

Ghosting in Online Dating: A Comprehensive Exploration on What, How and Why of Ghosting

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ABSTRACT

The review paper examines the phenomenon of ghosting, a widely used break up strategy on dating apps nowadays. Ghosting, a relationship dissolution strategy involves ending a relationship by abruptly cutting off all the contacts with the partner without any direct confrontation, closure, and explanation of why the person ended the relationship which includes ignoring partner's calls and messages, blocking, or unfriending the partner from all social media platform without facing them directly, initiating breakup process. The paper discusses the reason, process and the consequences of the process ghosting in detail. Ghosters attributed the cause of ghosting to ghosting been an easy, safe, and convenient option with avoidance of direct confrontation, affordance provided by the dating apps, and the negative qualities of the ghostee encouraging the act of ghosting. Other factors contributing to ghosting are the personality traits, ghoster's attachment style, commitment issues and high level of anxiety among the ghoster. The episode of ghosting has been seen to impact the ghostee's emotions, trust issues, self- esteem and overall well- being. Looking at the increasing prevalence of ghosting, insightful research should be provided to minimize the act and impact of ghosting, especially on dating apps.

Keywords: *Ghosting, Relationship Dissolution, Ghoster Characteristics, Ghosting Process, Reasons of Ghosting, Impact of Ghosting*

Dating and forming romantic relations hold a significant importance in one's young adulthood. People define dating as "getting to know each other" and spending time with the other person one finds appealing with the intention of developing a romantic relationship. (Khattar et al., 2023)

The popularity of social media platforms and dating apps like tinder, bumble, aise, ok cupid, and others have made dating and indulging in intimate relationships convenient for today's generation. (Hobbs et al., 2017) Dating apps have transformed dating into a source of entertainment – swiping right, making new connections in excitement, getting intimate, later realising the facts and compatibility, people indulge in breakups as quick as they decide for initiating the process of dating. (Carpenter & McEwan, 2016)

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In the era of dating apps, instant breakups are not unheard. The ease and affordance of dating apps and availability of options, rapid matches, and snap decisions which contribute to initiate the dating process also led to the collapse of relationship abruptly. People may find it easier to break up with someone they met online, especially in the beginning, because there is not as much emotional commitment as there is in relationships that develop more gradually through in-person contact.

Relationship dissolution strategy

Talking about breakups, there are unique difficulties associated with the dynamics of breaking up in this digital environment. People use different breakup strategies to terminate their relationships ranging from clear indication and direct confrontation to other tactics like avoiding or withdrawing oneself by maintaining the distance, using de-escalation tactics, cast escalation tactics, making the partner's life difficult and unpleasant. (Collins & Gillath, 2012)

Baxter (1985) identified two basic dimensions for relationship dissolution strategy. One basic dimension is the level of directness or indirectness in communicating the intention to terminate the relationship. Direct strategies involve explicit, straightforward communication whereas indirect strategies involve implicit, unclear, and ambiguous messages regarding ending the relationship.

Research suggests that breaking up through mediated and indirect strategies such as ending relationship via text messaging or changing relationship status on social media, is often considered as an inappropriate method. (Starks, 2007). Surprisingly, indirect breakup tactics – avoidance, withdrawal are on the rise among young adults.

Ghosting

Given this, it should come as no surprise that young adults are currently experiencing a high prevalence of ghosting. (de Wiele & Campbell, 2019; Timmermans et al., 2021) Ghosting has been defined as a strategy to end a dating or intimate relationship, a modern way of breaking up by using avoidant and withdrawal behaviour. Ghosting, a relationship dissolution strategy involves ending a relationship by abruptly cutting off all the contacts with the partner without any direct confrontation, closure, and explanation of why the person ended the relationship. LeFebvre et al. (2017) defined ghosting as “unilaterally access to individual prompting relationship dissolution (suddenly or gradually) commonly enacted via one or multiple technological medium(s).” Ghosting can be described with two terms – contact interruption which includes blocking or unfriending the partner, not scheduling the further dates and act of disappearing which involves distancing themselves and disengaging with the partner. (Koessler et al., 2019a) Cutting off contact occurs through technology mediums including not replying to the text and messages, not picking up the calls or blocking the partner on all social media platforms to ensure there is no way of connection (Navarro et al., 2021)

One characteristic that makes ghosting different from other breakup tactics is that in this, the person ends the relationship suddenly without any explanation or explicit communication leaving the ghosted partner in doubt (Koessler et. al. 2019).

Ghosting is not equivalent to self cyberostracism and orbiting. Ghosting is different from self cyberostracism, which involves withdrawing from social interactions and secluding oneself, the fact that it is characterised by lack of explanation and is directed towards a

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particular individual(s). (Forrai et al., 2023) Orbiting is like ghosting which includes cutting the communication and ending the relation without any explanation but what makes it different is that the disengager still follows the other person on social media platforms and occasionally liking their social media content. (Pancani et al., 2021)

Existing definitions

Although the word "ghosting" first appeared in the Urban Dictionary in 2006 and started attracting media attention around the middle of the 2010s. Notably, diverse definitions have been employed to conceptualize this behavior. (Koessler et al., 2019a)

As defined in urban dictionary, ghosting is “The act of suddenly ceasing all communication with someone the subject is dating, but no longer wishes to date. This is done in hopes that the ghostee will just ‘get the hint’ and leave the subject alone, as opposed to the subject simply telling them he/she is no longer interested.” Similarly, ghosting was defined as “the ending of a relationship by one party who gradually removes him or herself from the other person’s life...until eventually, all communication ceases” by Elle. (Crotty, 2014) while LeFebvre et al. (2017) defined ghosting as “unilaterally access to individual prompting relationship dissolution (suddenly or gradually) commonly enacted via one or multiple technological medium(s).”

Despite variations in the definitions of ghosting, a shared characteristic among them is the act of ending the relationship abruptly by ceasing communication without even notifying the other person.

Ghosting process

Kay & Courtice (2022) defined ghosting process as sudden while LeFebvre et al. (2017) asserts that ghosting exhibits variability in suddenness and lasting impact. Individuals initiating ghosting process outlined three things – selection of a communication medium, determining the timing for implementation ranging from sudden to gradual process of ghosting and then establishing the permanency of the relationship dissolution. Ghosters employ varies tactics, ranging from neglecting to blocking mechanisms. In the process of ghosting, the initial step involves ignoring the ghostee by neglecting their messages and calls and then subsequently, blocking them if the ghostee attempts to reach them out. (Wu & Bamishigbin, 2023) The fundamental feature in the implementation of ghosting involves - Contact interruption including ceasing all ways of communication and contact attempts by blocking the other person’s contact, blocking on social media platforms, and unmatching them on dating apps. (Collins et al., 2023; Koessler et al., 2019a) Additionally, Koessler et al. (2019a) discovered that individuals engaging in ghosting would occasionally make excuses, providing a lie and not planning future meet ups before implementing ghosting.

Characteristics of ghoster

Several researchers have investigated the potential traits a ghoster might have. It has been discovered that the act of ghosting is associated positively with strong destiny belief of relationships. Individual with the belief that the individuals are either meant to be together or they are not, are quick to terminate their relationship using ghosting when they think that their partner is not a suitable match. (Freedman et al., 2019) Individuals, both ghoster and ghostees’ indicated high level of anxiety. Further, ghosters were found to be high on avoidant attachment whereas ghostees showed high anxious attachment. (Powell et al., 2021) Individual with dark triad traits viewed ghosting as a reasonable tactic but only in the context of short - term relationship. Traits of psychopaths and Machiavellian were seen to be

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high among ghosters. (Jonason et al., 2021) In a research by Di Santo et al. (2022) the study concluded that individuals who ghost are high on narcissistic trait, suggesting that they won't be concerned about the emotional toll of ghosting someone as their only concern is oneself. The intention to ghost a partner was significantly associated with hostile conflict resolution approaches, and withdrawing conflict resolution styles. (Navarro et al., 2020)

Reasons of ghosting

Avoidance of direct confrontation

People who initiate ghosting often do so to avoid direct confrontation. They avoid clear and direct conversations because they anticipate it to be challenging requiring significant efforts. (Koessler et al., 2019a) Opting for ghosting is viewed as a simpler alternative compared to arranging a time to formally end a relationship and dealing with the associated emotions and feelings of hurt, both for themselves and their current partner (Koessler et al., 2019b; LeFebvre et al., 2017) Individuals with the ambiguity of their reasons for rejecting someone may choose ghosting as it allows them to avoid providing a direct explanation. (Di Santo et al., 2022; Timmermans et al., 2021) Individuals struggling with communication skills, making it difficult for them to articulate their reasons for ending a relationship often use ghosting as a breakup strategy. The fear of being unable to handle their partner's emotions or their own emotions often leads them to lack clarity, making ghosting as an option. (Wu & Bamishigbin, 2023)

Explanation or direct breakup considered unnecessary

Ghosters did not feel the need to give explanations of breakup or even considering formal breakup when the relationship was casual and was for a short and brief duration. (Wu & Bamishigbin, 2023) When a disengager thought a relationship wasn't serious enough or lasting long enough, they didn't think a direct conversation and explanation was necessary, which is why individuals indulge in ghosting. (Koessler et al., 2019a; Timmermans et al., 2021) Communication through social media platforms lack personal connections as compared to offline interaction leading the ghosters feel less accountable for explanation of their behaviour. (Forrai et al., 2023)

Status of relationship

The length, time spent together, the nature and seriousness of the relationship, degree of emotional investment were among the criteria that affected the decision of ghosting. (Koessler et al., 2019b; Wu & Bamishigbin, 2023). When the relationship was considered short and casual, where intimacy was low, people opted for ghosting strategy. (Koessler et al., 2019b) Ghosting often occurred during the transitional phase of relationship from acquaintanceship to romantic involvement. People do evaluate the degree of emotional investment before implementing ghosting. (Wu & Bamishigbin, 2023) On the other hand, ghosting was not considered as an appropriate strategy if the person has invested time and emotions and formed the relationship. (LeFebvre et al., 2019) Ghosting was preferred when the person felt that they were not emotionally ready for dating or to get into a relationship, or living with the idea that they will not be able to meet the expectations of the other person. In addition, loss of interest in their partner did contribute to the prevalence of ghosting. (Timmermans et al., 2021)

Ghosting considered as a safe and convenient option

Ghosting was opted as a safe strategy where the individual perceived threat to their personal safety when they found their partner to exhibit erratic, inappropriate, creepy, and strange behaviour and encompassing risky circumstances. In such scenarios, individual find

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ghosting as a secure option than face to face interactions for breakup. (LeFebvre et al., 2019) Direct confrontation was seen to be more painful, challenging causing emotional harm to their partner. Therefore, ghosting to be an insulated option, allow individuals to avoid discomfort of explanation. Further, ghosting was seen as a secured option than lingering on their partner or deceiving them by showing fake interest. (Timmermans et al., 2021)

Dating app affordances

Dating apps and technology were considered as significant factor in the prevalence of ghosting primarily due to the convenience, anonymity, and the surveillance of the dating apps. (Thomas & Dubar, 2021) Given the affordance of directly rejecting, blocking, or deleting all the conversations and unmatching the person on the dating apps, dating apps has made ghosting easy and affordable. It is plain sailing to ghost the person by deleting their profile on dating app, thus, deleting all the chat history and conversations. (Timmermans et al., 2021)

Ghoster's fear of commitment

Ghosters choose to ghost individuals who start connecting with them emotionally, and develop feelings and transit their relationship status. Ghosters live with the fear of commitment where they are not ready for a relationship emotionally and apprehensive of not meeting the expectations of their partner. (Timmermans et al., 2021; Wu & Bamishigbin, 2023)

Negative qualities of the ghostee

Most individuals who have engaged in ghosting gave clear explanation of their actions, often stemming from negative experiences or undesirable traits exhibited by their partner. (Wu & Bamishigbin, 2023) Ghosters shared significant encounters marked by unmet emotional needs, inappropriate behaviours on the part of the ghostee such as pushiness and clinginess, incompatibility, or unpleasant interactions. (Timmermans et al., 2021) Ghosters explained that their decision to ghost was prompted by their partner's disagreeable and negative behaviours, such as being pushy, bossy, manipulative, or displaying unfavorable traits like rudeness, clinginess, annoyance, or self-righteousness. (Koessler et al., 2019a) Negative interaction with ghostee and unfavourable behaviours led the tendency to withdraw their relationship using ghosting as a strategy. (LeFebvre et al., 2017) The motivation for ghosting often arose from the ghostee's hostile and disrespectful traits, withholding crucial information, or sending unsolicited sexual content. (Timmermans et al., 2021) Unpleasant and disappointing date experiences, with dissatisfaction with their partner's appearance, further contributed to the prevalence of ghosting. (Timmermans et al., 2021)

Ghostee's response to ghosting process

Pancani et al. (2021) outlined four phases of responses among ghostee following ghosting incident – first, emotions of surprise and confusion of why they were ghosted. Second, feeling of anger, sadness and guilt felt by the ghostee. Third, ghostee tries to reconnect and repair the relation and lastly, accept the act of being ghosted. Most of the ghostee reported to take no action and opt for “moving on” or “letting go” and approach for initiating a new relation after being ghosted. (Koessler et al., 2019a) After experiencing ghosting, individual did not always try to attempt for repairing the relationship because of low belief of successful reconciliation. However, few ghostees often try to reconnect and make persistent contact driven by negative feelings of anger and sadness (Pancani et al., 2021) with that individual via direct communication, through social media interactions or reaching out through mutual connections and asking for explanation. In extreme, they may stalk the

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person with new identities on social media platforms or calling with new numbers. (Wu & Bamishigbin, 2023) Small number of ghostees indulge in retaliatory measures such as blocking the ghoster from all the means of communication. Additionally, ghostees sometimes responds with sending hostile and angry messages to the ghoster and blaming them for their action. (Koessler et al., 2019a)

Consequences of ghosting

The act of ghosting impacts individual's emotional reaction and experiences. Ghosters has been shown to have a positive psychological effect of initiating ghosting but unfavourable impact on the ghostee. (Thomas & Dubar, 2021) Ghosters engaging in ghosting were satisfied with their decision over time whereas, few of them experienced remorse, regret, and a sense of loss of their partner. On the other hand, ghosters reported minimal concern and no feelings for the ghostee. (Freedman et al., 2019; Timmermans et al., 2021; Wu & Bamishigbin, 2023) The process of ghosting leading to lack of closure for the ghostee give rise to the negative emotions – confusion, distress, sadness, anger and often a sense of worthlessness. (Wu & Bamishigbin, 2023) Ghostees expressed the feelings of hurt and sadness, frequently experiencing anger, feeling of disappointment and disillusionment. (Timmermans et al., 2021) Some ghostees reported mild negative impressions – rudeness, coldness, meanness, immaturity, and cowardice while few of them conveyed more intense negative perceptions like name calling, using abusive language and words. (Koessler et al., 2019a) Certain ghostees expressed their concern if something negative might have happened to the ghoster. While, some felt a sense of shame upon being ghosted, others felt relief interpreting that ghosting behaviour acted as a clear indication that that person was not a suitable partner. (Koessler et al., 2019a).

Low level of distress and negative emotions were reported among the individuals who used ghosting than using direct breakup strategies. (Koessler et al., 2019a) On contrary, ghostees' expressed more of distress and negative emotions on experiencing ghosting. (Koessler et al., 2019b). Ghostees witnessed an increase threat to their autonomy, self - worth and sense of belongingness needs. (Freedman et al., 2022) Surprisingly, in a study, ghosting a romantic partner did not show any negative consequences on one's wellbeing but, ghosting among friends experienced depressive tendencies over time. (Forrai et al., 2023) Ghosting incident may negatively affect the ghostee's self-esteem, mental wellbeing, and trust in others. Individuals with low self - esteem when experience ghosting, intensifies the pain of rejection. (Timmermans et al., 2021) Individuals who had been ghosted reported feeling helpless, lonely, and low life satisfaction. (Navarro et al., 2020) Ghostees, high on demand of closure, were found to have low need satisfaction. (Leckfor et al., 2023)

CONCLUSION

Ghosting has become a common practice in today's online dating era. The current review paper on the relationship dissolution strategy, ghosting, adds to the understanding of the concept ghosting, process of ghosting, characteristics of the ghoster, along with the factors contributing to the process of ghosting. Ghosting entails cutting off all the communication abruptly through blocking the contact and the person from all social media platform without any direct confrontation. The paper provide insight to the reasons why ghosters opt for indirect breakup strategy, ghosting over other direct breakup tactics. Most of the ghosters have a clear cause of why they choose ghosting while others see ghosting as an easy option for breakup. Ghosters have different perspectives on the reasons why they choose ghosting ranging from avoidance of direct confrontation to ghosting been an easy and convenient option. The paper further reviews suggest the consequences of ghosting and the impact

ghoster leaves on the ghostee's psychological well-being. The act of ghosting leads the ghostee to experience negative emotions, lowering their self-esteem and trust. Limited research has been conducted on the strategies to address and reduce the frequency of ghosting, as well as on the coping mechanisms ghostee uses to deal with the experience of ghosting process. The study fosters to further study the approaches to tackle and decrease the occurrence of ghosting.

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Conflict of Interest

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