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Apparently Normal Relationship Styles: Exploring the Intersection of Psychological Trauma and Dysfunctional Attachment Dynamics

Görünürde Normal İlişki Stilleri: Ruhsal Travma ve Disfonksiyonel Bağlanma Dinamiklerinin Kesişimini Keşfetmek

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Abstract

Modern relationship dynamics have evolved significantly, reflecting changes in societal norms, digital communication, and psychological complexities. This article is a theoretical review examining the interaction of early trauma, attachment disruptions, dissociation, and narcissistic traits in shaping relational behaviors such as situationships, cushioning, breadcrumbing, ghosting-zombie-ing, enmeshment, and the objectification trap. From the perspective of modern psychotraumatology and dissoanalysis theory, it explores how unresolved emotional issues and societal influences sustain patterns of control, superficial interactions, and emotional detachment, drawing on concepts like necriphysiphilia and controlled human syndrome. These dysfunctional relationships are intensified by digital platforms, amplifying interpersonal alienation and promoting cycles of control, submission, and dependency. To counter consumerist and digital structures that encourage emotional detachment and the commodification of relationships, societal shifts emphasizing empathy, authenticity, and mutual connection are needed. This study integrates psychosocial perspectives to offer a framework for understanding and minimizing dysfunctional relationship patterns in the modern era.

Keywords

Dysfunctional Relationships, Dissoanalysis, Ghosting-Zombie-ing, Objectification Trap, Necriphysiphilia.

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Öz

Modern ilişki dinamikleri, toplumsal normlardaki değişimler, dijital iletişim ve psikolojik karmaşıklıkları yansıtarak önemli ölçüde evrilmiştir. Bu makale, durumsal/tanımsız ilişkiler, yedekleme, ekmek kırıntısı taktiği (sinyalcilik), hayaletleme-zobileme (öl-diril ilişki) iç içe geçme ve objeleştirme kapanı gibi ilişki davranışlarını şekillendiren erken dönem travmaları, bağlanma bozuklukları, dissosiyasyon ve narsistik özelliklerin etkileşimini incelemeyi amaçlayan kuramsal bir derlemedir. Modern psikotravmatoloji ve dissoanaliz kuramı perspektifinden,

ölüdoğa seviciliği ve kontrol edilmiş insan sendromu gibi kavramlar ışığında, nötralize edilememiş duygusal sorunların ve toplumsal etkilerin kontrol, yüzeysel etkileşimler ve duygusal kopukluk kalıplarını nasıl sürdürdüğünü incelemektedir. Bu disfonksiyonel ilişkiler, kişilerarası yabancılaşmayı artıran ve kontrol, itaat ve bağımlılık döngülerini teşvik eden dijital platformlar tarafından daha da yoğunlaşmaktadır. Duygusal kopukluk ve ilişkilerdeki metalaşmayı teşvik eden tüketimci ve dijital yapılarla mücadele edilmesi adına empati, özgünlük ve karşılıklı bağ kurmayı ön plana çıkaran toplumsal değişimlere ihtiyaç duyulmaktadır. Psikotoplumsal perspektifleri bir araya getiren bu çalışma, modern çağın disfonksiyonel ilişki kalıplarını anlamaya ve bunları minimize etmeye yönelik kapsamlı bir çerçeve sunmayı amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler

Disfonksiyonel ilişkiler, Dissoanaliz, Hayaletleşme, Objeleştirme Kapanı, Ölüdoğa Seviciliği.

Introduction

The dissoanalytic theory defines dissociation as a phenomenon closely related to chronic, complex, and cumulative traumatic experiences that can move between individual and social dimensions under conditions of oppression and can even occur simultaneously at both levels. This theory interprets dissociation within relational and psychosociopolitical contexts (Öztürk, 2022a, p.1363). “Controlled Human Syndrome,” which represents an apparently normal but dysfunctional relationship dynamic based on transitions between dissociative states, describes a fusal and sadomasochistic life pattern. It is characterized by a “master–slave” structure formed through the intertwining of the traumatic selves of two individuals—one introverted and the other extroverted—who both have dissociative experiences rooted in chronic childhood trauma. In this primitive dynamic, the introverted partner takes the role of the “victim”, while the extroverted partner assumes the “abuser” role. In contemporary society, individuals who are unable to neutralize their traumas tend to repeat reversible victim/abuser roles in their relationships, creating a pattern that has become widespread and normalized (Öztürk, 2023, p.502). As this study does not include empirical data collection, it is structured as a theoretical review article grounded in modern psychotraumatology and dissoanalysis theory. Within this framework, the study aims to examine the concepts of apparently normal dysfunctional relationships, situationships, cushioning, enmeshment, breadcrumbing, ghosting-zombie-ing, the objectification trap, and necriphysiphilia, by comparing them through the lens of modern psychotraumatology principles and the dissoanalysis theory.

Apparently Normal Dysfunctional Relationships

Romantic relationships are evolving in response to shifting societal norms, technological advancements, and the growing prevalence of psychological complexities in interpersonal dynamics. While these changes are often perceived as natural byproducts of contemporary dating culture, they might reveal underlying psychological struggles rooted in early traumatic experiences, including dysfunctional attachment styles (Simpson & Rholes, 2017, p.21), dissociation (Farina et al., 2019; Öztürk, 2023, p.503), and some non-adaptive personality traits (Jonason et al., 2021, p.4). These relational dynamics are far more than fleeting trends; they are manifestations of deeper emotional dysfunctions that affect the ability to form secure and meaningful connections. Moreover, the psychological outcomes of these behaviors—ranging from anxiety and depression to diminished self-esteem and emotional dysregulation—underscore their far-reaching impact on individuals and their relational well-being (Klein et al., 2023, p.1328; Li & Chan, 2012, p.412). Examining these behaviors through the lens of trauma and other psychopathologies provides critical insights into the challenges that define modern relationships.

Early traumatic experiences, such as neglect, inconsistent caregiving, or emotional abuse, play a pivotal role in shaping relational patterns (Simpson & Rholes, 2017, p.21). These adverse childhood experiences disrupt the formation of secure attachments, often resulting in maladaptive attachment styles that persist into adulthood (Bowlby, 1978). Anxious attachment styles may manifest as dependency and an overwhelming fear of abandonment, while avoidant attachment styles foster emotional detachment and discomfort with intimacy (Szeifert et al., 2025, p.2). “*Modern psychotraumatology*”, which explores the impact of chronic and complex childhood traumas on relational and psychological functioning, provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how these disruptions lead to relational dysfunctions over time. By emphasizing the role of dissociative mechanisms in coping with trauma, this field highlights how individuals adapt to unneutralized trauma by developing patterns of ambiguity, avoidance, and self-preservation at the expense of mutual connection (Öztürk, 2022a, p.1372).

Dissociation, a psychological mechanism closely tied to trauma, exacerbates these patterns by fostering a disconnection from one’s emotions, thoughts, or sense of self (Öztürk, 2022a, p.12). As a coping strategy for managing

overwhelming emotional experiences, dissociation enables individuals to detach from their feelings, impairing their capacity for emotional intimacy (Ciringione et al., 2025). In relational contexts, dissociation often manifests as an avoidance of accountability and depth, contributing to interactions that lack genuine emotional engagement (Öztürk, 2023, p.508). This emotional detachment can lead to feelings of isolation, alienation, and emotional numbing, with long-term effects on self-esteem and mental health. Additionally, the digital environment amplifies dissociative tendencies by encouraging superficial connections and the creation of idealized personas, allowing individuals to maintain emotional distance while avoiding vulnerability (Öztürk & Erdoğan, 2022, p.28).

Adding another layer of this complexity, narcissistic traits often emerge as both a product and perpetuator of these dysfunctional dynamics. Narcissistic individuals, especially those with vulnerable traits, frequently seek validation and admiration to mask deep-seated feelings of inadequacy (Smolewska & Dion, 2010, p.63). From a modern psychotraumatological perspective, these traits can be understood as compensatory mechanisms arising from unmetabolized and/or unneutralized childhood trauma (Öztürk, 2022a, p.1370; 2022c, p.55). In relationships, this pursuit of external affirmation leads to behaviors prioritizing control and superficial interactions over mutual emotional investment. Such dynamics can cause significant harm, both to the narcissistic individual—who remains isolated and emotionally unfulfilled—and to their partners, who often experience manipulation, control, decreased self-worth, and emotional exhaustion (Jonason et al., 2021, p.5). In this context, Öztürk's (2023) concept of "*controlled human syndrome*" provides an integrative framework for understanding these patterns. This phenomenon, characterized by cycles of dominance and submission within relationships, highlights the ways unmetabolized trauma and dissociative defenses lead to fused interpersonal dynamics. In such relationships, partners often shift between controlling and submissive roles, reflecting internalized trauma and a compromised sense of autonomy. Similarly, Öztürk's (2024a, p.968) concept of "*Necriphysiphilia*" links these dynamics to broader societal dysfunctions, emphasizing how material consumption and relational control replace authentic emotional connections. These frameworks illustrate how early traumatic experiences, attachment disruptions, and dissociative defenses intersect to shape relational behaviors, perpetuating cycles of control and emotional detachment.

The psychological outcomes of these relational dysfunctions are profound, affecting both individuals and societal norms. Those engaged in ambiguous or manipulative relational patterns often report increased levels of stress, anxiety, and emotional confusion, as they struggle to navigate relationships characterized by a lack of trust and clarity (LeFebvre et al., 2019, p.140). This emotional ambiguity can lead to feelings of rejection, inadequacy, and diminished self-esteem, especially for individuals who experience cycles of emotional reinforcement followed by neglect (Gupta, 2022, p.1943). Over time, the erosion of trust in these interactions contributes to a broader culture of detachment and instability, where meaningful connections are replaced by superficial and transactional exchanges (Bandinelli, 2022, p.912). Furthermore, individuals involved in these dysfunctional dynamics are more likely to experience symptoms of depression, emotional exhaustion, and difficulty regulating their emotions due to the lack of secure relational foundations (Li & Chan, 2012, p.415). These patterns often reflect deeper unresolved issues tied to early attachment disruptions and dissociative tendencies, as emotional disconnection becomes both a symptom and a perpetrator of relational dysfunction (Öztürk, 2023; Van der Kolk, 2015, p.210). This feedback loop of unmet emotional needs and maladaptive behaviors reinforces cycles of psychological distress, leaving individuals trapped in patterns of avoidance, control, and emotional instability (Simpson & Rholes, 2017, p.22). Moreover, the societal normalization of these behaviors, amplified by digital platforms that promote depersonalization and detachment, further reinforces these dynamics, making it increasingly difficult for individuals to break free from these unhealthy patterns (Öztürk & Erdoğan, 2022). Through these relational struggles, the psychological costs are not only personal but extend to the relational fabric of society, undermining the potential for emotional depth and genuine connection.

In this context, terms including situationships, cushioning, enmeshment, breadcrumbing, ghosting-zombie-ing, objectification trap, and necriphysiphilia reflect not only the changing dynamics of modern relationships but also the deep-seated psychological struggles that underlie these behaviors. These patterns, rooted in childhood trauma and trauma-related conditions, including dissociation and maladaptive personality traits, are not merely contemporary phenomena but indicators of profound emotional and relational dysfunctions. By understanding their origins, psychological impacts, and societal implications, this article seeks to illuminate the challenges of modern relationship dynamics and propose pathways to healthier, more authentic connections. In the following section, several commonly used terms associated with modern relationships will be critically analyzed, focusing on their inherent dysfunctions, supported by insights from current literature.

The Glossary of Dysfunction: Unpacking Key Terms in Modern Relationships

Situationships

A *situationship* is an informal, undefined romantic or sexual relationship that lacks the commitments, future expectations, or labels typically associated with traditional romantic relationships. Unlike casual dating where individuals may see each other with little emotional attachment, or committed relationships with clear intentions, situationships occupy a middle ground (Juteau et al., 2024, p.57). Partners may spend significant time together, share intimate experiences, and even develop emotional bonds, but there is no mutual agreement or explicit definition regarding the relationship's official status or future. Situationships are often characterized by ambiguity, with each person avoiding discussions about exclusivity, long-term plans, or emotional commitments. This ambiguity can create a defiance of boundaries, allowing both individuals to enjoy companionship without commitment; however, it can also lead to uncertainty, confusion, and unmet expectations if either person desires a deeper connection. For example, prior research examined the nature of situationships (Langlais et al., 2024, p.1845). Results showed that most situationships ended because (1) one party did not want to get involved in a committed relationship or (2) being unable to define the boundaries of the relationship caused them a lot of stress. In other words, individuals involved in such undefined relationships often experience uncertainty, vulnerability, and confusion, while blurred interpersonal rules and unclear expectations tend to create emotional strain and instability. (Loyola et al., 2025, pp.197-199).

Narcissism and attachment in situationships

Individuals with narcissistic traits and dysfunctional attachment styles might find themselves drawn to situationships due to the dynamics of emotional distance, superficial connections, and a lack of commitment that these relationships offer. For those with avoidant attachment, the appeal of situationships lies in their ability to maintain emotional distance and avoid the demands of deeper emotional involvement. Avoidant individuals tend to keep relationships at arm's length, fearing the closeness that would require them to be vulnerable or reliant on others (Smolewska & Dion, 2010, p.63). This detachment often stems from early experiences of inconsistent caregiving or childhood trauma, where they learned to rely on themselves rather than others, leading to discomfort with emotional closeness (Simpson & Rolls, 2017; Van der Kolk, 2015, p.120). In situationships, these individuals can maintain the emotional autonomy they crave, avoiding the intimacy and emotional depth of a more committed relationship. Similarly, narcissistic individuals, who are characterized by a strong need for admiration, validation, and control (Jonason et al., 2021, p.5), might tend to prefer situationships because superficial relationships provide them with attention and admiration without the risk of emotional vulnerability or commitment. Narcissism, notably when it manifests as a defensive mechanism to cope with insecurity, often correlates with an avoidance of genuine emotional intimacy. Narcissists are highly sensitive to rejection and fear of being perceived as inadequate or unworthy, so they avoid relationships that demand emotional depth or risk exposing their vulnerabilities (Loyola et al., 2025; Smolewska & Dion, 2010).

In a situationship, they can control the interaction on their own terms, maintaining the appearance of a connection while keeping the depth shallow and the commitment minimal. The lack of attachment in these types of relationships feeds into their need for admiration without requiring the emotional investment that could leave them exposed or hurt (Saladino et al., 2024). Ambiguity within such dynamics also functions as a psychological buffer, allowing individuals to protect themselves from rejection or dependency while sustaining a superficial sense of connection (Loyola et al., 2025, p.200). The roots of these dynamics can be further understood through the perspective of dissoanalysis, which explores how unneutralized childhood traumas contribute to the development of narcissistic traits (Öztürk, 2022a, pp.1360). These traits often serve as compensatory mechanisms for the residual effects of trauma, with dissociative processes influencing identity and relational patterns. Individuals who fail to neutralize their traumas may externalize unresolved conflicts into their relationships, perpetuating cycles of superficial connections like situationships. This dynamic allows them to maintain emotional distance and control, avoiding the vulnerabilities associated with deeper relationships (Howell, 2003, p.55).

In other words, while narcissists and those with avoidant attachment style tend to engage in situationships to maintain emotional distance, people with anxious attachment may find themselves in such relationships because they are often attracted to individuals who keep them emotionally uncertain vulnerabilities (Smolewska & Dion, 2010, p.63). In both cases, the dysfunctional attachment styles result in a preference for relationships that are inconsistent, unfulfilling, and devoid of commitment (Simpson, 1990, p.975). In light of this, individuals exhibiting narcissistic traits and dysfunctional attachment styles might engage in situationships as these relationships offer a sense of control and superficial connection, while enabling them to evade vulnerability, commitment, and emotional intimacy characteristic of deeper, more fulfilling partnerships.

Cushioning

Cushioning in relationships refers to a strategy where an individual within a committed partnership sustains flirtatious or emotionally intimate interactions with others as a contingency. These secondary connections are intended to serve as a buffer, or “*cushion*,” to compensate potential feelings of loss, loneliness, or emotional distress caused by the possible challenges that can be faced in a relationship (George, 2024, p.25). By cultivating subtle romantic or sexual interest outside of the primary partnership, the individual seeks to soften the emotional impact of a possible breakup or period of instability in their main relationship. While there is significant public interest in understanding this phenomenon, particularly through online articles and discussions, academic research on the topic appears to be limited so far. However, it is a growing area of interest as psychologists explore how modern dating culture, including the use of apps and social media, affects commitment and emotional connections (Castro & Barrada, 2020, p.6503). Dating apps have fundamentally transformed the ways individuals form, maintain, and navigate romantic connections. Moreover, their unique environment facilitates behaviors like cushioning by leveraging the anonymity and disinhibition of cyberspace, which play a critical role in fostering cushioning behaviors. In digital environments, individuals often experience what is referred to as *cyber dissociation*, a phenomenon where overstimulation, continuous connectivity, and the depersonalized nature of interactions contribute to a fragmented sense of self (Öztürk & Erdoğan, 2022, p.28). This dissociation, hence, can leave individuals detached from their authentic emotional experiences, enabling them to engage in relational behaviors that would otherwise feel morally or emotionally significant in face-to-face interactions. Furthermore, the rise of cyberspace has given way to the term described as a *monolithic cyber culture* (Öztürk, 2024b, p.370).

This global cultural shift erodes traditional cultural diversity, leading to a homogenized digital environment where emotional distancing and superficial interactions are normalized. Such dynamics amplify the conditions for behaviors like cushioning, as the emphasis on immediacy and appearance in digital spaces undermines deeper relational commitments. As such, the structure of cyberspace itself creates conditions that encourage emotional distancing and facilitates cushioning, intertwining psychological dynamics with the sociocultural impacts of digital transformation (Öztürk & Erdoğan, 2022; Öztürk, 2024b). Additionally, following from cyber dissociation, individuals often develop *cyber alter personalities*—online personas shaped by the expectations, norms, and interactions of the digital environment (Öztürk, 2022b). This persona often differs from an individual’s real-life identity, reflecting the social norms and expectations of online platforms. These alter personalities may range from slightly idealized versions of oneself to entirely fabricated identities. The ability to adopt such personas makes it easier to maintain emotional distance and manage multiple connections, facilitating cushioning in the digital realm. According to Bandinelli (2022), dating apps encourage “*careless conduct*” by removing traditional relational norms, which might further support this behavior. The design of dating apps also plays a key role in this process. Features like swiping and matching reduce people to profiles and images, creating what Bandinelli (2022, p.910) describes as a “*libidinal economy*.” Users experience cycles of validation and rejection, which separate emotional engagement from interaction. This depersonalized approach allows individuals to see others as placeable options, making it easier to juggle multiple relationships with minimal emotional investment. As a result, dating apps create an environment that fosters cushioning by enabling detachment and lowering the moral and emotional stakes of romantic interactions.

Enmeshment

Enmeshment in romantic relationships arises when individuals lose their sense of personal identity and fail to maintain boundaries within the relationship (Koh, et al., 2020, p.398). This often results in a lack of autonomy, with partners becoming overly dependent on each other. In such relationships, individuals may find it difficult to separate their thoughts, feelings, and needs from those of their partner, leading to confusion about where one person ends and the other begins (D’Astice & Russell, 2019, p.912). This can create blurred identities and emotional dependency, making it challenging for individuals to function independently or make decisions outside of the relationship. As a result, the partners may feel overly responsible for each other’s emotional states and actions, disrupting the balance necessary for a healthy connection (Petrican et al., 2011, p.1115). Emotional overinvolvement in such dynamics gradually erodes self-differentiation, as individuals internalize their partner’s emotions and lose the ability to regulate their own affective experiences independently, leading to diminished autonomy and identity confusion (Baroncelli et al., 2025, pp. 3-7).

Psychologically, enmeshment often has its roots in early family dynamics, where a child’s emotional development is blocked, or where caregivers’ emotional needs overshadow the child’s need for autonomy (Coe et al., 2019, p.293). According to schema therapy, enmeshment falls under the domain of “*impaired autonomy and performance*”, which includes emotional difficulties caused by caregivers who demand excessive emotional involvement (Young

et al., 2003). This prevents the child's development of a strong, independent sense of self, creating a foundation for difficulties in adulthood, including challenges in self-definition. As an adult, individuals with enmeshment schemas often struggle to define their sense of self, instead focusing on meeting the needs of others and seeking validation externally (Bacon et al., 2020, p.28). From a dissoanalytic perspective, on the other hand, childhood traumas often position individuals relationally as either victims or manipulators, disrupting their ability to form healthy connections later in life. These early traumatic experiences create patterns of relational dysfunction, which persist into adulthood, leading to unhealthy relationship dynamics and a repeated inability to establish balanced autonomy and intimacy (Öztürk, 2022b, p.964).

These early relational patterns contribute to behaviors also seen in co-dependency, such as self-sacrifice and other-directedness. *Self-sacrifice* involves prioritizing the needs of others to the detriment of one's own, driven by feelings of guilt or fear of rejection, while *other-directedness* refers to the need for external validation to define self-worth (Bacon, 2015; Bacon & Conway, 2023; Young et al., 2003). These patterns develop due to the lack of emotional independence cultivated in childhood and result in behaviors like neglecting personal needs, emotional suppression, and an inability to assert boundaries. This often leads to a cycle of over-adapting to others' needs, with a constant focus on approval, resulting in relational dysfunction (Bacon et al., 2023). Moreover, these relational dysfunctions align with what Öztürk (2023) describes as "*controlled human syndrome*." According to the dissoanalysis theory (Öztürk, 2022a), controlled human syndrome occurs when people feel stuck in unhealthy relationships where they switch between submissive and controlling behaviors. This often starts from early trauma and is maintained by cycles of dependence and control. In such relationships, individuals lose their sense of independence and equality, becoming trapped by manipulative and controlling dynamics. Without emotional independence from childhood, these patterns can carry into adulthood.

In conclusion, enmeshment in romantic relationships is often rooted in childhood trauma, where the lack of emotional autonomy and excessive dependence on caregivers creates difficulties in forming a strong sense of self. This early emotional confusion leads to unhealthy relational patterns in adulthood, such as self-sacrifice, seeking external validation, and entering fused relational dynamics as seen in controlled human syndrome. Recognizing the influence of early relational dynamics and their connection to broader societal structures is key to understanding and treating these relational challenges.

Breadcrumbing

Breadcrumbing is a manipulative tactic in dating, where individuals engage in flirtatious but non-committal communication or actions to maintain another person's interest without any real intention of developing a deeper relationship. The term draws from the Hansel and Gretel story, where breadcrumbs are used as small, scattered markers to guide a path. In modern dating, breadcrumbing typically involves occasional text messages, social media engagement, surface-level compliments, or infrequent invitations, all of which foster false expectations of a meaningful connection, which frequently occurs in short-term or casual relationships characterized by minimal commitment (Khattar et al., 2023, p.12). Individuals who engage in breadcrumbing often do so for various reasons, such as seeking attention, avoiding confrontation, or maintaining a connection with someone who boosts their self-esteem or serves as a backup option (Navarro et al., 2020a, p. 1116). For those on the receiving end, breadcrumbing can lead to significant confusion and emotional distress. The intermittent reinforcement—sporadic displays of interest followed by periods of neglect—creates a cycle of heightened expectations and emotional investment, making it challenging for individuals to disengage (Dykes & Fochs, 2023, p.77). This emotional oscillation often reflects an underlying struggle with vulnerability and self-concept stability, where the breadcrumber maintains superficial control through minimal but strategically timed interactions, avoiding the discomfort of genuine intimacy (Jaspal & Lopes, 2025, p.5). This uncertainty and lack of closure can leave recipients feeling devalued and manipulated, often resulting in a negative impact on their self-esteem and overall mental well-being (Gupta, 2022, p.1943).

Breadcrumbing shares similarities with *gaslighting*, another manipulative behavior often used to maintain control in relationships. Both behaviors rely on emotional manipulation to influence and control another person. In gaslighting, a person distorts or denies someone else's reality, causing confusion, self-doubt, and dependence on the manipulator. Similarly, breadcrumbing uses inconsistent signals—like occasional communication or attention—to keep the other person emotionally invested without offering real commitment (Klein et al., 2023, p.1329; Navarro et al., 2020b, p.52). The key similarity is how both tactics exploit emotional vulnerabilities. A breadcrumber creates a pattern of hope and disappointment by giving mixed signals, keeping the recipient unsure and emotionally tied. A gaslighter takes this further by questioning the other person's feelings and perceptions, making them doubt their reality and increasing their reliance on the manipulator (March et al., 2023, p.9). For instance, a breadcrumber might use sporadic communication to keep the recipient invested while simultaneously avoiding commitment, creating a cycle of hope

and disappointment (Navarro et al., 2020b). Similarly, a gaslighter might exploit this dynamic by questioning the recipient's perceptions and emotions, further deepening their confusion and dependency (Klein et al., 2023, p.1329). Together, these behaviors highlight the exploitative tendencies of individuals who prioritize self-serving motives over emotional authenticity. Recent evidence further indicates that repeated exposure to manipulative behaviors such as breadcrumbing and gaslighting can have a cumulative victimization effect, weakening the protective function of social support and impairing coping mechanisms. Under these conditions, individuals—particularly younger adults—become more vulnerable to repeated patterns of emotional exploitation and revictimization (Jaspal & Lopes, 2025, p.6).

Attachment theory, which examines how early caregiver relationships influence emotional connections in adulthood, sheds light on breadcrumbing dynamics. People with insecure attachment styles, particularly avoidant and anxious attachments, are more likely to engage in or fall victim to breadcrumbing. Those with avoidant attachment styles often prioritize independence and avoid emotional closeness, making breadcrumbing an attractive strategy. By keeping connections superficial, they can satisfy their need for attention and validation without exposing themselves to the vulnerability of deeper relationships (Khattar et al., 2023; Li, 2012). Moreover, the concept of breadcrumbing can be closely tied to the two of the Dark Triad traits, that are narcissism and Machiavellianism. The Dark Triad traits are often associated with behaviors characterized by manipulation, self-centeredness, and a lack of empathy, which align with the exploitative nature of breadcrumbing (Navarro et al., 2020b; Jonason et al., 2021, p.5). Individuals with high levels of narcissism, especially vulnerable narcissism, might engage in breadcrumbing to gain constant validation and reassurance stemming from their deep-seated feelings of inadequacy and low self-worth (March et al., 2023). By breadcrumbing, people with vulnerable narcissistic traits may be able to draw attention and admiration while avoiding the emotional risks involved in forming genuine connections. In addition to narcissism, Machiavellianism, characterized by a manipulative and strategic approach to relationships, also plays a role in breadcrumbing. Those with high Machiavellian traits often exploit others to achieve personal goals and view human interactions as transactional (Monaghan et al., 2020, p.311). In breadcrumbing, these individuals use intermittent signs of interest to keep others engaged as backup options while avoiding commitment, prioritizing their gains over the emotional well-being of their partners (Khattar et al., 2023).

Ghosting-Zombie-ing

Ghosting and zombie-ing are becoming increasingly common behaviors in today's romantic relationships, especially among young adults who use digital communication as a primary means of interaction. Ghosting involves cutting off all communication with someone without any explanation, effectively ending the relationship (Wu & Bamishigbin, 2023, p.1375). In contrast, zombie-ing occurs when the person who ghosted unexpectedly makes contact again, often without addressing their prior disappearance. These behaviors take advantage of the ease and convenience offered by digital platforms, making it possible to withdraw from a relationship with minimal confrontation or accountability (LeFebvre et al., 2019). Both ghosting and zombie-ing have significant and lasting psychological effects on the people involved. For those who are ghosted, the sudden silence can lead to feelings of rejection, confusion, and low self-esteem. The lack of closure creates a sense of ambiguous loss, where the ghoster is physically and communicatively absent but remains present in the ghostee's thoughts and emotions (Boss, 2007, p.105).

This emotional ambiguity can cause prolonged distress, as ghostees question their own value and struggle to understand why the relationship ended. Moreover, zombie-ing can worsen these feelings by reopening old wounds and creating cycles of hope and disappointment. When a ghoster returns without acknowledging their previous behavior, the ghostee is forced to grapple with the conflicting emotions of their return and the pain caused by their earlier disappearance. This unpredictability damages trust, increases anxiety, and can make ghostees overly cautious or defensive in future relationships. Therefore, the instability caused by these experiences often prevents ghostees from forming secure and fulfilling connections, leaving them with feelings of betrayal and diminished self-worth (LeFebvre et al., 2019). Also, these behaviors reflect an underlying intention to emotionally manipulate and control the ghostee, aligning with patterns seen in controlled human syndrome. Ghosting and zombie-ing exploit the ghostee's vulnerability by creating cycles of emotional destabilization that foster dependency and compliance. The ghoster's withdrawal and subsequent return serve as tools to damage the ghostee's sense of autonomy and self-worth, making them more susceptible to the ghoster's influence. This manipulation mirrors dissociative projective identification, where unresolved aspects of the ghoster's internal conflicts are projected onto the ghostee, who is then controlled to serve the ghoster's emotional needs (Öztürk, 2023).

Additionally, ghosters and zombies often act out of deep-seated psychological challenges, such as insecure attachment styles, unmetabolized trauma from childhood, or personality traits that disrupt healthy relationships.

For example, individuals with avoidant attachment styles may ghost because they feel uncomfortable with emotional closeness or dependency and prefer to avoid conflict (Szeifert et al., 2025, p.5). Similarly, people with fearful-avoidant attachment, who desire intimacy but fear rejection, are particularly likely to engage in zombie-ing. Their internal struggle makes them pull away when relationships feel overwhelming but return when they feel lonely or emotionally unfulfilled (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Childhood experiences of neglect, abandonment, or inconsistent caregiving often contribute to these behaviors by creating deep insecurities that carry into adulthood. As a result, individuals who grew up in unpredictable or emotionally unavailable environments may use ghosting and zombie-ing as coping mechanisms to manage their fears about relationships. Furthermore, personality traits like narcissism, impulsivity, or low conscientiousness can make these behaviors more common. Narcissistic individuals, for instance, may ghost or zombie without considering the harm caused to others, as they are often more focused on their own needs for autonomy or attention (Twenge & Campbell, 2003). Therefore, while ghosting and zombie-ing may seem like convenient ways for initiators to handle difficult emotions or situations, they often reflect deeper psychological challenges that need to be addressed for healthier relational outcomes.

Objectification Trap

The *objectification trap phenomenon* is a psychological and relational dynamic in which a dominant individual, often shaped by unneutralized childhood traumas and dysfunctional family dynamics, exerts control over a more recessive partner by manipulating their memory, consciousness, and identity. This phenomenon is characterized by gaslighting, emotional manipulation, emotional abuse, and control-oriented behaviors that create dependency and submission in the recessive partner. It serves as a mechanism for the dominant individual to project their unmetabolized internal conflicts and psychological traumas onto their partner, thereby regaining a sense of power and control they perceive to have lost (Öztürk, 2022b, 964). Moreover, similar to enmeshment, this dynamic aligns closely with the controlled human syndrome, where individuals subjected to long-term manipulation lose autonomy and exhibit submissive psychosocial modes characterized by hyperconformity and a diminished sense of self. Over time, their thoughts, behaviors, and emotions are shaped entirely by the dominant partner's demands and expectations, creating a learned helplessness and dependency (Öztürk, 2023).

In the objectification trap, the dominant partner uses manipulative tactics, such as shame, guilt, humiliation, and constant criticism, to destabilize the recessive partner's sense of self, leading to *dissociative attachment* — a fear-driven, trauma-induced attachment style in which individuals dissociate from their authentic emotions and form submissive, hyperempathetic, and conformist bonds with their oppressors or abusers as a coping mechanism (Öztürk, 2023). The recessive partner, driven by feelings of shame and guilt, becomes trapped in a submissive position, unable to break free from the relationship due to emotional dependency and confusion. This process often involves the activation of a *flatterer alter personality*, where the individual unconsciously adopts pleasing behaviors toward the abuser as a defense mechanism to avoid further harm (Öztürk, 2023; Öztürk & Erdoğan, 2022). Ultimately, the trap reflects a cycle of revictimization, where unneutralized trauma from the dominant partner's past is projected onto the recessive partner, perpetuating patterns of control, identity fragmentation, and emotional harm within the relationship (Akiş & Öztürk, 2021). Different from gaslighting (March et al., 2023), the objectification trap involves deeper mechanisms such as *dissociative projective identification*, where the manipulator projects rejected aspects of their identity onto the victim and enforces control to resolve their internal conflicts. This concept aligns with *dissociative projective identity transition theory* (Öztürk, 2023), which explains how unneutralized trauma and dissociation lead to relational dynamics in which manipulators externalize their own conflicts through projection. These projections disrupt the victim's consciousness, memory, and sense of self, reinforcing their submissive role in the relationship. Furthermore, it is typically seen in relationships where partners have a history of unmetabolized trauma, dissociation, or power imbalances in relationships (e.g., dysfunctional families, abusive partnerships). Thus, the manipulator uses the victim as a means of reenacting or resolving their own trauma in a cycle of control and submission (Öztürk, 2023; 2024).

The objectification trap is not only an issue on a personal level but also reflects broader societal and political structures. In these structures, individuals, particularly those with dissociative narcissism, form relationships based on oppression and obedience (Howell, 2003). These relationships perpetuate control and obedience cycles driven by self-interest and the need for power. In a political context, these dynamics are mirrored in authoritarian power structures, where the dominant forces continue to oppress and control in a cycle of manipulation, submission, and power imbalance. The dominant individual's need for control is often rooted in unneutralized trauma, and their ability to manipulate others is a means of restoring their own sense of power and affirmation (Öztürk, 2023).

Necriphysiphilia: The Complexity of Modern Relationship Dynamics

Necriphysiphilia, as described by Öztürk (2024a, p.962), refers to a psychopathological tendency emerging in the Anthropocene era, where individuals replace genuine emotional bonds with material consumption, superficial pleasure, and relational control. It reflects a blending of personal traumas with societal dysfunction, where individuals navigate unresolved psychological issues within the broader context of consumerism, environmental degradation, and technological acceleration. The term highlights how people commodify relationships and identities, relying on external possessions or dominance to compensate for internal emotional deficits. Psychologically, necriphysiphilia is deeply connected to childhood trauma, insecure attachment styles, and personality traits such as narcissism and impulsivity (Öztürk, 2024a, p.964). Such early experiences create vulnerabilities that later appear as unstable relationships, emotional detachment, and self-centered behavior in adulthood. Moreover, societal norms emphasizing consumption and individualism exacerbate these tendencies, leading to patterns of emotional disconnection and dysfunction in relationships (Twenge & Campbell, 2009, p.37). This phenomenon interconnects with dysfunctional romantic relationships, such as situationships, cushioning, enmeshment, breadcrumbing, ghosting, zombie-ing, and the objectification trap mentioned previously in this paper. *Situationships*, for example, often appeal to individuals with avoidant attachment styles or narcissistic traits, who prefer superficial connections to maintain emotional distance and avoid vulnerability (Juteau et al., 2024, p.57; Smolewska & Dion, 2010, p.63). *Cyber dissociation*, in which individuals emotionally detach and separate their digital and real selves, reinforces these ambiguous relationships by allowing avoidance of intimacy while maintaining superficial contact (Öztürk & Erdoğan, 2022, p.28). *Cushioning and breadcrumbing* reflect control-obedience cycles central to necriphysiphilia. Cushioning, where individuals maintain backup relationships as emotional contingencies, and breadcrumbing, characterized by manipulative and sporadic attention, reinforce cycles of dominance and dependence. Both behaviors highlight the transactional nature of modern relationships, where control replaces genuine emotional authenticity (Bandinelli, 2022, p.910; Navarro et al., 2020b, p.52; Öztürk, 2024a, p.965).

The controlled human syndrome, as conceptualized by Öztürk (2023, p.508), offers a framework for understanding how necriphysiphilia perpetuates relational dysfunctions through power imbalances and dependency. This syndrome describes cycles of dominance and submission where unneutralized trauma and dissociative defenses drive manipulative relational dynamics. Partners in such relationships alternate between controlling and submissive roles, reflecting their internalized trauma and disrupted sense of autonomy. These cycles damage trust and emotional stability, preventing the formation of secure and fulfilling connections (Öztürk, 2023, p.509). *Ghosting and zombie-ing* further exemplify these dynamics by creating instability and fostering emotional dependency. Ghosting involves abruptly cutting off communication, leaving the recipient in a state of ambiguous loss, while zombie-ing perpetuates control by reinitiating contact without addressing prior actions (LeFebvre et al., 2019, p.140; Wu & Bamishigbin, 2023, p.1375). Similarly, *enmeshment* illustrates the entrenchment of control and obedience cycles, where blurred boundaries and overdependency disrupt relational health, trapping individuals in dynamics of submission and dominance (Koh et al., 2020, p.398). *The objectification trap* represents necriphysiphilia's relational dysfunction. In this dynamic, a dominant individual manipulates a more submissive partner using tactics like gaslighting and dissociative projection, fostering dependency and control. This reflects both personal trauma and broader societal structures of exploitation, demonstrating how unresolved internal conflicts manifest in cycles of control and obedience (Öztürk, 2023, p.964). Together, these patterns reveal the pervasive impact of necriphysiphilia, perpetuating relational dysfunction and emotional harm.

In other words, necriphysiphilia serves as a framework to understand how personal psychopathology and societal dysfunction shape modern relational behaviors (Öztürk, 2024a, p.966). Situationships, cushioning, breadcrumbing, enmeshment, ghosting and zombie-ing, and the objectification trap highlight the various ways individuals navigate relationships while grappling with unneutralized trauma and societal pressures. These dysfunctional relationship styles are further intensified by cyber dissociation, which allows individuals to separate their digital and real-life identities, fostering emotional detachment and avoidance of genuine connections (Öztürk & Erdoğan, 2022, p.28). Similarly, cyber control plays a pivotal role in enabling power imbalances, where digital tools are used to monitor, manipulate, or dominate partners, reinforcing dependency and relational instability (Bacon & Conway, 2023, p.3598). This control is often intertwined with cyber dissociation, a phenomenon where the depersonalized and overstimulated nature of digital interactions fragments an individual's sense of self, leaving them more susceptible to manipulation and control (Öztürk & Erdoğan, 2022). Within these dynamics, obedience cycles emerge, trapping individuals in repetitive patterns of submission and compliance that perpetuate emotional harm and relational dysfunction (Öztürk, 2023). Addressing these patterns requires both individual and systemic efforts. Therapeutically, interventions such as trauma-

informed care and schema therapy and Trauma-Based Alliance Model Therapy (TBAMT) can help individuals develop emotional regulation and secure attachments, while also mitigating the relational impacts of cyber dissociation and the influence of control and obedience cycles (Öztürk, 2021, p.632). On a societal level, fostering environments that prioritize authenticity, relational reciprocity, and collective well-being can reduce the conditions that give rise to necrophysiphilia, including its digital dimensions, ultimately promoting healthier and more fulfilling connections.

Conclusion

In conclusion, modern relationship patterns such as situationships, cushioning, enmeshment, breadcrumbing, ghosting, zombie-ing, and the objectification trap highlight the significant impact of unresolved emotional issues and societal influences on human connections. These behaviors, closely tied to necrophysiphilia, emphasize a tendency for control, surface-level interactions, and material consumption rather than meaningful emotional intimacy (Öztürk, 2024a, p.962). Many of these patterns align with the controlled human syndrome, where individuals lose autonomy and become trapped in cycles of dependency and submission, often shaped by unmetabolized trauma and power imbalances in their relationships (Öztürk, 2023, p.970). These dynamics frequently stem from personal challenges, such as insecure attachment styles, childhood trauma, dissociation or personality traits like narcissism and impulsivity (Smolewska & Dion, 2010, p.63; Young et al., 2003).

Moreover, societal factors, including consumerism and the rise of digital communication, exacerbate these tendencies by promoting detachment and manipulation in relationships (Bandinelli, 2022, p.910; Navarro et al., 2020b, p.52). The controlled human syndrome framework underscores how societal structures and digital platforms amplify these issues, fostering environments where control and obedience cycles thrive. In such settings, individuals may become conditioned to accept dominance and manipulation, further perpetuating relational dysfunction. These dynamics often manifest as emotional manipulation tactics, such as gaslighting, where individuals are coerced into doubting their own perceptions and feelings. By distorting reality and creating dependency, gaslighting becomes a tool for maintaining power imbalances and perpetuating control in relationships (Klein et al., 2023, p.1329; Navarro et al., 2020b, p.51). To address these patterns, a multifaceted approach is required on a personal level, and therapeutic interventions can help individuals develop emotional resilience and healthier attachment styles. Trauma-informed care and schema therapy, for example, are effective in helping people identify and change dysfunctional behaviors rooted in childhood experiences (Young et al., 2003). Besides, TBAMT provides a structured approach for addressing relational dysfunction and dissociation. By addressing dissociation and trauma directly, TBAMT enables individuals to rebuild healthier relational patterns and achieve a cohesive sense of self (Öztürk, 2021, p.641). These therapies not only encourage self-awareness and emotional regulation but also empower individuals to break free from the control and obedience cycles, fostering the ability to build authentic and autonomous connections.

At a societal level, cultural shifts are necessary to promote values such as empathy, authenticity, and mutual respect in relationships. However, these efforts are increasingly challenged by the pervasive influence of digital platforms, which often encourage depersonalized interactions and superficial validation, playing a significant role in fostering cyber dissociation (Öztürk, 2022a). This state not only weakens emotional connections but also reinforces control and obedience cycles in romantic relationships, as individuals become more conditioned to the manipulative and disinhibiting nature of digital environments. To counter these effects, societal and individual efforts must focus on fostering open communication and emotional accountability, helping rebuild trust and depth in relationships (Öztürk, 2022a; LeFebvre et al., 2019, p.140).

Behaviors and relationship statuses covered in this article, including situationships, cushioning, breadcrumbing, enmeshment, ghosting, zombie-ing, and the objectification trap reflect the dysfunctions in modern romantic relationships as they prioritize control, avoidance, and superficial validation over emotional depth and mutual respect. These patterns often leave individuals trapped in cycles of confusion, emotional detachment, and unmet needs, perpetuating dissatisfaction and disconnection. Addressing these dynamics requires challenging their underlying causes, such as emotional manipulation, fear of vulnerability, and societal norms that devalue authentic connections. By addressing the underlying psychological and societal causes of these behaviors, individuals can break free from unhealthy relational patterns and build stronger, more fulfilling connections. Recognizing the role of controlled human syndrome in these dynamics is key to understanding how power imbalances and dependency are reinforced in modern relationships. This awareness can pave the way for a culture that values genuine intimacy over control and superficiality. Transforming these dynamics not only benefits individuals but also strengthens the broader societal fabric, fostering a more compassionate and connected world.

Beyanlar

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Özet

Modern romantik ilişki dinamikleri, dijitalleşmenin hızla yayılması, toplumsal ve bireysel normlardaki dönüşümler ve hatta kırılmalarla birlikte giderek daha karmaşık ve disfonksiyonel bir yapı kazanmaktadır. Bu bağlamda, durumsal/tanımsız ilişki, yedekleme, ekmek kııntısı taktiği (sinyalcilik), hayaletleme-zobileme, iç içe geçme ve objeleştirme kaparı gibi kişilerarası ilişki kavram ve biçimleri, bireylerin nötrale edilmemiş çocukluk çağı travmalarının, dissosiyatif savunma mekanizmalarının, güvensiz bağlanma stillerinin ve narsistik özellikleriyle ilişkilendirilebilir. Güvensiz bağlanma stilleri, özellikle kaygılı, kaçınan ve korkulu-kaçınan bağlanma stilleri, bireyin duygusal yakınlık kurmasını zorlaştırır. Aile içinde yaşanan istismar ve ihmal gibi çocukluk çağı travmaları nötrale edilemediğinde, bu durum yetişkinlikte ilişki sorunlara dönüşebilmekte ve öznelere yüzeysel, belirsiz ve duygusal sorumluluktan kaçınan ilişki biçimlerine yönlendirebilmektedir. Örneğin, durumsal/tanımsız ilişki kavramı, karşılıklı bağlanma ve geleceğe yönelik bir çerçeveden yoksun ilişkileri tanımlarken; ekmek kııntısı taktiği (sinyalcilik) ve hayaletleme gibi davranışlar, ilişki sorumluluktan kaçmak adına kullanılan manipülatif stratejiler haline gelmiştir. Zobileme ise, terk edilen bireyin belirsizlik içinde bırakılmasını sürdürerek, duygusal karmaşayı ve güvensizliği pekiştirmektedir.

Bu kişilerarası ilişki biçimlerinin temelinde yer alan dissosiyasyon, bireyin yoğun duygusal acıyla baş edebilmek adına benliğinden ve ilişki gerçeklikten ayrışmasını sağlayan bir savunma mekanizması olarak işlev görebilmektedir. Özellikle duygusal istismar ve/veya ihmal yaşamış bireylerde, dissosiyatif başa çıkma stratejileri yaygın biçimde gözlemlenmekte ve bu stratejiler, duygusal sorumluluktan uzak, kaçınmacı ve kontrol odaklı ilişki davranışlarını beslemektedir. Bununla birlikte, dissoanaliz kuramı çerçevesinde tanımlanan “kontrol edilmiş insan sendromu”, bireylerin hem özne hem nesne konumlarında dönüşümlü olarak yer aldığı, bağımlılık, kontrol ve itaat döngülerine sıkışmış ilişki yapıları betimlemektedir. Bu yapılar, narsistik savunmalarla da birleştiğinde, karşılıklı olarak duygusal sömürü, manipülasyon ve kimlik çözülmesi içeren ilişkiler ortaya çıkarabilmektedir. Modern psikotraumatoji ilkeleri ve dissoanalitik ekol perspektifinden geliştirilen “ölüdoğa seviciliği” kavramı ise, bireylerin doyum karşılıklı ilişki bağdan değil; kontrol, tüketim ve haz temelli etkileşimlerden sağlamaya yöneldiği bir ilişki yozlaşma biçimini ifade etmektedir. Bu bağlamda ilişkiler, duygusal derinlikten uzak, yüzeysel, araçsallaştırılmış ve metalaşmış yapılara dönüşmektedir. Tüm bu örüntüler, dijitalleşme ile daha da yoğunlaşmakta; bireylerin siber dissosiyasyon aracılığıyla çevrimiçi kimlikler üzerinden gerçek duygusal temas kurmaksızın ilişki tatmin aramalarına zemin hazırlamaktadır.

Bireylerin bu travmatize edici döngüsel yapıları kırabilmesi, yalnızca bireysel psikolojik müdahalelerle değil; aynı zamanda empati, özgünlük ve karşılıklılık gibi değerlere dayanan toplumsal dönüşümlerle mümkündür. Travma merkezli

terapi modelleri (örneğin Şema Terapisi ve Travma Merkezli Alyans Model Terapi), bireyin çözülmemiş travmalarını nötralize etmesine, dissosiyatif savunma mekanizmalarını fark etmesine ve sağlıklı bağlanma kapasitesini yeniden inşa etmesine olanak tanımaktadır. Ancak bu müdahalelerin kalıcı bir dönüşüm sağlayabilmesi için, bireysel iyileşme süreçlerinin ötesine geçerek, toplumsal düzeyde ilişki normlarını dönüştürmeye yönelik kültürel farkındalıkların da inşa edilmesi gerekmektedir. Modern ilişkilerdeki işlevsellik kaybı, bireyin psikolojik altyapısı ile dijital kültürün ve tüketim odaklı sosyolojik yapının etkileşimi sonucunda ortaya çıkan çok katmanlı bir psikotoplumsal soruna işaret etmektedir. Bu nedenle, ilişkiyel sağaltımı mümkün kılacak bütüncül bir yaklaşım hem bireysel hem de kültürel düzeyde travmanın nötralize edilmesine yönelik müdahale stratejilerinin eş zamanlı olarak geliştirilmesini zorunlu kılmaktadır.