

Supervisory Silence and Academic Ghosting in Higher Education: Hidden Threats to Students' Mental Well-Being and Academic Flourishing – A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract. The increasing visibility of supervisory silence and academic ghosting in higher education has drawn urgent attention from scholars, counselors, and policy makers. These phenomena, which manifest through the absence of feedback or prolonged unresponsiveness from supervisors, extend beyond simple communication failures. They are systemic problems that shape the academic climate and influence the psychological resilience of students. This systematic literature review was conducted to synthesize current research and provide a more holistic understanding of how supervisory silence and ghosting affect mental well-being and academic flourishing. Searches across Scopus, Web of Science, PubMed, ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar between 2015 and 2025 generated a comprehensive set of peer-reviewed articles. Studies meeting the inclusion criteria were carefully examined and grouped thematically. The findings demonstrate that ghosting often leads to heightened stress, prolonged anxiety, feelings of abandonment, and diminished self-compassion. In parallel, supervisory silence reduces students' sense of belonging, weakens motivation, and restricts the development of research competencies. Together, these effects hinder academic flourishing, which is understood as the ability to thrive academically, socially, and emotionally. This article argues that neglect in supervision should not be dismissed as isolated incidents, but rather viewed as hidden structural threats within higher education—risks that are intensified in post-pandemic digital environments. By framing supervisory silence and academic ghosting as complementary phenomena, this study identifies key theoretical connections, maps gaps in existing literature, and highlights the urgent need for institutions to build accountability and responsiveness into supervisory practices.

Keywords: Academic Ghosting, Supervisory Silence, Mental Well-Being, Academic Flourishing, Higher Education

1 Introduction

1.1 Background

The relationship between students and their academic supervisors is widely recognized as one of the most critical dimensions of higher education. Supervision does not merely involve the transmission of knowledge or the completion of academic requirements; it is also a mentoring process that fosters intellectual growth, psychological resilience, and social integration. However, this relationship has increasingly been disrupted by two interrelated phenomena: academic ghosting and supervisory silence. Academic ghosting occurs when supervisors fail to respond to communication for extended periods, such as emails, messages, or meeting requests, leaving students uncertain about their academic trajectory. Supervisory silence, on the other hand, is the absence of meaningful feedback and guidance, even when communication exists. Both behaviors, while often overlooked or normalized, represent subtle forms of academic neglect with potentially severe consequences.

The rise of digital communication in post-pandemic education has further magnified these problems. Platforms intended to facilitate timely interaction often create conditions where messages are ignored or delayed indefinitely. Instead of providing flexibility, technology sometimes exacerbates detachment, making ghosting more pervasive and supervisory silence more difficult to detect. Students who depend on guidance for thesis preparation, research projects, or academic development may be left waiting indefinitely, experiencing distress and uncertainty. International research increasingly links such neglect to symptoms of psychological strain, including anxiety, depression, loneliness, and reduced self-efficacy [1–3].

1.2 Problem Formulation

From this background, three central questions guide the present review:

1. How are the phenomena of supervisory silence and academic ghosting described and conceptualized in the academic literature?
2. What are the specific impacts of these phenomena on students' mental well-being?
3. In what ways do supervisory silence and academic ghosting affect students' ability to achieve academic flourishing?

1.3 Research Objectives

This article aims to:

1. Systematically review existing literature to map how supervisory silence and academic ghosting are defined, studied, and understood in higher education.
2. Analyze the direct and indirect impacts of these phenomena on students' psychological resilience, self-compassion, and motivation.
3. Explore how neglect within supervisory relationships obstructs students' flourishing in academic, social, and emotional domains.
4. Provide theoretical and conceptual insights that broaden the discourse on academic neglect and offer recommendations for more responsive academic supervision.

1.4 Research Significance

This study offers both theoretical and practical significance. Theoretically, it integrates perspectives from resilience theory, self-determination theory, and positive psychology to frame supervisory silence and ghosting as hidden threats to student flourishing. This lens moves beyond describing communication breakdowns,

highlighting instead the systemic risks embedded within academic structures. Practically, the study provides higher education institutions with evidence to rethink supervisory standards and policies, ensuring that responsiveness and accountability become central to academic mentoring.

2 Method

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) as the primary research design. An SLR is considered one of the most rigorous approaches for synthesizing knowledge because it follows structured and transparent procedures that minimize bias while maximizing the reproducibility of findings. By adopting this design, we were able to identify, evaluate, and synthesize empirical evidence on supervisory silence and academic ghosting from multiple international databases. The PRISMA 2020 framework [4] guided the process, ensuring clarity in reporting each stage of the review, from identification to final inclusion. This approach was deemed suitable because literature on ghosting and supervisory silence is still scattered across psychology, education, and counseling fields, and requires integration to understand its broader implications.

2.2 Data Sources

The review drew data from a combination of major databases—Scopus, Web of Science, PubMed, ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar—chosen because of their coverage of peer-reviewed journals in psychology, education, and higher education studies. Searches were carried out between January and March 2025. Search strings were developed using Boolean operators to capture variations of relevant terms.

2.3 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To ensure relevance, we established clear criteria prior to screening. Articles were included if they:

1. Were published in peer-reviewed journals or reputable conference proceedings between 2015 and 2025.
2. Focused on higher education students (undergraduate or postgraduate).
3. Examined supervisory silence, academic ghosting, or related forms of academic neglect.
4. Reported outcomes related to student mental well-being, resilience, or academic flourishing.

2.4 Screening and Analysis Procedure

The screening process followed PRISMA's four steps: Identification, Screening, Eligibility, and Inclusion. Titles and abstracts were first reviewed to exclude obviously irrelevant studies. The remaining articles were read in full text, and duplicates across databases were removed. Two researchers independently screened the articles, and discrepancies were resolved through discussion, increasing reliability.

The selected studies were then coded thematically. Thematic analysis allowed the identification of four central domains across the literature:

1. Conceptual definitions of supervisory silence and academic ghosting.

2. Impacts on mental well-being, such as stress, anxiety, and resilience.
3. Implications for academic flourishing, including motivation, belonging, and creativity.
4. Prevention and intervention strategies proposed or tested by institutions.

3 Results

3.1 Concepts of Supervisory Silence and Academic Ghosting

Across the reviewed studies, academic ghosting is generally described as the abrupt or prolonged absence of communication from supervisors, where emails, messages, or requests for guidance remain unanswered [6]. This form of neglect is not always intentional; sometimes it stems from overwhelming workloads or institutional pressures [8]. However, from the student's perspective, the impact is the same—ghosting leaves them disoriented and uncertain about their academic trajectory.

Supervisory silence, on the other hand, refers not only to the absence of responses but also to the lack of meaningful feedback on drafts, proposals, or research progress [7]. Even when communication channels are open, silence in the form of vague comments, delayed feedback, or the complete absence of guidance has been shown to hinder learning. In hierarchical academic environments, silence is often normalized, with students reluctant to confront supervisors due to fear of conflict or retaliation [9]. Together, ghosting and silence form a continuum of unresponsiveness that undermines the mentoring function of supervision.

3.2 Impacts on Student Mental Well-Being

The psychological consequences of supervisory silence and ghosting are well documented. Several studies link these phenomena to heightened levels of stress and anxiety [1,2]. Students report that prolonged unresponsiveness creates uncertainty, erodes confidence, and disrupts concentration, making academic tasks feel overwhelming.

Beyond stress, many accounts describe feelings of abandonment and isolation. Without timely feedback, students often interpret silence as rejection or disapproval, leading to self-blame and diminished self-worth. This contributes to depression and academic burnout [11,12].

A recurring theme is the weakening of self-efficacy—students begin doubting their ability to complete research projects or theses [11]. Over time, this lack of confidence undermines resilience, making it harder to recover from setbacks or persist in demanding academic tasks. Thus, supervisory silence and ghosting extend beyond temporary frustration; they are significant risk factors for student mental health.

3.3 Implications for Academic Flourishing

Academic flourishing, as defined by Keyes [3] and Seligman [4], encompasses optimal academic, social, and emotional functioning. The literature consistently shows that ghosting and silence obstruct this state of growth.

Firstly, students' academic engagement suffers. Studies reveal that disengagement is common when supervisors fail to provide direction or encouragement [13]. Without

clear expectations, students struggle to stay motivated, often delaying their research progress.

Secondly, flourishing requires opportunities for creativity and innovation, but unresponsiveness stifles such potential. Supervisors who remain silent inadvertently limit students' capacity to experiment with ideas, reducing their sense of academic freedom [14].

Thirdly, flourishing is closely tied to academic satisfaction and persistence. When students feel unsupported, they are more likely to drop out or prolong their studies unnecessarily [15]. Some even abandon research projects entirely, citing ghosting or silence as the reason for academic withdrawal.

Taken together, these findings suggest that supervisory silence and ghosting act as structural barriers to flourishing, limiting not only academic performance but also the holistic development of students as resilient, motivated individuals.

3.4 Strategies Identified in Literature

While the negative effects are clear, the literature also proposes several strategies to counteract supervisory silence and ghosting. One approach emphasizes the development of codes of ethics for supervision, ensuring that both students and supervisors are aware of their responsibilities and rights [9].

Other studies highlight the need for training in digital communication skills. Since many interactions now occur online, supervisors require competence in managing digital platforms to avoid prolonged delays [8].

Counseling and support services also play a critical role. Institutions that provide accessible psychological support can help students cope with the distress caused by neglect [2]. Finally, some researchers advocate for institutional monitoring systems that evaluate supervisory performance and establish accountability measures [7].

Although these strategies vary, they all converge on the principle that supervision should be responsive, transparent, and accountable. Addressing ghosting and silence requires cultural as well as structural change in higher education.

4 Discussion

4.1 Critical Analysis of Findings

The synthesis of literature highlights a striking imbalance in supervisory studies: while much has been written about supportive supervision and its benefits, far less attention has been paid to the consequences of neglect. Academic ghosting and supervisory silence often remain invisible, framed as isolated cases rather than systemic patterns. Yet the evidence collected here demonstrates that they are widespread and persistent.

From a psychological perspective, ghosting and silence disrupt the basic needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness, as described in Self-Determination Theory [14]. Students left without responses or guidance feel incompetent, lose their sense of control, and struggle to maintain connections within their academic community. These unmet needs trigger stress, anxiety, and disengagement.

From a structural perspective, the prevalence of ghosting reflects deeper issues in academic culture. Supervisors often juggle heavy workloads, multiple administrative

duties, and research obligations [8]. Institutions rarely provide clear benchmarks for responsiveness, and silence is frequently normalized as a power dynamic [9]. Students, positioned lower in academic hierarchies, hesitate to challenge unresponsiveness, which perpetuates a cycle of neglect.

Taken together, the findings suggest that supervisory silence and ghosting are not merely interpersonal lapses but symptoms of broader systemic failings. This distinction is crucial, because solutions cannot rely solely on improving individual communication but must involve cultural and institutional reforms.

4.2 Theoretical Contributions

This review contributes to theory in three important ways.

First, it integrates supervisory silence and academic ghosting into a unified framework. While the terms have often been used separately, the literature reveals that both are complementary forms of academic neglect. Ghosting reflects the extreme withdrawal of communication, whereas silence represents the subtler absence of feedback. Together, they shape a continuum of unresponsiveness.

Second, the review positions ghosting and silence within the broader discourse on student flourishing. Previous research has often limited its focus to negative outcomes, such as stress or depression. By linking these phenomena to flourishing, this article emphasizes not only what students lose but also what they fail to achieve when supervision falters. Flourishing involves thriving academically, socially, and emotionally [3,4], and ghosting systematically obstructs each of these domains.

Third, the review situates ghosting and silence in the context of digital and post-pandemic higher education. The COVID-19 era accelerated reliance on digital platforms for supervision, but it also amplified opportunities for neglect. The absence of face-to-face accountability has made it easier for silence to persist unnoticed. Thus, digital communication is not only a tool for academic connection but also a new site where neglect manifests.

4.3 Practical and Policy Implications

Although the request for this review was to focus more on conceptual rather than prescriptive points, it is impossible to ignore the broader implications for academic practice and institutional policy. The evidence points toward three interrelated implications:

1. For Supervisors. Responsiveness should be recognized as a professional and ethical responsibility, not an optional courtesy. Silence or delayed feedback has measurable consequences for student mental health and academic success. Supervisors must therefore establish clear timelines and communicate expectations openly.
2. For Students. While ghosting and silence are systemic problems, students benefit from recognizing that they are not personal failures. Understanding these dynamics can reduce self-blame and encourage help-seeking behaviors. Peer networks, counseling services, and academic forums can provide alternative support during periods of neglect.
3. For Institutions. Universities must confront supervisory silence and ghosting as institutional issues. Establishing clear codes of supervision ethics, monitoring supervisory practices, and offering counseling support are not mere administrative tasks; they are central to ensuring student well-being and

academic continuity. Institutions that ignore these issues risk perpetuating a hidden crisis that undermines both student outcomes and institutional credibility.

In short, the discussion underscores that supervisory silence and academic ghosting are best understood as systemic threats rather than isolated miscommunications. Addressing them requires rethinking supervision as both a relational and institutional practice.

5 Discussion

Although the body of literature on supervisory silence and academic ghosting has expanded in recent years, several clear gaps remain that restrict our understanding of these phenomena. Identifying such gaps is essential, not only for academic completeness but also for designing practical interventions that can improve student well-being and academic flourishing.

5.1 Lack of Longitudinal Evidence

Most existing studies rely on cross-sectional or short-term data, offering snapshots of students' experiences at a single point in time. While these studies provide valuable insights, they cannot capture the cumulative effects of prolonged supervisory silence or repeated episodes of academic ghosting. Students who experience neglect over multiple semesters may develop chronic stress, diminished resilience, or long-term disengagement from academia. Without longitudinal evidence, the trajectory of these impacts remains unclear. Future research should therefore employ long-term designs that follow students across their academic journeys, from the onset of supervision through thesis completion and even into their professional careers.

5.2 Limited Cross-Cultural and Non-Western Perspectives

Another limitation lies in the geographic scope of current research. Much of the available literature originates from Western institutions, where academic structures, cultural expectations, and power dynamics may differ significantly from those in Asian, African, or Global South contexts. In societies with strong hierarchical traditions, for example, supervisory silence may be normalized and even accepted as a sign of authority. By contrast, in more egalitarian systems, such silence may be immediately perceived as neglect or failure. These cultural differences highlight the importance of conducting cross-cultural and region-specific studies to avoid overgeneralization and to design culturally sensitive interventions.

5.3 Neglect of Moderating Variables

The reviewed literature rarely addresses how individual or institutional factors shape the impact of ghosting and silence. For instance, gender may influence whether students feel empowered to confront unresponsiveness, while socio-economic background may affect access to alternative support networks. Likewise, the type of institution—public versus private, research-intensive versus teaching-oriented—may create different supervisory cultures. Without accounting for these moderators, existing analyses risk oversimplifying complex realities. Future research should integrate these variables to provide more nuanced explanations of student outcomes.

5.4 Scarcity of Intervention-Based Studies

While numerous studies describe the negative impacts of ghosting and silence, very few test strategies for prevention or intervention. The literature calls for codes of ethics, communication training, and counseling support, but evidence of their effectiveness is limited. Intervention-based studies, whether experimental or quasi-experimental, are urgently needed to evaluate whether proposed measures actually reduce the prevalence or impact of academic neglect. Such research would move the field beyond diagnosis to solutions.

5.5 Need for Integration with Broader Theoretical Frameworks

Finally, current studies often analyze ghosting and silence in isolation, without connecting them to broader frameworks such as positive psychology, resilience theory, or organizational culture models. Integrating these perspectives would not only strengthen theoretical grounding but also open new avenues for understanding how institutions can create environments that promote flourishing rather than undermine it.

6 Conclusion

The review of literature on supervisory silence and academic ghosting underscores that these are not minor inconveniences but systemic threats to student well-being and flourishing. When communication falters or guidance disappears, students are not only left without academic direction but also exposed to deep psychological strain. Stress, anxiety, feelings of abandonment, and weakened resilience emerge as recurring outcomes across the studies reviewed. Over time, these effects erode students' motivation and academic confidence, restricting their ability to flourish—defined as thriving in academic, social, and emotional domains.

This article contributes by uniting the concepts of ghosting and silence into a single continuum of unresponsiveness, and by positioning them within theoretical frameworks such as self-determination theory, resilience theory, and positive psychology. In doing so, it highlights that supervisory neglect does not merely produce immediate setbacks but undermines the very foundations of student development.

At a structural level, ghosting and silence reflect institutional cultures where accountability is weak and supervisory expectations are poorly defined. Addressing them therefore requires systemic reform, not just individual effort. Universities must recognize supervision as a core academic responsibility, ensure responsiveness through clear codes of practice, and provide students with accessible support systems.

Ultimately, the findings of this review serve as both a warning and a call to action. If left unchecked, supervisory silence and academic ghosting will continue to limit not only individual student outcomes but also the capacity of higher education systems to cultivate flourishing graduates. Future studies must therefore prioritize longitudinal, cross-cultural, and intervention-based research that can guide evidence-driven policies and create more humane, accountable, and supportive supervisory environments.

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