THE PHENOMENON OF GHOSTING IN DIGITAL COMMUNICATION

Ivana STAMENKOVIĆ

Assistant proffesor, University of Niš, Faculty of Philosophy, Department of Communicology and Journalism, Niš, Serbia
E-mail: ivana.stamenkovic@filfak.ni.ac.rs

Marta MITROVIĆ

Assistant proffesor, University of Niš, Faculty of Philosophy, Department of Communicology and Journalism, Niš, Serbia
E-mail: marta.mitrovic@filfak.ni.ac.rs

Abstract

In recent years, the concept of ghosting has gained attention in both every day and academic communication. Scholars define it as the interruption of communication initiated by one person (temporary or permanent), with the intention of limiting or completely severing contact with individuals who negatively impact the relationship, often accomplished using one or more technological channels (LeFebvre et al., 2019). This paper analyzes scientific articles on the phenomenon of ghosting, published in full on Google Scholar between 2017 and 2024. The corpus was narrowed to 50 freely available full-text articles from humanities fields, including psychology, communication, and language studies, and categorized into four thematic groups: *articles focusing on personality traits, articles centered on individual characteristics, studies examining motivation, and research addressing the consequences of ghosting.* Research indicates that ghosting is driven by personal characteristics, coping styles, and the ease of ending contact in digital environments, while at the same time producing a range of negative emotional reactions, especially in long-term relationships and friendships. The research findings indicate that ghosting is a multidimensional phenomenon that can be explained only when all relevant factors are considered, including individual traits, motivation, consequences, and contextual influences. Furthermore,

the study highlights the need for a more precise definition of the phenomenon itself, as it manifests differently depending on the goals of individuals who employ this abrupt communication-termination style and on the victim's perception.

Keywords: *ghosting, digital communication, interpersonal relationships, online behavior, communication interruption*

1. Introduction

In the digital age, personal, social, and professional life is nearly inconceivable without the use of the internet and social media. This is reflected in statistical data highlighting the growth in the number of internet and social media users. According to Statista, 5.44 billion people globally use the internet, while social media users are estimated to number 5.07 billion, or 62.6% of the total global population.[1]. Internet usage is more frequent among young people aged 16 to 29, with approximately 97% of them accessing the internet daily[2][3]. These statistical findings highlight shifts in the dynamics of friendships, romantic relationships, and professional connections. The key feature of digital communication is primarily associated with the speed and ease of message exchange. However, digital communication also carries certain negative dimensions that are increasingly recognized in both academic research and everyday experience. "Contrary to the expectations that the internet will enable greater freedom and the autonomy of users, that they will be connected with others, eliminate spatial distance and facilitate learning, obtaining information and providing entertainment, the reality framed by digital experience reveals its negative side" (Stamenković, Aleksić & Đukić Živadinović, 2023, p. 201). The increasing emphasis on mediated communication creates opportunities for

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[1]Please review the details on the website: https://www.statista.com/statistics/617136/digital-population-worldwide/ (Accessed: November 10, 2024).

[2] Please review the details on the website: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Young_people_-_digital_world (Accessed: September 29, 2024).

[3]In Serbia, data shows that in 2023, 75.4% of the population accessed the internet, while 82.3% of internet users had social media accounts. All respondents (100%) aged between 16 and 24 reported using the internet in the past three months of 2023. The most common online activities were sending messages via WhatsApp, Viber, Skype, and Messenger (93.2%), as well as making internet calls (94.0%). Social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter) were also frequently used by 82.3% of users. Please review the details on the website: https://publikacije.stat.gov.rs/G2023/Pdf/G202316018.pdf (Accessed: August 10, 2024).

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abuse and manipulation in online relationships, with psychological and emotional impacts becoming more evident among users (Forrai et al., 2023; Pancani et al., 2022; Timmermans et al., 2021; LeFebvre et al., 2020).

One phenomenon that has been gaining attention in both every day and academic discussions, related to communication issues online, is called ghosting, so named due to the ghost-like disappearance in communication. It refers to the sudden end of communication between two people without any explanation, particularly in electronic interactions such as texting, emailing, and messaging (Merriam-Webster; June 18, 2024). Based on available information, the term "ghosting" was first included in the dictionary in February 2017[4]. The phenomenon of ghosting is defined by LeFebvre and colleagues as "Unilaterally ceasing communication (either temporarily or permanently) in order to block access to individuals leading to the dissolution of a relationship (either suddenly or gradually), typically carried out through one or more technological mediums" (LeFebvre et al, 2019, p. 134). In recent years, interest in the study of the ghosting phenomenon has grown, with the increasing prevalence of online interactions in various types of relationships fueling this research. According to a 2020 study by the Pew Research Center, individuals from all age groups reported encountering ghosting. It is most common among young people aged 18 to 29 (42%), with the percentage decreasing as age increases. Among those aged 30 to 49, 37% reported experiencing ghosting, while only 14% of those over 65 had this experience[5]. Other research indicates that abruptly ending online interactions is becoming more frequent, particularly among younger individuals, although this occurrence is also found in the general population at a notable rate (20-40%) (Freedman et al., 2019; LeFebvre et al., 2019).

Ghosting can happen in romantic, friendly, or professional relationships, whether between employees and employers, students and professors, or any other type of relationship (Brazeau et al., 2024; Fanti et al., 2023; LeFebvre et al, 2019; LeFebvre et al, 2020, LeFebvre & Fan, 2020; Freedman et al., 2022a; Freedman et al., 2019; Pancani et al., 2022; Powell et al., 2021; Forrai et al., 2023). When examining the factors contributing to the breakdown of professional communication, Brezo and colleagues identify three key elements: *the speed of information flow, the volume of work and information, and the perceived or actual immediacy in terms of professional priorities* (Breazeau et al., 2024, p. 2). Beyond external factors, internal factors, such as personality traits and personal assessments of the person ending the

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[4] Retrieved from the website: https://www.merriam-webster.com/wordplay/ghosting-words-were-watching (Accessed: June 18, 2024).

[5] Please review the details on the website: https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2020/08/20/personal-experiences-and-attitudes-of-daters/ (Accessed: June 11, 2024).

communication, can also play an important role in the ghosting phenomenon. Factors such as a loss of interest, lack of attraction, inappropriate behavior by the other person, avoidance of confrontation or conflict, and concerns over safety in personal encounters (LeFebvre et al., 2019; Koessler et al., 2019) are all part of the spectrum of motivations for abruptly ending an online interaction. Additionally, some authors have explored the relationship between personality traits and the occurrence of ghosting in online spaces and have discovered that the so-called dark triad of traits is linked to the tendency to view ghosting as an acceptable way to end a relationship (Daraj et al., 2024). This is particularly evident in individuals with high scores in personality traits such as Machiavellianism (cynicism, manipulativeness), narcissism, and psychopathy (Jonason et al., 2021), who end short relationships by "disappearing" from the communication process.

The growing prevalence of ghosting as a method for ending interactions in various types of relationships, along with its significant emotional and psychological effects, has led to an increase in research on this phenomenon. As a result, questionnaires measuring the tendency to abandon a partner have been developed, and the corpus of analyzed studies includes assessments of the statistical parameters of these questionnaires and scales (Lopez et al., 2024; Husain et al., 2024; Herrera et al., 2024; Jahrami et al., 2023). While this phenomenon was previously identified as a strategy for ending romantic relationships (Nar & Luong, 2023; LeFebvre et al., 2019; Bagnas et al., 2022; Fanti et al, 2023; Freedman et al., 2022a), today, ghosting can also occur in non-romantic relationships, such as friendships and professional connections (Campaioli et al., 2022), as well as in both informal and formal interactions with others (Brazeau et al., 2024; Yap et al., 2021), and even between married couples (Nashrullah & Nuruddien, 2023) (See Table 1).

Table 1: The phenomenon of ghosting in different social relationships

Relationship type	Authors
Romantic relationship	LeFebvre et al., 2019
	Khattar et al., 2023
	Jain Nidhi, 2024
	LeFebvre et al., 2020
	Pancani et al., 2021
	Šiša, 2022
	Freedman et al., 2022a
	Helin Mereta, 2023
	Pancani et al., 2022
	Freedman et al., 2019
	Powell et al., 2021
	Bagnas et al., 2022
	Manning et al., 2019

	De Wiele & Campbell, 2019 Fanti et al., 2023 Prasertwit, 2019 LeFebvre & Fan, 2020 Freedman et al., 2022b Willis et al., 2023 Biocati et al., 2022 Koessler et al., 2019
Friendship	Campaioli et al., 2022 LeFebvre et al., 2019 Sukmana et al., 2022 Forrai et al., 2023
Professional relationship	Brazeau et al., 2024
Family relationship	Nashrullah & Nuruddien, 2023

As modern romantic relationships become increasingly reliant on online communication and the use of apps and networks, Pancani and colleagues have pointed out phenomena closely associated with ghosting. One of these is known as orbiting, where a person who ends a romantic relationship continues to monitor their ex-partner's activities on social media, occasionally liking the content they post (Pancani et al., 2022). Another phenomenon linked to ghosting is breadcrumbing, which focuses not on progressing a romantic relationship but rather on fulfilling a need for attention. In this online interaction, the manipulative person shows no interest in truly getting to know the person they send romantic messages to, frequently cancels plans, avoids initiating meetings, fails to engage in meaningful communication or relationship development, and is insecure or lonely, or they maintain a parallel relationship with two individuals (Navarro et al., 2020a; Khattar et al., 2023; Helin, 2023; Wilis et al., 2023). Another term discussed in studies of online romantic relationships is catfishing, which involves creating a false identity to initiate a romantic relationship. The aim is to deceive, targeting someone for an online romantic relationship that never comes to fruition (Rull García & Bove, 2022).

Some researchers have explored the impact of various forms of deception, abandonment, and psychological abuse in online dating among young people. One study, which focused on three psychological constructs—life satisfaction, loneliness, and helplessness—revealed that participants who experienced breadcrumbing or a combination of breadcrumbing and ghosting reported lower life satisfaction and heightened feelings of loneliness and helplessness. However, none of the psychological constructs studied showed strong correlations with the experience of ghosting (Navarro et al., 2020a). In contrast, other studies suggest that both ghosting and breadcrumbing have

negative effects on victims, increasing feelings of loneliness and helplessness while reducing life satisfaction and self-esteem (Gupta, 2022). A study that viewed orbiting and ghosting as forms of ostracism focused on the psychological effects of these behaviors, particularly social exclusion. The effects included the emergence of negative emotions, threats to basic needs fulfillment, event interpretation, and aggression. The authors also considered rejection as a strategy for ending a relationship, where the partner clearly communicates the reasons for ending the romantic relationship. The findings showed that participants experienced ghosting more intensely than rejection because the sudden end of interaction resulted in a stronger sense of social exclusion, due to the lack of feedback on the reasons for the breakup. No significant statistical differences were observed among the three categories of experience in relation to orbiting. The degree of social exclusion experienced by orbiting victims was somewhere between those who experienced ghosting and those who experienced rejection (Pancani et al., 2022). A study examining the correlation between personality traits and ghosting and breadcrumbing found no clear link between victims' personalities and breadcrumbing, but identified a negative correlation between extroversion and ghosting. This suggests that extroverted individuals are more resilient to ghosting, experiencing milder emotional consequences compared to introverted personalities (Helin, 2023).

This paper explores the academic literature addressing the phenomenon of ghosting. The objective is to analyze and summarize the findings of research papers that have investigated the topic of ghosting. Given that the term ghosting was first introduced into the dictionary in 2017, this year has been selected as the starting point for the analysis, which includes studies published until 2024 on Google Scholar. An additional reason for this analysis is the growing prevalence of unexpected relationship termination in online spaces, particularly among individuals of all age groups who use dating apps and social media platforms.

2. Methods

Through qualitative content analysis, academic articles published on Google Scholar from 2017 to 2024 were examined. The search was conducted using the keyword "ghosting," which helped identify articles where this term appeared in the title, abstract, or keywords. The inclusion criteria were:

1. A study had to explicitly address the phenomenon of ghosting (e.g., in the context of interpersonal relationships, communication, or psychological outcomes, and fell within various fields of the humanities, including psychology, communication studies, and language studies).

2. The study had to be either original research or a review article.

3. The full text had to be available.

Studies that only mention ghosting superficially, without an analytical focus were excluded.

The initial corpus of 67 studies was reduced to 50 based on the previously mentioned criteria. A qualitative approach was used for the content analysis, with coding guided by a combination of deductive and inductive strategies. All studies were read in detail to gain a general understanding and to identify preliminary themes. Subsequently, all relevant meaning units were identified across the studies, without any predefined categories. The codes were then grouped into thematic clusters based on similarities, relationships, and recurring patterns observed in the analyzed corpus. As a final outcome, four main categories were formed, integrating the key themes present in the literature. The resulting central categories (personality traits, individual characteristics, motivation, and the consequences of ghosting) emerged through repeated reading, connecting, and interpreting the content. These categories indicate the dominant directions of ghosting research in the analyzed literature. Coding was conducted by two coders, which ensured consistency through comparison of their codes and the reconciliation of discrepancies.

3. Results with discussion

By using the focus of the article as an indicator, four categories were identified, into which the analyzed articles were classified. These categories include:

a. Articles that consider ***personality traits*** as an important factor in the context of ghosting;

b. Articles that highlight ***individual characteristics*** as significant when analyzing the phenomenon of ghosting;

c. Articles where the ***motivation*** of the person initiating ghosting was the primary focus of the research;

d. Articles that explore the ***consequences of ghosting***.

3a. Personality traits

Personality traits significantly influence individuals' behavior in social interactions (Furnham & Heaven, 1999 as cited in Jonason et al., 2009), particularly within romantic relationships (Botwin et al., 1997 as cited in Jonason et al., 2009). Research utilizing the Big Five personality traits has found a positive correlation between relationship stability, partner selection, and approaches to ending relationships (Botwin et al., 1997 as cited in Jonason et al., 2009). Conversely, studies have also examined the connection between emotional relationship behaviors and negative traits, especially those

categorized under the dark triad of personality traits. This triad, comprising narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism, has been linked to a predisposition for casual sexual encounters, a high number of sexual partners, and promiscuous attitudes, desires, and behaviors (Jonason et al., 2009). Narcissism is commonly associated with entitlement and superiority, Machiavellianism with cynicism and manipulativeness, and psychopathy with callousness, cruelty, and interpersonal antagonism (Jonason et al., 2021). In examining relationship termination patterns related to dark triad traits, findings indicate that individuals scoring highly on dark triad traits view ghosting as an acceptable behavior, though only within the context of short-term relationships (Jonason et al., 2021). These results are consistent with earlier studies (Freedman et al., 2019; Koessler et al., 2019). The study further demonstrated that individuals with pronounced Machiavellian and psychopathic traits were more likely to engage in abrupt disappearances, while no significant connection was identified between narcissism and this method of ending romantic relationships (Jonason et al., 2021). Another study, which considered dark triad traits, secondary love styles, and gender as predictors of ghosting, found that women with high scores on the pragma love style, who have a pragmatic approach to selecting a partner based on their suitability for family life, were more inclined to abruptly leave their partners, while men did not exhibit this tendency. Additionally, high scores on the mania love style, characterized by intense emotional involvement and dependency, were associated with a lower likelihood of using ghosting as a breakup method among men, though no such trend was observed in women. Lastly, the agape love style, defined by selflessness and profound commitment to a partner, showed a negative correlation with ghosting among both men and women (Sulymka, 2022: 38–39).

In opposition to the dark triad of traits, there is a concept known as the light triad, which includes Kantianism, the inclination to treat others as ends in themselves rather than as means to an end; humanism, the belief in the inherent goodness of people; and faith in humanity. Individuals who score higher on the light triad traits are less likely to leave others without explanation. Conversely, narcissism, a component of the dark triad, increases the likelihood of employing ghosting as a method for ending relationships. Additionally, extroverts, compared to introverts, are more prone to abruptly end relationships through communication platforms. Considering attachment styles, be it secure, anxious, or dependent, the dependent style is negatively correlated with ghosting. Moreover, individuals exhibiting borderline personality traits are more inclined to leave others without providing an explanation. As for those who are ghosted, they tend to display the following characteristics: they possess traits from the dark triad, are extroverted, and exhibit borderline personality tendencies. Similar to the previous findings, the dependent attachment style shows a

negative correlation with experiencing ghosting. On the other hand, a secure attachment style acts as a protective shield against the negative impact of ghosting, while other attachment styles intensify the severity of negative experiences and perceptions (Di Santo et al., 2022).

The experience of ghosting elicits heightened emotional responses in participants, including anger, anxiety, and paranoia. This suggests that individuals scoring high on tests assessing pathological personality traits, such as narcissistic and borderline traits, tend to exhibit more intense emotional reactions when faced with an unexpected relationship termination. In relation to narcissistic traits, Fanti and colleagues discovered that individuals displaying traits of vulnerable narcissism, characterized by hypersensitivity to rejection and criticism, experience stronger negative psychological reactions and exhibit paranoid states. In contrast, grandiose narcissism does not exert a similar influence on behavior or emotional responses in participants (Fanti et al., 2023).

3b. Individual characteristics

Given that numerous individual, interpersonal, and relational factors play a role in shaping romantic relationships, certain studies on the phenomenon of ghosting have centered on examining specific attitudes and beliefs, such as self-esteem, sense of power, moral disengagement, assertiveness, empathic concern, and conflict resolution styles (Navarro et al., 2020b). This research found no evidence of a significant relationship between these socio-cognitive factors and either the intention or the act of abruptly ending a relationship without explanation. Of all the personal beliefs analyzed, only moral disengagement showed a positive but weak correlation with ghosting behavior and intentions, while self-esteem was positively associated only with the intention to ghost, not the behavior itself. Furthermore, hostile engagement as a conflict resolution style revealed a positive yet weak correlation with ghosting behavior and intentions. Conversely, assertiveness, empathy, and a sense of power did not exhibit any meaningful connection to the practice or intention of ending romantic relationships in the digital age (Navarro et al., 2020b).

Life in a digitalized world often leads to an overwhelming influx of information, inspiring a study to examine experiences on social media platforms, such as fear of missing out (FoMo), perceived victimization in abrupt relationship endings (ghosting), and ambiguous relationships (vaguebooking). The study also investigated the mediating role of these experiences in the relationship between personal traits, such as need for belonging, social comparison orientation, social identity, and histrionic personality, individual characteristics (gender, age), and mental health. The research confirmed a connection between increased social media use and a

heightened likelihood of experiencing fear of missing out, becoming a victim of sudden relationship endings, or being part of an undefined romantic relationship. These experiences can contribute to mental health issues among social media users. For example, victims of ghosting may experience negative emotions such as sadness, hurt, anger, disappointment, and related feelings. The results also showed that women are less likely than men to fall victim to sudden relationship terminations and are less preoccupied with missing out on social media. Older participants were found to dedicate less time to social media, enjoy better mental health, and demonstrate higher levels of self-esteem.

The authors suggest that there is also a positive relationship between the need for belonging and the fear of losing connections, with a more pronounced need for belonging linked to a reduced likelihood of experiencing unclear or suddenly ended relationships online, as these individuals tend to have a well-developed set of social skills. On one hand, a positive correlation was found between the need for comparison and the fear of missing out on connections, as well as the possibility of being abandoned in the online space. On the other hand, a well-established social identity supports mental health but is associated with both the fear of missing out on social connections and the potential for negative romantic experiences. Histrionic personality, with a strong need to build self-esteem through social approval and judgment, increases the likelihood of experiencing fear of missing out on social connections and being victimized in the context of both types of unhealthy online relationships (Astleitner et al., 2022).

3c. Motivation

A range of motivational factors contributes to the occurrence of ghosting as a method of ending a relationship. These include factors linked to the personality and behavior of the person doing the ghosting, as well as characteristics of the individual excluded from further interaction. External factors that may contribute to the termination of communication and a romantic relationship are also identified. The first group consists of loss of interest, the introduction of a new partner, negative traits, issues with commitment and attachment, lack of readiness for a relationship, inadequate communication skills, and a tendency to avoid confrontation (Pancani et al., 2022; LeFebvre et al., 2019; LeFebvre et al., 2020; Timmermans et al., 2021; Yap et al., 2021; Keffer, 2024). On the other hand, those who end relationships through ghosting often report that the reasons lie in the partner's personality and the perception that they are unable to accept a breakup, as well as protective reasons (Manning et al., 2019; Timmermans et al., 2021; LeFebvre et al., 2019). Those left behind are criticized for being boring, falling in love too easily, and exhibiting a fear of commitment and attachment (Timmermans et al., 2021). Racist and

misogynistic views are often cited as reasons for cutting off communication, as such beliefs conflicting with the views held by those who end the interaction (Dean Marshall et al., 2024; Timmermans et al., 2021). Concerns about negative reactions from the person being ghosted are especially prominent when that person displays negative behaviors such as a controlling attitude, rudeness, manipulation, increased intrusiveness, or sending unwanted sexual content (Timmermans et al., 2021; Koessler et al., 2019). This can lead to fears that an in-person encounter could result in verbal abuse or aggressive outbursts, making online breakups a form of self-defense (Timmermans et al., 2021). Additionally, behaviors such as intrusiveness, excessive attachment, incompatibility, and unpleasant interactions are given as reasons for justifying the sudden end of a relationship (Timmermans et al., 2021; Koessler et al., 2019). However, participants may experience guilt and remorse after choosing to indirectly end a relationship by disappearing from their network (Dean Marshall et al., 2024; Koessler et al., 2019), although this often comes with a sense of relief (Freedman et al., 2022a). Some participants associate the ability to end communication through social networks and dating apps with a sense of control over the situation, as they fear the other party might try to change their mind or manipulate them (Timmermans et al., 2021).

In exploring the reasons behind rejection and indirect termination of romantic relationships, Freedman and colleagues found that safety concerns are a key factor in choosing this method to end a relationship. While it is more likely that safety concerns contribute to the sudden breakup (ghosting), it remains unclear whether the gender of the person excluded from the relationship influences this decision (Freedman et al., 2022b). Regarding the motivation to abruptly stop communication with a partner, Freedman identifies three main factors. These include the ease of rejection, as the relationship is online, and there is no chance for direct confrontation with the partner, followed by concerns about reputation and safety. By ending the relationship through disappearing from all networks, the feelings of guilt and discomfort typically associated with face-to-face encounters are reduced. Social reputation, based on the importance of social perception and approval, plays a significant role, so those who highly value this aspect are more likely to use ghosting to abruptly end a romantic relationship or friendship. The third factor is safety concerns, which impact the decision to end online interactions due to a potentially aggressive partner or verbal or psychological abuse (Freedman et al., 2022b).

This phenomenon can also be observed in toxic friendships, where it is shaped by personality traits of the friend who is left behind (Yap et al., 2021). In addition to the traits that can explain the occurrence of sudden interaction termination, relationship incompatibility, differing values, and diverging opinions can also result in the cessation of communication (Dean Marshall et al., 2024; LeFebvre et al., 2020). Alongside these factors, the technological

aspects of mediated communication can encourage and facilitate ghosting, as many users view mediated forms of rejection and ending romantic relationships as an easier and more convenient way to leave a partner (Dean Marshall et al., 2024; Timmermans et al., 2021). Moreover, given the technologically altered environment and the rise of various channels for finding romantic partners, many dating app users admit they turn to these platforms out of boredom. However, using specialized dating apps does not relieve their boredom, which is why they sometimes feel that uncreative texting with others leads to the conclusion that disappearing from the network is the only viable solution (Narr & Luong, 2023).

When examining the demographic characteristics of individuals who use ghosting to end a romantic relationship, research has indicated that younger people are more likely to engage in this behavior (Timmermans et al., 2021). As for gender, the findings are mixed. Some studies suggest that gender is not a significant factor (Biolcati et al., 2021; Timmermans et al., 2021), while others show that women are more likely than men to use ghosting due to safety concerns (Freedman et al., 2022b). Freedman and colleagues found that different beliefs about relationships can impact the intention and actions of suddenly abandoning a partner online. They compared participants who held beliefs in fate with those who believed in growth within romantic relationships. The core of fate-related beliefs revolves around the idea of soulmates, while growth beliefs emphasize mutual effort to develop a relationship, without the notion of fate as something fixed and predestined. Those who believed in fate, as opposed to growth beliefs, were more likely to view ghosting positively, had prior experiences with it, and intended to engage in it again (Freedman et al., 2019). These findings were corroborated in a subsequent study, which added that avoidant attachment styles were common among those who ghosted, while anxious attachment styles were more prevalent among those who were unexpectedly left in the online space (Powell et al., 2021). Moreover, studies suggest that those who have previously been victims of ghosting later adopt the practice of disappearing from networks as an acceptable behavior in romantic relationships (Sukmana et al., 2022; Powell et al., 2022; Freedman et al., 2019; Timmermans et al., 2021; Navarro et al., 2020b; LeFebvre et al., 2019).

In a study using the semi-structured interview method, eight themes were identified that explain the reasons for the sudden end of communication in relationships (Wu & Bamishigbin, 2023). These include: a clear cause, avoidance of confrontation, short-term orientation, ghostees as socially inferior, ignoring then blocking, attempts by ghostee to reach out, mixed and evolving feelings, and recognition of harm. Apart from romantic partners, the cessation of communication in online spaces also happens in friendships and family relationships. The common reasons for abandoning romantic partners and

friends are the perceived incompatibility of values and traits between the individuals involved (Wu & Bamishigbin, 2023).

Avoiding direct confrontation with a partner when ending a romantic relationship is becoming an increasingly common experience among users of digital media and social networks. This form of relationship termination is preferred by many for several reasons. One of them is the desire to avoid the pressure of a face-to-face encounter, which would involve explaining the reasons for the breakup and dealing with both one's own and the other person's emotions. Research also indicates that abandonment and disappearance from romantic relationships are more common in shorter relationships, where the level of commitment between partners is lower compared to those that end through direct communication. Distress and negative emotions are higher for those who are left this way than for those who do the leaving, while those who choose a distant breakup experience less stress than those who end things directly. Additionally, breakups that involve completely disappearing are characterized by greater use of avoidance/withdrawal, distant/mediated tactics, and a lack of open confrontation and positive tone/self-blame. The authors clarify that in relationships where partners have developed a close and intimate connection, direct conversation is the preferred strategy for ending the relationship, whereas avoidance as a breakup method is more frequent when the desired level of closeness is lacking between the partners (Koessler et al., 2019). When there is difficulty articulating the reasons for the breakup due to poor communication skills, or a fear of direct confrontation with the emotional responses of both partners, the one making the decision to end the relationship is more likely to choose complete exclusion from communication platforms (Wu & Bamishigbin, 2023).

3d. Consequences of Ghosting

Given that ghosting is increasingly prevalent in the modern online dating world (Freedman et al., 2019), research efforts are directed toward understanding this behavior as a strategy for ending relationships in online spaces, as well as its resulting consequences. Humans are inherently social beings and seek to form and maintain relationships while avoiding social isolation. Social networks and specialized dating sites are integral parts of life in the new mediatized communication environment. Access to these communication platforms has raised various questions about how romantic relationships begin and end, as well as the psychological effects of such forms of interaction. Although communication on these platforms often occurs between complete strangers, its conclusion carries psychological and emotional consequences for the person who is left without any explanation.

The practice of abruptly ending a relationship can negatively affect the mental health of the person experiencing ghosting, leading to consequences such as stress, depression, anxiety (Lad, 2023), and negative emotional experiences like sadness, loneliness, helplessness, and a decrease in life satisfaction (Gupta, 2022). Other effects include a reduced sense of belonging, low self-esteem, feelings of loss of control, and a diminished sense of life meaning (Freedman et al., 2022a). Moreover, victims of ghosting often experience changes in their self-perception and an increase in feelings of self-criticism, self-doubt, hopelessness, and mistrust of future romantic relationships (Thomas & Dubar, 2021). Timmermans and colleagues point out that after the sudden cessation of interaction, without any explanation for the decision, some individuals feel sadness and hurt, while others express feelings of anger, frustration, and disappointment (Timmermans et al., 2021). Additionally, long-term effects on mental health, particularly in terms of self-esteem, well-being, trust in others, and depression, have also been identified (Šiša, 2022; Timmermans et al., 2021). However, a more recent study found that ghosting does not have a lasting impact on self-esteem, which the authors attribute to the fact that such experiences are now expected and considered part of the new normal in online relationships (Forrai et al., 2023; Šiša, 2022). The same group of authors notes a difference in the effects on mental health based on whether the relationship being ended was romantic or platonic, with the termination of friendships being linked to an increased likelihood of depressive symptoms, while no such effect is observed in romantic relationships (Forrai et al., 2023). This is consistent with findings from a study examining the relationship between psychological factors such as life satisfaction, helplessness, and loneliness, and experiences of manipulative relationships or breadcrumbing, and sudden abandonment in online environments, ghosting. The study found that individuals who experienced sudden abandonment did not suffer from mental health issues. Specifically, no significant connection was found between the experience of an abrupt breakup and the psychological factors measured. This supports the idea that individuals who were left may have developed effective coping strategies, and that factors such as individual characteristics, e.g., less rumination, lower social anxiety, and psychological flexibility, as well as the shorter duration of the relationship, contributed to this. The lack of a significant effect on life satisfaction, loneliness, and helplessness from a sudden breakup is also explained by the growing prevalence of unexpected relationship terminations online (Navarro et al., 2020b). While ghosting does affect mental health, one study also found that attachment styles may play a mediating role in how ghosting impacts mental health, although this effect was not statistically significant (Lad, 2023).

In one qualitative study focused on the experiences of individuals who have been excluded from relationships, data was collected regarding how they

interpret this type of experience. The metaphors used by the participants, such as wall, knife in the back, door slammed in their face, reflect the emotional state of the recipients of the messages, as well as the psychological and emotional consequences of ghosting. Many describe this action as creating a wall and initiating a silence without any clear explanation. The result is confusion and questioning about the meaning of this action and what they may have done wrong, alongside the feeling of an unresolved story with no closure or sense. Some participants link this behavior in the online space with a sense of power, where the power rests with the person who ends the contact and interaction, leaving the abandoned individual completely dependent on the other person's next move (metaphor of tied hands). However, the intensity and depth of the consequences depend on the level of significance, intimacy, and closeness of the relationship, with the experience being more painful and the suffering greater when a friendship ends in this way, compared to a relationship with a stranger (Campaioli et al., 2022). One study showed a correlation between the degree of closeness and negative emotional experiences (directed at oneself and others) associated with an abrupt ending of the relationship, meaning that as feelings of intimacy increase, so does the intensity of emotions such as sadness, fear, confusion, regret, remorse, shock, guilt, anger, and even a desire for revenge (Prasertwit, 2019).

LeFebvre and colleagues also point out that while the experience of an unexpected breakup may not lead to trauma, it can still be accompanied by pain and discomfort related to uncertainty, ambiguity, hurt, distress, and the need to create a narrative that provides a satisfying explanation for the reasons behind the relationship's end. Among the main reasons given by participants to explain why they were left, several are mentioned: the presence of an alternative partner (as the dominant reason), confusion, unwillingness for a relationship, loss or lack of interest, insufficient personal traits, incompatibility, and misalignment of sexual desires, (LeFebvre et al., 2020). Lerida and colleagues conducted a thematic analysis of the experiences of those who were left without an explanation. They identified three key themes in the narratives of victims of an unexpected breakup. These are euphoric-toxic issues with the partner who initiated the breakup and disappeared without explanation (Masala effect), bittersweet problems with the breakup initiator (Matcha effect), and "smoke in the eye" issues with the partner who ends the romantic relationship (Lapsang effect). The first theme, labeled the Masala effect, is marked by a shift from the euphoric phase of the romantic relationship to toxic behavior by the partner, while the second theme involves mixed feelings of disappointment and confusion that, although bitter, might motivate the person to accept the end of the romantic relationship and move forward. The third theme is connected to feelings of sadness, with "smoke in the eyes" being a metaphor for unclear reasons for the breakup, where sadness, confusion, and anger cloud the person's

perspective (Lerida et al., 2023). A qualitative study focusing on interviews with young people highlighted several significant themes in the experiences of ghosting victims. These include justification, confusion over taking responsibility, avoidance of future vulnerability, and the role of technology (Holmes, 2022).

By comparing three methods of ending a romantic relationship, direct rejection, sudden cessation of communication (ghosting), and orbiting in romantic relationships (orbiting), Pancani and colleagues gained insights into the specific psychological responses triggered by indirect forms of relationship termination. In the initial phase, feelings of unexpectedness and surprise emerge, with ghosting and orbiting producing more intense reactions than direct breakups, alongside confusion and disorientation due to the lack of clarity in the behavior of the person who abandons their partner. The second phase involves guilt tied to a sense of responsibility, anger, and sadness, which the authors attribute to an unfulfilled need for belonging, as ghosting and orbiting are considered forms of social exclusion. Furthermore, the intensity of these emotional responses following a breakup depends on the significance of the relationship, with greater emotional investment leading to stronger emotional reactions. The third phase begins with acceptance of the new reality, detaching from the past relationship, and moving on to potential new partners (Pancani et al., 2022).

In several studies, the phenomenon of sudden abandonment in the online space is often viewed as a strategy influenced by new communication technologies, while strategies used by those who are left after a breakup are also examined (LeFebvre & Fan, 2020; Pancani et al., 2021). Dating apps create an environment conducive to the occurrence of sudden disappearance, with some authors arguing that this form of abrupt relationship termination is often incidental (Timmermans et al., 2021). In the context of gaming theory, Šiša highlights that these online spaces provide users with entertainment and excitement, while simultaneously offering them a shield from the risks associated with direct encounters, thanks to the option of withdrawing from relationships without offering any explanation. Šiša notes that the role of technology is vital for understanding the emergence of ghosting. Although this breakup mechanism is related to dating site users, the relationship they form with technology significantly contributes to the interpretation of new communication methods and their endings (Šiša, 2022). Another significant conclusion from this qualitative study is that ghosting, as a strategy for discontinuing communication, has become completely normalized in a hyper-connected yet uncertain environment, with many users having been both initiators and victims of this experience (Šiša, 2022).

Ghosting can be viewed as a strategy for ending a romantic relationship, with some authors recognizing four potential forms of indirect

breakups, which arise from the intersection of the duration categories (short-term and long-term) and the breakup interval (sudden and gradual) (see Chart 1).

Sudden

Short-term[6]	Quickly disappears without notice and leaves opportunity to reinitiate communication.	Quickly disappears without notice and plans not to reinitiate communication.	**Long-term**
	Slowly disappears over time and leaves opportunity to reinitiate communication.	Slowly disappears over time and plans not to reinitiate communication.	

Gradual

Chart 1: Indirect ghosting disengagement strategies, according to LeFebvre et al., 2019, p. 140.

Unlike mutual involvement in initiating a breakup, the phenomenon of ghosting is marked by a one-sided cessation of communication and interaction, creating both physical and, above all, psychological distance. In the first scenario, uncertainty is minimal, which allows for greater control over what happens after the relationship ends, whereas with ghosting, uncertainty is heightened for various reasons. The consequence of this uncertainty can be the abandoned person's inability to confront the breakup, accept the separation, or close the story, leading them to feel stuck in the mourning process (LeFebvre et al., 2019). The person who ends communication with their partner takes the primary role, leaving the abandoned person to navigate the process of abandonment and deal with its personal and relational effects. A significant percentage of respondents reported that they did not use any strategies, as the experience did not negatively impact their mental health or well-being. Effective coping strategies for handling online abandonment include focusing on the future, accepting the new reality, and moving forward, as well as engaging in alternative communication with others who are still in contact with the ex-partner, redirecting focus to other things, and initiating new interpersonal

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[6] In this chart, the x-axis represents the duration (short-term and long-term), with short-term linked to the breakup initiator's desires (focused on themselves), while in the case of long-term, the initiator has decided to permanently end the relationship without any indication that it could be rekindled. The y-axis shows the interval chosen by the initiator for the breakup, which may be either gradual or sudden (LeFebvre et al., 2019).

relationships and intimacy. Another helpful strategy is maintaining a positive focus on oneself, which contributes to the development of a healthy and prosocial life for the person who has been abandoned.

Ineffective uncertainty-reduction strategies include both active and passive information seeking, which refers to the person who has been abandoned attempting to directly or indirectly contact their ex-partner, as well as monitoring their activities through social media. This leads to an intensification of suffering and pain, as concluded by the authors (LeFebvre & Fan, 2020). The uncertainty that arises after ghosting has been examined in the context of the need for closure, taking into account the attributions assigned to the person who ends the relationship and the time needed to recognize that abandonment has taken place, the study shows that individuals with a stronger need for closure tend to be more confident in their judgments when faced with uncertain situations, such as the experience of unexpected abandonment in an online context. Additionally, emerging adults (aged 18 to 29) have less definite attribution assessments but require less time to conclude that they have been ghosted or abandoned in the online space. Arvidson and Flygfors link this finding to the ability of younger individuals to identify the signals of newer forms of relationship termination, as well as to their experiences, given that the topic is frequently discussed and such experiences are more common among them than among those over 30 (Arvidsson & Flygfors, 2023). These results highlight the widespread occurrence of increasingly unstable and less clearly defined relationships among young people. While this may shield them from excessive emotional investment in relationships with strangers online, it also impedes their attempts to form meaningful romantic and friendships based on trust and commitment.

4. Conclusion

In recent years, the term ghosting has gained increasing popularity in both every day and academic discussions. This can be attributed to the influence of technology on communication practices, the emergence of new spaces for meeting people and forming romantic and friendship connections, and the shift in relationships with existing social networks. Apart from technological factors, which have made it easier to form different types of relationships in the online space, researchers have explored the motivations of those who suddenly cut off all communication with others, as well as the personality traits associated with the intention and practice of ending a relationship in this way. Additionally, the emotional consequences experienced by both those who do not initiate the breakup and those who do have become significant points of investigation. The authors found that the main emotional responses include confusion,

disorientation, feelings of guilt, sadness, hurt, anger, frustration, and disappointment. Over the long term, the effects on mental health can compound, as individuals left without explanation may experience lower self-esteem and difficulty trusting others in the future. The results regarding depression, however, remain unclear. Sudden abandonment and permanent cessation of communication in short-term online relationships are considered acceptable forms of behavior, while in relationships with a longer duration and a certain degree of commitment and closeness, ghosting is deemed an inappropriate model for ending a romantic relationship, as the authors concluded. More intense emotional reactions are found in friendships that end through complete disappearance and exclusion.

Recent studies, however, show that this practice is becoming more common among users of social media and dating platforms, and as a result of these new experiences, people are becoming less emotionally reactive to these forms of ending romantic relationships. On one hand, this supports the idea that individuals have developed coping skills when dealing with communication issues, but on the other hand, it suggests that such behavior has been normalized and is increasingly seen as an acceptable mode of functioning in contemporary romantic and friendship networks. Additionally, this should be viewed in the context of the overwhelming flow of information that floods online users, leading them to a state of apathy and indifference, as well as the creation of new behavioral norms that are unhealthy and could seriously disrupt personal functioning and self-image, as well as perceptions of others. Moreover, the lack of response increases anxiety in any situation, and the use of technology to form romantic and friendly relationships seems to contribute to the emergence of counterproductive effects, with alienation, distrust, and lack of intimacy being the most prominent outcomes. These emotional effects for participants in the ghosting process point to the need to reassess responsibility for one's actions in the digital realm of romantic and friendship relationships, as the responsibility lies with the network users and specialized apps, rather than the technology itself.

The research findings indicate that ghosting is a multidimensional phenomenon that can be explained only when all relevant factors are considered, including individual traits, motivation, consequences, and contextual influences. Furthermore, the study highlights the need for a more precise definition of the phenomenon itself, as it manifests differently depending on the goals of individuals who employ this abrupt communication-termination style and on the victim's perception. In this regard, understanding the motivation of those who engage in ghosting may contribute to the development of targeted programs or workshops promoting healthier models of ending communication in digital spaces, as well as strategies for protecting users of social networks and specific applications.

With respect to socio-psychological consequences, it would be beneficial to conduct longitudinal research that could show how the effects of ghosting develop over time. Additionally, more empirical studies with clear operationalizations are needed to examine the relationships between personality traits, motivation, and the consequences of ghosting. This could lead to the refinement of existing theoretical perspectives and the establishment of a more robust and comprehensive theoretical model of ghosting.

While the phenomenon of ghosting is being studied more extensively, it is evident that this is just the beginning, as many questions remain unanswered and require further investigation. Some of the questions that remained outside the scope of previous research relate to the influence of social and cultural context on the occurrence of ghosting, as well as the role of algorithmic systems, platform design, and user anonymity in facilitating this type of behavior in digital environments.

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