further examined in future studies.

The analysis conducted in this systematic review showed that the effects of ghosting on mental health were not consistent across all cases but varied according to how the variables were examined, the instruments used, and certain characteristics of the study populations, such as age range and geographical context. Despite these differences, the reviewed studies reported findings related to several aspects of mental health, encompassing both social and emotional domains, including the need to belong, social identity, social comparison, life satisfaction, helplessness, and loneliness. This finding is particularly relevant because it suggests that ghosting may be associated with more than one aspect of mental health. However, the available evidence remains insufficient to conclude that its consequences are the same for all adolescents and young adults.

It is also important to emphasize that very few studies have been conducted specifically among adolescent and young adult populations, as a substantial proportion of the available research on ghosting has focused on adults.^(5,38) This finding is particularly relevant because social relationships occupy an important role during these developmental stages, and many of these relationships take place through social media and other digital environments. Expanding research on ghosting among these populations could therefore contribute to a better understanding of its potential consequences. With a stronger body of evidence, actions could also be developed in settings such as tutoring programs, psychological counseling, and psychoeducational activities to help individuals identify this and other related phenomena while promoting more responsible digital relationships, as evidenced by Sioco et al.⁽³⁹⁾

This systematic review presented certain limitations that were considered during the data collection process. One limitation was that part of the literature on ghosting and mental health was not available through open access, which hindered the retrieval and examination of full-text reports. This represents a challenge in systematic review studies, as noted by Shamseer et al.⁽⁴⁰⁾ However, this limitation was addressed by conducting a complementary search in alternative but similarly reputable databases, such as ProQuest, and by carefully applying the established search strategies. Furthermore, although the literature on ghosting and mental health remains limited, the search process made it possible to gather and systematically organize the available scientific evidence, thereby expanding current knowledge regarding its effects on mental health and providing a basis for future research on these variables.

The limited amount of scientific evidence identified constitutes one of the main findings of this study, as it demonstrates the existence of a gap in knowledge that requires further exploration and development.⁽⁴¹⁾ Although ghosting may have become a common practice in relationships conducted through social media and other digital platforms, there is still a need to better understand its implications for the mental health of those who experience it, particularly adolescents and young adults. Therefore, greater attention to this phenomenon within scientific research could help ensure that a situation often perceived as normal does not go unnoticed when it may be affecting an individual's mental health.

Conclusions

The present review showed that ghosting affects different aspects of mental health to varying degrees. Changes were identified in the way individuals feel, relate to others, and cope with their experiences, as well as in factors such as the need to belong, social comparison, life satisfaction, helplessness, and loneliness. The findings also showed that ghosting may occur alongside other digital experiences, such as FoMO, vaguebooking, and breadcrumbing, suggesting that its effects may not always depend solely on the act of one person suddenly ceasing communication. However, one of the most notable findings was the limited number

of studies identified, particularly those involving adolescents and young adults, despite the fact that a substantial proportion of their current relationships takes place through social media and other digital environments. This finding indicates that there is still much to learn about the actual effects of this experience on young people's mental health. Therefore, further research involving younger populations is needed, while guidance and prevention initiatives should also be promoted to help individuals recognize ghosting and cope with this experience in healthier ways.

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Conflict of interest

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