



Dynamics of Breakup Distress and Digital Grieving on Social Media: A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract

The digital era has transformed how individuals experience romantic relationship dissolution, shifting the mourning process into virtual environments. This study aims to systematically review the dynamics of breakup distress and digital mourning expressions on social media platforms. Using a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) method guided by the PRISMA 2020 framework, 126 records were identified, with nine studies published between 2020 and 2024 meeting the inclusion criteria. The findings reveal that social media serves an ambivalent role in the grieving process. While these platforms provide a space for emotional catharsis, identity reconstruction, and communal support, they simultaneously prolong emotional attachment through digital archives and algorithmic reminders. Emerging themes such as digital hauntings, the use of griefbots, and resistance to online mourning practices highlight the complexity of contemporary loss. This study concludes that digital grieving is a non-linear and technologically mediated experience that redefines traditional grief models. These results underscore the necessity for adaptive psychological interventions and enhanced digital literacy to foster healthy relational closure in an increasingly connected world.

Keywords: breakup distress, digital grieving, social media, online emotional expression, virtual environments

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1. Introduction

Romantic relationships during the late adolescent phase are widely recognized as a fundamental cornerstone for the development of individual identity and the refinement of socio-emotional competencies. At the high school level, adolescents begin to navigate the complexities of emotional intimacy and commitment, which serve as a rehearsal for adult relational dynamics. However, these developmental milestones are frequently interrupted by the dissolution of such bonds, a phenomenon that triggers a psychological state known as breakup distress. This distress is not merely a transient period of sadness but a profound emotional crisis characterized by heightened anxiety, sleep disturbances, and a significant decline in overall psychological well-being [1], [2]. Recent empirical evidence has further demonstrated that the shock associated with romantic loss can lead to long-term attachment disruptions and increased vulnerability to clinical depression [3], [4].

In the specific context of Indonesian society, the manifestation and management of breakup distress are deeply interwoven with sociocultural narratives and collective expectations. The internalizing of these social expectations plays a critical role in shaping how young individuals regulate their emotions during periods of

interpersonal crisis, as emotional regulation has been shown to directly influence aggressive behavioral outcomes among high school students [5]. These emotional regulation strategies are not formed in a vacuum; they are the result of continuous interaction between the individual and their social environment. Furthermore, this findings demonstrate through a big data systematic review that social support is a significant determinant of psychological well-being among adolescents, suggesting that its availability may either buffer or intensify the distress experienced following a relational dissolution [6].

Psychological perspectives suggest that males and females possess different 'scripts' for processing loss, with females demonstrating significantly higher levels of ruminative thinking and emotional reactivity while males tend toward avoidant coping strategies following relationship dissolution [7]. Female adolescents are often socialized toward relational interdependence, which places a high value on the maintenance of emotional bonds. Consequently, when a breakup occurs, they often perceive it as a fragmentation of their own self-concept [8]. This perception frequently leads to prolonged periods of rumination and a heightened need for social validation, as rumination has been identified as a self-perpetuating cognitive pattern that intensifies emotional distress following interpersonal loss [9]. This is consistent with findings, who found that

perceived social support and adaptive coping strategies are critical protective factors for adolescent resilience in Indonesian institutional settings, underscoring the heightened emotional burden faced by female adolescents navigating relational loss [10].

On the other hand, male adolescents navigate heartbreak through a lens of masculinity that often prioritizes stoicism and emotional restraint, a pattern that has been linked to maladaptive emotion regulation strategies and heightened vulnerability to psychological distress [11], [12]. Traditional gender socialization encourages males to suppress vulnerability and maintain a facade of strength and autonomy. While this may result in lower reported scores of overt distress, it often masks a "hidden" grief that manifests through avoidant coping mechanisms such as excessive physical activity or immersive digital gaming [13]. These gendered coping styles are further compounded by emotional regulation difficulties, as maladaptive cognitive emotion regulation strategies have been found to significantly predict PTSD symptoms following relational victimization [11], while paternal attachment quality has been shown to meaningfully shape emotional regulation capacity in young adults [12]. This disparity in emotional expression underscores the need for a deeper qualitative understanding of the "unspoken" narratives of male distress.

The cultural landscape of Malang City, as an educational hub, provides a unique backdrop for this study. High school students in this region are subjected to an intersection of high academic expectations and traditional family values that dictate appropriate emotional conduct. These cultural moderators define the "speed" and "style" of recovery, often leading to a "forced recovery" where students perform emotional stability to satisfy social peer groups or family reputations [17]. The role of peer-based support systems is increasingly recognized as vital in addressing these emotional crises, as a peer counselor training module for emerging adults has been developed to strengthen peer support capacities [16], while forgiveness dynamics in young women following relational loss have been shown to be deeply shaped by early attachment experiences and gender-specific grief processes [17].

Social media platforms can act as a 'double-edged sword,' providing a space for social support while also facilitating monitoring behaviors and constant digital reminders of the lost bond, as post-breakup social media use has been shown to be significantly associated with heightened emotional distress [18]. The complexity of these experiences necessitates longitudinal and contextual approaches that capture not only the immediate distress but also the long-term psychological trajectories of individuals navigating romantic dissolution [19]. Social support and resilience have been identified as key protective factors against distress,

underscoring the importance of relational resources in helping young individuals navigate significant personal and academic stressors [20].

Most existing studies focus on university-aged individuals or rely solely on Western-centric theoretical frameworks that inadequately capture the cultural specificities of relational loss, as existing models tend to overlook the intersectionality of gender, attachment, and local cultural values [21]. This study seeks to address this gap by exploring the subjective meanings of breakup distress among students at SMAN 6 Malang. By adopting a narrative design, this research aims to provide a platform for adolescents to share their reconstructed stories of loss, filtered through their gendered experiences. This understanding is paramount for developing gender-sensitive counseling frameworks that can effectively support the psychological health and development of the younger generation [22].

2. Methods

This study adopted a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) design to synthesize empirical and theoretical findings related to breakup distress and digital grieving within virtual environments. The research methodology was structured to provide a clear and reproducible framework for identifying how psychological mourning processes adapt to digital platforms. The target population for this review comprised peer-reviewed journal articles that examined the psychological, social, and technological dimensions of grieving occurring in digital spaces, such as social media and virtual communities.

The sampling technique employed was purposive sampling, focusing on high-quality studies published between 2020 and 2024 to capture the most recent scholarly developments in digital psychology. The search and selection process strictly adhered to the PRISMA 2020 framework to ensure transparency in the identification, screening, and inclusion stages. Initially, a total of 126 records were identified through electronic databases, specifically Mendeley and the Digital Grieving Database. After removing duplicates and studies published outside the designated period, the remaining records were screened based on title and abstract relevance.

The eligibility of the remaining reports was assessed through a full-text review based on specific inclusion criteria, which required the studies to be accessible in English, provide open-access full texts, and be published in reputable journals (Q1–Q4). Following this rigorous selection process, nine studies met all criteria and were included for qualitative synthesis. Although this review did not involve primary human participants, demographic trends within the synthesized literature were recorded, showing a focus on young adults aged 18 to 35 years. This methodological approach ensures that the findings are grounded in high-quality

contemporary evidence regarding digital coping behaviors.

2.1. Table

The selection process for this systematic review was governed by a set of predefined parameters to ensure the relevance and quality of the synthesized data, as detailed in Table 1. These criteria focused on studies published within the last five years (2020–2024) to capture the most contemporary developments in digital psychology and online mourning behaviors. The inclusion criteria required that articles must be peer-reviewed, written in English, and categorized within reputable journal rankings from Q1 to Q4 to maintain high academic standards. Conversely, exclusion criteria were applied to remove non-open access publications and works that did not directly address the psychological constructs of digital grieving or breakup distress.

Criterion	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Research Theme	Breakup distress, digital grieving, and online mourning processes	Topics unrelated to digital grieving or relationship loss
Language	English	Language other than English
Publication Year	2020-2024	Published before 2020
Document Type	Peer-reviewed journal article	Book, conference proceedings, or dissertations
Journal Quality	Reputable journals indexed in Q1-Q4	Non-indexed or predatory journals
Accessibility	Open access full-text articles	Subscription-based or restricted access

To ensure a comprehensive identification of relevant literature, a systematic search strategy was implemented across primary electronic databases, as shown in Table 2. The search utilized specific keywords and Boolean operators, including "breakup distress," "digital grieving," and "social media," to target the intersection of relationship loss and virtual environments. This initial identification phase yielded a total of 126 records from Mendeley and the Digital Grieving Database. This systematic approach allowed for a broad initial capture of the literature before the subsequent screening and eligibility phases were conducted according to the PRISMA 2020 framework.

Database	Search Terms/Keyword	Initial Records
Mendeley	"breakup distress"	126
Digital Grieving Database	AND "digital grieving"	
	AND "social media"	
Total Identifications		126

2.4 Figure

The systematic selection process of the literature is visually represented in the PRISMA flowchart (Figure

1). The initial identification phase yielded 126 records from digital databases, which were then subjected to a rigorous screening process. After removing duplicates and filtering based on publication year (2020–2024), the remaining records were evaluated for title and abstract relevance. This screening resulted in a smaller subset of reports assessed for full-text eligibility. Studies were excluded if they did not meet the strict inclusion criteria, such as lack of focus on the psychological dynamics of breakup distress or being published in non-reputable journals. Ultimately, nine high-quality studies were selected for final qualitative synthesis, providing the foundational data for the results and discussion section of this review.

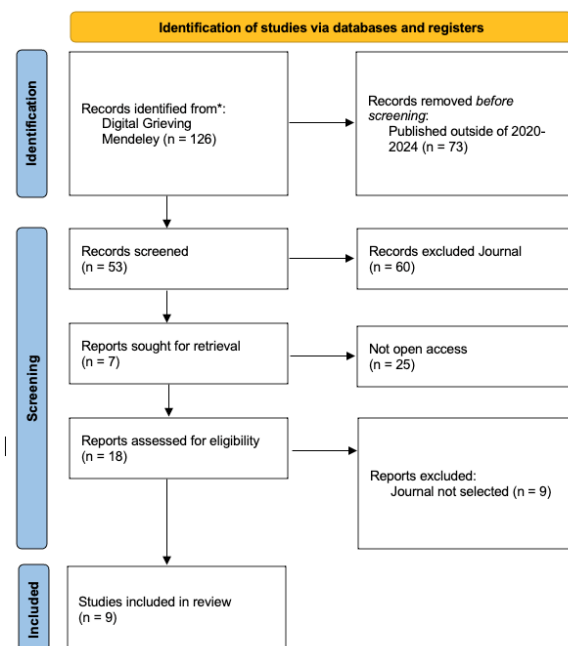


Figure 1. PRISMA 2020 Flow Summary of Study Selection Process

2.5 References, Bullet and Numbering

The referencing and citation system in this study strictly follows the American Psychological Association (APA) 7th edition style, managed through citation software to ensure technical accuracy. In accordance with the requirements for review articles, this study synthesizes primary sources with a focus on literature published within the last five years to ensure contemporary relevance. Each cited work is meticulously recorded in the reference list, including Digital Object Identifier (DOI) links where available to facilitate reference linking and data verifiability. Furthermore, the manuscript adheres to the journal's formatting standards, avoiding the use of bullet points or numbered lists within the body text to maintain a professional, narrative-style academic presentation.

3. Results and Discussions

The systematic selection process resulted in nine peer-reviewed articles that met the inclusion criteria for synthesizing the dynamics of breakup distress and

digital grieving. These studies encompass a range of empirical and conceptual works published between 2020 and 2024, providing a comprehensive overview of how technological mediation reshapes the experience of loss. A descriptive summary of these articles, including methodological approaches and principal findings, is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Descriptive Overview of Included Studies on Digital Grieving and Breakup Distress (2020–2024)

Author & Year	Methodology	Principal Findings
Avis et al. (2021) [23]	Systematic analysis	The stages of grief model are frequently used as digital guidelines despite criticisms.
Alseng (2024) [24]	Qualitative; semi-structured in-depth interviews analyzed using thematic analysis	Facebook presents both challenges (emotional shock, misinformation, cultural dilution) and opportunities (fast news sharing, emotional support, memory sharing) in reshaping bereavement practices within traditional communities.
Bassett (2021) [25]	Theoretical discussion	Social media platforms alter traditional mourning experiences in the digital age.
Asgari (2022) [26]	Literature review	Digital spaces create ambiguous roles for the deceased and the bereaved, as users navigate undefined boundaries between life, death, and ongoing digital presence, fundamentally altering grief practices in the digital era.
Sánchez-Querubín (2023) [27]	Empirical work	New media facilitate grieving connections for transnational families.
Khumairoh (2023) [28]	Socio-cultural analysis	Technology makes societal grieving practices more digital and less impersonal.
Pasquali et al. (2022) [29]	Empirical study	Significant resistance exists toward using social media in grieving processes.
Marín-Cortés et al. (2023) [30]	Interaction analysis	Online support groups aid grieving through the validation of grief expressions.
Grandinetti et al. (2020) [31]	Big data analysis	Digital media and grief bots blur the boundaries between life and loss.

3.1 Technological Mediation and Continuity of Bonds

The first major finding highlights that digital environments facilitate the continuity of bonds through technological mediation. A majority of the reviewed literature suggests that technology functions as both an emotional archive and a communicative bridge, allowing individuals to sustain relationships with former partners or the deceased through persistent

online interactions. This phenomenon indicates a shift from traditional linear grief models to ongoing, interactive experiences. While this continuity can provide comfort, it also introduces complexity as individuals navigate digital traces that may act as constant emotional triggers, potentially prolonging the distress associated with the relationship dissolution.

3.2 Emotional Regulation and Virtual Coping Strategies

The synthesis further reveals that social media platforms serve as vital ecosystems for emotional regulation and identity reconstruction. Several studies demonstrate that digital spaces provide a venue for emotional catharsis and communal empathy, where posting memories and engaging in support groups promote self-regulation. This finding enriches attachment theory by showing that digital grieving extends the attachment system beyond physical presence through mediated emotional bonds. However, the role of these platforms is inherently ambivalent; they can foster connection and healing while simultaneously creating ethical tensions regarding privacy and the authenticity of digitally mediated loss.

3.3 Limitations and Future Work

Despite the comprehensive nature of this review, several limitations must be acknowledged to guide future research. The study relied exclusively on open-access literature, which may have excluded significant findings from subscription-based journals. Furthermore, the heterogeneity of the included research designs limited direct comparability across the studies. Most of the reviewed works also focused on Western or globalized social media contexts, leaving cultural variations in digital grieving underrepresented.

Future research should aim to include a more diverse range of cultural contexts to understand how digital mourning practices vary across different societies. Additionally, longitudinal studies are needed to examine the long-term psychological impacts of using AI-based technologies, such as griefbots, on the resolution of breakup distress. Investigating the specific role of platform algorithms in intensifying or alleviating grief responses also remains a critical area for further investigation to inform the development of more ethical digital interfaces.

4. Conclusions

This systematic review concludes that breakup distress and digital grieving represent deeply interconnected psychological phenomena that are increasingly shaped by technological mediation in virtual spaces. The synthesis of nine peer-reviewed studies demonstrates that social media and digital communication platforms have fundamentally transformed the grieving process from a private, linear experience into an ongoing, interactive, and technologically mediated journey

marked by emotional regulation, the continuity of bonds, and complex identity negotiation. While these digital environments provide essential spaces for connection, emotional catharsis, and communal support, they simultaneously introduce significant ethical and existential challenges related to privacy, authenticity, and the permanence of digital data.

The original contribution of this work lies in its integration of breakup distress into the broader discourse of thana technology, highlighting how relational loss in the digital age requires a re-evaluation of traditional grief models that often overlook the role of algorithmic reminders and persistent digital archives. Practically, these findings underscore the necessity for mental health professionals to validate digital mourning as a legitimate coping mechanism and for platform designers to consider the ethical implications of "memory" features that may unintentionally intensify distress. Ultimately, this study emphasizes that while technology mediates the interface of loss, the experience remains profoundly human, necessitating more nuanced theoretical and clinical approaches that foster adaptive psychological coping and healthy relational closure among young adults navigating the complexities of the digital era.

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Author Contributions Statement

This study involves three contributors with specific roles defined by the CRediT taxonomy. Ghitsna Nadila Farha served as the primary author responsible for conceptualization, methodology, formal analysis, investigation, and the preparation of the original draft. Nur Eva and Imanuel Hitipeuw contributed to the supervision of the systematic review process, validation of the findings, and provided critical reviews and editing to the final manuscript. All authors have reviewed and approved the final version for submission

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Imanuel Hitipeuw	✓			✓		✓	✓		✓

C : Conceptualization I : Investigation
M : Methodology R : Resources
So : Software D : Data Curation
Va : Validation W : Writing
Fo : Formal analysis Review

Conflict of Interest Statement (mandatory)

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper. Authors state no conflict of interest.

Informed Consent (if applicable)

The protection of privacy is a legal right that must not be breached without individual informed consent. In cases where the identification of personal information is necessary for scientific reasons, authors should obtain full documentation of informed consent, including written permission from the patient prior to inclusion in the study. Incorporate the following (or a similar) statement: We have obtained informed consent from all individuals included in this study.

Ethical Approval

The authors clarify that this research is a systematic literature review and did not involve direct experiments with human subjects or animals. All data were derived from previously published scholarly works. Consequently, specific institutional ethical approval was not required for this study. Furthermore, the authors ensured that the primary studies synthesized in this review reported compliance with relevant national regulations and institutional policies, including the tenets of the Helsinki Declaration where applicable.

Data Availability

The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study, which consist of synthesized literature and thematic analysis results, are available within the article and its supplementary materials. Additional information regarding the search strategy and the complete list of screened records are available from the corresponding author, GNF, upon reasonable request.

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