

"Ghosting" and the implications of digital in the phenomenon of Romantic Scams

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Abstract

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The concept of "ghosting" outlines an increasingly common social practice in online interactions, characterized by the sudden interruption of a personal communication or relationship. Its roots lie in the dynamics of contemporary society, which emphasizes individual autonomy and the pervasive use of digital media for interpersonal communication. It is to be seen as a symptom of the modern emotional paralysis and commitment anxiety that plagues many contemporary structures. The normalization of the phenomenon, perpetrated through media content, only accentuates its significant cultural and social impact, configuring ghosting as an acceptable form of relationship management. All this should be seen as a shadow of modern social interactions, revealing the complexities and contradictions of an increasingly mediatized and individualistic society. This approach aims to offer a critical vantage point for investigating interpersonal dynamics and the broader structures of power and technology that shape our reality.

Keywords

Dark | Digital | Ghosting | Romantic Scam | Shadow | Social Media

1. Introduction: The Sacred within the Secular

The "shadows of the social" represent those gray and invisible zones that inhabit the margins of interpersonal relationships and contemporary society, phenomena that escape the naked eye of the norm and are located in a liminal space between presence and absence. These shadows emerge in everyday interactions, often marked by anonymity or distance mediated by digital technologies, creating a form of invisibility that, while intangible, has a concrete impact on relational dynamics. The concept of social shadows includes not only marginalized individuals, but also social practices that contribute to their symbolic alienation or disappearance from the relational landscape. Prominent among these phenomena are ghosting and online romantic scams, manifestations of a contemporary form of disappearance and identity manipulation that nurture otherness and silence.

In order to better understand the link between the construction of the imaginary and the dimension of invisibility, it is first necessary to situate the sociology of the imaginary within a theoretical path that develops through various historical stages and philosophical reflections. The imaginary is not a mere reflection of the real, but is an active tool for interpreting the world, mediating between the visible and the invisible, between what is accepted and what is removed or concealed from the collective consciousness. Unlike empirical representations, the imaginary moves on a symbolic plane, rooted in the myths, collective beliefs and dreams of a society.

Gilbert Durand (1969) points out that the imaginary is a system of signs and symbols that shapes our perception of reality, and deeply conditions the way we interpret the world. Building on this idea, the social imaginary creates categories that define what is visible, acceptable and valued within a given culture, but also what is systematically obscured or excluded: the imaginary as the site of social creation, where shared meanings are produced. (Castoriadis, 1975) The imaginary does not merely represent social reality: it shapes it and establishes the coordinates within which identities and social relations take shape. The imaginary establishes meanings that are "naturalized," making visible only certain dimensions of social life, while others remain marginal or invisible.

At this point, it is also useful to consider the perspective on "social visibility" (Bourdieu, 1979): I and power dynamics within a society determine who has access to visibility and who is deprived of it, the dominant social groups use the imaginary to maintain their privileged position, making only certain discourses and representations visible, while others are excluded. This is where the concept of invisibility comes into play: the social imaginary not only constructs the other as a "different" entity (in terms of ethnicity, gender, class), but in some cases erases him or her completely from the public scene. Otherness, then, is not only something visible, but can also become a form of absence, of non-recognition, of silence.

Riflection that can be further explored by referring to the concept of "distribution of the sensible" (Rancière, 2000), which describes how societies regulate what is perceivable and what is not. Social and political hierarchies are also reflected in a



hierarchy of perceptions: some social groups are visible, their experiences are recognized and narrated, while others remain excluded from this visibility: 'invisibility, in this sense, becomes a political and social condition, a strategy to keep certain groups on the margins of public recognition.

To return to the central research question: how do we get from the imaginary to invisibility? The social imaginary not only constructs otherness, but also determines who or what is considered "other" and, therefore, invisible or marginal.

The imaginary functions as a cultural lens that focuses certain social phenomena, making them visible and worthy of attention, while blurring or obscuring others, pushing them to the margins of social awareness. This process occurs systematically and, often, unconsciously: the imaginary institutionalizes the invisibility of certain subjects or experiences, reducing their symbolic presence in the public sphere.

The concept of "non-places" offers another perspective in this respect: certain spaces and people are relegated to "anonymous" areas of social life, as if they were absent despite being physically present. In contemporary visual culture, with its continuous flow of images and representations, reinforces these dynamics of visibility and invisibility: in the context of a society dominated by images, those who are not represented become symbolically invisible: we live in a "society of the spectacle" in which what is visible is constantly spectacularized, while what does not fit the dominant visual canons ends up being excluded. (Debord, 1967)

At this point, digital ghosting, as a relational practice, can be interpreted in the light of the sociology of the imaginary as a form of identity construction and deconstruction within contemporary society, which is highly mediatized and characterized by ephemeral and fragmented relationships. To include ghosting in the concept of the imaginary is to analyze how social interactions are, increasingly, shaped by representations and images that inhabit our digital world and help shape the way we perceive ourselves and others. This reflects a projection of power, in which the individual, through the disruption of contact, redefines or cancels his or her own presence in relational experience. This process of disappearance and invisibilization is rooted in a culture of individualism, which privileges autonomy and the possibility of selectively "existing," in line with the imaginary of freedom and control over interaction with the other. The phenomenon presents itself as the product of identity and relational fragmentation: a way of withdrawing from emotional connection, breaking ties without explanation or direct confrontation, dynamics strongly linked to the contemporary imaginary, where the individual, through digital media, perceives himself and acts as an entity capable of determining his own visibility and absence.

The possibility of "disappearing" is not only a physical act, but a symbolic gesture that reflects the desire to preserve autonomy at the expense of relational reciprocity.

Moreover, by linking "ghosting" to the imaginary, we can understand how it expresses the tension between the desire to be there and the fear of becoming too involved. In a society dominated by fleeting images and screen-mediated interactions, the practice of ghosting becomes a way to avoid the anxiety generated by social expectations, vulnerability and emotional commitment (Illouz, 2007).



This type of behavior is emblematic of digital modernity, in which the fragmentation of identity and the precariousness of human ties are reflected in relationships.

The notion of "society of the spectacle" finds an interesting connection with Habermas' analysis of the public sphere, according to which public space is the place where collective opinion is formed and social meanings are negotiated (Habermas, 1989). However, in a society dominated by media visibility, as Debord points out, the public sphere is profoundly influenced by the logics of the spectacle, which privilege superficial images and representations over dialogical confrontation based on rationality. This dynamic amplifies the invisibility of those who do not conform to the dominant canons, marginalizing them symbolically within a collective imagination oriented toward visual consumption.

The construction of otherness and social exclusion can be further analyzed through Goffman's (1963, 1959) concepts of "stigma" and "performance." Stigma serves as a symbolic device that marks the other as different or inferior, reducing them to a social category that justifies their marginalization. In parallel, social "performance" highlights how identity is continuously constructed and negotiated through interactions mediated by cultural expectations and norms. In a digital context, where representations of identity are often curated and filtered, performance becomes a tool to control visibility and social recognition, making invisibility not only a condition suffered, but such a strategic choice.

These concepts illuminate how ghosting and romantic cheating represent not only relational phenomena, but also structural dynamics related to the construction of identity and otherness. In the first case, sudden disappearance can be seen as a form of performance that reaffirms individual autonomy at the expense of relational reciprocity. In the second, stigma manifests itself through the perception of the victim as naive or guilty, contributing to her further social exclusion. Both phenomena, so ingrained in the contemporary imagination, reflect the tension between visibility and invisibility, between recognition and marginalization.

In sum, ghosting can be included in the contemporary imagination as a manifestation of relational anxiety and individualism, embodying the idea of a self-narrative that exists in fragments, in which the choice of "being there" or "not being there" is part of an exercise in controlling interaction, fueled by the power dynamics and invisibilization of modernity.

The explosion of digital communication has amplified this dynamic, in which the digital interface makes it easier to avoid direct conflict and disappear from the interaction. Turkle (2011), in his study on the impact of digital technologies on relational life, points out how communication mediated by screens and mobile devices fosters a kind of emotional detachment, individuals, in fact find themselves immersed in a reality in which physical presence is no longer necessary to maintain a relationship, but at the same time, the lack of physical contact creates greater ease in suddenly severing ties. Technology thus becomes a tool for mediating relationships, but also for isolation and escape. Ghosting represents, in this sense, the pinnacle of



relational disconnection, an act that amplifies the power of individual control and makes the other invisible, excluded from any form of recognition.

In a society characterized by what is known as liquid modernity (Bauman, 2000), interpersonal ties are increasingly fragile and flexible, reflecting the volatility and uncertainty of a constantly changing world. Relationships, like consumer objects, become easily replaceable and lack a solid foundation. Ghosting fits perfectly into this context, representing an extreme form of relational liquidity, in which presence and absence become two sides of the same coin. The sudden disappearance of an individual from a relationship not only breaks the bond but leaves the other person in a state of suspension, deprived of any explanation or emotional closure.

This situation contributes to the fragmentation of individual identity, which is increasingly "saturated" with relational and media inputs, making it fragile and easily manipulated (Gergen, 2000). Romance scams (Whitty and Buchanan, 2012) exploit victims' emotionality and trust through false identities constructed online, ghosting represents the final act of a premeditated deception and is not simply an individual relational choice to avoid conflict, but part of a calculated strategy of emotional and financial manipulation. This practice, in everyday relationships can be the result of the inability to manage commitment or the tension between autonomy and connection, as analyzed by Illouz (2007), in the context of romantic scams, the abrupt termination of contact is the last act of an exploitative plan. The purpose is not only to end the relationship, but to ensure the scammer's impunity, leaving the victim in a state of deep emotional vulnerability and often with significant economic losses

These two phenomena are not only issues of interpersonal dynamics but reveal deep cultural and social tensions related to trust, transparency and accountability, people become vulnerable to forms of manipulation that exploit physical distance and anonymity. The collective imagination, nurtured by the media and popular culture, contributes to the normalization of these practices, often presenting ghosting as an acceptable way to manage relationships. Marwick and boyd (2011) observed how digital culture promotes individual freedom at the expense of relational responsibility, creating fertile ground for similar behaviors.

The shadows of the social, then, represent not only the phenomena of invisibility and disappearance in relationships, but also the broader tensions that characterize contemporary modernity. Those highlighted so far are just two examples of how digital technology can amplify the dynamics of disappearance and alienation, making it easier for individuals to hide behind screens and fictitious identities.

2. Ghosting as a cultural and social phenomenon rooted in mediated communication

Ghosting, a social practice that has gained particular relevance in the era of digitally mediated communication, is characterized by the sudden and often unexplained disappearance of an individual from a relationship or social interaction.



It has become especially prevalent in online dating and social media platforms. While this is not a historical novelty, it takes on new significance in the contemporary context as it reflects broader dynamics related to individualism, the liquidity of relationships, and the intensive use of digital technologies.

To better analyze this cultural and social phenomenon, it is necessary to examine the factors that fuel it in today's society. Ghosting is closely linked to the emotional individualism that pervades contemporary romantic relationship structures (Illouz, 2007). People are increasingly oriented to view romantic relationships in terms of consumer opportunities, with an increasing focus on personal gratification and a reduced emphasis on long-term mutual commitment. The result is that this practice becomes a way of ending a relationship without directly addressing the emotional conflict that an explicit one would entail. In other words, consumer culture has carried its values into the spheres of human relationships as well, turning others into replaceable goods rather than partners on whom one is emotionally dependent.

The dynamics of ghosting and online romance scams can be further understood through the concept of "expulsion of the other" (Han, 2017): contemporary society, characterized by individualism and fragmentation, tends to expel anything that is perceived as an obstacle to self-actualization and the continuous flow of superficial interactions. In the sphere of digital relationships, the other is often treated as a "non-thing," that is, an entity that can be easily replaced or eliminated.

Digital interfaces facilitate this expulsion, allowing individuals to abruptly break off relationships without directly addressing the emotional or relational consequences (Han, 2022). In parallel, technology-mediated communication has reshaped the way we build and maintain relationships. Messaging apps and social media have introduced an emotional distance that makes it easier for people to "disappear" from interactions (Turkle, 2011), fueling the phenomenon of ghosting.

This "disappearance" becomes a form of rejection of the other, made possible by technologies that amplify individual control over relationships.

In the context of romantic scams, the expulsion of the other takes on a manipulative dimension. It is not just an act of avoidance but the final stage of a premeditated scheme of emotional and financial exploitation. The scammer uses digital intimacy as a tool for manipulation, then expels the victim from the relationship when they have achieved their goals.

This broader view highlights the fragility of interpersonal ties in a society where communication is increasingly mediated by digital technologies. The bond between people becomes more tenuous, and the possibility of disappearing without apparent consequences increases. In this context, ghosting can be seen as a reflection of the disconnection and alienation that characterize contemporary digital interactions. Online platforms offer a kind of anonymity and absence of accountability, making it easier for individuals to avoid the confrontation and difficult conversations that a traditional breakup would require.

The issue of "in/out" manifested through ghosting, understood as the act of appearing or disappearing, underscores the complexity of contemporary relational dynamics. This phenomenon, while related to romantic relationships, should not be



confined exclusively to them. Ghosting can also occur in other types of affective relationships, such as friendship, where the dynamics of reciprocity and recognition can come to a sudden halt.

Moreover, ghosting expresses a tension between belonging and alienation, where the other is transformed into an external or replaceable element. As suggested in the concept of the "normal chaos of love" (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2018), the fluidity of modern relationships amplifies these dynamics, making ties less stable and more vulnerable to sudden interruptions. In this sense, ghosting represents not only a form of relational disconnection, but also a manifestation of a broader mismatch between relational expectations and the reality of a world increasingly characterized by emotional and relational fragility.

Friendship, family or work relationships, just like romantic ones, are affected by the precariousness typical of liquid modernity. Ghosting in these relationships, although less visible or studied, raises important questions about the value of mutual recognition and the ability to sustain emotional bonds in a context where individualism prevails (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2013). The disappearance of the other, whether physical or emotional, not only disrupts the relationship, but also destabilizes the sense of self and the construction of identity, which is often based on meaningful and lasting connections.

This reflection underscores the importance of problematizing ghosting as a practice not only relational, but also social and cultural, in which the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion are intertwined with the increasing mediatization of interactions. The phenomenon cannot be fully understood without considering how the global imaginary, mediated by technology, continually redefines the meaning of affective ties, intimacy and reciprocity.

A further contribution to the understanding of ghosting is found in the analysis of the "reflective self" and the transformation of intimacy in the modern era.

In contemporary society, intimate relationships are increasingly built on a fragile and temporary foundation, reflecting a radical change from traditional conceptions that emphasized stability and mutual commitment. Intimacy is perceived as a personal project rather than a shared construction between individuals, facilitating the idea that people can "turn off" relationships when they no longer meet their individual goals.

This new relational setting creates a space in which ghosting becomes a viable solution for those seeking to avoid the emotional pain and complexity of an explicit breakup. The act of abruptly breaking off a relationship aligns with a society that prizes personal autonomy and control while simultaneously diminishing the value of lasting emotional connections. Relationships that were once based on mutual promises and deep ties are now more susceptible to interruption as individuals are increasingly willing to close chapters of their lives when a relationship becomes burdensome or uncomfortable.

Digital interfaces, such as messaging apps and social media, offer opportunities for superficial connections but often do not provide the support needed to deal with the emotional complications of relationships. Exchanges can happen quickly and



casually, leading to a shallowness in interactions that can result in a lack of empathy and accountability. This condition of relational precariousness is exacerbated by the culture of consumability, where relationships are treated as exchangeable goods that are easily replaced when they no longer meet expectations.

The idea of negotiable intimacy leads to inherent fragility: the possibility to break off relationships without facing the emotional consequences generates insecurity, prompting individuals to view emotional ties as temporary contracts. This paradigm shift means that the end of a relationship can occur with a push of a button, depriving individuals of the experience of meaningful closure and the grieving that follows. Ghosting not only disrupts a bond but also contributes to a culture of disconnection that can leave lasting emotional scars.

Ghosting, then, does not just represent a gesture of indifference but becomes a symbol of a deeper relational crisis: the fragility of ties is reflected in the behavior of individuals, who may feel justified in abandoning relationships because of a lack of mutual commitment. In this scenario, the boundaries between authenticity and deception become blurred, creating an environment in which emotional honesty is often sacrificed in the name of personal comfort.

This analysis also suggests the need for deeper reflection on how digital technologies and cultural expectations influence the way we experience relationships. Recognizing the role of intimacy in the construction of identity and social connections could lead to a more conscious and responsible approach in interactions, mitigating the deleterious effects of ghosting and promoting more authentic and sustainable relationships. The social and psychological implications of ghosting are profound and deserve critical analysis: the practice not only adversely affects the mental health of its victims but also reveals a broader crisis in the modes of human interaction in contemporary society. Ghosting is symptomatic of a culture that values empathy and emotional responsibility less and less, pushing individuals to prioritize their own well-being at the expense of others. Its prevalence reflects a broader trend toward extreme individualism and a lack of social engagement that characterize many aspects of contemporary relationships.

Ghosting embodies the tensions between individualism and social responsibility, between the quest for autonomy and the need for meaningful relationships.

The sociological literature points out that ghosting is a practice that not only destroys relationships but also leaves a deep mark on the psyche of those involved, contributing to the disconnection and alienation that characterize contemporary life.

3. Sociology of the imaginary and liquid identity

Studies on the imaginary have highlighted the importance of collective representations in the construction of the social world and personal identity. Durand (1960) developed an anthropological theory of the imaginary, arguing that symbolic representations shape not only our perceptions of reality but also the way we construct ourselves within this reality. The imaginary is not simply a reflection of the



world but an active mediator that organizes and structures individual and collective experiences.

In the context of liquid modernity (Bauman, 2000), identity is increasingly fluid and changeable. However, this fluidity cannot be fully understood without considering the role that the imaginary plays in shaping our representations of ourselves and others. The imaginary operates through archetypes and symbols that organize our experiences in ways that transcend the simple rational level. In contemporary society, where digital technology has taken over, the imaginary is particularly relevant to understanding the new ways in which individuals construct and negotiate their identities. Digital platforms, such as social media, serve as spaces where the collective and individual imaginary intertwine, allowing people to experience and represent different versions of themselves quickly and temporarily.

The "social imaginary" is the foundation of social institutions and practices. It is not just a set of symbolic representations but a creative force that shapes the social world and gives form to reality (Castoriadis, 1987). Thus, it is responsible for the constitution of social identities and roles within a community. In the digital age, the collective imaginary continues to perform this function but does so in new and more complex ways. For example, relationships that develop online are often mediated by images and representations that are part of a technological imaginary in which identity is perceived as fluid and malleable.

In the analysis of interpersonal relationships, the contribution of the sociology of the imaginary becomes essential to understand phenomena such as ghosting and romantic cheating, which reflect the increasing fragmentation of identities and relationships. Ghosting, or the practice of suddenly breaking off a relationship without explanation, can be interpreted through the imaginary of otherness. In the digital world, the other becomes an easily replaceable and perishable figure—a relational "object" that can be discarded when no longer useful or desired.

This imaginary of otherness reflects the dynamics of relational consumption that characterize modernity. The social imaginary not only legitimizes such practices but makes them an integral part of the way relationships are experienced and perceived. As Illouz (2012) highlights in her exploration of *Why Love Hurts*, the commodification of emotions in contemporary society has transformed relationships into transactional exchanges, increasing emotional fragility and the prevalence of disconnection.

Through technological imagery, new forms of intimacy and connection are created that challenge traditional ways of building relationships. However, these forms of connection tend to be more fragile and unstable because they are based on an idealized representation of self and other. Ghosting, for example, represents not only a physical or emotional disconnection, but reflects a deeper rupture in the relational imaginary, where the other is reduced to an interchangeable entity unworthy of recognition (Durand, 1960). The fluidity of contemporary identities, accentuated by technological mediation, reflects the transformations of intimate relationships in a context of globalization and advanced capitalism. Representations of love and intimacy, often constructed through idealized imagery, contribute to the



precariousness of relationships, redefining relational hierarchies and interconnectedness across cultures that generate hybrid patterns that challenge traditional notions of intimacy and belonging (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2013).

In this context, digital relationships often amplify emotional inequalities, fueling cultural misunderstandings and emotional distance. These factors contribute to ties characterized by asymmetrical emotional investments, which foster such practices. This phenomenon not only represents a relational rupture, but reflects a deeper fracture in the collective imagination, in which the other is reduced to an interchangeable entity (Illouz, 2012). Moreover, the introduction of globalized patterns of relationships, such as "world families," highlights the impact of global inequalities and tensions between cultural and legal systems, which profoundly affect intimate relationships (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2013).

These dynamics are intertwined with a narrative of love that, while still promising connection and authenticity, is often rooted in unrealistic and contradictory expectations. The romantic imaginary perpetuates in fact, a consumerist model of relationships, in which emotional bonding is often subordinated to dynamics of personal satisfaction and individualism (Illouz, 2012). This leads to a structural fragility in relationships, which are increasingly experienced as temporary contracts rather than stable mutual commitments.

Social representations serve as vehicles for the dissemination of values and norms that legitimize fragmented and often superficial relational practices (Moscovici, 1961). In digital culture, these representations help create an imaginary in which relationships are perceived as temporary and easily replaced. The imaginary fosters a narrative of romantic love that, despite its idealized promises, is increasingly intertwined with the vulnerabilities of modernity. As Illouz (2012) explains, this narrative perpetuates expectations that are often in conflict with the fluid and commodified nature of contemporary intimacy, making ghosting and emotional manipulation frequent outcomes of these contradictions.

These phenomena are based on relational imagery that exploits the desire for intimacy and connection to manipulate people. The fraudster assumes a fictitious identity, constructed through an idealized self-image, which is used to deceive the other. This process reflects the fragmentation of identity in the digital age, where imagery plays a key role in the creation of multiple and artificial identities. Social representations are powerful tools for influencing the perception of reality (Moscovici, 1961), and in the case of romantic scams, these representations create an imaginary of trust and intimacy that is exploited for manipulative purposes. The imagery, however, is distorted through digital techniques such as deepfakes, making it even more difficult to distinguish the real from the fictitious. The cases under review exemplify how these deceptive digital identities leverage victims' emotional vulnerabilities, turning their quest for connection into a psychological trap.



4. Romantic Scams and Relationship Scams

Romance scams represent increasingly forming through digital platforms, the line between trust and deception becoming thin and easily exploited. These scams, in which some individuals manipulate the emotions of victims for financial gain, not only

exploit the human desire for emotional connection, but also fit into a broader sociocultural issue related to the changing nature of relationships and identity in the digital age. It is a sophisticated and deceptive form of manipulation (Whitty and Buchanan, 2012), in which the victim is lured into a fictitious relationship based on the fraudster's falsification of identity that creates a deep emotional connection before exploiting it for money, leveraging feelings of trust and love, making the experience devastating not only financially but also emotionally.

Trust becomes the focus of the manipulation: in the early stages of the interaction, the perpetrators use various techniques to gain the victim's trust, including idealized self-presentation, which manifests itself in highly positive self-portraits consistent with what the victim wishes to find in a partner. This discrepancy between the real self and the virtual self is the basis of romantic scams, in which the scammer manipulates his or her identity to create an ideal person who can win the victim's heart. The trust-building process can take weeks, months or even years, during which the scammer tries to establish a strong and genuine emotional relationship in the eyes of the victim.

The fragility of online relationships, in particular, amplifies this tendency, as the lack of face-to-face interactions makes it easier for scammers to conceal their identities and manipulate information; the digitization of relationships in fact allows constant but superficial communication, in which control over shared information becomes a powerful weapon in the hands of those who intend to exploit the other. This one-sided control of information and narratives makes romantic scams an emblematic example of how power can be exercised in digital relationships.

Romantic scammers do not simply manipulate their victims' emotions; they construct elaborate narratives that legitimize their demands for money. These narratives often include dramatic elements, such as sudden financial problems, health emergencies, or work-related needs, that elicit feelings of empathy and responsibility in the victim (Whitty, 2013) The use of such narratives instrumentalizes the victim's humanity, leveraging their moral values and emotions, to extract money. In most cases, the victim does not suspect that the report is false until it is too late, as the fraudster continues to maintain constant and reassuring emotional contact, giving the impression that the report is genuine.

The phenomenon of romantic scams can be read as a manifestation of the broader social context characterized by an increasing disconnection between people. Despite the apparent digital hyperconnectedness (Giddens, 1991), trust has become a central component in maintaining personal relationships in a context of uncertainty. However, online relationships, as evidenced by romantic scams, challenge traditional notions of trust because they are based on screen-mediated



interaction in which identity can be easily manipulated. In these cases, trust is built not on direct knowledge of the other, but on digital representations that can be deeply deceptive.

Digital networks enable a decentralized and invisible form of power in which the fraudster has complete control over the narrative and information (Castells, 2009). Physical distance and anonymity offer additional power to the scammer, as the victim has no opportunity to verify the veracity of the information provided. This aspect of the romance scam highlights the role that technology plays in restructuring power dynamics in contemporary relationships, making scammers almost invulnerable until the moment they decide to break off communication or "ghost" the victim.

This represents the last stage of manipulation, in which the fraudster, having obtained what he or she wanted (money, material goods or other resources), abruptly breaks off all contact, leaving the victim disoriented and traumatized. The sudden disappearance amplifies the emotional damage, as the victim, in addition to suffering a financial loss, also faces a sudden emotional abandonment, which undermines his or her ability to trust other people in the future and has profound effects on the victims' self-esteem (Lefebvre, 2017) as they are suddenly faced with a communication gap that makes it difficult to process the end of the relationship and understand the reasons for the betrayal.

The interplay between power, trust, and deception is mediated by digital technologies, which facilitate the creation of fictitious identities and emotional manipulation: victims not only lose money, but also suffer significant emotional trauma, which can have lasting effects on their ability to form future relationships.

The social and cultural context in which these scams occur, characterized by the fluidity of human relationships and the increasing reliance on digital technologies for interpersonal connection, amplifies people's vulnerability to this type of deception.

5. Methodological analysis

The main objective of this investigation is to analyze the dynamics social emerging from the phenomenon of online romance scams, a phenomenon increasingly prevalent in the digital age, at the crossroads of identity manipulation and the construction of fictitious relationships, often culminating in ghosting. To explore such dynamics, a case broadcast within the Italian television program *Chi l'ha visto?* was chosen, a paradigmatic example of deception and manipulation, in which the identity of the scammer is artfully constructed through digital tools and a false self-representation.

Chi l'ha visto? is an investigative and in-depth program broadcast in Italy by RAI, established in 1989. Its main focus is the search for missing persons and the reconstruction of unsolved mysteries, but over the years it has expanded its mission to include coverage of crimes, frauds, and events of social and human interest. The program, currently hosted by Federica Sciarelli, airs every Wednesday in prime time



on Rai 3. One of the key elements of the program's success is its empathetic approach and ability to bring to light complex stories involving vulnerable victims.

The video describing the romantic scam case analyzed in this article was broadcast in an episode of 2023 as part of a section devoted to online scams. The case occupied a significant portion of the episode, as it raised relevant questions about the growing phenomenon, a topic that has captured the public's attention because of its topicality and prevalence.

The case analyzed represents an emblematic example of how romantic scams are constructed through the use of digital technologies and by exploiting victims' vulnerabilities. The woman was manipulated by a scammer who posed as a U.S. Army general, using a false online identity to establish a romantic relationship. The relationship was developed entirely through digital tools, such as social media messages and emails, without ever resulting in a face-to-face meeting.

The incident was covered in only one episode of the program, but its impact and scope offer important insights into the broader dynamics that characterize this type of phenomenon. The scammer exploited the victim's emotional vulnerabilities, appealing to her need for companionship and affection. Over time, he demanded sums of money to deal with alleged personal emergencies, a classic pattern in romantic scams. When the victim began to suspect that something was wrong, the scammer suddenly disappeared, leaving the victim with a deep sense of betrayal and loss.

The case was chosen because of its emblematic value and the way it represents a prime example of how online romance scams operate. The profile of the victim, an emotionally vulnerable woman, reflects a common trend: people who, despite having a seemingly stable social and economic life, seek emotional connections online and become prey to scammers skilled in psychological manipulation. Ave ndo lost her husband a few years earlier and, seeking companionship, the woman had turned to social media to find a new relationship: i her profile is representative of many victims of romantic scams, who often seek emotional connections online, finding themselves emotionally or socially isolated.

The scammer, on the other hand, was a man who operated entirely online, using a false high-ranking identity, namely that of a U.S. Army general. This type of profile is common in online romance scams: people who present themselves as authority or power figures, able to quickly gain the victim's trust. The scammer used stolen images and a well-constructed narrative to make the victim believe he or she was in a serious romantic relationship, creating a strong emotional bond before demanding sums of money for alleged financial problems related to his or her military role.

The choice of this video was motivated by the fact that the story perfectly illustrates how digital technology is not only a means of communication, but also a tool that facilitates the construction of false identities. All this allows the fraudster to maintain a physical and psychological distance while manipulating the victim's emotions, establishing a relationship that appears authentic but is, in fact, a fictitious construction. The TV show made it possible to clearly show how such scams work and to raise public awareness of this danger.



Technology plays a pivotal role in facilitating these types of scams, enabling fraudsters to create fictitious identities quickly and relatively easily. Social media and online dating platforms provide an ideal space to manipulate images, build fake profiles, and establish virtual relationships without ever meeting victims in person. Moreover, online communication, often based on text messages or video calls with manipulated technologies, allows the scammer to maintain complete control of the narrative, dosing information and using psychological techniques to create a strong but fictitious emotional bond.

Vulnerability, the search for emotional connections and misplaced trust are all aspects that reflect the growing social alienation that characterizes modernity.

The primary data consists mainly of the video of the victim's interview and testimony broadcast during the TV program. The video segment contains elements that allow for the study of not only the content of the victim's words, but also the tone, expression, and emotionality behind the speech, an analysis offers a wealth of detail that exceeds the simple textual transcript, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics of manipulation and the psychological impact on the victim. This content provides a broader context for interpreting the scam, allowing for an examination of how the story was narrated and perceived at the public and media level. Media narratives play a key role in constructing the social meaning of events, influencing the public perception of victims and fraudsters. Therefore, the analysis of such content allows us to explore how the media treat the phenomenon of romantic scams, and how they contribute to constructing a narrative around the concept of betrayed trust and deception.

Through meticulous analysis of the testimony, it is possible to identify recurring themes such as the scammer's construction of trust, the use of fictitious identities (such as that of the "fake U.S. general"), and the emotions experienced by the victim, ranging from initial confusion to hope to ultimate fear and betrayal. These themes provide a comprehensive view of how victims are emotionally and psychologically manipulated, and how ghosting represents an ultimate weapon used by the fraudster to evade the emotional consequences of his actions.

Narrative analysis, on the other hand, will focus on how the victim narrates her experience. Through the study of language, pauses, and emotional expressions, it will be possible to understand how the victim constructs her identity within the narrative, and how she justifies her emotional and financial involvement with the fraudster. Narrative is a powerful tool for revealing the power dynamics within the fictitious relationship and for understanding how one interprets and rationalizes the deception suffered. In particular, analysis of the justifications the victim offers to explain why she believed the fraudster, and how she interprets the warning signs she ignored during the course of the relationship.

Through this analysis, it is possible to identify how the fraudster used ghosting as a strategy to avoid confrontation and to evade the consequences of his actions. Indeed, ghosting represents not only a cessation of communication, but is an act of power that leaves the victim in a state of uncertainty and vulnerability.



Online romance scams are not simply isolated events, but reflect broader dynamics related to the liquefaction of relationships, the fragmentation of identity, and the use of technology as a tool for manipulation as we have already highlighted so far.

In addition, it is important to consider the emotional impact that research can have on both the victim and the reader. Analyzing issues such as manipulation and betrayal can be particularly painful, and research must take into account the psychological implications that such issues can generate

6. The case study: The U.S. General

The analysis of this romantic scam case is based on the "Who Saw It?" video highlights the emotional and psychological manipulation techniques to which victims are subjected. Below we analyze in detail the phrases used and integrate their meaning into the broader context of romantic scams.

The picture used by the scammer belongs to an unsuspecting man, whose face has been stolen and integrated into a well-designed manipulation system. In the romantic scam, the use of pictures of soldiers, as shown in the attached image, immediately creates a feeling of reliability, strength and security.



FIG. 1 – *The stolen photos for romantic scams* (Source: Chi l'ha visto - Rai.it)

Scammers use seemingly believable figures to attract victims and construct a narrative to justify financial claims, such as being stranded at the border or needing medical treatment.

In this case, the victim, an 83-year-old woman, clearly says she is "madly in love," showing how deeply she has fallen into the scammer's net. This stage is central to the success of the scam: the scammers invest time in building a credible story and an emotional bond with the victim; in fact, the man is described as a "high-ranking, widowed general," elements that make him attractive and stimulate the victim's sympathy. The idea that such a powerful man chose her, an older person, increases her emotional involvement, reinforcing the illusion of a special bond.

The use of images of men in uniform, such as many of the faces in the attached image grid, proves to be an effective psychological tool here: the military often represents figures of authority and integrity, and this helps to lower the victims' defenses; the scammer then appropriates this visual credibility to construct a compelling narrative.

The victim recounts that the scammer told her that "He was coming to see me, but the flight was diverted to America, where he was stuck at the border for a \$400 bail." This is a common strategy in romantic scams: the creation of a fictitious emergency to justify an urgent request for money. Here the scammer exploits the previously created trust, leveraging the feelings of the victim who, eager to help him, goes so far as to give 640 euros from his pension.

Another element of manipulation is the use of bureaucratic or institutional terms, such as the mention of "Elizabeth of the United Nations" or a billion-dollar company, which serves to make the scammer's narrative more credible and important. Here, too, we see an effective narrative technique: the use of specific details and proper names helps keep the victim's confidence high and the feeling that the situation is real.

The scam continues with a series of incidents created by the scammer to extort more money: an accident leading to a fractured leg, a stay in the hospital with the need for payment for not disconnecting the oxygen. Here stronger emotional blackmail comes into play: the victim feels responsible for the scammer's life, who goes so far as to call himself her husband in the messages exchanged. This term amplifies the emotional commitment, convincing the victim that she has a deep connection and even a moral obligation to the scammer.

When the victim begins to worry about the life of her virtual companion, she turns to the television program and discovers that the photos belong to another person and that the name William James was actually that of a nineteenth-century psychologist. The victim's reaction is significant: despite the evidence, it takes her a while to come to terms with the fact that the person with whom she had been having this relationship does not exist.

Even after being informed of the scam, the victim says, "In two years I was happy, I loved that man." This sentence is indicative of the victim's emotional investment: despite the scam, she remains attached to the memory of the fictitious relationship that gave her happiness and comfort.



After being discovered and ghosting by blocking her on Whatsapp, the scammer attempts one last twist, reappearing and again trying to manipulate the victim with messages that paint him as a victim of the system, ready even to be arrested, but reaffirming his love for her. This comeback appeals to the empathy of the victim, who despite everything is still emotionally attached to him.

The case of Delilah, analyzed in light of the sentences and images, perfectly illustrates the manipulative cycle of romantic scams, in which the construction of a credible identity, emotional blackmail, and the use of images of soldiers and men in authority is indicative. The images in the appendix show the breadth of this phenomenon: unsuspecting men (and sometimes women), often in uniform or in positions of power, whose photos are stolen and used to deceive vulnerable people.

7. The case study: Due Lipa



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The case of Gianfranco Bonzi represents one of the most dramatic and emblematic events related to the phenomenon of online romantic scams, highlighting not only the manipulative tactics used by scammers, but also the devastating emotional consequences that these virtual relationships can cause on victims. The story, recounted in detail by the TV program "Who Saw It?", moved and deeply shocked the public, revealing how the construction of fictitious bonds can culminate in tragedies of unexpected proportions.

Gianfranco Bonzi, a 59-year-old man, worked as a doorman in an elegant building in Milan's Brera district. Described by friends and acquaintances as a kind and dedicated person, Bonzi led a simple and quiet life. However, as is often the case in such cases, behind this serene facade were probably hidden desires and vulnerabilities that made him a perfect target for a romantic scam. His story began when he came into contact online with a profile apparently belonging to the famous British singer Dua Lipa. The fascination exerted by such an iconic and beloved figure probably led him to believe that this interaction was not only possible, but also a sign of a special connection that was brewing.

The scammer, using the pop star's fake profile, quickly established a virtual relationship with Bonzi, consisting of affectionate messages and implied promises. The relationship building was based on a classic but effective strategy: creating a sense of uniqueness and intimacy that would lead the victim to trust him completely. Bonzi was convinced that he had won the attention and affection of a woman admired by millions of people around the world, a condition that could give a huge boost to his self-esteem and sense of personal worth. This type of narrative, which exploits the victims' aspiration to feel special, is one of the mainstays of romantic scams.

The relationship continued for weeks, with an increasingly emotionally engaging progression. In messages, the fake profile referred to Bonzi with affectionate nicknames such as "my love," further reinforcing the feeling of authenticity of the bond. Bonzi's closest friends, as one of them told "Who Saw Him?", had noticed a



change in him: he spoke enthusiastically about the relationship and was excited about this unexpected turn in his life. However, behind this apparent happiness, emotional manipulation was taking place that would have tragic consequences.

In February 2024, the scammer began to introduce elements of financial difficulty and urgency into the narrative. This tactic, typical of romantic scams, serves to create a sense of moral obligation in the victim, who, feeling emotionally involved, also feels responsible for the welfare of the other person. In Bonzi's case, the request was about alleged financial problems related to cryptocurrency investments. The fake profile told Bonzi that he was in a complicated situation and needed financial help to solve the problem. At that point, Bonzi made two bank withdrawals, one in late February and one in early March, totaling 5,000 euros, which he sent to the scammer.

This gesture, the result of a now fully established trust, represented for Bonzi not only an act of generosity, but also a demonstration of his emotional involvement and willingness to support what he perceived as a genuine relationship. However, soon after receiving the money, the scammer suddenly broke off all communication. This sudden silence, known as ghosting, had a devastating impact on Bonzi. The man, who had become convinced of the sincerity of the connection, suddenly found himself abandoned, with no explanation and no chance to clarify what had happened.

Ghosting is a cruel tactic that, in cases like this, amplifies the victim's sense of vulnerability. Bonzi found himself coming to terms not only with the loss of money, but also with the end of a relationship that for him represented source of happiness and hope. As his friend told the broadcast, Bonzi was "nervous" and deeply disappointed. "He was convinced of the relationship he had with her, he felt betrayed. A huge disappointment," he said, describing the pain and confusion that had begun to consume Bonzi.

The sudden abandonment was not only experienced as a material loss, but struck at the heart of Bonzi's confidence in himself and others. Indeed, this kind of experience can lead to a deep emotional breakdown, especially in individuals who, like Bonzi, had become totally involved in the relationship. The feeling of having been betrayed by someone they trusted blindly combined with a sense of shame at having fallen into deception, creating a spiral of suffering from which Bonzi was unable to escape. On March 23, 2024, Bonzi disappeared, leaving behind worried friends and acquaintances unable to fully comprehend what he was going through. The search went on for months until, on June 22, his body was found in the Adda River. The identification was confirmed through DNA testing, ending an affair that left everyone speechless.

Milan prosecutors have opened an investigation for incitement to suicide and aggravated fraud, trying to trace those responsible for the deception. Authorities suspect that the fake profile was run by a foreign criminal network that specializes in romantic and financial scams. These groups often use identities of celebrities or public figures to make their narratives more credible, exploiting the seductive power and admiration that these figures inspire.



The tragic story of Gianfranco Bonzi is a warning about the danger of online emotional manipulation and the devastating psychological consequences it can cause. Beyond the financial deception, what emerges powerfully is the impact that ghosting and sudden abandonment can have on victims, leaving them in a state of emotional isolation and deep suffering. The story underscores the importance of raising awareness of these issues, encouraging people to seek help and support when they become involved in online relationships that raise doubts or concerns.

Bonzi, like many other victims, sought authentic connection and hope for happiness in the virtual relationship, finding instead a cruel deception that led him to a tragic fate. His story should serve as a lesson in recognizing the warning signs and protecting anyone who may find themselves in similar situations, while reinforcing the need for psychological and social support for victims of these crimes.

8. Conclusions

Online romance scams, as the cases analyzed show, are phenomena that go far beyond simple emotional deception, intertwining sociological, psychological, and economic aspects. These episodes offer a complex insight into the dynamics that characterize modern digital interaction, highlighting the crucial role of emotional vulnerability and cultural narratives. By examining these cases, significant reflections on mechanisms of manipulation, digital identity construction, and the impact of online platforms emerge. The cases of Delilah and Gianfranco highlight the attractiveness of well-constructed romantic narratives capable of exploiting archetypes deeply rooted in our collective imagination. In Delilah's case, the scammer used the image of a "widowed general" to construct an idealized figure: a strong, protective and resilient man who despite life's adversities seeks sincere love. This type of figure, already widely present in Western fiction, particularly resonates with people experiencing situations of emotional isolation, making them more likely to trust and invest in the relationship. Gianfranco, on the other hand, fell victim to another powerful narrative: that of a celebrity connection. The fake profile posing as singer Dua Lipa exploited the admiration and desire for connection with such a charismatic figure to strengthen the credibility of the relationship. This tactic is particularly effective because it associates the promise of love and attention with a person who represents an aspirational ideal, prompting the victim to believe that the relationship is unique and authentic. In both cases, the plots created by the scammers are carefully constructed to strike deep emotional chords, exploiting loneliness, the need to belong, and the desire to feel chosen. These factors explain why victims, despite warning signs, continue to trust and invest time, money and emotions. A central element of these scams is the strategic use of digital identity. Scammers steal photos and personal information to construct convincing masks that appear consistent with the stories they tell. In Delilah's case, the image of men in uniform evoked authority and integrity, lowering the victim's defenses.



For Gianfranco, on the other hand, the figure of a celebrity like Dua Lipa created an illusion of authenticity, making the scam even more sophisticated. The anonymity offered by digital platforms allows scammers to operate undisturbed, constructing fragmented identities and convincing narratives. In this context, truth is subordinated to narrative coherence, and identity performance becomes a tool for manipulating victims' emotions and perceptions. The construction of digital identity in the cases analyzed also highlights the misalignment between physical and digital reality. Where real life requires tangible evidence of authenticity, the digital environment relies on trust and the presentation of artfully manipulated fragments of reality. This discrepancy makes it particularly difficult for victims to distinguish between real and fake, contributing to their emotional involvement. A particularly devastating aspect that emerged from both cases is the psychological impact of ghosting, the sudden and total breakdown of communication by the scammer. For Delilah, this coincided with the discovery of the deception, leaving her in a state of shock and disbelief. Gianfranco, on the other hand, experienced ghosting as an unbearable betrayal, which fueled his confusion and emotional suffering.

Ghosting amplifies the sense of loss and abandonment. Victims, who had invested not only money but also emotions, suddenly find themselves without answers, forced to come to terms with the reality of an illusory relationship. In Gianfranco's case, the impact was tragic: the sense of betrayal and isolation led him to a psychological breakdown, culminating in his disappearance and the tragic discovery of his body months later.

This phenomenon underscores the need to raise awareness of ghosting, not only as a cruel act, but as a pivotal element of the manipulative strategy of romantic scams. The ability to abandon the victim without explanation strengthens the scammer's psychological control, leaving a void that often results in prolonged suffering. In addition to the emotional impacts, these scams have significant economic consequences. Delilah sacrificed part of her pension, while Gianfranco withdrew 5,000 euros from his savings, depriving himself of essential economic stability. This aspect highlights how scammers exploit not only the emotional trust but also the economic availability of victims, creating an escalation of financial demands justified by increasingly dramatic narratives. The financial impact is not limited to the loss of money; it becomes a symbol of the victim's commitment to the relationship, reinforcing their involvement and sense of obligation.

This dynamic also reflects a broader phenomenon in digital modernity: affective interaction mediated by market dynamics, where even love becomes an object of consumption and manipulation. The cases of Delilah and Gianfranco prompt us to reflect on the complexity of online romance scams and their social, psychological, and economic implications. These phenomena represent a meeting point between emotional manipulation, economic exploitation, and the manipulative potential of digital platforms.

To effectively address these dynamics, a multidimensional approach is needed. On the one hand, it is crucial to promote greater digital education, raising awareness of the risks of online interactions and providing tools to recognize warning signs. On



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the other hand, digital platforms must take greater responsibility, implementing identity verification mechanisms and tools to detect fraudulent behavior. It's essential to offer support to victims, both psychologically and financially, helping them overcome trauma and rebuild their trust. Only through a combination of prevention, intervention and support can we effectively counter a phenomenon that continues to claim victims worldwide, leaving behind a trail of pain and suffering.



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