Research Paper

A Correlational Study between Ghosting Phenomenon and Social Anxiety, Attachment Style, Self-Esteem among Youth Population

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ABSTRACT

The study was aimed to find any existing correlation in between ghosting and social anxiety, attachment style, self-esteem among youth population. Ghosting refers to abruptly cutting off contact with someone without giving that person any warning or explanation for doing so. Previous studies have found ghosting to be cruel, a form of emotional abuse, and it destroys one's self-esteem completely. The present study was conducted on 110 individuals between 22-30 years of age using Social Anxiety Questionnaire for Adults, Adult Attachment Scale, Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale. Later statistical analysis were done using Pearson's Product Moment Correlation and t test. The results revealed significant negative correlation between Ghosting experience and Adult anxious attachment style ($p<0.05$).

Keywords: *Ghosting, Social-media, Social anxiety, Attachment, Self-esteem*

While living in the twenty first century, the technology is becoming advance day by day and at the same time we are also becoming very dependent on technology. Especially after the COVID19 pandemic and lockdown we have become more and more dependent on technology. We have all kind of solutions of most of our problems in our digital devices. Which is really beneficial for us but at the same time whenever we are feeling little stress by interacting with very normal stressors in our daily lives, we are trying to find solutions for those situations in these search engines and on YouTube. If we are finding any satisfactory solution from these options, it is solving our problems temporarily but for long term solution we need to cope with our stressor using our natural coping mechanisms, which we are not doing as we are developing escapism, by escaping the problem all together.

This escapism is leading to ghosting directly or indirectly. From the very beginning we are familiar to abandonment in relationship but recently this abandoning situation has increased in tremendous rate. As most of us have social media accounts now a days, as a social animal we love to meet new people there, where we engage ourselves in networking, texting, and dating. Now pain of discontinuation of a relationship (platonic or romantic) is always present at the other side of the continuum. Now as we have learned to escape any situation which is not going according to our plan, we are doing it in our relationships as well. And as

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we have become used to get whatever we need at our fingertips; here a runner and chaser relationship is becoming vivid. Runner is those who are not getting what they actually want from a connection and they are escaping it altogether, and chaser are those who are wondering why those people have vanished' from their lives and keeps trying to talk to them in anyway.

Ghosting refers to abruptly cutting off contact with someone without giving that person any warning or explanation for doing so. Ghosting is defined as a unilateral discontinuance of communication with another person without explanation (LeFebvre et al., 2019). Even when the person being ghosted reaches out to re-initiate contact or gain closure, they are met with silence. This term refers to the situation where a person vanishes into the thin air like a ghost.[7]

Ghosting is often seen as an immature or passive-aggressive way to end a relationship. In other instances, it may even be a form of emotional abuse. In the study of Timmermans, Hermans and Opree, 2021 it was found that those persons who are the victim of ghosting incidents, are left with utter confusion about whom to blame for the loss of their relationships. Some of them (59%) blamed the ghoster by saying they have some "issues", childish, cowardly, rude, disrespectful etc. And others (37%) blamed themselves for losing the relationships they had with the ghoster, by pointing out their own flaws, such as not being interesting or attractive enough, for being "fat", "ugly", "difficult to love" etc. [1] Ghosting can have a real psychological impact on the person who's being ghosted. According to Bree Jenkins, "It's almost like sudden loss, grief, especially the first time you've ever been ghosted. You are shocked, and you're in denial, thinking things such as 'maybe they didn't see my text.' Then you feel anger. Next, the feelings of depression kick in along with feelings of poor self-esteem as you mentally reexamine your relationship and last conversation for possible warning signs."[2]

Social anxiety (SA) is a common human experience characterized by an intense fear of evaluation from others in social situations. Severe social anxiety with impaired functioning is called social anxiety disorder (SAD) or social phobia. Now a days, many people are very shy, not very social, and somewhat inhibited. For this reason, the suffering associated with social anxiety disorder is often minimized as a common trait in the population that does not require a formalized treatment intervention. But this is resulting in avoidance of a vital issue, that is, people who are suffering with social anxiety disorder faces overwhelming terror in the process of simply interacting with others and forming any relationship in the future, which needs to be treated properly. Social Anxiety Disorder has devastating effects on individual's interpersonal, social and occupational lives.[6] Lewandowski et al (2006), found in their study, people with greater dependence on partners and relationships are more likely to suffer after losing the relationship, particularly, individuals who utilized a relationship for self-expansion.[3]. Leah E. LeFebvre & Xiaoti Fan (2020) found in their study, after being ghosted, non-initiators (victims of ghosting) often felt cautious about communicating with others, it was found there was a significant hesitation they are facing in the matter of self-disclosure. There is a constant fear or anxiety present in them in terms of opening up. Responses suggested that participants were not sharing as much about their lives in order to prevent future hurt and pain. Other participants had given up on future dating and relationship initiation. They did not want to re-experience the implications from their prior ghosting in future communication and romantic relationships. [7] John Bowlby (Psychiatrist Child Guidance Clinic, London) defined attachment as, "a lasting psychological

connectedness between two human beings (1969). He observed, the link between early infant separations with the mother and later maladjustment during his work and later he formulated theory of Attachment. He said, later relationships are likely to be a continuation of early attachment styles (secure and insecure). [4] Later, Mary Ainsworth and her colleagues discovered three major patterns the way infants attach to their primary caregivers ("mother figures") from their Strange Situation Experiment (Ainsworth et al., 1978) those are: Secure Attachment, Anxious or Ambivalent Attachment, and Avoidant Attachment. Later, Main and Solomon (1986) discovered that a lot of infants did not fit into secure, anxious, or avoidant, based on their behaviors in the Strange Situation experiment. They categorized these infants as having a Disorganized Attachment type. [5] Weisskirch & Delevi (2012) stated, individuals with higher avoidance and higher anxiety perceive using technology to terminate relationships as more acceptable. [6] Darcy N. Powell et al (2021) found in their study (N=165), who previously were ghosted by a romantic partner reported higher anxious attachment style than those never ghosted by a romantic partner. And who had ghosted a partner reported more avoidant attachment style than those who had not previously ghosted a partner. In another study they found, individuals who had been ghosted or had both ghosted and been ghosted reported significantly higher anxious attachment style than those who had ghosted or had no prior ghosting experience. Individuals who had ghosted or had both ghosted and been ghosted reported significantly higher avoidant attachment than those with no prior ghosting experience. [9] Earlier, Fox & Tokunaga (2015) conducted an online survey (N= 431) and found; anxious attachment predicted relational investment (effort in the relationship) but also seeking relationship alternatives; avoidant attachment was negatively related to investment but positively related to seeking alternatives. Investment predicted commitment, whereas seeking alternatives was negatively related to commitment. Commitment predicted emotional distress after the breakup. [10] Ghosting has an extreme distressing effect on one's self-esteem. According to Morris Rosenberg, self-esteem is quite simply one's favorable or unfavorable attitude toward oneself (1965). Konings, et al (2023) stated, someone could feel degraded, irrelevant, and disposable as a result of ghosting. Many people do not know how to handle this harsh sort of rejection when it occurs. No explanation, justification, or comprehension of why the contact stopped is offered to the victim of ghosting. No matter how intense the relationship was, when a friend or someone in a relationship is ghosted, they never find closure. Not receiving closure after a breakup might cause confusion and uncertainty about what to do next. [18] According to Koessler et al (2019) self-blame can spiral down into further negative thoughts, affecting one's well-being. Ghosting can also be more distressing for some people than a traditional breakup. Domina PETRIC (2023) found, some victims of ghosting may even come to feel that they are unlovable and inadequate in the end. As an aftermath of ghosting some victims starts to become more like those who ghosted them once. [11]

Rationale for this Study
- To gather knowledge how Ghosting is affecting someone's mental health, and to what extent it is affecting.
- To spread the message that ghosting causes a lot of unnecessary distress and turns a person's life totally upside-down. It will serve as a justice to the victims of ghosting as the culture of Ghosting is continuously increasing day by day. Ghosting has received minimal scholarly attention; however, its practice has become more common place in contemporary dating (LeFebvre, 2017).

Aim and Objectives:
- To assess social anxiety, attachment style, and self-esteem among youth population (age 22-30 years) who have experienced ghosting and who have not.
- To study the relationship among ghosting phenomenon, social anxiety, attachment style, self esteem
- To study the differences in between social anxiety, attachment style, self-esteem based on ghosting experience.
- To study the differences in terms of ghosting experience, social anxiety, attachment style, and self-esteem among male and female youth population.

METHODOLOGY

Sample

This present correlational study was conducted on 110 individuals (52 male, 58 female) (51 experienced ghosting, 59 never experienced ghosting) using cross-sectional research design and purposive sampling technique to study if ghosting phenomenon has any effect on social anxiety, attachment style, and self-esteem of the youth population. Individuals, aged between 22-30 years who use social media (WhatsApp Messenger, Facebook Messenger, and Instagram Messenger) for communication with loved ones, with having Graduation as minimum educational qualification and most importantly who gave their consent for the present study were included in this study. Married individuals were not included in this study.

Instruments

The questionnaire was composed of six sections. The informed consent form, Socio-demographic datasheet, including name, age, sex, nationality, family type, relationship status etc., Screening question, Social Anxiety Questionnaire for Adults (SAQ-A30), Adult Attachment Scale, and Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale.

- **Social Anxiety Questionnaire for Adults (SAQ-A30):** SAQ-A30 is a 30-item five-point Likert self-report scale by Caballo et al., 2010. This inventory assesses five dimensions of Social Anxiety. Those are: 1) Speaking in public/ Talking with people in authority, 2) Interactions with strangers, 3) Interaction with the opposite sex, 4) Assertive expression of annoyance, disgust or displeasure, and 5) Criticism and embarrassment. Total scores can be ranged from 30 to 150. High score indicates high social anxiety. [12]
- **Adult Attachment Scale (AAS):** AAS is an 18 item five-point Likert self-report scale by Collins, N. L. and Read, S. J. (1990). This scale measures three subscales, each composed of six items. The subscales are: 1) Close (The extent to which a person is comfortable with closeness and intimacy), 2) Depend (The extent to which a person feels he/she can depend on others to be available when needed, 3) Anxiety (The extent to which a person is worried about being abandoned or unloved). According to the alternative scoring, higher score indicated a higher level of Anxious attachment style or Avoidant attachment style. [13]
- **Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale:** RSS is a ten item four-point Likert self-report scale by Morris Rosenberg (1965), measures the global level of self-worth by measuring both positive and negative feelings about the self. The score can be ranged from 10 to 40. Higher scores indicate higher self-esteem. [14]

***Data Analysis*:** Following statistical operations were done using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS)

Descriptive: Mean, Standard Deviation, Percentage was used to define the sample.

Correlation: Pearson's Product-Moment Correlation was done to assess the relation between Experience of Ghosting and Social Anxiety, Attachment Style, and Self-Esteem.

Inferential statistics: t-test (Welch's) was done to assess the difference across genders (male and female) in terms of Ghosting experience. And to find if there any significant difference in between those who have experienced Ghosting and who have never, in terms of Social Anxiety, Attachment Style, and Self-Esteem.

RESULTS
Table No. 1 Sample Characteristics

Category	n (%)
Sex	
Male	52 (47.3)
Female	58 (52.7)
Nationality	
Indian	104 (94.5)
Irish	4 (3.6)
British	2 (1.8)
Residence	
Urban	77 (70)
Sub-urban	22 (20)
Rural	11 (10)
Family Type	
Nuclear	92 (83.6)
Joint	18 (16.4)
Relationship Status	
Single	98 (89.1)
In a relationship	12 (16.4)
Ghosting Experience	
Yes	51 (46.4)
No	59 (53.6)

Table No. 2 Range, Mean, SD of mentioned Scales

Scale	Range of scores obtained	Mean	SD
SAQ-A30	41-135	77.48	18.60
AAS Anxious	6-27	16.13	4.90
AAS Avoidant	13-54	36.27	7.46
RSS	11-40	27.77	5.64

Table No. 3 Correlation between Ghosting Experience, Social Anxiety, Adult Anxious Attachment Style, Adult Avoidant Attachment Style, Self-Esteem

	Ghosting Experience	Social Anxiety	Adult Anxious Attachment Style	Adult Avoidant Attachment Style	Self-Esteem
Ghosting Experience	1	-.045	-.192*	-.125	.069

[**significant at the 0.01 level
 *significant at the 0.05 level]

The results revealed significant negative correlation between Ghosting experience and Adult anxious attachment style (p<0.05). In this case the null hypothesis was rejected. But there was no significant relationship found between Ghosting experience and Social anxiety, Adult avoidant attachment style, and self-esteem. So here null hypothesis was retained.

Table No. 4 Differences between With Ghosting Experience and Without Ghosting Experience in terms of Social Anxiety, Adult Anxious Attachment Style, Adult Avoidant Attachment Style, and Self-esteem

VARIABLE	With Ghosting Experience (N_1=51)		Without Ghosting Experience (N_2=59)		t (df=107)	p value
	Mean	*SD*	*Mean*	*SD*		
Social Anxiety	78.37	17.02	76.71	19.98	0.47	0.64
Adult Anxious Attachment Style	17.14	4.45	15.25	5.13	2.05	0.04
Adult Avoidant Attachment Style	37.27	6.38	35.41	8.23	1.33	0.19
Self-Esteem	27.35	5.35	28.14	5.90	-0.73	0.47

[**significant at the 0.01 level
 *significant at the 0.05 level]

There was no significant difference found in Social Anxiety, Adult Anxious Attachment Style, Adult Avoidant Attachment Style, and Self-esteem in terms of having ghosting experience or not. The null hypothesis retained.

Table No. 5 Differences between Male and Female in terms of Ghosting Experience

VARIABLE	MALE (N_1=52)		FEMALE (N_2=58)		t (df=107)	p value
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Ghosting Experience	1.54	0.50	1.53	0.50	0.04	0.97

[**significant at the 0.01 level
 *significant at the 0.05 level]

The present study, found there is no significant difference between the male and the female group in terms of Ghosting experience. So, the null hypothesis was retained.

DISCUSSION

The result of the present study found no significant correlation between Ghosting phenomenon and Social anxiety. Although the result shows slightly a higher mean in Social Anxiety (78.37) with having ghosting experience than not having (76.71). Pancani et al., (2021) found in their study that participants (208 young adults) who have faced ghosting, orbiting, and rejection have experienced the different stages of reactions: 1) surprise and confusion, 2) anger, sadness, and guilt, 3) attempts of relational repair, 4) acceptance.[16] Most of them have claimed ghosting is a form of social exclusion, a form of ostracism. In existing literature, it has been found after being ghosted, non-initiators (victims of ghosting) often felt cautious about communicating with others, it was found there was a significant hesitation they are facing in the matter of self-disclosure. There is a constant fear or anxiety present in them in terms of opening up.[8] The present study revealed, there was a significant negative correlation between Ghosting experience and Adult anxious attachment style, which states if Adult anxious attachment style is high, then as a result individuals become less prone to have ghosting experience. It may be because individuals who have anxious attachment style, are so scared to engage in an intimate relationship completely, anticipating any probable mishap, they leave first. As Santo, Montana et al., (2022) found in their study, having an overly dependent attachment style related to associations connected with being the initiator of ghosting outcomes (i.e., "the ghoster").[17] There was no significant correlation between Ghosting phenomenon and Self-esteem. Still the result shows individuals familiar with ghosting shares slightly lesser mean of self-esteem (27.35) than who are not familiar (28.14). As Konings, Sumter, and Vandenbosch, (2021) in their study on 268 Belgian individuals found, being ghosted on a mobile dating app was indirectly related to decreased self-esteem.[18] Timmermans, Hermans, and Opree, (2021) states experiencing ghosting on a dating app can be quite painful and has an impact on users' self-esteem and mental well-being.[1] Navarro et al., (2020) found in their study, individuals experience ghosting and breadcrumbing reported less satisfaction with life, more helplessness and self-perceived loneliness. Although the result of their study showed no significant correlation.[20]

There was no significant difference found across the genders in terms of Ghosting experience among the present sample of this study. The result shows the mean of ghosting experience of male participants is 1.54, and for female it is 1.53. It indicates males and females have almost similar probability to experience ghosting. Timmermans, Hermans, and Opree, (2021) found in their study gender was not a significant predictor of having ghosted.[1] There was no significant difference found in case of social anxiety based on being or not being familiar to ghosting experience among the present sample of this study. There was no significant difference found in case of attachment style based on being or not being familiar to ghosting experience among the present sample of this study. The present study found a little higher adult anxious attachment style in terms of being ghosted (mean: 17.14) than not being familiar with ghosting (mean: 15.25), and Adult avoidant attachment style in terms of being ghosted (mean: 37.27) than not being (mean: 35.41). It seems like ghosting may affect our previous attachment style in some way, though it is not very prominent in long term, but it still has some effect. As Powell, Freedman, and Green, (2021) found in their study, participants who were previously ghosted by a romantic partner reported higher anxiety attachment than those who did not experienced.[9] Though there was no significant difference found in case of self-esteem based on being or not being familiar to ghosting experience among the present sample of this study, literature found, some victims of ghosting may even feel that they are unlovable and inadequate in the end.[11]

Implication

As cases of ghosting is increasing day by day (46.4% in the present study), it is important to spread awareness of it. It spreads the message that, in ghosting most of the time there is no fault of the victim/ ghostee. It lies in the situational factor or predisposition of the ghosting initiator/ ghoster (all incidents of ghosting are not intentional). So, there is no necessity to self-blame from the ghostee side. It spreads the awareness to those individuals who like to escape any complicated situation; as ghosting creates many unnecessary distresses to the ghostee, and it is so painful that it can totally ruin one's self concept. So, if it is possible, they need to face the situation and convey their message directly, if they are not being able to continue any kind of relationship. This research will also serve all the mental health professionals to empathize their clients who are coming with similar experiences.

Future Direction

This research enables the scope of more research in this field as there is not plenty of documented scholar articles on this topic. It also encourages further researches on exploring any association between Ghosting experience and Adult anxious attachment style in a larger population.

Limitations

Limitations of this study is related to use of a purposive sampling method, which is a form of non-probability sampling method, and a larger sample size would enhance the generalizability of this study to the original population. Additionally, the data was collected using self-report questionnaire, so participants' self-evaluation cannot be totally unbiased.

CONCLUSION

The present study found a significant negative correlation between Ghosting experience and Adult anxious attachment style, which states if Adult anxious attachment style is high then, as a result individuals become less prone to have ghosting experience. It may be because individuals who have anxious attachment style, are so scared to engage in an intimate relationship completely, anticipating any probable mishap, they leave first.

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Conflict of Interest

I, Sanjukta Ganguly declares no conflict of interests.