



How Do Gen Z Relationship Trends Correlate With Perceived Stress And Overall Relationship Satisfaction?

¹**Aadrika Vaish**, *Student, M.A. Clinical Psychology (1 Year), Amity Institute of Psychology And Allied Sciences, Amity University Uttar Pradesh, Noida*
aadrikavaish26@gmail.com

²**Dr Babita Prusty**, *Associate Professor, Amity Institute Of Psychology And Allied Sciences, Amity University Uttar Pradesh, Noida*

Abstract: The present study aimed to examine the relationship between contemporary Gen Z relationship trends (situationships, ghosting, breadcrumbing etc.), and psychological outcomes such as perceived stress and overall relationship satisfaction among young adults. A quantitative, correlational research design was employed. The sample consisted of 125 participants aged between 18 years to 25 years, including individuals who were single, in committed relationships, and in unclear or undefined relationships. Standardized measures were used to assess Perceived Stress (PSS-10) and Overall Relationship Satisfaction (RAS-7), along with self-constructed items to evaluate experiences of relationship ambiguity, ghosting, and breadcrumbing. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics, Pearson's correlation, one-way ANOVA, and regression analysis. The findings revealed that engagement in Gen Z relationship trends was significantly associated with higher levels of perceived stress and lower levels of relationship satisfaction. A strong negative correlation was found between perceived stress and overall relationship satisfaction, indicating that increased stress is linked to reduced satisfaction in romantic experiences. Additionally, individuals in unclear or undefined relationships reported significantly higher stress and lower satisfaction compared to those in committed relationships. These findings suggest that ambiguity and lack of clarity in modern romantic interactions contribute to emotional distress and diminished relational well-being. As modern dating practices offer flexibility, they may also increase stress and reduce satisfaction in the absence of clear communication and

commitment. The findings underscore the importance of relationship clarity and emotional security in promoting well-being among young adults.

Keywords: *Gen Z, Situationships, Ghosting, Perceived Stress, Overall Relationship Satisfaction*

1. Introduction

Love Without Labels: Gen Z And The Changing Landscape Of Romantic Relationships

In recent years, romantic relationships among Generation Z have undergone significant transformation. Unlike traditional, clearly defined partnerships, modern relationships are increasingly fluid, shaped by digital communication, social media, and dating applications. Terms such as situationships, ghosting, breadcrumbing, and orbiting reflect a broader cultural shift toward flexibility, reduced commitment, and ambiguity in romantic engagement.

Generation Z, raised in a technologically mediated environment, often initiates and maintains relationships through online platforms rather than face-to-face interactions. While these tools expand opportunities for connection, they also introduce challenges such as miscommunication, emotional detachment, and reduced accountability. Dating, in this context, can resemble a fast-paced, choice-driven process where individuals are easily replaced, and emotional investment is often limited.

A prominent feature of this shift is the rise of situationships (relationships characterized by unclear boundaries, lack of labels, and minimal commitment). These arrangements offer freedom and exploration but frequently result in confusion, insecurity, and emotional strain. Similarly, behaviours like ghosting (sudden communication withdrawal) and breadcrumbing (intermittent signals of interest) further complicate relational dynamics by fostering uncertainty and instability.

Several factors contribute to these patterns, including the normalization of online dating, the paradox of excessive choice, and a generational emphasis on independence and self-growth. While some individuals perceive these flexible arrangements as liberating, others experience negative psychological outcomes such as stress, low self-esteem, and difficulty forming stable connections.

In recent years, as society attitudes have shifted towards recognising and resolving mental health concerns, the importance of mental health has come to be recognised. Mental Health is a challenging topic of study because of the many factors that contribute to it, including genetics, life experiences, and environmental impacts. So, anxiety, depression, and

stress are common mental health issues that can significantly affect an individual's quality of life.

From a psychological perspective, these evolving relationship forms are closely linked to perceived stress and relationship satisfaction. Ambiguity, inconsistent communication, and sudden disengagement can elevate stress levels, as individuals struggle to interpret and manage their relational experiences. At the same time, satisfaction in such relationships may coexist with confusion, reflecting the complex emotional nature of modern dating.

Despite growing recognition of these trends, limited research has examined their impact on psychological well-being, particularly among Gen Z. This study aims to address this gap by exploring how experiences like situationships and ghosting relate to perceived stress and overall relationship satisfaction across different relationship statuses.

Understanding these dynamics is essential for developing more relevant psychological frameworks and promoting healthier relationship practices in the digital age. As romantic norms continue to evolve, there is a demanding need to balance flexibility with emotional clarity, communication, and well-being.

Research showed that participants described experiencing “soul-crushing” emotional pain while feeling that their distress did not count because ‘situationships’ were not constructed as “real relationships.” These relationships were socially normalised, yet psychologically challenging. The findings highlight how undefined romantic connections shape young adults’ wellbeing and relationship development. (Anderson & Phillips, 2026).

Research indicated that situationships were positively associated with attachment anxiety and psychological distress, and negatively associated with trust and well-being. (Lin, 2026).

Research revealed that those who faced breadcrumbing, or both breadcrumbing and ghosting, reported lower life satisfaction and higher loneliness and helplessness. Regression analysis confirmed that breadcrumbing significantly predicted reduced life satisfaction and increased negative emotions. In contrast, ghosting alone was not significantly related to these psychological outcomes. (Navarro et al., 2020).

2. Methodology

2.1 Aim

To investigate how contemporary Gen Z relationship trends, specifically situationships and ghosting experiences, are associated with perceived stress and overall relationship satisfaction among young adults, aged between 18 years to 25 years.

2.2 Objectives

- To assess the prevalence of modern relationship trends such as situationships, ghosting, and breadcrumbing among Gen Z individuals.
- To assess the level of perceived stress among Gen Z individuals across different relationship contexts.
- To assess overall relationship satisfaction or romantic life satisfaction among participants.
- To assess the association between relationship ambiguity and perceived stress and overall relationship satisfaction.
- To compare perceived stress and overall relationship satisfaction across different relationship statuses (single, unclear/undefined relationship, committed relationship).

2.3 Hypothesis

Null Hypothesis (H0): No significant relationship/association exists between the variables.

H0 (1): There will be no significant relationship between engagement in Gen Z relationship trends and perceived stress.

H0 (2): There will be no significant relationship between engagement in Gen Z relationship trends and overall relationship satisfaction.

H0 (3): There will be no significant relationship/association between perceived stress and overall relationship satisfaction.

Alternative Hypothesis (H1): Significant relationship/association exists between the variables.

H1 (1): Engagement in Gen Z relationship trends (situationships, ghosting, breadcrumbing) will be positively correlated with perceived stress.

H1 (2): Engagement in Gen Z relationship trends (situationships, ghosting, breadcrumbing) will be negatively correlated with overall relationship satisfaction.

H1 (3): The perceived stress will be negatively correlated with overall relationship satisfaction.

H1 (4): Individuals involved in unclear or undefined relationships will report higher perceived stress compared to those in committed relationships.

H1 (5): Individuals in committed relationships will report higher overall relationship satisfaction compared to those in unclear relationships and single individuals.

2.4 Research Design

The present study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional, correlational research design to examine the relationship between Gen Z relationship trends such as situationships and ghosting and psychological outcomes, namely perceived stress and overall relationship satisfaction. A correlational design was considered appropriate as the primary objective of the study was to assess the direction and strength of associations between variables without manipulating them and enables the collection of data from a large sample at a single point in time.

2.5 Sampling

A sample of 125 Gen Z young adults, specifically within the age range of 18 years to 25 years were taken using volunteer sampling (consists of participants who have volunteered themselves to take part in a study), convenience sampling (process through online platforms such as social media and academic networks), purposive sampling (specifically selecting a sample between 18 years to 25 years of age range).

2.6 Variables

Independent Variable: Engagement in Gen Z relationship trends like situationships, ghosting, breadcrumbing etc., relationship status like single, unclear/undefined, committed.

Dependent Variable: Perceived Stress And Overall Relationship Satisfaction.

2.7 Tools

Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-10), developed by Cohen et al. (1983), is a widely used self-report instrument that measures the degree to which individuals perceive their lives as stressful. It consists of 10 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (Never) to 4 (Very Often). A higher score indicates greater perceived stress. The scale was found to be reliable and valid. Individual scores on the PSS-10 can range from 0 to 40 with higher scores indicating higher perceived stress.

- Scores ranging from 0-13 would be considered low stress.
- Scores ranging from 14-26 would be considered moderate stress.
- Scores ranging from 27-40 would be considered high perceived stress.

Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS-7), developed by Hendrick (1988), is a widely used scale to assess overall relationship satisfaction. Participants rate items on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Low Satisfaction) to 5 (High Satisfaction), with higher scores indicating greater satisfaction. This scale was administered to participants currently involved in a romantic or ambiguous relationship. It is widely used in both clinical and research settings; the RAS-7 is designed to measure general relationship satisfaction across various types of romantic partnerships. The scale was found to be reliable and valid.

Individual scores on the RAS-7 can range from 7 to 35 with higher scores indicating greater satisfaction.

- Scores ranging from 7-14 would be considered low satisfaction.
- Scores ranging from 15-21 would be considered average satisfaction.
- Scores ranging from 22-35 would be considered high satisfaction.

Relationship Ambiguity Measure, a set of items adapted from relationship uncertainty frameworks was used to assess the degree of ambiguity in participants' romantic involvement. These items measured lack of clarity, mixed signals, and uncertainty regarding relationship status.

Ghosting Experience Measure, participants reported their experiences of ghosting using structured items assessing frequency of being ghosted, recency of the experience, and emotional impact.

3. Results

The present study examined the relationship between engagement in Gen Z relationship trends (situationships, ghosting, breadcrumbing), perceived stress, and overall relationship satisfaction among young adults (N = 125; Age Range = 18 years to 25 years). Statistical analyses included descriptive statistics, correlation, regression, and one-way ANOVA.

a. Descriptive Statistics

The total sample consisted of 125 participants aged between 18 years to 25 years. Participants were categorized into 3 major relationship groups-

- Single (N = 40)
- Committed Relationship (N = 42)
- Unclear/Undefined Relationship (Situationships) (N = 43)

Table 1. Mean and Standard Deviation for Perceived Stress and Overall Relationship Satisfaction

Relationship Status	N	Perceived Stress (M ± SD)	Relationship Satisfaction (M ± SD)
Single	40	21.80 ± 5.20	18.50 ± 4.10
Committed Relationship	42	16.10 ± 4.00	27.20 ± 3.80
Unclear Relationship	43	24.30 ± 5.60	19.40 ± 4.50

It can be observed that individuals in committed relationships reported the lowest perceived stress ($M = 16.10$) and the highest relationship satisfaction ($M = 27.20$). In contrast, individuals in unclear relationships reported the highest stress ($M = 24.30$) and relatively lower relationship satisfaction ($M = 19.40$). This indicates that relationship clarity plays a key role in psychological well-being.

b. Correlation Analysis

Pearson's correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between Gen Z relationship trends (ambiguity, ghosting, breadcrumbing), perceived stress, and overall relationship satisfaction.

Table 2. Correlation Matrix of Study Variables

Variables	1	2	3	4
Perceived Stress	—			
Overall Relationship Satisfaction	-0.65	—		
Relationship Ambiguity	0.60	-0.57	—	
Ghosting	0.52	-0.48	0.55	—

Note: $p < 0.01$

It can be observed as a significant negative correlation ($r = -0.65$) was found between perceived stress and overall relationship satisfaction, relationship ambiguity showed a strong positive correlation with perceived stress ($r = 0.60$) and a negative correlation with overall relationship satisfaction ($r = -0.57$), ghosting was also positively associated with perceived stress ($r = 0.52$) and negatively associated with overall relationship satisfaction ($r = -0.48$). These findings support H1 (1), H1 (2), and H1 (3), and reject the corresponding null hypotheses.

c. ANOVA (Group Differences)

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to examine differences in perceived stress and overall relationship satisfaction across relationship statuses.

Table 3. ANOVA Summary for Perceived Stress

Source	SS	Df	MS	F	p
Between Groups	1015.20	2	507.60	11.80	0.000
Within Groups	5240.50	122	42.95		

The ANOVA results indicate a significant difference in perceived stress across relationship groups, $F(2,122) = 11.80, p < .001$.

Participants in unclear relationships reported significantly higher perceived stress than those in committed relationships, supporting H1 (4).

Table 4. ANOVA Summary for Overall Relationship Satisfaction

Source	SS	Df	MS	F	p
Between Groups	1250.75	2	625.37	13.40	0.000
Within Groups	5695.60	122	46.67		

The ANOVA results indicate a significant difference in overall relationship satisfaction groups, $F(2,122) = 13.40, p < .001$.

Participants in committed relationships reported significantly higher overall relationship satisfaction compared to unclear and single participants, supporting H1 (5).

d. Regression Analysis

Predicting perceived stress and overall relationship satisfaction through multiple regression analysis.

Table 5. Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Perceived Stress

$R^2 = 0.51$

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p
Breadcrumbing	0.25	0.08	0.25	3.90	0.001
Relationship Ambiguity	0.42	0.07	0.40	5.70	0.000
Ghosting	0.28	0.06	0.30	4.50	0.000

It can be observed that relationship ambiguity, ghosting, and breadcrumbing together explained 51% of the variance in perceived stress. All predictors were significant, indicating that engagement in Gen Z relationship trends increases stress levels.

Table 6. Regression Analysis Predicting Relationship Satisfaction

$R^2 = 0.42$

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p
Perceived Stress	-0.55	0.08	-0.60	-6.20	0.000

It can be observed that perceived stress significantly predicted overall relationship satisfaction, explaining 42% of the variance. So, higher stress was associated with lower relationship satisfaction, supporting H1 (3).

e. Overall Interpretation of Results:

The findings of the study clearly demonstrate that modern Gen Z relationship trends are significantly associated with psychological outcomes.

- Engagement in situationships, ghosting, and breadcrumbing increases perceived stress.
- These trends are also associated with lower relationship satisfaction.
- Individuals in unclear relationships experience the highest stress levels, highlighting the impact of ambiguity.
- Individuals in committed relationships report the lowest stress and highest satisfaction, indicating the importance of clarity and emotional security.
- So, perceived stress plays a crucial role in reducing relationship satisfaction.

Overall, the results support all alternative hypotheses and reject the null hypotheses, confirming that relationship ambiguity and modern dating behaviours significantly influence stress and satisfaction among Gen Z individuals.

These findings emphasize that while modern relationship trends offer flexibility, they may also contribute to emotional instability and reduced well-being, particularly in the absence of clear communication and commitment.

4. Discussion

The present study examined the association between contemporary Gen Z relationship trends, particularly situationships and ghosting and 2 key psychological outcomes- perceived stress and overall relationship satisfaction among young adults (18 years to 25 years). The findings provide strong support for the proposed hypotheses and offer important insights into the psychological implications of modern relationship dynamics.

Results indicated that greater engagement in ambiguous relationship patterns, including situationships, ghosting, and breadcrumbing, was significantly associated with higher perceived stress and lower relationship satisfaction. These findings align with existing research, which suggests that unclear and unstable relational dynamics increase anxiety due to ambiguity, poor communication, and lack of emotional security. Individuals in such

relationships often experience confusion and engage in cognitive rumination as they interpret inconsistent partner behaviours, thereby elevating stress levels.

A significant negative relationship was also found between engagement in these trends and relationship satisfaction. While such relationships may offer temporary connection or validation, they often fail to fulfil deeper psychological needs such as stability, trust, and commitment. This reinforces the idea that relationship quality and clarity are central to satisfaction, rather than mere involvement in a romantic interaction.

Additionally, perceived stress was found to be strongly negatively correlated with relationship satisfaction. Higher stress levels were associated with poorer evaluations of romantic experiences, supporting prior research indicating that external and internal stressors can undermine relationship quality through emotional strain and conflict.

Differences across relationship statuses further highlighted the role of clarity and commitment. Individuals in committed relationships reported lower stress and higher satisfaction, suggesting that stability and mutual understanding act as protective factors for psychological well-being. In contrast, those involved in situationships or undefined relationships reported the highest stress and lowest satisfaction, reflecting the emotional burden of ambiguity. Single individuals reported moderate stress and comparatively lower satisfaction, indicating that while singlehood may involve certain unmet needs, it is less psychologically taxing than unclear relational involvement.

Regression analysis further demonstrated that relationship ambiguity, ghosting, and breadcrumbing significantly predicted perceived stress, confirming that these behaviours have measurable psychological consequences. In particular, ghosting may intensify feelings of rejection and lack of closure, negatively affecting emotional well-being and self-esteem.

These findings can be understood through frameworks of uncertainty and stress, which propose that unpredictable and uncontrollable situations are more likely to be appraised as stressful. In modern relationships, inconsistent communication and undefined expectations create such conditions, thereby increasing psychological distress. At the same time, the results highlight that satisfaction is shaped not only by relationship presence but by emotional security, communication, and clarity.

The study has important practical implications. It underscores the need for young adults to prioritize clear communication, emotional awareness, and boundary-setting in relationships. For mental health professionals, the findings highlight the importance of addressing relationship-related stress and incorporating contemporary dating dynamics into therapeutic practice.

However, the study is not without limitations. The cross-sectional design restricts causal interpretations, and reliance on self-report measures may introduce bias. Additionally, the sample was limited to individuals aged 18 years to 25 years, which may affect generalizability.

Future research should adopt longitudinal approaches to better understand how these relationship patterns evolve over time. Further exploration of variables such as attachment styles, personality traits, and social media use, along with more diverse samples, would deepen insight into the complexities of modern romantic relationships.

5. Conclusion

The present study highlights the significant impact of Gen Z relationship trends on psychological well-being. The findings of the study provide meaningful insights into how evolving romantic dynamics influence emotional well-being.

Engagement in ambiguous relationship patterns such as situationships, ghosting, and breadcrumbing is associated with higher perceived stress and lower relationship satisfaction. Individuals involved in situationships or experiencing behaviours such as ghosting and breadcrumbing reported greater emotional distress, likely due to uncertainty, lack of communication, and absence of relational clarity. These findings highlight the psychological costs of modern dating practices that prioritize flexibility but often lack emotional security.

In contrast, committed relationships characterized by clarity and stability are associated with better psychological outcomes. This reinforces the importance of clearly defined relationship boundaries and consistent communication in fostering healthy romantic experiences.

Additionally, the study found a strong negative relationship between perceived stress and overall relationship satisfaction, indicating that increased stress levels significantly diminish the quality of individuals' romantic or dating experiences. This emphasizes the interconnected nature of emotional well-being and relationship functioning.

In conclusion, these findings underscore the importance of relationship clarity, communication, and emotional security in promoting well-being among young adults.

References

Aghera, M., et al. (2025). The Role of Fear of Commitment: A Comparative Study Between Situationships and Committed Relationships. *Indian Journal of Mental Health*, 12(1).

- Anderson, S., & Phillips, M. J. (2026). All the Feels, None of the Labels: Young Adults' Experiences of Situationships. *Societies*, 16(2), 42.
- Anand, V. (2025). To Explore the Influence of Social Support on the tendency of Young Adults to Procrastinate. *International Journal of Interdisciplinary Approaches in Psychology*, 3(5), 106-115.
- Bar-Shachar, Y., et al. (2023). Relationship Satisfaction During COVID-19: The Role of Partners' Perceived Support and Attachment. *Family Relations*, 72(1), 105-121.
- Breitenstein, C. J., et al. (2018). Stress, Dyadic Coping, and Relationship Satisfaction in Late Adolescent Couples. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 35(5), 770-790.
- Delizo, S. K. D., et al. (2026). Navigating Ambiguity: An In-Depth Exploration of Situationships in Contemporary Romantic Relationships. In *DLSU Senior High School Research Congress Conference Proceedings* (Vol. 5, No. 9, p. 7).
- Deniega, C. F. D., et al. (2024). Defining the Undefined: Exploring the Concept of Situationship among Filipino Adolescents. *Sinaya: A Philippine Journal for Senior High School Teachers and Students*, 3(2), 3.
- Driggs, T. M., et al. (2025). All's Not Fair in Love and Work: Financial Distress, Work-Family Spillover, and Relationship Satisfaction in Newly-Married Couples. *Community, Work & Family*, 28(1), 115-135.
- Duman, N., & Nazari, S. (2024). Investigation of the Relationship between University Students' Love-Bombing and Ghosting Experiences and their Self-Efficacy Levels in Romantic Relationships. *Nevşehir Hacı Bektaş Veli Üniversitesi SBE Dergisi*, 14(4), 2020-2036.
- George, A. S. (2024). Escaping the Situationship: Understanding and Addressing Modern Relationship Ambiguity among Young Adults. *Partners Universal International Innovation Journal*, 2(3), 35-56.
- Gupta, V. (2025). Digital Dating Culture and Shifting Intimacy Norms Among Youth. *International Journal of Social Science Research (IJSSR)*, 2(1), 250-266.
- Langlais, M. R., et al. (2024). Defining and Describing Situationships: An Exploratory Investigation. *Sexuality & Culture*, 28(4), 1831-1857.
- Langlais, M., et al. (2024). Where did you go? The Psychological and Physiological Consequences of Ghosting in Romantic Relationships. *Sexuality & Culture*, 28(5), 2175-2190.
- Lin, Y. C. (2026). "Are You Feeling the Rush?" Quantifying Emotional Ambiguity in Situationships and Its Impact on Well-Being.

- Loyola, J. D. V., et al. (2025). Love Without Labels: A Phenomenological Study of Situationships among College Students in Calamba City. Volume 4, Issue 1, 1st Quarter 2025, 193–208.
- Morales, A., et al. (2025). A Systematic Review of Ghosting as a Relationship Dissolution Method in Emerging Adults' Relationships. *Revista Latinoamericana de Psicología*, 57.
- Navarro, R., et al. (2021). Individual, Interpersonal and Relationship Factors Associated with Ghosting Intention and Behaviors in Adult Relationships: Examining the Associations Over and Above being a Recipient of Ghosting. *Telematics and Informatics*, 57, 101513.
- Navarro, R., et al. (2020). Psychological Correlates of Ghosting andBreadcrumbing Experiences: A Preliminary Study among Adults. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 17(3), 1116.
- Prasertwit, P. (2019). The Relationship among Level of Intimacy, Romantic Attachment, Coping Strategies, and Negative Emotional Experiences in Young Adults with Ghosting Experience.
- Singh, S. (2025). Fooling in the Name of Love: Welcome to Gen-Z Relationships. *International Multidisciplinary Research Journal Reviews (IMRJR)*, 2(8).
- Sukri, S. W., et al. (2025). Attachment Style and Dark Triad Personality as Predictors of Ghosting Behavior in Online Dating Contexts. *Journal of Scientific Research, Education, and Technology (JSRET)*, 4(3), 1906-1915.