

# Ghosting on Tinder: Examining Disconnectivity in Online Dating

Anamarija Šiša 

Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia

**Correspondence:** Anamarija Šiša ([anamarija.sisa@fdv.uni-lj.si](mailto:anamarija.sisa@fdv.uni-lj.si))

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## Abstract

This study examines the phenomenon of ghosting on the mobile dating app Tinder among Slovenia’s dating app users. Ghosting is defined as the unexpected unilateral termination of communication in interpersonal relationships exerted through digital platforms. Drawing upon data from the walkthrough of the mobile dating app Tinder and 26 semi-structured interviews with users living in Ljubljana (Slovenia), ghosting is conceptualized as an undesirable but normalized disconnection strategy on Tinder. We argue that choosing ghosting as a communication strategy emerges predominantly from two different contexts. Firstly, from the need to protect oneself from harassment and vulnerability, and secondly, as a reaction to the information overload in an environment that demands perpetual activity, availability, and interaction. Therefore, it manifests as a disconnection strategy on an interaction level or as a consequence of disconnecting from the platform itself. According to users, the desire to disconnect from others and exit the app is as high and ambiguous as the desire to connect and experience an ego boost or the excitement of interactions. Ghosting on Tinder, therefore, emerges as a response to general hyperconnectivity to navigate the increasing information overload and to a feeling of loss of the possibilities for safe and authentic connections in digital spaces.

## Keywords

digital disconnection; ghosting; hyperconnectivity; information overload; safety strategy; Tinder

## 1. Introduction

In the past decade, mobile dating applications (MDAs) have seen a significant rise in popularity and availability. These apps leverage GPS technology to enable immediate, location-based connections, creating an environment that seamlessly merges digital and physical interactions, facilitating fluid transitions between the two. Among dating apps that establish this “hybrid ecology” (Toch & Levi, 2013), Tinder stands

out as a particularly prominent example, enabling 1.6 billion swipes and claiming responsibility for 26 million matches daily (Lindner, 2023) with 75 million active users, and 10.4 million subscribers in 2023 (Mansoor, 2024). Those high numbers indicate increased access and partner options for Tinder dating app users. The growing user base and the platformization of dating (Bandinelli, 2022) have transformed how individuals initiate encounters and engage in flirtation, as well as how they terminate interactions and exit relationships. One notable practice in this context is ghosting, which has become a prevalent communication strategy on mobile dating apps over the past decade (Collins et al., 2023; LeFebvre et al., 2019; Van de Wiele & Campbell, 2019).

Ghosting is the practice of unilaterally ending an interaction without explanation and avoiding any further communication with the (potential) partner, commonly enacted via one or multiple technological medium(s) (LeFebvre, 2017). This study aims to examine ghosting within the context of disconnection practices. Based on the results of our research, ghosting emerges not only as a mechanism for protection against undesirable interactions but also as a consequence of the overwhelming flow of interactions and the continuous demands for availability and engagement in digital environments. Consequently, this study seeks to conceptualize ghosting as both a method of disengaging from interpersonal connections and how it is more broadly connected to digital disconnection practices. This dual perspective provides a comprehensive understanding of ghosting's role and its implications in the digital social sphere.

Substantial scholarly attention has been devoted to exploring the phenomenon of ghosting and the broader concept of digital disconnection. Research has focused on the adverse emotional consequences experienced by individuals who have been ghosted (Koessler et al., 2019; Konings et al., 2023; Navarro et al., 2020), the coping strategies following the experience of being ghosted (LeFebvre & Fan, 2020; Timmermans et al., 2021), and ghosting within the specific setting of dating apps (Halversen et al., 2022; Narr & Luong, 2023; Van de Wiele & Campbell, 2019). At the same time, digital disconnection studies have primarily focused on voluntary disconnection from specific devices, platforms, social networking services (SNS), and digital media in general (Altmaier et al., 2024). The latest research by Nassen et al. (2023) supports this finding, defining five levels of disconnection: device-level, platform-level, feature-level, interaction-level, and message-level. Additionally, they identify six core motivations (perceived overuse, social interactions, psychological well-being, productivity, privacy, and perceived usefulness) and various strategies of disconnection (quitting, taking breaks, reducing, switching, and using tools) present in the existing literature. Furthermore, Nassen et al. (2023, p. 13) propose a working definition for voluntary digital disconnection as an intentional non-use of digital technologies or their features at varying frequencies and durations to control and improve perceived overuse, social interactions, psychological well-being, privacy, and productivity.

## 2. Ghosting on Mobile Dating Apps

In recent years, research on ghosting on MDAs has proliferated, but there has not been uniform agreement on its definition. Kay and Courtice (2022, p. 406) have proposed an empirically accessible definition of ghosting as a “relationship dissolution strategy that requires the termination of all communication and occurs suddenly without explanation, unilaterally by one of the partners.” Other research has emphasized the role of information and communication technologies in ghosting, as it is “primarily enacted using mediated communication” (LeFebvre et al., 2019, p. 133). Technologically mediated rejection or relationship dissolution is often used to avoid uncomfortable or negative reactions and is practiced across diverse types

of relationships (Halversen et al., 2022; LeFebvre et al., 2019). Since the present research focuses on Tinder, understanding ghosting as a technologically mediated dating practice that can happen in various stages of relationships is crucial. This article stands in agreement with LeFebvre et al. (2019) and LeFebvre and Fan (2020) that ghosting does not take place only in formal romantic relationships; it can occur within any interpersonal relationship where communication is established. According to Šiša (2022, p. 4), ghosting “requires a one-sided expectation that interaction will happen and continue developing, and that termination then comes as a surprise.” In the digital environment of MDAs, there is a mutual expectation among users that communication is directed towards “future horizons” (Veel & Thylstrup, 2021, p. 204), typically culminating in at least one date.

Ghosting on Tinder can be used in a variety of ways, from not initiating an interaction once a match is established, not responding to messages when a potential partner makes first contact, to unmatching mid-conversation, or ending contact after the first or several dates. At the same time, studies have revealed that interface elements such as swiping (left), unmatching, and blocking are common methods of rejection, underscoring the unique affordances of the platform that are not present in offline interactions (Van de Wiele & Campbell, 2019, p. 44). Outside of dating apps, ghosting includes ignoring communication attempts and terminating communication channels, especially unfollowing ex-partners on social media (Collins et al., 2023). Ghosting can therefore occur at any stage of an interaction or relationship and leaves behind a feeling of uncertainty that goes hand in hand with the uncertain environment of gamified MDAs (Isisag, 2019; Mackinnon, 2022). The affordances of MDAs, which prioritize image-based partner selection and enable mobility, alongside the gamification of dating that encourages superficial interactions and the commodity-like treatment of users, contribute to emotional detachment and may facilitate the practice of ghosting. Reports from individuals who engage in ghosting indicate that the action is often unintentional and is not necessarily undertaken with malicious intent. Rather, it is often perceived as a protective measure against aggressive advances (Timmermans et al., 2021, p. 16). Similarly, Halversen et al. (2022) demonstrate that on Bumble, women often utilize ghosting to end early relationships non-confrontationally, especially when the potential for negative reactions is present. The literature also shows that frequent use of computer-mediated communication may contribute to communication burnout or “Tinder fatigue” (Solovyeva & Laskin, 2022) and negatively impact users’ well-being (Her & Timmermans, 2021). The study by Navarro et al. (2020) demonstrates that ghosting is common in short-term relationships characterized by minimal commitment, suggesting that technological platforms facilitate easier dissolution of relationships lacking emotional ties, potentially perpetuating a cycle where individuals who engage in or experience ghosting are predisposed to further short-term interactions.

### 3. Voluntary Digital Disconnection

Connection and disconnection are inherently intertwined and mutually necessary (Light, 2014). In the mediatized (see Couldry & Hepp, 2013) and datafied (see van Dijck & Poell, 2013) world, there is an ever-present mobile connectivity paradox. It encapsulates the dual nature of mobile technology, enhancing autonomy by allowing flexible, anytime-anywhere access to information and communication, yet simultaneously undermining it by diverting attention and control from people’s primary activities (Vanden Abeele, 2021, p. 934). The infrastructure enabling individual addressability fosters a global culture of omnipresent connectivity (see Lupinacci, 2021), wherein expectations of immediate availability and response impose constraints on personal freedom, leading to perceived pressures and new responsibilities in

managing one's connectivity and accountability (Vanden Abeele et al., 2018). There is an inclination to alleviate these pressures that correlate with the pursuit of deeper social interactions facilitated by the non-use of mobile media and deliberate disconnection from digital devices (Karlsen & Syvertsen, 2016; Light & Cassidy, 2014).

Disconnection is a fundamental aspect of social media practices, serving various purposes such as maintaining safety and managing relationships (Light, 2014). Light and Cassidy (2014) identify common strategies for interpersonal disconnection on SNSs, including permanently or temporarily removing relationships, suspending engagement with SNSs, unfriending, and altering how SNSs and their users record events, actions, and associations. Concerning the notion of safety, existing research on "interaction-level disconnection practices" (Nassen et al., 2023) primarily focuses on "politically motivated unfriending" on SNSs (Zhu, 2023). Zhu and Skoric (2022) understand politically motivated unfriending as a form of selective avoidance that can sometimes be motivated by psychological discomfort or conflict. In the context of politically motivated unfriending on instant messaging platforms, users disconnect to protect their well-being, protect personal safety, and minimize social risks (Zhu & Skoric, 2023). Barnidge et al. (2023, p. 1032) found that selective avoidance is more likely in larger diverse networks with weak ties, acting as a form of boundary maintenance to manage political diversity. Overall, these studies illustrate that disconnection practices are employed to avoid conflict and ensure personal safety on SNSs.

Digital disconnection encompasses various practices aimed at managing individuals' time and well-being in response to neoliberal demands for optimization (Jorge et al., 2022). These practices address issues like the overuse of digital technologies, low productivity, and imbalance in mobile connectivity (Vanden Abeele, 2021), often suggesting individual responsibility and the use of technology itself as a solution (Jorge et al., 2022; Syvertsen & Enli, 2020). Nevertheless, motivations for disengaging from digital technologies are influenced by platform or device-related factors, social pressures, and personal circumstances (Nguyen, 2021). Among others, key reasons are personal perceptions of excessive usage and information overload (Franks et al., 2018). For instance, youths in Norway and Portugal report frustration and a sense of meaninglessness from excessive social media use, with boredom driving both engagement and disengagement (Jorge et al., 2023). Prolonged and excessive use of digital platforms can lead to emotional exhaustion and diminished interest or "online fatigue" (Gregersen et al., 2023). Petit (2015, pp. 177–178) speaks of "digital disaffect," a hypnotic state of boredom, detachment, ennui, and malaise, marked by a repetitive cycle of engagement without fulfillment. This author claims that this sensation parallels the Tantalus myth, where the gratification promised by the internet always remains just out of reach, leading to an endless series of clicks. Or as Paasonen (2021, p. 124) describes it: "The disaffected have seen the same thing before—been there, done that, with nothing new left to see." This author claims that despite the promise of immediate gratification, users often face delays in finding and accessing desired content. They embark on a quest for the perfect image or scene, only to find inadequate options, leading to an ongoing, frustrating, yet enticing search that is both boring and exciting.

The phenomenon of disconnection on dating applications represents an underexplored area within academic research. Despite the growing socio-cultural significance of these platforms, scholarly investigations into the reasons and effects of voluntarily ceasing their use are sparse. Brubaker et al. (2016) identified four primary reasons for users leaving Grindr: its time-consuming nature, problematic behaviors, challenging interpersonal interactions, and objectionable app features. Users often perceive Grindr as a distraction, with communication deemed laborious and ineffective. Most users exit by deleting the app, some by deleting

their accounts or anonymizing profiles, with the study highlighting social aspects such as losing access to other users and withdrawing from Grindr's overarching culture. Vares (2023), on the other hand, focuses on users leaving Tinder and is similarly dedicated to showing the termination of the use of Tinder as a gradual process. The most frequent reason for leaving Tinder was "the success in finding the relationship" (Vares, 2023, p. 976) but there was a recurring pattern in which they would delete their dating applications at the onset of a new relationship, only to revisit these platforms if the relationship subsequently dissolved.

#### 4. Methodological Approach

This study formed part of a larger doctoral project on technologically mediated dating practices and intimate relationships on Tinder in Slovenia. In the first stage of data collection, we employed the "walkthrough method" (Light et al., 2018), which involved the analysis of the organizational materials (Tinder's technical blog and press releases, marketing materials including app store information, formal terms of services, the frequently asked questions section, media articles about the app, etc.) to better understand Tinder's environment of expected use. We compiled these documents, focusing on the period from the beginning of 2019 to the end of 2021. Furthermore, the method included a technical walkthrough of Tinder's mobile interface to identify discrete affordances and examine the app's features and functionalities that might typically go unnoticed during regular use. To thoroughly explore Tinder's technical architecture, we created two research accounts, one in March and one in November 2021, taking screenshots and field notes throughout. We synthesized data from these technical walkthroughs and utilized a hybrid approach to thematic analysis, combining deductive a priori coding with data-driven inductive coding to integrate existing research findings while allowing codes to emerge directly from the data. We focused on codes connected to the affordances of the app, for example "unmatch," "ghosting," "safety feature," and "deleting the app."

In the meantime, we conducted the second stage of data collection. From April to July 2021, we interviewed 26 Tinder users with ages between 18–35-years-old living in Ljubljana, Slovenia. Our sample includes 17 women and 9 men. We decided to include semi-structured in-person interviews to better grasp how users engage with Tinder's interface and we encouraged them to interact with the app during the interviews. This approach closely aligns with the "media go-along" method (Jørgensen, 2016; Møller & Robards, 2019), in which the researcher observes and steers participants through their interactions with the app being studied. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and pseudonymized. First, we merged both data sources and, using an already existing template, undertook a comprehensive process of initial data coding. Although certain codes were predetermined, we allowed for a specific degree of flexibility, accommodating inductive coding where the empirical material warranted it. At this point, codes relevant to user experience were formed such as "overload," "boredom," and "harassment." Finally, after axial and selective coding (Boeije, 2010), three overarching themes that captured the phenomenon of ghosting as a disconnection practice as described in the raw data were identified. Themes such as "ghosting as a disconnection safety strategy," "digital overload leading to disconnection," and "ghosting as an outcome of digital disaffect" emerged. These themes were instrumental in organizing our findings coherently and systematically.

#### 5. Ghosting as a Disconnection Strategy for Safety on Tinder

Ghosting on Tinder can occur by using the "unmatch only" or "report & unmatch" features within the "security toolbox," framing unmatching as a safety feature and allowing users to unmatch at their discretion due to

discomfort, safety concerns, or changing their minds. While Tinder does not explicitly link unmatching to ghosting, it provides guidelines where ghosting is appropriate, such as inconsistent communication, consent breaches, safety issues, dishonesty, and general unease (Tinder, n.d.). The “unmatch” feature in dating apps works in the same manner as unfriending in other social media. The user needs permission to be someone’s friend, however, no permission is needed to unfriend them (Sibona, 2014). As most of our female participants confirmed, they utilize unmatching mostly when feeling uncomfortable or harassed. Vita unmatched a man who mocked her during a video call after initially matching without a photo. Hana noted that inappropriate vulgar messages are common among Tinder users: “Some of the conversations were awkward, I got many unsolicited dick pics. I really didn’t like it. How does a person I just met think it is appropriate to send me a dick pic. Why?” She decided to ghost and unmatch this user, as well as block his number on Viber. The same strategy was used by Maša on many occasions: “If he’s bothering me and I don’t want to talk to him, I just unmatch him and that’s it. I won’t put effort into every match that messages me.” Female participants mentioned a wide range of “technology-facilitated sexual violence behaviors” (Filice et al., 2022), in-person stalking, and harassment that have mostly been resolved by terminating contact with the perpetrator.

In general, women speak of technologically facilitated and in-person sexual harassment while using MDAs (Douglass et al., 2018) and experience it as ordinary, expected, and normalized (Gillett, 2021). As Sandra describes, women often feel apprehensive about the uncertainty of meeting strangers through Tinder: “When I was in Croatia, I was talking to a guy who wanted to come to my location. After some time, I changed my mind and didn’t reply to him, as I didn’t know him.” Despite the absence of any overt harassment, Sandra chose to adopt these safety measures in anticipation of a potentially unsafe situation, effectively engaging in ghosting by terminating the match. Similarly, Ema ghosted a man who was insisting on “Netflix and Chill”: “He didn’t understand that I wasn’t going to come to his apartment. I don’t know who he is or what his situation at home is—there could be another guy there for all I know. So, I ghosted him.” Refusing to accept rejection was therefore a common motivation among women who decided to ghost men. Julija explained: “Basically, I ended up ghosting people because guys didn’t understand ‘no’ and explaining that something didn’t suit me or couldn’t work didn’t make a difference.” Similarly, Ada described a situation when she felt that ghosting was the only possibility:

It was a situation where he wanted more than I did. After I explained this to him, he didn’t accept it and continued to communicate as if nothing had happened, repeatedly asking when we should meet. In the end, I concluded that the only way for him to understand that I didn’t want anything with him was to stop communicating. I’m not happy about it, but I didn’t feel like there was any other option.

On Tinder, ghosting is one of the disconnection strategies that women use to protect themselves against risks, harassment, and violence (Freedman et al., 2022), even if they are not directly exposed to danger. Ghosting is a practice with uncertain outcomes (LeFebvre & Fan, 2020), as one cannot always predict how others will react to rejection, which can potentially result in harassment. Halversen et al. (2022, p. 16) found that women on Bumble repeatedly use the practice of ghosting, on the one hand, to avoid confrontations that could cause negative reactions, and, on the other hand, to avoid directly hurting or embarrassing someone. Our findings can be reinforced by the research on politically motivated unfriending on instant messaging platforms (Zhu & Skoric, 2023). Prevailing motivations for unfriending others in uncertain political contexts were protecting personal well-being and safety and reducing social risks. As authors concluded, politically motivated unfriending is “a product of systemic problems, rather than individual choices alone”

(Zhu & Skoric, 2023, p. 11), since the users who see themselves as victims of an oppressive system are more likely to delete or block someone. Similarly, when establishing connections on Tinder, female users are aware of safety issues that stem from patriarchal social relations where gender-based violence is prevalent. In this context, ghosting is about avoiding unpleasant future situations (Chan, 2018, pp. 308–309; Timmermans et al., 2021, p. 16), as fear stems from the possibility that users will be violent or is the response to harassment (Gillett, 2021).

Nevertheless, on Tinder, users aim to connect with a diverse array of strangers for various relationships and connection is central to the use of dating apps. Ghosting as a practice of dissolution of interaction in many cases may therefore feel like a microaggression of being rejected and excluded without explanation (see Wu & Bamishigbin, 2024). As explained by Denis, ghosting affects a person's self-esteem, since "the most unpleasant thing is that people just stop answering your messages in the middle of a conversation." He claims that "in person, no one would walk away in the middle of a conversation. On Tinder, however, this is the most common outcome of the conversation." According to Karppi (2018, p. 24), disconnections arise and evolve alongside connections, presenting as partial, dissonant, and sometimes violent disruptions to the unifying process of connectivity. While these disconnections may appear brief and irrelevant, their effects are substantial. Whereas social media and dating platforms aim to create a connected world, disconnections can reveal the imperfections and cracks in these seemingly cohesive networks. Ghosting on dating apps reveals the impossible mission of everyone meeting a partner and transcending gender-based violence.

Overall, female users have a different understanding of connecting and disconnecting on Tinder from male users. This is not surprising since research on technologically facilitated sexual violence shows that certain groups, including women and girls, sexual and gender minorities (e.g., LGBTQ+ individuals), and people of color, are disproportionately at risk (Bivens & Hoque, 2018; Powell & Henry, 2019). Women mostly do not feel the obligation to respond to every message, even though they have matched with someone. Iva is very certain regarding this issue: "I've noticed that men have the idea that if you have Tinder, it means you've signed a contract. I just don't see it that way. I have Tinder for no reason, it's fun and I ghost all the time." This is something Maša also agrees with: "It seems to me that the platform itself...it is not necessary for you to reply to every person who writes to you." Especially vocal on this issue was Meta:

Some guys include in their profiles: "If you don't want to chat, don't swipe right." They seem to have an attitude about it. I don't feel obliged to respond just because someone messages me. I believe ghosting should be even more acceptable. I'm on the app for my own reasons, not because I owe anyone a reply for messaging me. It happens to me constantly too; if a guy doesn't respond, I don't worry or send him a hundred more messages.

On the other hand, male users think that ghosting should not be as normalized as it is. Luka believes ghosting is overly normalized and feels that a decent profile and respectful conversation should warrant a response. Ghosting even makes users uncomfortable or paranoid. The case of Matjaž is exemplary:

I'm much more paranoid now and really scared of ghosting. While I understand it—since both guys and girls can react aggressively to rejection and many find ghosting simpler—for me, it's very uncomfortable. As much as it hurts, I'd rather be rejected outright than overthink and create scenarios about what I did wrong.

Male users, such as Max, understand that women on Tinder often ghost to avoid frequent persistent messages from men:

Some girls have mentioned that if they don't reply for two days, men start bombarding them with questions like "Where are you hiding?" or "Why aren't you replying?"; if the conversation is bad, they unmatch to avoid receiving messages like that.

We can see that users are using ghosting as a digital disconnection from others because of the need to protect themselves from harassment and vulnerability and to establish a safe space for themselves. At the same time, the normalization of ghosting enables users to engage in microaggressions towards others. Once again, users are confronted with systemic issues, since online sexual violence perpetuates (hetero)sexist norms, which assume men's inherent entitlement to sex and expect women to be accommodating and submissive (Filice et al., 2022, p. 13). Ghosting is not the ethical approach we would advocate for, but we can acknowledge this disconnection practice as a "practical response" (Light, 2014) by individuals to the challenges posed by constant engagement with others in the dating sphere. As Light (2014) explains, perpetual connectivity is unsustainable, necessitating selective disconnection to prioritize and manage safe and meaningful connections effectively.

## 6. Managing Overload and Ghosting as an Outcome of Digital Disaffect

Users claim that after using Tinder for some time, they start to feel overwhelmed and tired of all interactions, both successful and unsuccessful. Matjaž is such an example:

This year, there was a point where it became overwhelming, and I thought to myself, 'I can't talk to five people at once.' You hope at least one connection will work out, but they all fall apart one by one. I was spending more than two hours a day just typing.

He assumed that a higher number of connections would bring him closer to his goal of finding a relationship but: "It was way too exhausting. I wasn't doing anything else. I bought a new bass guitar and didn't practice it for the first month because I was wasting time on Tinder." In some cases, Tinder was a distraction from obligations. As Petra stated: "Exams were approaching, but I kept going on dates. I couldn't stop." Petra found Tinder to be a significant distraction from her studies ultimately impacting her academic performance, resulting in incomplete exams and not finishing the year.

As noted by Jorge et al. (2023) in their study on dis/connection among teenagers, the realization of spending excessive time on digital activities is often associated with missing out on other pursuits like studying, spending time with family and friends, or engaging in hobbies. Tinder users pointed out they frequently dedicate substantial time and effort to their interactions on the platform. However, these engagements do not consistently yield anticipated outcomes, leaving many users with a perception of inefficacy regarding their invested efforts. This frustration was echoed by Anastasija: "There was so much repetitive small talk—just the initial 'hellos,' 'how are you,' 'where are you from,' 'what do you do?' It became annoying and boring, and I just couldn't deal with it anymore." Similarly, Krištof felt overwhelmed by Tinder's focus on appearance-based judgments, which prevented him from meeting potentially interesting people and led to frustration, since he was objectifying women and swiping based on superficial preferences. Our findings



align with the study done by Brubaker et al. (2016), which found that Grindr users left the app viewing it as time-consuming, distracting, and objectifying—the latter similarly observed with Tinder users, but directed towards women.

Participants reported that the overwhelming nature of Tinder interactions, characterized by repetitive and numerous chats and superficial judgments based on appearance, led to frustration, ultimately prompting some users to reduce or terminate their use of the app. As Ada mentioned: “Regardless of whether I met someone to date, there always came a point of saturation where I couldn’t take it anymore. That was the main reason why I deleted the app each time.” While Krištof and Ada described how they “could not take it anymore,” Ema expressed that she “got tired of it,” and Meta told us she “got bored with it.” These descriptions indicate online fatigue (Gregersen et al., 2023), where prolonged and excessive use of digital platforms leads to emotional exhaustion and diminished interest. This aligns with Petit’s (2015) concept of digital disaffect, a hypnotic state of boredom and detachment marked by repetitive engagement without fulfillment. As Ema pointed out: “I usually get tired of Tinder after 2–3 days, then I delete it or forget about it. After some time, I return to Tinder and write back to people, but until then they mostly think I ghosted them.”

Tinder users reported ghosting others as a direct result of terminating their use of the app, as they abruptly ceased interactions with all their matches without prior notice. While not always intentional, ghosting occurs as an immediate consequence ceasing to use the app, even if only temporarily. According to Lucija: “I feel like I’m filling my brain with some unimportant information and people, and in the end, I’m tired of talking to five different people and putting so much energy into it. After a while, I just disappear.” She also explained: “Initially, I used to open the app and swipe daily. Gradually, I started using it less frequently. I had a few conversations open, but then I would go a week without messaging anyone before returning to continue the conversations.” Users often find themselves in situations where they feel that the interactions they establish are not exciting or important enough to maintain or terminate meaningfully, as this requires additional interaction they would like to avoid. As Ivana explained: “Communication eventually starts to tire me out. I prefer spending time with my old friends, as I find it more comforting. This is why many of my Tinder contacts fail.” A telling example is Maša, who even included the following notice in her profile bio: “You must reset Tinder every three months, I didn’t unmatch you (probably).” And then an emoji with its eyes slightly to the side and its tongue sticking out. She explained:

Yes, a fun emoji. It’s true; I still reset Tinder every three months, and then someone I talked to for a while who hasn’t seen me around asks, ‘Did you ghost me?’ I’ve written this notice because I’ve been here so long that almost everyone already knows me, and we’ve probably matched before.

Although focused on politically motivated unfriending and avoidance behaviors on social media, Barnidge et al. (2023) offer useful insights into the role of social network structures in selective avoidance behaviors. Their results indicate that selective avoidance is more likely among individuals in larger, more diverse networks with many weak ties, which lack the affective bonds of inner circles. Tinder, as a larger and more diverse network containing weak ties, supports selective avoidance as a form of boundary maintenance to manage its overwhelming environment. Given that ghosting and unmatching have become normalized and expected, users have developed strategies to stay connected and avoid being ghosted. For example, Luka told us: “I realized people often delete their accounts suddenly, which can be a shame. So, if I liked someone, I’d suggest adding each other on social media to stay in touch and possibly reconnect later.”

Deleting Tinder or temporarily pausing Tinder's use were strategies implemented when users sought to reduce their use or optimize their online experience, without intending to disconnect permanently. As Anastasija mentioned: "I just deactivated and deleted the app. So that the next time I want, I can return." When questioned about the likelihood of her return to the app, she affirmed: "Almost definitely." Maša, who has been using Tinder for four years, said: "I have deleted my profile before, but only for a month at most; it was never a permanent decision. I can't live without him; we've been together too long." This example illustrates a common behavioral pattern where users manage their digital presence by alternating between periods of active participation and deliberate disconnection. Kaun (2021, p.1574) argues that "practices of digital disconnection are formed in close association with hyper-connectivity, not as a fundamental critique, but as a way of reproducing and maintaining a social order based on digital technology." Users are thus faced with a contradiction. Dating apps and their users demand constant engagement, activity, and availability, to the extent that the dating process becomes overwhelming. This saturation precipitates a need among users to temporarily disengage from the app only to come back after a while and restore a sense of novelty and excitement. This cycle underscores the complex interplay between continuous connectivity demands and the intermittent necessity for disconnection that users must maintain to balance their online dating life and well-being.

## 7. Conclusion

Drawing on data from the walkthrough of Tinder and 26 semi-structured interviews with users in Ljubljana (Slovenia), we examined ghosting as a disconnection strategy and its implications for user well-being and interpersonal relationships in digital dating. This study contributes to disconnection studies in three significant ways: First, it broadens the scope of what is considered disconnective behavior, particularly at the interaction level within dating and intimate relationships, a relatively under-researched part of disconnection studies (see Nassen et al., 2023). It contributes to the typology of disconnection strategies by Nguyen (2021), as it includes ghosting and unmatching strategies focused on disconnecting from communication. At the same time, it demonstrates how digital platforms extend their influence on interpersonal relationships, showcasing that disconnection is not merely binary between use and nonuse, but involves nuanced practices to limit connectivity (Light & Cassidy, 2014). The study shows that ghosting and unmatching are forms of strategic disconnection framed by Tinder as safety features used to maintain personal boundaries while enabling an overwhelming number of interactions.

Second, as a disconnection practice, ghosting reflects broader struggles within interpersonal digital interactions, balancing personal safety and ethical engagement. The dual nature of ghosting—as both a mechanism for protection and a potential source of harm—highlights the need for a deeper understanding of communication strategies in digital dating contexts. Zhu and Skoric (2023) have shown that (politically motivated) unfriending as a form of selective avoidance can be motivated by psychological discomfort or conflict and that users disconnect to protect their safety and well-being while minimizing social risks. As they concluded, politically motivated unfriending is driven by systemic issues, not just individual choices. Similarly, female Tinder users, who are cognizant of technologically facilitated and in-person harassment and are aware of safety concerns rooted in patriarchal social relations, are more likely to ghost others to protect themselves. Overall, this study underscores the complexity of ghosting as a response to perceived threats and discomfort while acknowledging its impact on those who are ghosted.

Third, the ways users disconnect on Tinder help manage “Tinder fatigue” (Solovyeva & Laskin, 2022) or “online fatigue” (Gregersen et al., 2023). While disconnection can create stressful and uncertain situations for those being ghosted, it is often a strategy for maintaining personal well-being. Participants indicated that the overwhelming nature of Tinder interactions, marked by repetitive and numerous conversations and superficial judgments based on appearance, caused frustration, leading some users to reduce or discontinue their use of the app. Navarro et al. (2020) show that ghosting is common in short-term relationships with minimal commitment, suggesting that technological platforms facilitate the easy dissolution of emotionally uninvested relationships. Supporting this, Barnidge et al. (2023) found that selective avoidance is more likely in larger, diverse networks with many weak ties, like Tinder, which supports selective avoidance as a boundary maintenance strategy to manage its overwhelming environment.

Ghosting can, therefore, be more explicitly defined as a form of digital disconnection at the interaction level, characterized by the sudden and unilateral termination of communication without prior notice, often facilitated by app features such as “unmatch.” This study reveals that on dating apps like Tinder, ghosting functions as a strategy for maintaining personal boundaries and managing the overwhelming demands of hyperconnectivity. Users engage in ghosting mostly to avoid unwelcome interactions and cope with digital engagement saturation. The cyclical pattern of engagement and disengagement reflects a broader struggle with the demands of hyperconnectedness, where users navigate the complex interplay between seeking meaningful interactions and managing digital overload. While often criticized, ghosting emerges as a rational response within this context, providing users with means to withdraw, reassess their social engagements, and potentially return with renewed interest, maintaining a balance within their digital and personal lives.

Nevertheless, ghosting on dating apps (like Tinder) raises significant ethical implications. While it can be a necessary strategy for personal safety and well-being, particularly against harassment, it also leads to feelings of rejection and uncertainty for those being ghosted. The ability to unmatch and ghost someone without explanation provides a sense of control and protection, especially for women and marginalized groups. However, the lack of closure can be emotionally distressing and perpetuates a culture of disposability in digital interactions, eroding social norms around respectful communication. To address these issues, platform designers should promote safer, more respectful disconnection practices, such as providing predefined messages for unmatching to provide some level of closure while maintaining personal safety. This could encourage more considerate communication strategies and foster a more empathetic digital dating environment.

This study has limitations that should be considered: First, the sample size was limited to 26 participants from Ljubljana (Slovenia), which may not be representative of the broader Tinder user base. Additionally, analyzing the practices of users on a single dating app is insufficient for making generalized statements. Future research should include a larger and more diverse sample of users from different countries and various dating apps to enhance the generalizability of the findings. Second, our study focused only on two contexts in which ghosting appears on Tinder. Since it was not exclusively centered on ghosting and disconnection from Tinder, it lacks data that could provide a more complex narrative. Future research should delve deeper into the various disconnection practices across different dating apps and their impacts on user well-being. Moreover, it would be beneficial to explore how people across different sociodemographic groups, including gender differences, experience and practice ghosting and other forms of disconnection on dating apps. Our results revealed differences by gender, suggesting that more comprehensive studies are needed to understand these

dynamics fully. This study is a step forward in fostering dialogue between the fields of online dating and digital disconnection studies. However, further research is essential to build on these findings and provide a more nuanced understanding of disconnection practices in the digital dating landscape.

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### Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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## About the Author



**Anamarija Šiša** is a teaching assistant at the Department of Media and Communication at the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana. She is currently completing the interdisciplinary doctoral study program in humanities and social sciences, specializing in media studies. Her doctoral dissertation is titled *Technologically Mediated Dating Practices and Intimate Relationships on the Mobile Dating App Tinder*.