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Ghosting: A Common but Unpopular Rejection Strategy

Gili Freedman[1] 🆔 | Darcey N. Powell[2] 🆔

[1]Department of Psychology, St. Mary's College of Maryland, St. Mary's City, Maryland, USA | [2]Department of Psychology and Sociology, Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi, Corpus Christi, Texas, USA

Correspondence: Gili Freedman (gili.freedman@gmail.com) | Darcey N. Powell (darcey.powell@tamucc.edu)

ABSTRACT

Ghosting (i.e., unilaterally ending a relationship by cutting off all contact) is a poorly perceived but common relationship dissolution strategy used to end romantic, platonic, and other relationships. The experience of ghosting elicits a range of emotional consequences including hurt feelings and confusion in the person being ghosted and guilt and relief in the person engaging in ghosting. Ghosting occurs for a variety of reasons including believing that it is the most appropriate form of rejection within digital contexts, desire for ease, and safety concerns. Willingness to engage in ghosting is associated with individual differences such as attachment and implicit theories of relationships. We conclude with suggestions for future research that highlight methodological, as well as sample- and context-based, recommendations to better understand the nuances of ghosting decisions and experiences as they unfold over time.

1 | Ghosting: A Common but Unpopular Rejection Strategy

"It's over." Although these words may seem harsh, many people want to hear them when interpersonal relationships end. Instead, some people are ghosted: their relationships are ended without a word. Popular media has often focused on those who have been ghosted. Even a cursory internet search for "ghosting" reveals forums devoted to people recounting their experiences being ghosted as well as sites providing advice on "getting over" being ghosted. However, the experiences of both the person being ghosted (i.e., the ghostee) and the person engaging in ghosting (i.e., the ghoster) are important as rejection (e.g., ghosting) is a two-sided process (e.g., Poulsen and Kashy 2012).

Researchers have defined ghosting in different ways, with some definitions focused specifically on ghosting in romantic relationships (e.g., Koessler, Kohut, and Campbell 2019b), ghosting as a phenomenon that occurs through technology-mediated-communication (e.g., LeFebvre 2017; Thomas and Dubar 2021),

or more broadly as suddenly ending communication without explanation (Kay and Courtice 2022). Across all definitions, ghosting consists of cutting off communication, whether suddenly or gradually, to change an existing relationship (e.g., Freedman et al. 2019; Kay and Courtice 2022; Koessler, Kohut, and Campbell 2019a; LeFebvre 2017; Thomas and Dubar 2021). The lack of communication can provoke a sense of uncertainty and ambiguity given the lack of closure that has occurred (Leckfor et al. 2023; LeFebvre, Rasner, and Allen 2020; LeFebvre and Fan 2020; Timmermans, Hermans, and Opree 2021). Although ghosting is most often associated with romantic relationships, it occurs across a wide range of social contexts and interpersonal relationships (e.g., Campaioli, Testoni, and Zamperini 2022; Farber, Hubbard, and Ort 2022; Freedman et al. 2019; Moran and Disney 2019; Park and Klein 2024; Sackett 2024; Vagaš and Miško 2018; Wood et al. 2023; Yap, Francisco, and Gopez 2021).

Ghosting has been a dissolution strategy for likely as long as relationships have been ended, but the phrase began rising in popularity in 2015 with a peak in search term popularity in 2019
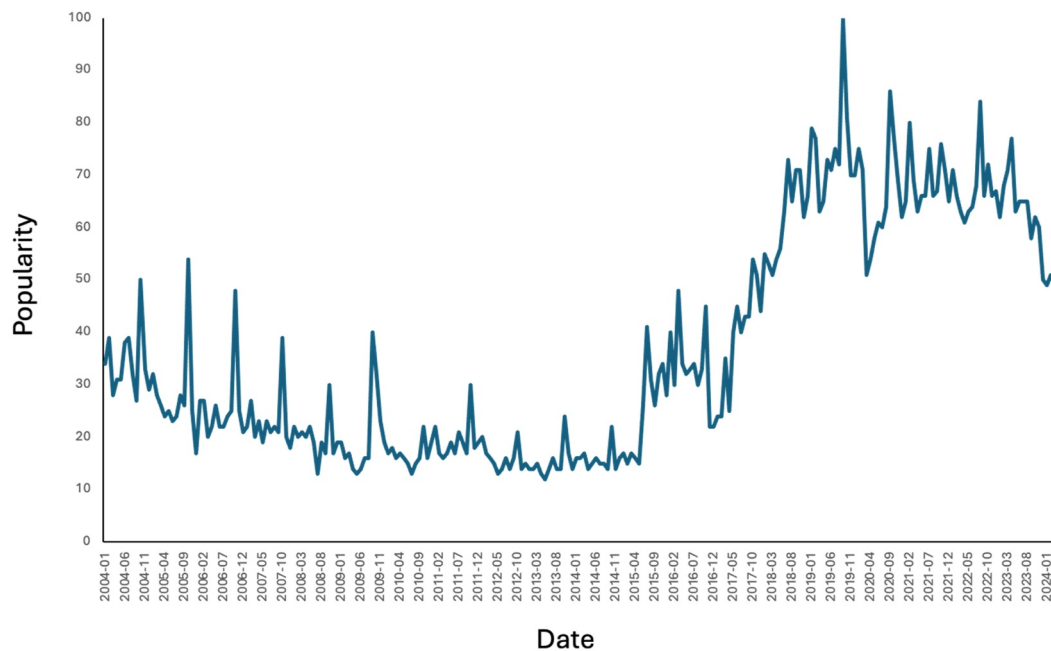

FIGURE 1 | Google Trends for "Ghosting" from 2004 to 2024. Google trends defines 100 as peak popularity and 50 as half of the peak popularity of the term. Zero indicates that there is not enough data on the term.

(see Figure 1), was added to Merriam-Webster dictionary in February 2017 (Merriam-Webster n.d.), and has subsequently garnered a great deal of attention by researchers and the popular media. Dating applications have attempted to address the issue of ghosting by creating in-app nudges (Cohen 2021), guides to teach people to avoid ghosting (Roth 2018), and apps that do not allow users to ghost (Dubois 2023). The introduction of the term ghosting and people's awareness of the experience are likely due to the salience of being ignored when there are many options for technology-mediated-communication (e.g., texting, social media, dating apps), and over 90% of people in the United States own a smartphone (Pew Research Center 2024). That is, when communication was more delayed, it may have been less apparent that someone was being ghosted; however, now that technology-mediated-communication is frequent (e.g., Gott-fried 2024), when someone stops responding across all media, it is very apparent.

Beyond the affordances of technology (LeFebvre et al. 2019; Manning, Denker, and Johnson 2019), ghosting may also be popular because it addresses a longstanding concern that people have within the context of social exclusion: scriptlessness (i.e., the idea that people do not know what to say when they need to reject someone; Baumeister, Wotman, and Stillwell 1993). Deciding how to reject someone is challenging because people often want to avoid causing hurt feelings or being seen in a negative light (e.g., Brown and Levinson 1987; Freedman et al. 2017; Goffman 1967; Park and Klein 2024; Tom Tong and Walther 2010). Ghosting allows people to avoid deciding what to say by providing a silent withdrawal. When ghosting is used within a romantic context, it can be seen within the broader framework of a withdrawal/avoidance breakup strategy (Baxter 1982; Collins and Gillath 2012).

Ghosting also shares overlap with a related construct: ostracism (i.e., the silent treatment; Williams 2007). Researchers have

differed in whether they have distinguished ghosting from ostracism (e.g., Freedman et al. 2019) or described ghosting as a form of ostracism (e.g., Pancani et al. 2021). Both ghosting and ostracism involve ignoring someone and may involve a similar staged emotional response (Pancani, Aureli, and Riva 2022; Wu and Bamishigbin 2024), but individuals perceive the constructs differently (Park and Klein 2024), and ghosting is more commonly considered a method of relationship dissolution (Campaioli, Testoni, and Zamperini 2022; Freedman et al. 2019). Ghosting is also unique from other forms of social exclusion (e.g., directly rejecting) because of the state of uncertainty that it causes: without a direct or explicit statement of rejection, ghostees wonder whether they have been ghosted or if something else has happened (LeFebvre, Rasner, and Allen 2020; LeFebvre and Fan 2020; Pancani et al. 2021) and may be more likely to experience guilt as a result of being ghosted (Pancani et al. 2021). In the following sections, we describe four main themes from the ghosting literature, acknowledge limitations of the field thus far, and suggest possible avenues for future research.

1.1 | Ghosting Has a Bad Reputation but Is Common

There are many ways to dissolve a relationship (Baxter 1982; Collins and Gillath 2012; Flannery and Smith 2021; Khullar, Kirmayer, and Dirks 2021; Sprecher, Zimmerman, and Abra-hams 2010). Most of these strategies involve communicating that the relationship is being ended. Ghosting, on the other hand, is characterized by a lack of communication. It can occur suddenly or gradually (Koessler, Kohut, and Campbell 2019b; LeFebvre et al. 2019; Marshall et al. 2024; Pancani, Aureli, and Riva 2022; Thomas and Dubar 2021; Yap, Francisco, and Gopez 2021) and is often made salient by technology-mediated-communication (e.g., Campaioli, Testoni, and Zamperini 2022;

LeFebvre 2018; Thomas and Dubar 2021). When ghosting through technology-mediated-communication, a ghoster typically does not contact or respond to the ghostee's attempts to connect with them, and they likely unfollow and/or block them on social media (Freedman et al. 2019; Powell et al. 2021). When ghosting in-person, individuals avoid talking face-to-face or acknowledging them in public, and some report that they avoid mutual friends (Freedman et al. 2019; Powell et al. 2021). Despite ghosters' intentions to avoid and ignore ghostees, ghosters reported that ghostees often attempt to reach out for connection and/or closure (Wu and Bamishigbin 2023).

Although people differ on whether ghosting is a permanent or temporary action (Campaioli, Testoni, and Zamperini 2022; Kay and Courtice 2022; LeFebvre et al. 2019; Powell et al. 2021), it is used to change the nature of the relationship. A ghoster may use temporary ghosting when their target wants to be more-than-friends but the ghoster does not. A ghoster may use the permanent form of ghosting on a dating app when they no longer want to engage with a connection. Relatedly, within friendships, ghostees are more likely to perceive the ghosting as temporary, compared to ghosters who are more likely to perceive the ghosting as permanent (Yap, Francisco, and Gopez 2021). Regardless of permanency, ghosting is generally not perceived positively (e.g., Freedman et al. 2019; Pancani, Aureli, and Riva 2022; Sukmana et al. 2022) or as the best dissolution strategy (LeFebvre et al. 2019; Manning, Denker, and Johnson 2019; Park and Klein 2024): ghosters themselves sometimes acknowledge that they could have taken a different approach and been more direct to avoid causing harm (Wu and Bamishigbin 2023).

Within romantic relationships, ghosting is particularly common on dating apps (De Wiele and Campbell 2019; Halversen, King, and Silva 2021; Marshall et al. 2024; Navarro et al. 2020a). However, simply matching with someone but not receiving a response is unlikely to be classified as ghosting. Rather, some level of bidirectional communication is necessary before a lack of response is considered ghosting (De Wiele and Campbell 2019; Koessler, Kohut, and Campbell 2019b). Yet, ghosting may be more common in friendships than in romantic relationships (Freedman et al. 2019). Across both friendships and romances, ghosting is more likely to be used and seen as more acceptable in short-term than long-term relationships (Freedman et al. 2019; Koessler, Kohut, and Campbell 2019a; Manning, Denker, and Johnson 2019; Navarro et al. 2020a).

When examining perceived commonality of ghosting, individuals' own experiences with ghosting plays a role. Specifically, ghostees tend to report it as occurring more often than ghosters (Collins, Thomas, and Harris 2023). Additionally, individuals with no prior experience with ghosting tend to perceive that both their friends and the general adult population use ghosting to end relationships less frequently than those who have prior experiences with ghosting (Powell et al. 2022). However, those who have previously been both a ghoster and a ghostee tend to have the highest perceptions of ghosting's frequency of use (Powell et al. 2022).

Exact rates of ghosting and being ghosted are difficult to discern. Many, but not all, authors report their sample's experiences with ghosting (see Table 1). However, sample recruitment and selection criteria may influence whether participants are likely to have had ghosting experiences. Researchers who report participants' ghosting experiences tend to report that meaningful proportions of their sample have prior experiences with ghosting (see Table 1). Specifically, although reported rates vary considerably for being a ghostee (23.0%–89.7%) and ghoster (18.9%–92.0%), in 52.2% of studies that reported rates of ghosting, more than half of their sample had been a ghostee. Additionally, in 56.5% of studies that reported rates of ghosting, more than half of their sample had been a ghoster.

1.2 | Ghosting Has Emotional Consequences for Both Parties

1.2.1 | Ghostees

As might be expected from individuals' perceptions of ghosting, being ghosted is associated with negative emotional consequences. Some of these consequences are consistent across studies, whereas other emotions are less reliably linked to the experience of being ghosted. One of the main ways in which being ghosted affects people is by causing sadness, depressive feelings, and hurt feelings (e.g., Farber, Hubbard, and Ort 2022; Forrai, Koban, and Matthes 2023; Freedman, Powell et al. 2022; LeFebvre and Fan 2020; Pancani et al. 2021; Timmermans, Hermans, and Opree 2021), much like other forms of social exclusion (e.g., Leary et al. 1998). Ghostees' negative emotions occur across contexts including within romantic relationships (e.g., Freedman, Powell et al. 2022; LeFebvre and Fan 2020; Pancani et al. 2021; Timmermans, Hermans, and Opree 2021), friendships (e.g., Forrai, Koban, and Matthes 2023; Pancani et al. 2021; Yap, Francisco, and Gopez 2021), therapeutic relationships (Farber, Hubbard, and Ort 2022), and visiting loved ones in prison (Moran and Disney 2019). Moreover, increased frequency of having been ghosted is also associated with adolescents' non-suicidal self-injury, and largely mediated by depressive symptomatology (Ding et al. 2024). Ghostees also experience general feelings of distress (e.g., De Wiele and Campbell 2019) and disillusionment (e.g., Konings, Sumter, and Vandenbosch 2023; Timmermans, Hermans, and Opree 2021), as well as lower levels of well-being (Astleitner, Bains, and Hörmann 2023) and psychological need satisfaction (Freedman, Powell et al. 2022; Leckfor et al. 2023).

Ghostees' negative emotional responses are not surprising given that ghosting involves an ambiguous loss that may leave people searching for answers about why it has occurred (LeFebvre, Rasner, and Allen 2020; LeFebvre and Fan 2020). A more explicit rejection allows people to experience closure and know that a relationship has ended (and perhaps why it has ended). However, ghosting leaves the ghostee in a state of ambiguity: they may not immediately realize they have been rejected and they may engage in rumination or self-blame as part of their uncertainty (LeFebvre and Fan 2020; Pancani et al. 2021; Thomas and Dubar 2021; Wu and Bamishigbin 2024).

Frustration, anxiety, and anger are also commonly linked to being ghosted. For example, dating app users indicate that they

TABLE 1 | Demographics and methodology of ghosting studies.

Article	If multiple samples, study info	Quant or qual	Method of data collection	Sample size	Sample location	Ghosting context	Age	Gender	Sexual orientation	Race/ethnicity or nationality	Ghosting experience
Alley and Jia (2023)		Quant	Survey	222	United States	Romantic	$M = 40.15$, SD = 12.08	58% men, 42% women, 1% did not report		4% African American/Black, 9% Asian/Asian American, 77% White, 5% other/mixed, 6% did not report	34.2% ghoster, 34.7% ghostee
Apostolou (2023)	Study 1	Qual	Survey	225	Cyprus	Friend	Women $M = 28.3$, SD = 10.1; Men $M = 28.8$, SD = 11.0	46% men, 53% women			
	Study 2	Quant	Survey	469	Cyprus	Friend	Women $M = 26.0$, SD = 10.8; Men $M = 29.2$; SD = 12.2	47% men, 52% women, 1 did not report			
Astleitner, Bains, and Hörmann (2023)		Quant	Survey	995	Austria, Canada, France, Germany, India, Malaysia, Sweden, United Kingdom, United States, Vietnam, Other	Social media	$M = 22.93$, SD = 2.98	21% men, 79% women			
Biolcati, Pupi, and Mancini (2021)		Quant	Survey	409	Italy	Romantic	$M = 26.40$, SD = 6.06	35% men, 64.8% women			58.5% ghostee

(Continues)

TABLE 1 | (Continued)

Article	If multiple samples, study info	Quant or qual	Method of data collection	Sample size	Sample location	Ghosting context	Age	Gender	Sexual orientation	Race/ethnicity or nationality	Ghosting experience
Campaioli, Testoni, and Zamperini (2022)		Qual	Interview	23	Italy	Romantic	$M = 26.58$, SD = 3.03	43.4% men, 47.8% women, 4.3% queer, 4.3% did not respond	43.4% heterosexual, 30.4% gay/lesbian 13% bisexual, 4.3% questioning		13% ghoster, 39% ghostee, 48% both
Collins, Thomas, and Harris (2023)	Phase 1	Quant	Survey	158		Romantic	18–64, Mdn = 21	13.9% men, 85.2% women, 0.9% non-binary	77.1% heterosexual, 22.9% nonheterosexual/other	19.4% African American. 4.6% Hispanic/Latino, 68.5% White, 7.4% multiracial/other	48.7% ghoster, 61.8% ghostee
	Phase 2	Quant	Survey	102		Romantic	18–34, Mdn = 20	12.6% men, 87.4% women	72% heterosexual, 28% nonheterosexual/other	22.1% African American, 5.8% Hispanic/Latino, 61.1% White, 10.5% multiracial/other	67.6% ghoster, 67.6% ghostee
De Wiele and Campbell (2019)		Qual & quant	Survey	68		Romantic	$M = 27.04$, SD = 6.12	35% men, 63% women, 1 did not respond	67% heterosexual, 13% gay/lesbian, 17% bisexual, 0.01% other	0.04% African American/Black, 0.2% Asian, 0.02% Hispanic/Latinx 85% White, 0.04% other	
Di Santo et al. (2022)		Quant	Survey	292	United States	Unspecific relationships With others	$M = 21.46$, SD = 4.19	26% men, 72.6% women, 0.3% not listed, 1% did not respond			
Ding et al. (2024)		Quant	Survey	887	China		$M = 16.65$, SD = 0.95	34.9% men, 65.1% women			

(Continues)

TABLE 1 | (Continued)

Article	If multiple samples, study info	Quant or qual	Method of data collection	Sample size	Sample location	Ghosting context	Age	Gender	Sexual orientation	Race/ethnicity or nationality	Ghosting experience
Farber, Hubbard, and Ort (2022)		Qual & quant	Survey	77	Canada, United States, other	Therapist	$M = 34.15$, $SD = 12.06$	28.6% men, 68.8% women, 2.6% transgender women	72.7% heterosexual, 3.9% gay/lesbian, 13.0% bisexual, 10.4% other	9.1% African American/Black, 5.2% Asian/Asian American, 76.6% White, 9.1% more than one race	
Forrai, Koban, and Matthes (2023)	Wave 1	Quant	Survey	978	Germany	Romantic and friend	$M = 19.08$, $SD = 1.57$	44.48% men, 54.81 women, 0.72% non-binary			
	Wave 2	Quant	Survey	415	Germany	Romantic	$M = 18.91$, $SD = 1.55$	41.69% men, 58.31% women			
Freedman, Hales et al. (2022)	Pilot	Quant	Experiment	239	United States	Romantic	$M = 18.71$, $SD = 1.42$	26.36% men, 73.22% women, 0.42% not specified	90% heterosexual	9% African American/Black, 5% Asian, 5% Hispanic, 79% White, 2% other	
	Main	Quant	Experiment	414	United States	Romantic	$M = 25.47$, $SD = 7.07$	39.61% men, 57% women, 1.45% non-binary, 1.2% trans-binary, 0.72% other		5% African American/Black, 5% Asian/Asian American, 9% Hispanic, 72% White, 8% Bi/Multiracial	
Freedman, Powell et al. (2022)		Qual & quant	Survey	80	United States	Romantic	$M = 33.73$, $SD = 11.44$	38.8% men, 60% women, 1.25% did not report	68.8% heterosexual, 11.3% lesbian or gay, 18.8% bisexual	10.0% African American, 8.8% Asian or Asian American, 5.0% Hispanic/Latinx, 1.3% Native American, 62.5% White, 8.8% Multiracial, 1.3% other, 2.5% did not provide	

TABLE 1 | (Continued)

Article	If multiple samples, study info	Quant or qual	Method of data collection	Sample size	Sample location	Ghosting context	Age	Gender	Sexual orientation	Race/ethnicity or nationality	Ghosting experience
Freedman et al. (2019)	Study 1	Quant	Survey	554	United States	Romantic	$M = 33.86$, $SD = 10.62$	49.46% men, 49.28% women, 0.72% transgender, 0.54% did not report	45.1% men only, 47.3% women only, 7% bisexual, 0.5% neither gender	6.9% African American, 7.6% Asian, 74.9% Caucasian, 6.7% Latino, 3.2% other, 0.4% did not disclose	21.7% ghoster, 25.3% ghostee
	Study 2	Quant	Survey	747	United States	Romantic and friend	$M = 32.64$, $SD = 11.59$	52.74% men, 46.32% women, 0.94% nonbinary	38.3% men only, 49.0% women only, 11.1% bisexual, 1.6% neither gender	4.4% African American, 10.0% Asian, 73.6% Caucasian, 3.3% Latino, 7.5% other, 1% did not disclose	18.9% romantic ghoster, 23.0% romantic ghostee, 31.7% friend ghoster, 38.6% friend ghostee
Halversen, King, and Silva (2021)		Quant	Survey	419		Romantic	$M = 29.83$, $SD = 7.97$	93.1% female, 5.0% male to female trans, 1.9% other (female)		2.4% American Indian or Alaskan Native, 23.4% Asian, 11% Black or African American, 0.2% Hawaiian Native or Pacific Islander, 4.1% Hispanic or Latino, 56.3% White, 2.4% multiracial	90% had engaged in ghosting
Herrera-López et al. (2024)		Quant	Survey	691	Colombia	Romantic	$M = 24.03$, $SD = 4.47$	37.6% men, 62.4% women			
Jahrami et al. (2023)		Qual & quant	Survey	811	Bahrain	Unspecified	$M = 24.65$, $SD = 5.66$	62% women			
Jonason et al. (2021)		Quant	Survey	341	United States	Romantic	$M = 29.12$, $SD = 11.10$	23.3% men, 76.4% women		71.7% White, "The rest predominantly African American"	51% ghoster
Kay and Courtice (2022)		Qual	Survey	499	Canada	Romantic	$M = 19.14$, $SD = 1.81$	35.1% men, 64.5% women, 0.2% nonbinary, 0.2% did not report		8.4% Arab, 6.8% Black, 5.8% Chinese, 55.8% White, 4.8% biracial/bi-ethnic or multiracial/multi-ethnic	50.8% offline ghoster, 44.8% offline ghostee, 45.4% online ghoster 34.8% online ghostee

TABLE 1 | (Continued)

Article	If multiple samples, study info	Quant or qual	Method of data collection	Sample size	Sample location	Ghosting context	Age	Gender	Sexual orientation	Race/ethnicity or nationality	Ghosting experience
Koessler, Kohut, and Campbell (2019a)	Sample A	Quant	Survey	299	Canada and United States	Romantic	$M = 25.87$, SD = 4.13	43.8% men, 55.5% women, 0.7% non-specified	83.6% heterosexual, 5.1% gay/lesbian, 9.2% bisexual, 2.3% other		
	Sample B	Quant	Survey	296	Canada and United States	Romantic	$M = 25.64$, SD = 4.09	41.2% men, 58.4% women, 0.3% non-specified	82.8% heterosexual, 4.4% gay/lesbian, 12.8% bisexual		
Koessler, Kohut, and Campbell (2019b)		Qual	Survey	332	Canada and United States	Romantic	$M = 28.26$, SD = 4.36	44.88% men, 54.52% women, 0.006% other	80.72% heterosexual, 19.28% non-heterosexual	4.5% Asian, 7.5% Black, 6% Hispanic, 2.1% indigenous, 74.7% White, 4.5% multiracial, 0.6% did not specify	13.9% only ghoster, 21.4% only ghostee, 50.6% both
Konings, Sumter, and Vandenbosch (2023)		Quant	Survey	268	Belgium	Romantic	$M = 23.17$, SD = 2.52	68.7% women	74.3% heterosexual	97.8% western-European	
Langlais et al. (2024)	Study 1	Quant	Survey	30	United States		$M = 19.52$, SD = 1.10	100% women		3.3% Asian, 16.9% Black, 13.3% Hispanic, 66.7% White	
	Study 2	Quant	Experiment	40	United States		$M = 19.70$, SD = 1.02	10% men, 90% women		7.5% Asian, 12.5% Black, 12.5% Hispanic, 62.5% White, 5% other	
Leckfor et al. (2023)	Study 1	Quant	Survey	553	United States	Romantic and friend	$M = 23.95$, SD = 3.17	47.60% men, 49% women, 3.44% other/non-binary	67.8% heterosexual, 8.32% gay/lesbian, 20.4% bisexual, 3.44% other	15.7% Asian, 9.0% Black, 8.1% Latinx, 0.4% Native American, 60.2% White, 5.8% multiracial, 0.7% other	62.9% ghoster, 66% ghostee

(Continues)

TABLE 1 | (Continued)

Article	If multiple samples, study info	Quant or qual	Method of data collection	Sample size	Sample location	Ghosting context	Age	Gender	Sexual orientation	Race/ethnicity or nationality	Ghosting experience
	Study 2	Quant	Survey	411	United States	Romantic and friend	$M = 24.23$, $SD = 3.11$	47.90% men, 48.90% women 3.16% other/ non-binary	71.5% heterosexual, 5.84% lesbian or gay, 18.7% bisexual, 3.89% other	19.2% Asian, 5.8% Black, 13.9% Latinx, 0.5% Native American, 54.5% White, 5.8% multiracial, 0.2% other	66.2% ghoster, 70.6% ghostee
	Study 3	Quant	Experiment	545	United States	Romantic and friend	$M = 24.68$, $SD = 3.23$	45.5% men, 51.38% women, 3.12% other/ non-binary	69.91% heterosexual, 5.69% lesbian or gay, 19.82% bisexual, 4.59% other	14.5% Asian, 12.1% Black, 4.8% Latinx, 0.4% Native American, 63.5% White, 4.2% multiracial, 0.6% other	65.7% ghoster, 74.9% ghostee
LeFebvre et al. (2019)		Qual	Survey	99	United States	Romantic	$M = 22.16$, $SD = 0.49$	38.4% men, 61.6% women	92.9% heterosexual, 3% same sex, 3% bisexual, 1% unidentified	2% African American, 2% Asian American, 86.9% Caucasian, 4% Hispanic, 5.1% multiracial	29.3% only ghoster, 25.3% only ghostee, 44.2% both
LeFebvre and Fan (2020)	Study 1	Qual	Survey	189		Romantic	$M = 33.11$, $SD = 10.15$	41.3% men, 58.2% women, 0.5% unidentified	84.7% heterosexual, 3.2% gay, 3.2% lesbian, 9.0% bisexual	5.8% African American, 6.3% Asian or Pacific Islander, 75.1% Caucasian, 4.8% Hispanic/Latino(a), 0.5% Middle Eastern, 1.6% Native American, 5.8% multiracial	
	Study 2	Qual & Quant	Survey	169		Romantic	$M = 33.12$, $SD = 9.19$	48.5% men, 50.9% women, 0.6% non-conforming	87% heterosexual, 2% lesbian, 1% gay, 9% bisexual, 1% pansexual/ demisexual	12% African American, 10% Asian or Pacific Islander, 66% Caucasian, 4% Hispanic, 1% Native American 7% multiracial	
LeFebvre, Rasner, and Allen (2020)	Study 1	Qual	Survey	189		Romantic	$M = 33.11$, $SD = 10.15$	41.3% men, 58.2% women, 0.5% unidentified	84.7% heterosexual, 3.2% gay, 3.2% lesbian, 9.0% bisexual	5.8% African American, 6.3% Asian or Pacific Islander 75.1% Caucasian, 4.8% Hispanic/Latino(a), 1.6% Native American, 0.5% Middle Eastern, 5.8% multiracial	

(Continues)

TABLE 1 | (Continued)

Article	If multiple samples, study info	Quant or qual	Method of data collection	Sample size	Sample location	Ghosting context	Age	Gender	Sexual orientation	Race/ethnicity or nationality	Ghosting experience
	Study 2	Quant	Survey	169		Romantic	$M = 33.12$, $SD = 9.19$	48.5% men, 50.9% women, 0.6% non-conforming	87% heterosexual, 2% lesbian, 1% gay, 9% bisexual, 1% pansexual/demisexual	12% African American, 10% Asian or Pacific Islander, 66% Caucasian, 4% Hispanic, 1% Native American, 7% multiracial	
Manning, Denker, and Johnson (2019)		Qual	Interview	30	United States	Romantic	$M = 24.7$			3.3% Asian American, 6.7% Black, 3.3% Latinx, 83.3% White, 3.3% multi-racial	
Marshall et al. (2024)		Qual	Interview	12	England	Romantic	$M = 24$, $SD = 6.17$	25% men, 66.7% women, 8.3% nonbinary	41.6% heterosexual, 50% bisexual, 8.3% queer	83% British, 8.3% Polish, 8.3% Romanian	
Moran and Disney (2019)		Qual	Interview & Field Diaries	58	United Kingdom	Prison visitors	$M = 34$	100% men		"Most described themselves as White/British; with a minority Asian/British or Black/African/Caribbean/Black British"	
Narr and Luong (2023)		Qual	Interview & Media analysis	48	United States	Romantic	$M = 32$	37.5% men, 62.5% women	56.25% "straight," 22.91% "non-straight"	39.6% "people of color," 60.4% White	
Navarro et al. (2020a)		Quant	Survey	626	Spain	Romantic	$M = 29.64$, $SD = 8.84$	48.4% men, 51.6% women	82.9% heterosexual, 17.1% lesbian, gay, or bisexual		23.2% ghoster, 19.3% ghostee
Navarro et al. (2020b)		Quant	Survey	626	Spain	Romantic	$M = 29.64$, $SD = 8.84$	48.4% men, 51.6% women	82.9% heterosexual, 17.1% lesbian, gay, or bisexual		4.8% ghostee,[a] 2.4% ghostee and breadcrumbing victim
Navarro et al. (2021)		Quant	Survey	626	Spain	Romantic	$M = 29.64$, $SD = 8.84$	48.4% men, 51.6% women	82.9% heterosexual, 17.1% lesbian, gay, or bisexual		5% ghoster, 4% ghostee 3% ghosting intentions
Pancani et al. (2021)		Qual	Experiment	295	Italy	Romantic and friend	$M = 24.12$, $SD = 5.01$	78.8% women		100% Italians	

(Continues)

TABLE 1 | (Continued)

Article	If multiple samples, study info	Quant or qual	Method of data collection	Sample size	Sample location	Ghosting context	Age	Gender	Sexual orientation	Race/ethnicity or nationality	Ghosting experience
Pancani, Aureli, and Riva (2022)		Quant	Experiment	176	Italy	Romantic and friend	$M = 23.39$, $SD = 2.78$	21.6% men, 69.3% women, 9.1% no answer		98.9% Italians, 1.1% non-Italians	35.8% ghostee
Park and Klein (2024)	Pilot 1a	Qual	Prototype analysis	91	United States		$M = 37.37$, $SD = 11.43$	49.5% men, 50.5% women		4.4% Black, 7.7% East Asian, 2.2% South Asian 10.9% Hispanic, 1.1% Middle Eastern 73.6% White	
	Pilot 1b	Quant	Experiment	96	Unites States		$M = 36.18$, $SD = 11.69$	53.1% men, 45.8% women, 1% other		9.4% Black, 6.3% Hispanic, 10.4% East Asian, 1% South Asian, 1% Middle Eastern 67.7% White, 4.2% other	
	Pilot 1c	Quant	Experiment	172	United States	Various relationships	$M = 40.69$, $SD = 12.80$	55.2% men, 44.2% women, 0.6% other		10.5% Black, 2.9% East Asian, 0.6% South Asian, 70.9% White, 15.1% other	
Park and Klein (2024)Cont.	Study 1	Quant & qual	Experiment	168	Singapore	Various relationships	$M = 33.55$, $SD = 8.91$	41.6% men, 57.7% women, 0.6% other		86.9% Chinese, 4.2% Indian, 1.2% Malay, 6.5% other	
	Study 2	Quant	Experiment	118	United Kingdom	Strangers	$M = 35.75$, $SD = 11.73$	56.8% men, 33.1% women		0.8% Asian, 5.9% Black, 0.8% Hispanic 81.4% White, 0.8% other	
	Study 2 (post-test)	Quant	Experiment	137			$M = 38.82$, $SD = 11.47$	57.7% men, 42.3% women		5.8% Black, 8.8% East Asian, 1.5% South Asian, 8% Hispanic, 68.6% White, 7.3% other/multi-racial	
	Study 3	Quant	Experiment	118	United Kingdom	Strangers	$M = 37.66$, $SD = 14.25$	50% men, 35.6% women, 0.8% other		5.1% Asian, 1.7% Black, 76.3% White, 3.4% other	

TABLE 1 | (Continued)

Article	If multiple samples, study info	Quant or qual	Method of data collection	Sample size	Sample location	Ghosting context	Age	Gender	Sexual orientation	Race/ethnicity or nationality	Ghosting experience
	Study 4	Quant	Experiment	289	Singapore	Personal or professional	$M = 30.98$, $SD = 9.08$	40.5% men, 37% women, 0.7% other		89.3% Chinese, 4.2% Indian 1.4% Malay, 0.7% White, 4.8% other	
	Study 5	Quant	Experiment	272	United States		$M = 38.67$, $SD = 11.91$	56.6% men, 43.4% women		8.8% Black, 8.8% East Asian, 2.9% South Asian, 1.8% Hispanic, 0.4% Middle Eastern, 71% White, 6.3% other/multi-racial	
	Study 6	Quant	Experiment	204	United Kingdom	Strangers	$M = 24.87$, $SD = 7.93$	19.6% men, 77.9% women, 2.5% other		8.8% Asian, 6.4% Black, 5.9% Hispanic, 0.5% Middle Eastern, 70.6% White, 7.8% other/multi-racial	
Park and Klein (2024) cont.	Study 7	Quant	Experiment	271	United States		$M = 39.48$, $SD = 13.02$	50.2% men, 48.3% women, 1.5% other		11.4% Black, 8.1% East Asian, 3% South Asian, 10% Hispanic, 0.4% Middle Eastern, 66.1% White, 1.1% other	
	Study 8	Quant	Experiment	303	Western Europe		$M = 26.09$, $SD = 5.28$	35.3% men, 64% women, 0.7% other		96% French, 4% other	
Powell et al. (2022)		Quant	Survey	863	United States	Romantic	$M = 33.35$, $SD = 11.63$	50.9% men, 47.5% women, 1.3% other, 0.3% did not report	74.3% heterosexual, 5.9% gay, 5% lesbian, 12.17% bisexual, 1.85% asexual, 0.78% did not disclose	7.8% African American/Black, 8.3% Asian/Asian American, 6.1% Hispanic/Latino, 67.8% White, 6.4% multiracial, 3.5% other or did not disclose	8.6% only ghoster, 19.8% only ghostee, 17.5% both

(Continues)

TABLE 1 | (Continued)

Article	If multiple samples, study info	Quant or qual	Method of data collection	Sample size	Sample location	Ghosting context	Age	Gender	Sexual orientation	Race/ethnicity or nationality	Ghosting experience
Powell et al. (2021)	Study 1	Quant	Survey	165	United States	Romantic	M = 19.34, SD = 1.20	53.3% men, 46.7% women		3% African American/Black, 17.6% Asian American, 67.3% Caucasian/White, 7.9% Hispanic/Latino, 4.2% other	38.2% ghoster, 28.5% ghostee
	Study 2	Quant	Survey	247	United States	Romantic	M = 33.17, SD = 11.14	49.4% men, 49% women, 1.6% nonbinary	47.4% heterosexual, 23.9% gay, 23.9% lesbian, 2.8% bisexual, 1.6% nonbinary and attracted to women, 0.4% asexual	6.9% African American/Black, 7.3% Asian American/Asian, 73.7% Caucasian/White, 5.3% Hispanic/Latino, 0.4% Native American, 4.9% Multiple races/ethnicities, 1.2% other, 0.4% did not report	38.9% ghoster, 47% ghostee
	Study 3	Quant	Survey	863	United Sates	Romantic	M = 33.35, SD = 11.63	50.9% men, 47.5% women, 1.3% other, 0.3% did not report	74.6% heterosexual, 5.9% gay, 5.0% lesbian, 11.5% bisexual, 1.9% asexual, 1.0% other	7.8% African American, 8.4% Asian American/Asian, 68.4% Caucasian/White, 6.2% Hispanic/Latino, 0.4% Native American, 6.4% Multiracial, 2.3% other	8.6% only ghoster, 19.8% only ghostee, 17.5% both
Rad and Rad (2018)		Quant	Survey	507	Belgum, Romania, Spain, Turkey,	Friend	17–19	48.6% men, 51.4% women		25.64% Belgian, 19.33% Romanian, 9.86% Spanish, 44.18% Turkish	
Sukmana et al. (2022)		Qual	Survey	224	Indonesia	Romantic and friend		25% men, 75% women			85.7% ghoster, 89.7% ghostee
Thomas and Dubar (2021)		Qual	Focus groups	76	United States	Mixed	M = 19.98, SD = 1.28	70% women		20% Asian, 7.1% Black/African American, 61/4% white/Caucasian, 10% mixed, 1.4% other	
Timmermans, Hermans, and Opree (2021)		Quant & Qual	Survey	328	Belgium, Netherlands	Romantic	M = 31.68, SD = 9.33	62.8% women	86% heterosexual		63% ghoster, 85% ghostee,
Vagaš and Misko (2018)		Quant	Survey	202	Slovakia	Workplace	M = 31.22, SD = 9.11	45.5% men, 54.5% women			

TABLE 1 | (Continued)

Article	If multiple samples, study info	Quant or qual	Method of data collection	Sample size	Sample location	Ghosting context	Age	Gender	Sexual orientation	Race/ethnicity or nationality	Ghosting experience
Wood et al. (2023)		Quant	Experiment	554	United Kingdom, United States	Workplace	M = 29.62, SD = 10.59	50.2% men, 46% women, 3.79% other/non-binary		11.9% Asian, 7.4% Black, 6.1% Latinx, 0.2% Native American, 68.1% White, 4.9% multiracial, 1.4% other/not mentioned	
Wu and Bamishigbin (2023)		Qual	Interview	34	United States	Romantic, Family member, and/or friend	M = 19.74, SD = 1.85	32% men, 68% women	88% straight/heterosexual, 3% gay, 6% bisexual, 1 did not respond	12% African American/Black, 15% Asian/Asian American, 3% European/European American, 65% Latinx, 3% Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, 3% Middle Eastern	22% only ghoster, 8% only ghostee, 70% both
Wu and Bamishigbin (2024)		Qual	Interview	29	United States	Friend, romantic, Family, and/or acquaintance	M = 19.59, SD = 1.86	31% men, 69% women	96.6% straight/heterosexual, 1 did not respond	6.9% Asian, 6.9% Black/African American, 3.4% European, 75.9% Latinx, 3.4% Middle Eastern, 3.4% Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	
Yap, Francisco, and Gopez (2021)		Qual	Interview	30	Philippines	Non-romantic	18–25				

Note: Empty cells reflect no information provided. Some minor changes in labeling were made for consistency and to be in line with APA recommendations.
[a]Participants in this study were only considered to be ghostees if they had been ghosted at least three times.

experience frustration when their romantic connections do not respond (Narr and Luong 2023). Similarly, ghostees report that the uncertainty produced by romantic ghosting leads to frustration and anxiety (Manning, Denker, and Johnson 2019). Furthermore, when therapists ghost their patients, patients report feeling frustrated and anxious (Farber, Hubbard, and Ort 2022), and people who are ghosted by their friends, particularly longer-term friends, also report being frustrated (Yap, Francisco, and Gopez 2021). Anxiety can also occur from thinking about the possibility of being ghosted by a romantic partner (Langlais et al. 2024) or by potential visitors when in prison (Moran and Disney 2019). These emotions are also accompanied by anger (Farber, Hubbard, and Ort 2022; Pancani et al. 2021; Timmermans, Hermans, and Opree 2021), even when being ghosted by someone with whom they are less close (Campaioli, Testoni, and Zamperini 2022).

One emotional consequence that is less clear is the effect of being ghosted on feelings about the self. For example, some ghostees report reduced self-esteem (Campaioli, Testoni, and Zamperini 2022; Langlais et al. 2024; Timmermans, Hermans, and Opree 2021) as well as self-doubt, self-blame, or guilt (LeFebvre and Fan 2020; Pancani et al. 2021; Thomas and Dubar 2021; Wu and Bamishigbin 2024); whereas others report no changes to their self-esteem after having been ghosted (Konings, Sumter, and Vandenbosch 2023). However, in one study, participants who were ghosted from a potential job reported higher levels of self-esteem than participants who were directly rejected (Wood et al. 2023). Thus, how being ghosted in different contexts affects self-esteem and self-directed emotions remains an open question.

The diverse array of emotions that ghostees experience may occur within a set of temporal stages (Pancani et al. 2021; Wu and Bamishigbin 2024), similar to the emotional responses to being ostracized (Williams 2009; Williams and Nida 2011). In the first stage, once ghosting is perceived or realized, ghostees often report feelings of uncertainty, confusion, or surprise. When that uncertainty reduces, they are likely to feel anger, frustration, and a sense that the situation they are in is unfair (Pancani et al. 2021; Wu and Bamishigbin 2024). Some people may try to reach out to repair the relationship or gain closure (Pancani et al. 2021; Wu and Bamishigbin 2024), which may be due to ghostees tending to have more negative emotions after being ghosted than ghosters anticipate that they will feel (Park and Klein 2024). Finally, before ghostees try to accept the situation, their feelings may transition to those of loss, including emotions such as sadness and disappointment (Pancani et al. 2021; Wu and Bamishigbin 2024).

1.2.2 | Ghosters

Ghostees are not the only ones affected by the ghosting experience: ghosters report a range of emotions as well. Although some ghostees report feeling guilty or that they were to blame (Pancani et al. 2021; Thomas and Dubar 2021), guilt seems to be a more common response for ghosters in both romantic relationships and friendships (Freedman, Powell et al. 2022; Marshall et al. 2024; Thomas and Dubar 2021; Wu and

Bamishigbin 2023; Yap, Francisco, and Gopez 2021). Experiencing guilt as the rejector is also seen in non-ghosting romantic rejections (e.g., Baumeister, Wotman, and Stillwell 1993). For instance, when rejecting someone with unreciprocated romantic feelings, people report feeling guilt as a central emotion, whereas the rejected individuals do not indicate feeling guilt (Baumeister, Wotman, and Stillwell 1993). In one ghosting-focused study, there were no overall differences in the positive or negative emotional valence of the narratives written by individuals who had been both ghosters and ghostees, but their narratives as a ghoster had more words related to guilt than their narratives as a ghostee (Freedman, Powell et al. 2022). Ghosters' guilt may stem from being aware that they are causing harm to the ghostees by not giving them adequate closure (Wu and Bamishigbin 2023).

However, ghosters also often report mixed feelings (Wu and Bamishigbin 2023), with both guilt and relief being a common theme (Freedman, Powell et al. 2022; Thomas and Dubar 2021; Wu and Bamishigbin 2023). The mixed emotions may stem from ghosters choosing ghosting to reduce the hurt they anticipate inducing with a more explicit rejection (Park and Klein 2024). Relatedly, ghosters report caring more about ghostees and their well-being than ghostees believe that ghosters care (Park and Klein 2024).

Unlike ghostees who do not experience closure with ghosting, ghosters are aware of what is happening, and are likely able to find relief in knowing that the relationship they were attempting to end is now over. Yet ghosters have more negative emotions after ghosting than ghostees anticipate they will feel (Park and Klein 2024). However, ghosters do not always experience strong positive or negative emotions: a common emotion when reflecting on a prior ghosting experience is apathy (Freedman, Powell et al. 2022; Sukmana et al. 2022).

As such, although ghosters' emotions have been the focus of fewer studies than ghostees' emotions, there are clear patterns for how ghosters are likely to feel. Taken together, ghosting is characterized by negative emotions for both parties, but ghosters seem to experience a greater mix of emotional responses, and some experience a lack of emotional response.

1.3 | Ghosters Are Motivated by Context, Ease, and Danger

Despite the negative emotions associated with ghosting, ghosters are still motivated to use this strategy for a variety of reasons, ranging from general motivations for ending a relationship such as disinterest in the person or interest in someone else (e.g., Koessler, Kohut, and Campbell 2019a; LeFebvre et al. 2019 2020; Sukmana et al. 2022; Thomas and Dubar 2021; Yap, Francisco, and Gopez 2021) to ghosting occurring inadvertently or accidentally (e.g., Moran and Disney 2019; Yap, Francisco, and Gopez 2021). Interestingly, ghosters tend to report more other-oriented reasons for ghosting than self-oriented reasons, and ghostees largely underestimate the likelihood of ghosters having other-oriented reasons for ghosting (Park and Klein 2024). Across studies, three themes particularly stand out

for why individuals choose ghosting: believing it makes the most sense given the context of the relationship, feeling like it is the easiest option, and trying to avoid or prevent a dangerous situation.

When ghosters are motivated by context, there are two key aspects to consider. First, the context of the relationship itself, and second, the context of how the people in the relationship communicate. People are more likely to ghost in short-term romantic relationships and friendships than in long-term romantic relationships and friendships (Freedman et al. 2019), and ghosting is motivated by having a short-term orientation toward a given relationship (Wu and Bamishigbin 2023). Relatedly, people are more motivated to ghost when they perceive a relationship as not serious enough or long enough to warrant having a conversation (Koessler, Kohut, and Campbell 2019b). In fact, some consider ghosting an expected part of a short-term or dating relationship (Manning, Denker, and Johnson 2019), and that ghosting has become a normalized part of dating (Marshall et al. 2024).

Beyond the relationship itself, ghosting frequently occurs via a cessation in technology-mediated-communication, and the context of online interactions lends itself to engaging in ghosting. For example, some individuals indicate that ghosting is part of the way that dating apps work, and that if an app matches you with someone who is not a good fit, then the app has caused an inconvenience, and ghosting is the most logical way to respond (Timmermans, Hermans, and Opree 2021). The idea that dating apps lead to ghosting is common across studies (e.g., Halversen, King, and Silva 2021; LeFebvre et al. 2019; Thomas and Dubar 2021; Timmermans, Hermans, and Opree 2021), and an analysis of perceptions of dating apps indicates that people are cynical about apps' algorithms, which may lead to boredom and a higher willingness to ghost (Narr and Luong 2023).

The context of technology-mediated-communication plays a role in ghosting motivated by ease as ghosting is considered to be a convenient way to end relationships and get the message across (e.g., Halversen, King, and Silva 2021; LeFebvre et al. 2019; Marshall et al. 2024; Thomas and Dubar 2021; Timmermans, Hermans, and Opree 2021). For example, dating apps and other forms of social media can lead to communication overload, in which people feel burdened by the onslaught of messages, and ghosting can feel like the easy solution to this problem (Forrai, Koban, and Matthes 2023). Dating apps also facilitate ghosting via features including anonymity, controlling who can contact users (Timmermans, Hermans, and Opree 2021), and blocking (Marshall et al. 2024).

Sometimes ghosting is motivated less by convenience than by trying to avoid confrontation and the potential for danger. For instance, ghosters perceive advantages of being able to end a relationship without having to directly confront or even have a conversation with the ghostee (e.g., LeFebvre et al. 2019; Thomas and Dubar 2021; Wu and Bamishigbin 2023), especially when the ghoster anticipates a difficult breakup (Koessler, Kohut, and Campbell 2019b). If ghosters have concerns about what that conversation will look like or how the ghostee might receive the news, ghosting may feel like the safest strategy. People also may choose to ghost when a direct rejection is met with aggression and subsequent stalking (Timmermans, Hermans, and Opree 2021) or when other rejection methods have failed (Koessler, Kohut, and Campbell 2019b). In other words, ghosting can occur when the target of rejection does not accept the rejection and becomes aggressive or abusive (Manning, Denker, and Johnson 2019). Ghosting as a last resort is seen in both romantic (e.g., Timmermans, Hermans, and Opree 2021) and platonic relationships (e.g., Yap, Francisco, and Gopez 2021).

Relatedly, ghosters express that the traits and previous actions of the ghostee can motivate them to ghost for safety reasons. For example, when individuals are rude, aggressive, or try to exert dominance, they are more likely to be ghosted (e.g., Koessler, Kohut, and Campbell 2019a; Manning, Denker, and Johnson 2019; Marshall et al. 2024). People also report being motivated to ghost because the situation they are in is already a dangerous one. For instance, people who have experienced obsessive messages and repeated attempts at interactions are more likely to be ghosters (Alley and Jia 2023). Furthermore, in contexts where people are experiencing harassment, violence, or being asked for or given unwanted sexual photographs, some people choose to ghost the initiator to remove themselves from the situation (Campaioli, Testoni, and Zamperini 2022). The connection between safety concerns and willingness to ghost has also been shown experimentally: when safety concerns are made salient, individuals express more willingness to ghost in romantic relationships (Freedman, Hales, et al. 2022).

1.4 | Individual Differences in Ghosting

In addition to studying why ghosting may be used to terminate a relationship, researchers have also examined individual differences in ghosters and ghostees. Specific individual differences have included personality, relational factors, and demographic factors. Although there are some consistent findings across relational factors, most of the other individual differences in ghosting evidence has been mixed.

Related to personality, research has been inconsistent on whether the Big five personality factors (i.e., extraversion, conscientiousness, agreeableness, openness, and emotional stability; Goldberg 1990; John and Srivastava 1999) are associated with ghosting behaviors. Within friendships, agreeableness and conscientiousness have been associated with a lower likelihood to ghost friends (Apostolou 2023), but there were no associations between any of the Big 5 factors in a study on romantic relationships (Biolcati, Pupi, and Mancini 2021). Focusing on other aspects of personality, those with a histrionic personality (i.e., basing one's self-esteem on how others evaluate you) may be more likely to have been ghosted (Astleitner, Bains, and Hörmann 2023), those with higher levels of Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and narcissism (Jonason et al. 2021) or moral disengagement (Navarro et al. 2021) may be more likely to have used ghosting. Furthermore, there has been mixed support for whether need for closure is associated with ghosting intentions (Leckfor et al. 2023).

Relational factors including implicit theories of relationships and anxious attachment have been more reliably associated with ghosting. Specifically, individuals with stronger growth beliefs (i.e., think that relationships can grow over time and persist through challenges; Knee 1998) perceive ghosting as less acceptable in both friendships and romantic relationships (Freedman et al. 2019). Furthermore, individuals with stronger destiny beliefs (i.e., think that relationship partners are either the right person or not; Knee 1998) perceive ghosting as more acceptable in both friendships and romantic relationships, and are more likely to intend to ghost (Freedman et al. 2019). Additionally, across multiple studies, those who had stronger destiny beliefs were more likely to have previously ghosted a romantic partner (Freedman et al. 2019; Powell et al. 2021). In line with the positive association between attachment anxiety and a technology-mediated breakup (Weisskirch and Delevi 2012), a series of studies also demonstrated that individuals with heightened attachment anxiety are more likely to report having been ghosted by a romantic partner (Powell et al. 2021). Although prior research suggests that individuals with heighted attachment avoidance are more likely to use withdrawal strategies to end romantic relationships (Collins and Gillath 2012), avoidant attachment has been inconsistently associated with having been a ghoster in prior romantic relationships (Powell et al. 2021). However, those who use withdrawal as a conflict strategy may be more likely to be a ghoster (Navarro et al. 2021). Finally, in terms of a broader need to belong, individuals with a stronger need to belong are slightly less likely to report having been a ghostee (Astleitner, Bains, and Hörmann 2023).

In terms of demographic factors, scholars have examined differences based on age, gender, sexuality, and culture. With respect to age and gender, findings have been mixed. Specifically, ghosting may be something that younger individuals are more likely to do (Manning, Denker, and Johnson 2019; Timmermans, Hermans, and Opree 2021), but Navarro et al. (2020a) reported no difference between emerging adults and young adults in their usage of ghosting. Additionally, it remains an open question as to whether men ghost more than women (Astleitner, Bains, and Hörmann 2023; Vagaš and Miško 2018), women ghost more than men in short-term relationships (Biolcati, Pupi, and Mancini 2021), or if there are no differences in ghosting based on gender (Freedman, Powell et al. 2022; Navarro et al. 2020b). However, men may be more likely to be ghosted than women (Freedman, Hales, et al. 2022) and, in one study that specifically surveyed women on Bumble (a dating app that requires women to initiate contact), ghosting rates were particularly high (Halversen, King, and Silva 2021). In addition to considering the role of gender, researchers have also begun to consider how sexual orientation may be associated with ghosting, and there is some preliminary evidence that lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals report being ghosted more than samples of heterosexual individuals (Navarro et al. 2020a).

Finally, while several studies have sampled participants outside of the United States (e.g., Apostolou 2023; Astleitner, Bains, and Hörmann 2023; Biolcati, Pupi, and Mancini 2021; Ding et al. 2024; Herrera-López et al. 2024; Jahrami et al. 2023; Kay and Courtice 2022; Navarro et al. 2020a 2021; Pancani, Aureli, and Riva 2022; Sukmana et al. 2022; Vagaš and Miško 2018) only one has examined cultural differences in attitudes toward ghosting.

Specifically, Rad and Rad (2018) found that individuals in Spain were least likely to feel bad when temporarily ghosted by a friend, individuals in Turkey were most likely to feel bad, and individuals in Belgium and Romania were in the middle. Their research suggests that there may be cultural differences in attitudes toward ghosting, but more work is warranted. For example, the differential use of technology across cultures (Poushter, Gubbala, and Austin 2024) likely plays an important role in how frequently people ghost, their attitudes about ghosting more broadly, and the consequences of ghosting and being ghosted.

2 | Discussion

In reviewing the ghosting research, it becomes apparent there have been four central themes of the research conducted to date. First, "ghosting" is a recognized term across multiple contexts (e.g., romantic, friendships, workplace), resembles avoidance/withdrawal romantic relationship dissolution strategies (Baxter 1982; Collins and Gillath 2012), and provides an answer to the problem of "scriptlessness" (Baumeister, Wotman, and Stillwell 1993) when rejecting. This strategy for rejection is not new—it has likely existed for generations through unanswered correspondence—but the process of naming the phenomenon as ghosting and the recognition of the term across social contexts is new. Relatedly, despite people perceiving it to be a normalized method of social rejection, it is viewed negatively. Second, there are often negative emotions experienced by both ghostees and ghosters, though the discrete emotions differ. Third, some of the key reasons for ghosting revolve around the context of the relationship, desire for ease, and concerns for personal safety. Finally, several relational factors have been consistently associated with ghosting (e.g., destiny beliefs, attachment anxiety) but other individual difference findings (e.g., demographics, personality) have been inconclusive. Below, we consider some of the gaps and potential areas of inquiry within ghosting research.

As a relatively new topic of scholarly inquiry, there is room for methodological refinements in ghosting research. For example, both across researchers and among participants there have been disagreements in how to define the concept of ghosting (Kay and Courtice 2022). There are also researcher disagreements about the overlap between ghosting and ostracism (e.g., Campaioli, Testoni, and Zamperini 2022; Freedman et al. 2019; Pancani et al. 2021). Some of these disagreements may have a large effect on how ghosting is studied. For example, some definitions involve technology-mediated-communication (e.g., LeFebvre et al. 2019; Timmermans, Hermans, and Opree 2021), whereas others do not (e.g., Freedman et al. 2019; Kay and Courtice 2022). If researchers are guided by the idea of technology-mediated-communication being a key aspect of ghosting, they may specifically recruit samples from places like dating apps (e.g., Halversen, King, and Silva 2021; Konings, Sumter, and Vandenbosch 2023; Narr and Luong 2023; Timmermans, Hermans, and Opree 2021); however, if technology-mediated-communication is not as relevant, researchers may broaden their study contexts. Moreover, for consistency in measuring ghosting attitudes, intentions, and behaviors, researchers may consider developing and validating measures for broader use (e.g., Herrera-López et al. 2024; Jahrami et al. 2023).

However, one of the strengths of the existing ghosting research is the usage of both qualitative and quantitative methodologies. Across the 68 unique studies[1] reviewed in Table 1, 64.71% are quantitative, 25.00% are qualitative, and 10.29% use mixed methods. Yet, research to date has been largely cross-sectional and retrospective. Given established concerns related to individuals′ ability to accurately recall the details and emotions surrounding their past experiences (Schwarz 1999), researchers may consider the value of using experience sampling studies to examine ghosting as it occurs (e.g., as has been done with ostracism; Büttner et al. 2024) and experimental paradigms to examine causal mechanisms (e.g., Freedman, Hales, et al. 2022; Park and Klein 2024). For example, only 15.56% of the articles reviewed in Table 1 report at least one experiment.

There are also considerations that should be made with respect to sampling participants for ghosting studies. For example, researchers should consider whether to constrain their samples based on relationship status when focused on romantic ghosting. That is, if ghosting is more acceptable within short-term romantic relationships (e.g., Freedman et al. 2019), but samples are unconstrained in terms of relationship status (or relationship status is not examined as a predictor variable), rates of ghosting may be underestimated. Furthermore, many of studies have predominantly focused on younger adults (see Table 1; weighted average age of 26.94 years old, SD = 6.47), which likely stems from ghosting research predominately focusing on non-marital, romantic relationships, which are common in younger adults (Bloome and Ang 2020; Mayol-García, Gurrentz, and Kreider 2021). However, an individual's age can impact their perception of experiences and the extent to which they prioritize existing versus newer relationships (Carstensen 2021). For example, ghosting could be a more negative experience for older adults than young adults. Moreover, aspects of individuals′ social identity have largely been understudied and warrant additional attention. For example, researchers might continue to explore how ghosting within various social contexts differs between cultures (e.g., Rad and Rad 2018) or how ghosting differs within friendships based on the group's gender dynamics (see Nielson et al. 2020). Furthermore, researchers can establish the ways in which ghosting may vary based on sexual orientation (Navarro et al. 2020a) by avoiding sampling from predominantly heterosexual samples (e.g., Freedman, Hales, et al. 2022), which is critical for work on interpersonal relationships (Williamson et al. 2022).

Another key area for future research is further examining the idea that individuals ghost for safety concerns (e.g., Freedman, Hales, et al. 2022; Koessler, Kohut, and Campbell 2019a; Manning, Denker, and Johnson 2019; Marshall et al. 2024). In particular, what remains unclear is the extent to which ghosting is actually a safer rejection strategy than explicit rejection. Ghosting does provide some distancing in that ghosters avoid a direct confrontation, but there may be different long-term consequences of ghosting compared to a direct rejection. For example, a common theme is that ghostees repeatedly try to contact the ghoster because of the lack of closure (e.g., Pancani et al. 2021; Wu and Bamishigbin 2024). Therefore, in some cases ghosting may be more likely to lead to repeated harassment depending on the context and the individuals involved. As such, how ghosting impacts safety is a critical research question given the potential for retaliatory aggression following rejection (e.g., Farr 2019; Leary, Twenge, and Quinlivan 2006; Warburton, Williams, and Cairns 2006).

Additionally, most ghosting research is situated within the context of romantic relationships. As other social contexts are more deeply examined (e.g., in therapeutic contexts: Farber, Hubbard, and Ort 2022; in the workplace: Wood et al. 2023), researchers may explore how ghosting differs across these contexts. For example, researchers could explore whether being ghosted as a job applicant (e.g., Wood et al. 2023) leads to similar emotional consequences as being ghosted by a friend (e.g., Yap, Francisco, and Gopez 2021). Additionally, while a few studies have compared ghosting to explicit rejections (e.g., Freedman, Hales, et al. 2022; Koessler, Kohut, and Campbell 2019a; Leckfor et al. 2023; Park and Klein 2024; Wood et al. 2023), most have focused solely on the experience of ghosting. Thus, although ghosting is largely perceived to be a negative experience, there is a limited understanding about how the experience of ghosting compares to other rejection strategies.

3 | Conclusion

The strategy of ghosting to terminate a relationship has likely existed for generations, but the labeling of this phenomenon as ghosting is relatively new. Consequently, the attention it has received has soared in the past decade. In this time, researchers have made substantial progress in operationalizing and understanding the phenomenon of ghosting—both from the point of view of the ghoster and from the ghostee—in a relatively short-period of time. One strength of the existing literature is the interdisciplinary background of the researchers (e.g., social psychology, developmental psychology, communication studies). Such varying perspectives have strengthened the breadth of research that has been conducted. Despite the progress made, though, opportunities for future research abound.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Endnotes

[1] Some datasets were reported across multiple manuscripts. When that was evident, we only used one instance of each dataset in these calculations and in the average age calculations below.

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