Disappearing in the Age of Hypervisibility: Definition, Context, and Perceived Psychological Consequences of Social Media Ghosting

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Ghosting has emerged at the intersection of technology/social media use and relationship dissolution. The term has received substantial attention within popular media, but there is limited empirical research on this phenomenon. The primary purpose of the present qualitative study was to explore the definition of, and motives for, ghosting, as well as to assess the role of technology/social media in ghosting, and the perceived consequences of ghosting for both the ghoster and the ghostee. Participants were 76 emerging adults at university (70% female; M_{age} = 19.98 years old, SD = 1.28), who participated in a focus group session. Results of thematic analysis of narrative responses indicated distinct motives for, and consequences of, ghosting for the ghoster versus the ghostee. Overall, technology/social media was thought to play an integral role in perpetuating ghosting mostly because of the ease of connecting with others but also because of the element of anonymity and surveillance that it allows. Overall, the perceived psychological consequences of ghosting were generally positive for the ghoster and negative for the ghostee. Notably, most participants had experienced ghosting both as ghoster and ghostee, which highlights the need for future research to delineate the roles of personality characteristics versus relationship contexts in predicting ghosting attitudes and behaviors.

Public Policy Relevance Statement
Ghosting is defined as the act of cutting off all communication with someone without any explanation, when there is an expected response—a phenomenon that has been exacerbated by the increased prevalence of social media. Individuals choose to ghost for several reasons, based on a combination of factors relating to the context of that specific relationship and one's own personal characteristics. Being ghosted is typically experienced as a negative relational event but may also provide opportunities for self-reflection and personal growth.

The last time that I got ghosted ... It was pretty intense because this guy really aggressively asked me out, like on a date. And then, date went really well and then we went on another one. And then all of a sudden, he like stopped responding to my Snapchat, to my texts. Or when he did respond, it was like very short responses and would ignore me in public.

—20-year-old female

The proliferation of online communication has had notable implications for psychological and interpersonal functioning

(Coyne et al., 2013). As of 2018, 96% of emerging adults in the United States owned a Smartphone (Mobile Fact Sheet, 2018). The emergence of dating websites like *Tinder* (www.tinder.com; established 2012), *Hinge* (https://hinge.co; established 2012), and *Bumble* (https://bumble.com; established 2014) has afforded emerging adults new opportunities to navigate the developmental task of exploring romantic relationships (Slater, 2014). In 2016, nearly 60% of 18-to-34-year-olds reported knowing someone who uses online dating and ∼30% reported knowing someone in a long-term relationship who met his or her partner online (Smith, 2016). Despite these increased opportunities to connect with potential romantic partners, online dating has bred unique challenges for relationship functioning, including increased cognitive load (Kreager et al., 2014).

An emerging phenomenon that has received attention within popular culture is *ghosting*. Within popular media, ghosting is generally defined as the act of cutting off all communication (in-person and/or online) with someone without an explanation (Gholipour, 2019; Mehta, 2019). Several public opinion polls (Moore, 2014), blog-style articles (Safronova, 2015), and

YouTube videos ("*Ghosting: Why some people just disappear*", 2018) have speculated about possible motives and consequences of ghosting, but empirical studies on the topic are lacking. It is especially worthwhile to examine ghosting among emerging adults who attend university because the university context affords unique challenges and opportunities for establishing and navigating interpersonal relationships (Pittman & Richmond, 2008) and other developmental life tasks (Shulman & Connolly, 2013). Emerging adulthood has been characterized as a period of (a) identity explorations, (b) instability, (c) self-focus, (d) feeling "in-between," and (e) the age of possibilities (Arnett, 2004). Several of these characteristics provide an intriguing setting for the study of relationship functioning. For example, identity explorations may include experimenting with one's sexuality through romantic relationships (Claxton & van Dulmen, 2013). Instability within romantic relationships has been evidenced by the prevalence of hook-up culture among university students (Vrangalova, 2015; Wentland & Reissing, 2014). Moreover, having a sense of "self-focus" may influence attitudes toward establishing committed relationships at the expense of pursuing career goals (Shulman & Connolly, 2013). For these reasons, emerging adulthood provides an important context to explore ghosting. The purpose of the present qualitative study was to investigate the definition, social media context, and perceived psychological consequences of social media ghosting among a sample of emerging adults at university.

The Psychology of Interpersonal Relationships

Several psychological theories, including the basic psychological needs theory, attachment theory, and the belongingness hypothesis, highlight the importance of close relationships for well-being (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Cohen, 2004).The *basic psychological needs theory* proposes that human motivation is driven by three universal needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. *Autonomy* is defined as having a sense of volition and authentic self-expression in accordance with one's beliefs and values. *Competence* refers to a demonstrated mastery of effective skills within key life domains. *Relatedness* encompasses feelings of interconnectedness and belongingness within one's interpersonal relationships (Deci & Ryan, 2000). These three basic needs are proposed as "innate psychological nutriments" that promote general psychological well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000, p. 229). This theory is a subtheory of the macro self-determination theory (SDT), which seeks to explain human motivation and personality development from a psychological perspective. At its core, SDT proposes that an individual's unique characteristics interact with their social environments to create opportunities that either promote or hinder human flourishing (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Past research has linked unfulfilled relatedness needs to various indices of negative psychological functioning, including psychological distress, lower life satisfaction (Rhoades et al., 2011), and suicidal ideation (Hom et al., 2017). Notably, several studies have highlighted the critical role that individuals' offline perceived satisfaction (or frustration) with these three basic psychological needs play in predicting social media use behaviors (Liu et al., 2020; Przybylski et al., 2013). An important empirical question within this field is whether basic psychological needs function as *motives* that propel goal-directed behaviors when said needs are unfulfilled, or whether these needs are the prized *outcomes* of specific behaviors (Sheldon & Gunz, 2009).

Sheldon et al. (2011) investigated this question in relation to Facebook use and subjective feelings of interpersonal connectedness (i.e., relatedness need-satisfaction) and disconnectedness (i.e., relatedness need-frustration). Results of baseline correlations were paradoxical: The frequency of Facebook use was *positively* correlated with both feelings of general connectedness and *dis*connectedness.

To explain this paradox, authors designed a follow-up experiment to test their proposed two-process hypothesis, which posits that unmet psychological needs motivate behaviors ("needs as motives"), and, in turn, these behaviors provide opportunities that promote feelings of need-fulfillment as a reward ("needs as outcomes"). As part of the experiment, undergraduate participants were instructed to refrain from Facebook use for 48 hours, then resume their Facebook usage. Subjective assessments of connectedness (e.g., "I felt close and connected with other people") and disconnectedness (e.g., "I was lonely") at pre- and post-Facebook use manipulation allowed researchers to test their hypothesis that basic psychological needs may function as both motives and outcomes. Results indicated that perceived connectedness decreased during the 48-hr Facebook cessation period (but perceived disconnectedness did *not* increase), whereas higher perceived disconnectedness during the 48-hr Facebook cessation period predicted higher Facebook use when participants resumed their online activity. Results, therefore, provided empirical support for the two-process model—that relatedness needs may function as both motives and outcomes of Facebook use. In another study, which focused on the *uses and gratifications theory* (Katz et al., 1973), Masur et al. (2014) explored whether unmet psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness would predict higher addiction to social networking sites (SNS) through specific mechanisms that promote gratification within each of the three domains. Results offered support for their hypotheses, such that thwarted autonomy predicted higher SNS addiction through escapism (i.e., relief from external constraints/pressure); thwarted competence predicted higher SNS addiction through information-seeking; and thwarted relatedness predicted higher SNS addiction through meeting new people.

Another prominent theory that highlights the salience of quality interpersonal relationships is attachment theory. Attachment theory proposes that during infancy, individuals begin to develop expectations about the support they will receive from caregivers under instances of duress (Bowlby, 1969/1982). These expectations evolve into "internal working models" (i.e., personal assumptions about one's self-worth in relation to others), which affect relational functioning across the life span and beyond the caregiver–infant dyad (Bowlby, 1969/1982; Holland et al., 2012). Adult attachment styles are typically classified on two dimensions—anxiety and avoidance. *Anxiety* refers to a preoccupation with pleasing others (negative "self" and positive "other" internal working models), whereas *avoidance* refers to low perceived emotional dependence on others (positive "self" and negative "other" internal working models; Collins et al., 2006). Attachment styles have been linked to the quality of romantic relationships and their dissolution (Holland et al., 2012; Weisskirch & Delevi, 2013). Avoidant attachment, for example, is associated with alternative monitoring (i.e., evaluating the qualities of a potential alternative romantic partner; Quirk et al., 2016), whereas anxious attachment predicts partner-directed aggression (Wright, 2015), higher

physiological reactivity during interpersonal interactions, and lower perceived relationship quality (Holland et al., 2012).

Relationship dissolution (breaking up) is one context that may threaten one's sense of belonging. Although several lines of research have examined psychosocial correlates of "breaking up" (Vangelisti, 2006), more research is needed to examine this topic within the context of technology and social media. In line with the basic psychological needs theory, the *belongingness hypothesis* (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) also offers support for the idea that humans are intrinsically driven to form long-lasting and mutually beneficial relationships. These psychological theories help explain why social media, online dating, and other forms of technology-mediated communication appeal to adolescents, emerging adults, and older adults alike (Stephure et al., 2009).

Technology/Social Media and Interpersonal Functioning

The pervasiveness of social media use is evident among individuals of all ages, but researchers have placed emphasis on adolescents (de Vries et al., 2019) and emerging adults because of the developmental relevance of interpersonal relationships during these age periods (Coyne et al., 2013). Like social media sites, online dating sites are increasing in their prevalence. As of September 2019, there were 7.9 million users on *Tinder* (www.tinder.com; established 2012), 1.8 million on *OK Cupid* (www.okcupid.com; established 2004), and 1.6 million on *Grindr* (www.grindr.com; established 2009; Statistica, 2021). Research suggests that the increased access to, and social acceptance of, online dating may facilitate casual sexual encounters among emerging adults (Bauermeister et al., 2011). Online dating, however, may also facilitate long-term, committed relationships. Results from one survey showed that 46% of now-married couples claim to have met online (Smith, 2016). Although online dating facilitates the developmental task of finding romantic partners (LeFebvre, 2017), the romantic relationships that are formed during this age period are generally fragile, unstable, and transient because emerging adulthood is inherently an age of exploration (Collins & van Dulmen, 2006). Given the role of social media in relationship functioning (Weisskirch & Delevi, 2013), there is a pressing need to explore the emerging norms and implications of breaking up in today's digital age (Quan-Haase et al., 2018).

Ghosting as a Relationship Dissolution Strategy

Several blog-style articles (Mehta, 2019) and public opinion polls (Moore, 2014) have attempted to explore the prevalence of, and motives for, ghosting. To the authors' knowledge, however, only two empirical studies have been published on the topic (Freedman et al., 2019; LeFebvre et al., 2019). Freedman and colleagues (2019) examined ghosting behaviors in relation to "destiny" and "growth" implicit theories of relationships. Destiny beliefs stipulate that relationships will simply work or not work, because individuals are either destined to be together or not (i.e., belief in soulmates), and according to growth beliefs, relationships are malleable and can be improved through communication and dedication (Freedman et al., 2019). Twenty-five percent of participants indicated that they had been ghosted by a former romantic partner, and 21.7% had ghosted a romantic partner (Freedman et al., 2019). Generally, having stronger destiny beliefs was associated with more positive perceptions of ghosting as an acceptable break-up strategy, whereas greater endorsement of growth beliefs was associated with less favorable attitudes toward ghosting (Freedman et al., 2019). Findings from the LeFebvre et al. (2019) qualitative study indicated that ghosting was conceptualized as an avoidance or withdrawal strategy, imposed using a mediated form of communication. Approximately 30% of participants reported ghosting, 25.3% of participants had been ghosted, and 44.2% of participants had experienced both ghosting someone and being ghosted by someone. Three quarters of the participants indicated that ghosting was an inappropriate break-up strategy. Moreover, the authors reported five emergent themes for individuals' perceived motivations for ghosting: (a) *convenience*, (b) *attractiveness*, (c) *negatively valanced interaction*, (d) *relationship state*, and (e) *safety* (LeFebvre et al., 2019). Participants considered ghosting *convenient* because they felt it was more practical than other dissolution strategies. *Attractiveness* was characterized by physical, emotional, or intellectual appeal. *Negatively valanced interaction* refers to the ghoster's disinterest as a result of some unfavorable behavior from the ghostee. *Relationship state* is the type and length of the relationship. Ghosting frequently occurred during transitional changes in relationships as an alternative to the "define-the-relationship" conversation. *Safety* involved issues surrounding personal self-protection from dangerous situations (LeFebvre et al., 2019).

Together, the two aforementioned studies have made important initial advances in this field, but gaps exist. For example, the current definition of ghosting is based on a single study (LeFebvre et al., 2019). Additional research with a different sample is needed to validate this existing definition. Furthermore, the Freedman et al. (2019) study was not exclusive to emerging adults. Given that the nature of interpersonal relationships changes over the course of the developmental timetable, results from studies on ghosting within one age sample might not generalize to a different age sample. Research on motives for ghosting is especially warranted with a sample of emerging adults because exploring romantic relationships is an important developmental task of this developmental age period.

The Present Study

Numerous studies have examined the psychological correlates of various domains of interpersonal functioning, including relationship dissolution, loneliness, social exclusion, and cyberbullying. Findings from these studies highlight the potentially distressing psychological impact that thwarted social ties and break ups can have for individuals across the life span. What is most concerning, however, is the salience of adolescence and emerging adulthood as developmentally-sensitive age periods for the establishment and maintenance of social ties—both platonic and romantic. The shifting dynamic of social media as one of *the* most prevalent platforms through which interpersonal relationships are formed, maintained, and terminated, warrants empirical attention. The present study employed an exploratory, qualitative research design to capitalize on the ability to document the subjective lived experiences of individuals, who are at a developmentally relevant age period. Two relevant theories—*basic psychological needs* and *attachment theory*—provided the theoretical context for formulating and analyzing the study's goals. The current study had four objectives: (a) to provide a definition of ghosting and evaluate

this definition in relation to existing ideas about what constitutes ghosting; (b) to assess motives for ghosting; (c) to evaluate the role of technology/social media in ghosting experiences; and (d) to examine emerging adults' perceived psychological consequences of being ghosted and ghosting others.

Method

Participants

Participants were 76 emerging adults (70% female; M_{age} = 19.98 years old, SD = 1.28) from a liberal arts university on the east coast. The sample comprised freshmen (n = 28, 40%), sophomores (n = 17, 24.3%), juniors (n = 7, 9.7%), seniors (n = 15, 20.8%), and other (n = 3, 4.2%). Ninety percent (n = 63) of participants identified as non-Hispanic/Latino. Racial groups represented were as follows: White/Caucasian (n = 43, 61.4%), Asian (n = 14, 20%), Mixed (n = 7, 10%), Black/African American (n = 5, 7.1%), and Other (n = 1, 1.4%). Most participants had mothers who graduated from a four-year college (n = 24, 42.1%) or completed a master's degree or other equivalent (n = 25, 43.9%), and fathers who graduated from a four-year college (n = 20, 38.5%) or completed a master's degree or other equivalent (n = 22, 42.3%).

Procedures

Participants were recruited in-person, through on-campus flyers, social media posts, and the psychology department's participant pool. Prospective participants were sent an informational e-mail, which included a link to a consent form. Participants were asked to complete a brief online survey and to participate in an in-person focus group. The online survey included questions assessing demographics and interpersonal functioning. Following completion of the online survey, participants were directed to select an available time slot to attend a focus group. For the purposes of the present study, only the qualitative data from the focus groups were analyzed. Focus groups were conducted between September and October 2018. The average duration of the focus groups was 48 min (range: 21–66 min). Focus groups ranged in size from two to five participants, with mixed genders. All focus groups were semistructured and facilitated by Jhanelle Oneika Thomas. In alignment with the study's goals, the following four questions from the focus groups were analyzed: (a) *How would you define or describe ghosting?*; (b) *What do you think are some reasons why someone might ghost?*; (c) *What role do you think technology/social media plays in ghosting?*; and (d) *What do you think are the psychological consequences (positive or negative) of ghosting for: the ghoster and the ghostee?* The full list of questions is available in an online supplemental materials. Participants received either research participation credit or $15.00 cash. Study procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board at Wesleyan University.

Plan of Analysis

Audio-recorded data (15 hr, 50 min) were transcribed via a professional transcription service (www.rev.com). Text transcriptions were checked for accuracy against the original audio recordings and were subsequently deidentified. Data were analyzed using a basic interpretive qualitative approach (Merriam, 2002). Within this framework, thematic coding was selected as the primary mode of data analysis. First, all transcribed data were read thoroughly and divided into "segments." Each segment comprised the amalgamated responses to each question from the focus group, across *all* sessions—for a total of four segments. For example, Segment 1 comprised all participant responses to the first question, whereas Segment 2 comprised all participant responses to the second question. Next, each sentence was assessed for the "core idea" expressed within that narrative response (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). These core ideas are referred to as *codes*. To reduce redundancy, codes that shared similar characteristics were grouped together to form *categories*. Next, a streamlining procedure was employed to refine the categories, which subsequently formed the *emergent themes*. To increase the validity of this analytic approach, the thematic coding process was originally carried out by Jhanelle Oneika Thomas and then independently repeated by Royette Tavernier Dubar. Note, however, that there was some collaboration between the two authors during the earlier coding procedures (specifically, grouping initial codes into categories). Discrepancies and disagreements in the content and descriptions of the emergent themes were resolved by further discussion between the two authors until a consensus was reached. Once the themes were finalized, data were assessed for the presence of each emergent theme within each focus group. Thus, a prevalence rate of 80% indicates that a theme was mentioned by at least one participant in 16 out of the 20 focus groups. For each theme presented below, the prevalence rate (number, percentage of focus groups) for that theme is presented in parentheses. When available, information on the age and gender of the participant is included for the quoted responses.

Results

Research Question 1: How Would You Define or Describe Ghosting?

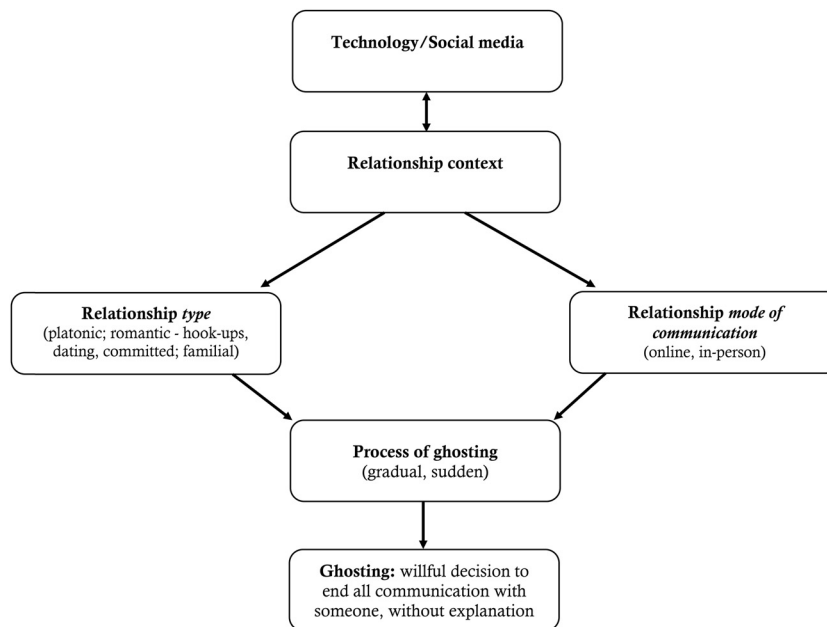Participant responses revealed six emergent themes (see Figure 1).

Ghosting Is . . . a Decision to Cut Off All Communication With Someone (20, 100%)

The most central component of ghosting is the act of cutting off all communication with someone. This includes refraining from initiating contact as well as purposefully ignoring someone's attempts at communicating with you. It is distinct from forgetting because it is a deliberate decision to avoid communication. According to one 19-year-old female participant, ". . . ghosting is pretty much like an active and knowing choice to no longer have communication with this person."

Ghosting . . . Requires an Online Medium (20, 100%)

Participants consistently expressed that ghosting occurs through technology-mediated communication (e.g., texting, social media). Generally, participants emphasized the fact that social media platforms facilitate confirmation of whether ghosting has transpired; for example, one 22-year-old female participant stated, "To me, it's confined to the online space. It's confined to social media because terms preexisted to describe phenomenas like ghosting but [in the context of] a real person."

Figure 1
Key Components of the Conceptual Definition of Social Media Ghosting

Technology/Social media

Relationship context

Relationship *type*
(platonic; romantic - hook-ups, dating, committed; familial)

Relationship *mode of communication*
(online, in-person)

Process of ghosting
(gradual, sudden)

Ghosting: willful decision to end all communication with someone, without explanation

Ghosting Is . . . a Process—Either "an Unexpected Slap in the Face" or "Gradual Let-Down" (19, 95%)

Ghosting is a process, which may be experienced distinctly from the perspectives of the ghoster and the ghostee. For the ghostee, ghosting was typically perceived as sudden: ". . . and then all of a sudden, he like stopped responding to my Snapchat, to my texts . . ." (20-year-old female). From the ghoster's perspective, however, ghosting was generally described as a gradual process: "It's when you've been talking for a while and then you slowly start to not respond as much and eventually just cut off and they might continue to text you or whatever . . . but then you just do not respond anymore" (21-year-old female).

Ghosting Is . . . a Significant Change to a Preexisting Pattern of Communication (14, 70%)

Several participants expressed the idea that ghosting requires some form of preexisting pattern of communication between two individuals. One 22-year-old male explained:

> . . . I mean if you're just talking back and forth for a few days and you stop talking, it doesn't really apply. 'Cause I think there has to be some emotions attached to it, where all of a sudden you're talking to somebody, you're dating somebody, and you just cut off all communication . . .

Ghosting . . . May Not Always Be Exclusive to Romantic Relationships (13, 65%)

Some participants indicated that ghosting almost exclusively takes place within romantic relationships (e.g., "When I hear ghosting, all I can associate with is sexual experiences"; 20-year-old female). Other participants, however, believed that it is also possible to experience ghosting within friendships and familial relationships: "It's just like a friend, but we were cojunior counselors at camp for four weeks, and then she just never responded to my texts ever . . . She responded once at the very beginning, so I know she got them" (19-year-old male).

Ghosting Is . . . Having No Closure (12, 60%)

For many participants, one of the most commonly noted elements of ghosting was the lack of closure from the relationship.

> I was in a relationship with somebody and unfortunately they cheated on me and when I found out I tried to get them to talk to me about it and I never heard from them ever again . . . like I still see them on Snapchat . . . there was no resolution . . . (20-year-old female)

Research Question 2: What Do You Think Are Some Reasons Why Someone Might Ghost?

Thematic analysis indicated five main themes and three minor, less prevalent themes.

Disinterest (17, 85%)

The most frequently reported motive for ghosting was mere disinterest—especially within the context of casual dating and hook-ups. Within these relational contexts, "sometimes the conversation just gets boring" or "you're no longer interested." Disinterest was also evidenced by the perception that the relationship no longer fulfills the ghoster's needs: "[the ghoster has] gained whatever

they were looking for in that relationship and feels that they no longer need to talk to them"; ". . . in hook-ups . . . the purpose is like 'Okay, that was fun I guess but I do not really have to do it again'." Overall, in these contexts, participants expressed little or no concern for the ghostee: "In the casual stage, you're not too concerned about what's going on with the other person" and "It's just so casual, so I do not feel the need to put that [effort] in" (20-year-old female).

To Avoid Confrontation, Conflict, and Sexual or Emotional Intimacy (12, 60%)

Beyond mere disinterest, individuals reported ghosting "to avoid a confrontation," "to avoid conflict," or to escape vulnerable emotions (e.g., "if there was some type of iffy sexual experience that happened, and you were nervous or ashamed or embarrassed"). Individuals also reported ghosting because they wanted to evade sexual intimacy ("It's not worth it to go through and meet up and talk about and not hook up toxically") or "put themselves at a risk of reinitiating the relationship." Participants also reported ghosting to relieve themselves from the "emotional work" that having an intimate conversation would require: "I think people get tired. It can be really tiring to have conversations relating to a lot of emotional labor and relationships and stuff like that." Ghosting to avoid emotional intimacy was another motive for ghosting ("people are afraid of something becoming too much . . . the fact that [the] relationship is somehow getting to the next level"; 22-year-old female). The following narrative further illustrates this point:

> I think in America, at least we have it backwards in thinking that open and honest communication implies commitment and connection, and so I feel like some people are scared away from being honest and just having open casual dialogue, because that implies some deeper meaning. So, I feel like that is one of the baseline reasons why people ghost. [it's] just because they don't want to have that honest dialogue. (19-year-old female)

A subtheme within this larger theme was the perception of lacking the proper communication skills to have an open and honest conversation; hence avoiding confrontation: "I'm not good at communication with people in person, so I definitely cannot do it through typing or anything like that" (19-year-old female). Furthermore, ". . . they do not have the confidence to tell them that. Or, I guess it could be because of social anxiety . . ." (22-year-old female).

Safety, Mental Well-Being (9, 45%)

Another motive for ghosting was to protect the ghoster's mental health and well-being by disengaging from "toxic," "unpleasant," "uncomfortable," or "unhealthy" situations. When an individual perceives "a lot of negativity" from someone or may have been "offended by someone," ghosting may be the "healthier" option. According to one 20-year-old participant, ". . . in some cases, people will be afraid for their own safety . . . so ghosting is a way to extricate yourself from a relationship that could turn dangerous for you."

Easy and Effective (9, 45%)

This theme captures the sentiment that ghosting gets "the message" across without having to send a message at all. Thus, it is an effective way to end a relationship with minimal effort from the ghoster. The following narratives illustrate this theme: "Just not responding at all is easier and makes you less liable" (20-year-old male); "I just didn't answer and then the problem went away, so it's like, 'Oh, that's easy'" (21-year-old female); and "It's easier to hide behind the screen and not face the music" (21-year-old female).

To Protect the Ghostee (6, 30%)

Participants reported ghosting someone because they wanted to protect the ghostee from hurt feelings and spare them the experience of a blatant rejection. These sentiments included statements such as ". . . it felt nicer than rejecting someone outright" (23-year-old female); "I think it's a little bit politer way to reject someone than to directly say that, 'I do not want to chat with you'" (18-year-old female); and "I do not want to . . . reject the person so I'll just not respond" (19-year-old female).

Other Themes

Other, less prevalent, themes included ghosting to establish dominance in the relationship, ("once you ghost someone . . . you have a lot of power because you're determining what your relationship status with that person is and you hold all agency over it"). Furthermore, participants reported ghosting if direct communication had failed to resolve conflict ("I talked to him directly . . . and after I feel it's impossible to make him realize that he makes me upset by actually talking face to face, I decided to just block him on everything"). Lastly, one theme centered around ghosting because people are "too busy with life" or feel overwhelmed by social media/technology (e.g., "We are texting a lot of people every day . . . so like the people have less responsibility for each person").

Research Question 3: What Role Do You Think Technology/Social Media Plays in Ghosting?

Data revealed four themes regarding the role of technology in ghosting.

Technology/Social Media Facilitates Communication, Increases Outreach to Others, and Expediates Tracking and Surveillance (19, 95%)

Responses revealed overwhelming agreement with the reality that technology/social media represents the most prevalent way of communicating with others and thus, plays an integral role in ghosting. Three implications of this widespread access to others emerged from participants' narratives. The first relates to increased opportunities to ghost as a function of increased connectedness to an infinite number of people: "Because social media gives the opportunity for people to connect so easily and so fast, [it] gives the opportunity at the same time to just cut off that connection so fast, and so easily" (19-year-old female). Similarly, "I feel like it [social media] offers ample opportunities to ghost because you contact people in a way that you couldn't pretechnology and social media" (21-year-old female).

The second implication is that of expectations around the timing of responding to others. Being so intimately connected breeds an expectation that people always have instant access to their phones

and can respond easily ("... there is this weird pressure to respond"). Differences in these norms around acceptable response time frames, as well as differences in one's preferred mode of communication can lead to the perception of ghosting.

> Also, the other thing is before technology got to the point where it is now, ghosting probably wasn't as much of a problem because there wasn't much of an expectation of constantly being in contact with people ... Now, since you have the means of communicating all the time, there's an expectation to, which makes it weird if you don't. (19-year-old male)

Another participant stated, "... I think it's strange that we communicate with a sense of immediacy all the time with communication that you want to get a response right away, so it becomes very apparent when people do not" (19-year-old female).

The third implication relates to the surveillance of others, through social media features that allow "tracking":

> And I think another deeper layer to ghosting is that we can so easily track people, literally where they are, and also follow what they're doing every day, and where they are and who they're with in terms of Instagram ... which adds a whole other layer to it because it's not only, oh they're not responding to me but maybe they're doing this or that, because you know what they're doing; you know who they're with; you know that they're on their phone, but they're still not responding to you ... (19-year-old female)

Another participant stated, "Especially on Instagram, they now have [a feature where] you can see when people were last active ... obviously if they're not replying to your DMs [direct messages] and they were just active, they're probably ignoring you" (18-year-old male).

The Screen as a Protective Barrier (17, 85%)

Technology-mediated communication provides a sense of anonymity ("You can hide behind your phone"). The screen may protect individuals from awkward encounters and is a protective barrier because it creates a degree of separation that de-personalizes the ghostee and decreases the ghoster's accountability. According to one 22-year-old female, "... the other person [ghostee] feels more fake. Somehow, it doesn't feel like you're actually talking to another person, so I feel that's what makes ghosting so tempting, if you're sort of a serial offender like me."

One male participant (no age reported) further explained,

> There's like a human element that's lost through social media that makes it ... like it allows people to feel okay completely ghosting someone. Social media is very impersonal, and you can kind of separate your social media presence and your everyday life ...

Ghosting Can Occur Without Social Media (14, 70%)

In addition to the idea that technology/social media is inherent to the experience of ghosting, several participants also acknowledged the idea that "... [ghosting] might have taken other forms in the past" (e.g., through letters, phone calls, physical distancing) and that it is, in fact, possible to experience ghosting in the absence of technology/social media:

> In my experience, it wasn't social media. When I was ghosting, I was just not looking at the person, not talking to the person, even though he lived in a very close commute. I was just basically ignoring the person. And the same when I was ghosted. The person was physically not interacting and not contacting me, coming out and so ... (20-year-old female)

Another participant relayed the following experience:

> It definitely could exist without technology because I just remember my dad telling me he's ghosted somebody in person ... so he had a girlfriend in high school and every day they would meet up at the bus stop together or in the hallway together and when he decided he just didn't want to do it anymore he walked past her rather than meeting up with her. So, I guess it did exist back in the day but I feel like it's much harder to ghost that way. (20-year-old female)

Notably, among participants who embraced the idea that ghosting occurs beyond the realm of technology/social media, there was consensus that technology/social media does facilitate ghosting:

> I mean I'm sure it occurred before social media because if people wrote letters all the time to somebody and all of a sudden they letters stopped ... but with technology and how ubiquitous it is and we have access to it at our fingertips whenever we want at any time, it just makes it so much easier to cut off communication. (20-year-old female)

Research Question 4: What Do You Think Are the Psychological Consequences (Positive or Negative) of Ghosting for: The *Ghoster* and the *Ghostee*?

Four main themes emerged from participants' narratives regarding perceived consequences of ghosting for the *ghoster*.

Anxiety/Avoidance and Awkwardness (13, 65%)

Participants described situations in which the ghoster may experience feelings of anxiety or avoidance due to a perceived lack of effective communication skills that would facilitate having an open discussion. Concerns were also raised about the possible long-term stunted interpersonal development that could result if ghosting becomes a habit; "... sometimes a lack of maturity and growth, and learning how to communicate with people; so I guess they're [ghosters] psychologically stunted in that way" (18-year-old female).

Another participant stated that,

> ... the negative consequences for the ghoster is that if you're doing really immature ghosting, it can be a habit. And it becomes part of your behavior and that's how you think you should end a relationship with someone ... they're so afraid of confrontation, like feeling like bad people. And I don't think that's healthy for them because they're gonna hurt a lot of people and it's gonna mess up their relationships. (20-year-old male)

Moreover, some participants stated that once an individual has ghosted someone, they may feel awkward about the situation because they have concerns about running into the ghostee in the future.

If you go to the same school with somebody . . . especially when it's the size of ours, you're probably going to run into them. Maybe you have a friend or two who are mutual friends and that can be really awkward and weird for both people. (23-year-old male)

Indifference, No Emotion (13, 65%)

Some participants expressed the sentiment that ghosting someone may have no emotive impact for the ghoster. One line of thought was that individuals who ghost frequently become indifferent about their actions or some may perceive their ghosting behavior as the norm and thus are not affected by the act ("I feel like it has a consequence of likely completely desensitizing you to [the fact that] your actions—especially over social media—affect other people"). According to one 19-year-old female participant,

> I refer to people who are involved a lot in the hook up culture, but they are just doing this regularly and they're just using people in a way . . . I've seen people not caring about ghosting other people just because they've done it so many times, it's nothing to them.

Remorse/Guilt (12, 60%)

Although generally conceptualized as a fleeting emotion, participants stated that ghosters may feel some guilt or remorse after ghosting.

> I would always feel super guilty right up until the point that I actually did it, and then I realized, wait, I made the right choice for myself at this time, so I'm good. And from then on, it's kind of like out of sight, out of mind. (19-year-old male)

Interestingly, this guilt was generally expressed in the context of a close relationship where the ghostee may be in close physical proximity.

> I feel like there's some guilt in it. I felt a little cause I kept seeing the person too and I felt guilty that I just kind of cause it. It was also a bad friendship and I ended it cause I was like "well I don't know how to deal with this" so there's definitely some guilt, not like the worst guilt ever but there's some. (20-year-old female)

Relief (10, 50%)

Participants expressed that ghosting may bring about positive feelings for the ghoster (e.g., "relaxed," "empowerment," "higher self-esteem," a feeling of being "free," and having "peace of mind"). Several narratives contained evidence of feelings of relief for the ghoster.

> I think for the majority of the time, ghosting can be pretty healthy, especially for the ghoster. At least for me like when I blocked a bunch of people I went to high school with, on social media. It made me feel so much better, like I just didn't have to think about them, and they disappeared from my life and that was so great. (19-year-old female)

According to one 20-year-old female, "If they're ghosting 'cause they need space and they cannot talk to the person, I think it can give them some relief from the situation."

Two main themes emerged from participants' narratives regarding perceived consequences of ghosting for the *ghostee*.

Internalized Feelings of Self-Criticism, Self-Doubt, and Hopelessness About Future Relationships (20, 100%)

Narratives across all focus groups contained some acknowledgment that being ghosted may cause one to feel ostracized. Several participants used terms and phrases that described an overall lowered sense of self-worth for the ghostee: "you're more self-conscious," "a lot of self-doubt," "your self-esteem is lower," "start thinking less of themselves," "blame themselves," "feel worthless," "makes me feel like trash," "they didn't value me," and "dehumanizing." According to one 19-year-old female participant,

> And I guess like the first time I got ghosted, it kind of went downhill from there. I was kind of like, "Wait, not everyone adores me?" It must be my fault, like he must've not wanted to talk to me because I'm annoying or I'm not pretty enough or I'm aggressive or whatever it is that, you know, it could be. And it just becomes a question of self-doubt, which I think is super harmful because when you have self-doubt, it only leads to self-hatred and self-destruction. So, all you do is destroy yourself from the inside out and that can be so terrible.

Expressions of self-criticism generally stemmed from feelings of confusion when individuals perceived that they had received no closure, which often spiraled into internalized feelings of self-depreciation and paranoia.

> It becomes a lot of self-doubt at first. I think a lot of personal insecurity comes out when you don't have answers. So, you question yourself, you question what you know about yourself and you blame yourself. Like you say that it's because "I'm not pretty enough" or "I'm not smart enough," or like I said the wrong thing, or I did the wrong thing or whatever. And at least for me, that's like really harmful and can really affect my mood for a long period of time. (19-year-old female)

Another participant explained, "And it could have been something like really didn't have to do with you at all, but you do not know and so you start getting this like paranoid cycle . . ." (19-year-old female)

Several participants stated that one implication of these feelings of self-criticism was a lack of trust/intimacy and a general feeling of hopelessness in future relationships.

> I think unfortunately . . . you can become overly cautious with showing emotion or feelings for another person, and that someone who you might have a real connection with or could have a real connection with you might scare off or just not be able to bring yourself to become close with them because of past experiences with ghosting. (20-year-old female)

Self-Reflection, Resilience (11, 55%)

Some individuals stated that a consequence of being ghosted could be an opportunity for self-reflection, resilience, and growth for future relationships.

> I think this [being ghosted] can also be a chance for the ghostee to reflect on themselves . . . I think it can be a chance for them to just

reconsider some of the parts of themselves … I think it can be partly positive for the ghostee because maybe they can realize some of the shortcomings they have and they may change it. (18-year-old female)

According to one female participant (age not reported), being ghosted provided an opportunity to grow in terms of communication within a subsequent relationship:

Something positive from my experience was that I thought to myself, "oh I shouldn't be assuming that just because it's [the relationship] going a certain type of way that the person sees it in that same way." So being more clear with communication and now that I'm in a relationship it's like I just want to communicate more with him and let him know. I'm being better with trying to communicate my feelings towards him and things like asserting that you do like them.

Generally, these sentiments were reported as a long-term consequence following a period of negative emotions.

… Like I think it takes several steps of pain before you're able to look back on it and like with a mature eye and say, "Oh, but it was for the better of myself" … there are stages of recovery from being ghosted. (19-year-old female)

Discussion

The goal of the present study was to explore the definition of ghosting, motives for ghosting, the role of technology/social media in ghosting, and the perceived psychological consequences of ghosting. Thematic coding of participants' narratives revealed several themes that illuminate the psychosocial context of ghosting among this sample of emerging adults. We evaluate these themes against the backdrop of the relevance of interpersonal relationships during emerging adulthood and discuss some key implications of our findings.

So, Really—What Is Social Media Ghosting?

LeFebvre (2017) defined ghosting as, "unilaterally ceasing communication (temporarily or permanently) in an effort to withdraw access to individual(s) prompting relationship dissolution (suddenly or gradually) commonly enacted via one or multiple technological medium(s)" (p. 134). Overall, our results corroborate LeFebvre's definition of ghosting and extend this definition in two unique ways. First, results illuminate the specific contexts in which ghosting is likely to be experienced as sudden or gradual. Narratives generally indicated that ghosting was typically experienced as sudden from the *ghostee*'s perspective but was often perceived as a gradual process from the *ghoster*'s perspective. This phenomenon raises questions about the possible role of attachment styles and conflict resolution strategies in ghosting (Weisskirch & Delevi, 2013). Past research has shown that individuals who have high attachment anxiety tend to perceive greater relationship conflict in their relationships and report being more hurt by these conflicts, relative to individuals with low attachment anxiety (Campbell et al., 2005). Future studies should, therefore, determine whether attachment styles predict motives for ghosting and whether anxiously attached individuals are more likely to be ghosted.

Second, our results shed light on the role of social media in promoting the surveillance of others—and not solely a medium through which ghosting transpires. The surveillance features of many social media platforms facilitate the ability to track someone's online activity, providing validation of the person's (online) existence. We elaborate on the role of social media later in the discussion. Taken together, the following represents a comprehensive definition of social media ghosting: ghosting is a relationship dissolution strategy (platonic or romantic), characterized by a sudden or gradual decision to cut off all online and/or in person communication with someone when there is an expected response—without a clear explanation.

Motives for Ghosting

The appeal of ghosting is that it is effective in accomplishing the immediate goal of alleviating emotional distress with little effort from the ghoster (Rhoades et al., 2011). The most prevalent reason for ghosting was disinterest. This motive fits within the characterization of emerging adulthood as a period of instability and self-focus (Arnett, 2004). Instability within romantic relationships has been documented in the form of hook-up culture, which includes various forms of casual romantic/sexual arrangements (Vrangalova, 2015; Wentland & Reissing, 2014). Emerging adults may demonstrate a self-focused attitude when they autonomously prioritize other developmental tasks (e.g., career achievement) over the pursuit of a committed relationship (Shulman & Connolly, 2013). For these emerging adults, having lower romantic interest (Beckmeyer & Cromwell, 2019) and relationship importance (Watkins & Beckmeyer, 2020) may serve as catalysts to ghost as a demonstration of one's autonomy and need for independence. The second most prevalent motive for ghosting was to avoid confrontation, conflict, or sexual and emotional intimacy. According to attachment theory, individuals who are characterized by avoidant attachment styles typically enter novel romantic relationships with a script for commitment aversion (Birnie et al., 2009). Future research is needed to determine whether individuals with avoidant attachment styles are more likely to resort to ghosting as a relationship dissolution strategy. In contrast to the disinterest motive, in which participants described very little concern for the ghostee, the avoidance motive typically contained evidence of having some interest in the ghostee. Specifically, the idea that someone would ghost to avoid the possibility of engaging in casual sex or reinitiating a toxic relationship suggests that not all those who ghost do so from a place of indifference. Our results suggest that the decision to ghost may sometimes be accompanied by mixed emotions. In fact, an interesting sentiment that was expressed in some of the focus groups, was the idea that individuals may choose to ghost out of concern for the ghostee—that is, to shield them from hurt feelings.

Moreover, participants admitted to ghosting because they felt inept at effectively communicating their feelings, and thus avoided confrontation. One proposed advantage of avoidance is the belief that the situation will resolve itself (Stemler et al., 2006)—a sentiment that some participants expressed. Avoiding conversations that may lead to healthy conflict, however, may be a missed opportunity to develop intimacy and build trust (Domingue & Mollen, 2009)—two important elements of a secure attachment. Another motive for ghosting centered on the need to protect one's mental and physical well-being. Research suggests that technology may facilitate novel avenues for interpersonal violence within dating/romantic relationships, including controlling behaviors through surveillance of online activity (Stonard et al., 2017). Taken together, our findings indicate that emerging adults' motives to ghost stem from a

combination of factors relating to the specific context of the relationship, as well as personal characteristics. From a developmental systems theory perspective, it will be important for future studies to determine whether motives for ghosting change as a function of the value that emerging adults place on romantic relationships as they transition to adulthood and beyond (Norona et al., 2017).

The Role of Technology/Social Media

Overall, participants believed that ghosting evolved out of social media because surveillance features (e.g., time since last active on Instagram) provide evidence of an individual's online presence, which may confirm that ghosting has transpired. The increased availability of technology-mediated communication has facilitated outreach and exposure to individuals (including strangers) at an unprecedented rate. These digital connections may facilitate "alternative monitoring" (Quirk et al., 2016), which may increase the appeal of ghosting. The ease of initiating contact with potential romantic partners has been linked to lower relationship commitment (Drouin et al., 2014) and could explain why such increased access to others plays an integral role in ghosting. Additionally, increased online accessibility translates to the perception that everyone is always "checking their phones" (Oulasvirta et al., 2012, p. 113). We found some evidence that this anticipated immediate gratification may create pressure to respond within a given time frame, and when that opportunity is missed, individuals may resort to ghosting. Although participants highlighted advantages of technology-mediated communication, they also noted challenges with intimacy. Social media affords access to other people's personal information (Albright & Conran, 2003), but past research has shown that virtual relationships are characterized by significantly less intimacy relative to face-to-face relationships (Scott et al., 2006). Face-to-face interactions, however, may be more emotionally taxing than virtual interactions. Thus, the screen serves to assuage the burden of being vulnerable and addressing potentially awkward conversations in person (Suler, 2004).

Notably, some participants believed that ghosting may have existed before recent advances in technology and that social media has allowed for a formal label for the phenomenon. Other participants argued that although the act of ignoring someone preceded social media, the prevalence of social media platforms has allowed the behavior to evolve into a novel phenomenon. Overall, our findings suggest that ghosting emerged at the intersection of widespread access to technology-mediated communication and relationship dissolution. More research is needed to determine the factors that may help alleviate the avoidance and anxiety that emerging adults may feel when building intimacy with others.

Psychological Consequences of Ghosting

Interestingly, ghosters expressed some guilt over their actions but eventually these feelings were resolved and the ghostee became "out of sight, out of mind." Past research has noted some ghosters' initial feelings of remorse (LeFebvre, 2017), but the factors that may explain this guilt remain unknown and warrant further research. Notably, past research suggests that individuals who ghost others have had the experience of being ghosted themselves and are consequently aware of the implications of their actions for the ghostee (LeFebvre, 2017). Results from the present study, however, indicate that the ghoster's guilty feelings were typically rooted in the potential awkwardness that could ensue from a face-to-face encounter with the ghostee and not due to

empathy for the ghostee. Future research is needed to determine whether this guilt is due to empathetic or self-serving motives.

Resilience was discussed as a possible long-term implication of ghosting for the ghostee, a sentiment that may be explained by cognitive reappraisal (Palmer & Alfano, 2017). Initiators of breakups are typically better adjusted than noninitiators up to five years afterward; for noninitiators, there is significantly more emotional distress and preoccupation with the former partner (Sbarra, 2006). Notably, the lack of closure seems to be viewed as an important contributing factor to the levels of emotional distress experienced by the ghostee. Our data suggests increased instances of paranoia and gas-lighting (Riggs & Bartholomaeus, 2018). Results further demonstrate that the internalized feelings of devaluation that may result from being ghosted can have long-term implications for interpersonal functioning, including an unwillingness to be intimately vulnerable in future relationships. These attitudes may ultimately affect the ghostee's ability to develop trust in subsequent relationships, which is a key predictor of relationship dissolution (Le et al., 2010). Notably, ghosting has been associated with negative psychological adjustment, including pain and emotional distress (LeFebvre et al., 2019). Our findings, therefore, offer support for the basic psychological needs theory, which would predict that thwarted relatedness needs—in the form of being ghosted—would be associated with poor psychological well-being. Future research should determine whether unfulfilled psychological needs within the autonomy, competence, and relatedness domains moderate the link between one's ghosting experiences and psychological well-being. For example, does higher perceived autonomy and competence buffer the negative psychological consequences of ghosting? Are individuals who report higher autonomy more likely to develop resilience following a ghosting experience? Emerging adulthood may be an opportune stage to intervene with resources that aim to promote the development of intimacy and interpersonal communication skills that will ultimately facilitate positive adjustment to thwarted relatedness needs.

Emerging adults at university could benefit from on-campus programs that teach effective conflict resolution skills within in-person and online contexts. University health centers and student organizations can tailor programs that specifically address healthy online habits during dating and post break-up. Although there are perceived dangers with online dating, these platforms also allow for the formation of healthy and thriving relationships (Smith, 2016). Future research should investigate the factors that predict online dating relationship success. Furthermore, it might be worthwhile for dating and online social media applications to publish guidelines on online dating etiquette that highlight the perceived negative consequences of ghosting. Many of these applications have existing privacy settings, but these should be promoted to inform individuals of the ways in which they can protect themselves in dangerous situations (e.g., abusive relationships).

Limitations

Participants in the present study were recruited from a small, liberal arts university and thus findings may not reflect the experiences of emerging adults from different contexts. Second, no causal conclusions can be drawn from this study because of the lack of an experimental design. A qualitative approach, however, was well suited for the goals of the present study. The subjective lived experiences of participants have important theoretical implications and can be used to devise theories about antecedents and consequences of ghosting

for both the *ghoster* and *ghostee*. A third limitation is the possibility of the "Groupthink" effect (Boateng, 2012). However, narratives within the same focus groups were characterized by diverse experiences and opposing views, suggesting that "Groupthink" was not a major concern.

Conclusion

Despite these limitations, the present study makes important contributions to this field. The study allowed for a detailed analysis of participants' subjective lived experiences of ghosting from the perspectives of both the *ghoster* and *ghostee*. Importantly, the study was conducted with a sample from a developmentally relevant age period—emerging adulthood. Establishing and maintaining close interpersonal relationships is a developmental task of emerging adulthood and understanding when and how it is appropriate to start and end them will facilitate the development of healthy interpersonal functioning across the life span. Ghosting is a multifaceted construct that warrants future research into both the personality-based and relationship-specific factors that may explain its growing prevalence. Understanding the individual and relational contexts that promote ghosting and its psychological consequences will allow researchers to provide empirically based models that explain why individuals resort to disappearing in the age of hypervisibility.

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