Ghosting in Emerging Adults' Romantic Relationships: The Digital Dissolution Disappearance Strategy

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine relational dissolution using the technique of ghosting. This qualitative study explores the emerging adults' dissolution strategies leading up to and through enactment of disengagement through mediated contexts. Participants ($N = 99$) completed questionnaires about their ghosting familiarity and participation as initiators or noninitiators. The majority of participants reported participating in both roles. Five themes described why initiators chose to enact ghosting, and three themes chronicled their ghosting decision-making processes. Noninitiators illustrated how they realized ghosting occurred through three themes. This exploratory investigation offers a definitive definition of ghosting and a modern discussion of its contents to dissolution, communication, and romantic relationship development.

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The ghosting phenomenon gained attention in popular press; however, empirical examinations lag behind current relational dissolution linguistic etymology. Most individuals forming romantic relationships experience relational dissolution (Sprecher, Zimmerman, & Fehr, 2014), and the initiator must decide the dissolution process. Originally posted in the 2006 Urban Dictionary, the term *ghosting* gained attention and popularity in verbiage and practice and continued to gain traction throughout 2014 and 2015 (Hansen-Bundy, 2016). Urban Dictionary (2006) described ghosting as "the act of disappearing on your friends without notice or cancelling plans with little or no choice." Currently, minimal academic literature on this phenomenon exists (e.g., Freedman, Powell, Le, & Williams, 2018; LeFebvre, 2017a). Beyond the folklore of Urban Dictionary, a definition is sought that requires a more developed conceptualization and understanding.

Popular press articles mention said practice, as it has emerged on the relationship forefront in association with technology and dissolution behaviors. Ghosting may reflect an old relationship dissolution strategy—avoidance; however, the mediated context offers nuances in its enactments. Popular press articles (e.g., *GQ*, *Huffington Post*, *Vogue*, etc.) cited in this study consider ghosting a contemporary dissolution strategy. Many people utilize mediated communication to initiate relationships (LeFebvre, 2017b) and thus also use technology to implement relational dissolution. This study assists to demystify and consequently define a practice that has yet to be fully understood. This study describes *what* ghosting is and situates *how* ghosting fits into the larger information and communication technologies (ICTs) and mediated interpersonal communication discussion. This extension further delineates how previous dissolution scholarship informs contemporary practices while simultaneously demonstrating how indirect ghosting strategies function differently in a mediated context.

Relationship Dissolution

In a *YouGov* survey, Americans admitted experience with ghosting both as initiator (or ghoster) and noninitiator (or ghostee; Moore, 2014).[1] Initiators are able to vanish in an accessible and highly connected society, thus impacting noninitiators. Relationship dissolution, the transition from coupling to

singlehood, occurs bilaterally (i.e., mutually initiated) or unilaterally (i.e., self-initiated or partner initiated). Bilateral breakups indicate both partners share responsibility for relationship dissolution (without a clear initiator or noninitiator), whereas, in unilateral breakups, one partner initiates dissolution. When researchers combined breakup accounts from both partners, bilateral breakups remain rare. Therefore, unilateral dissolutions more frequently exist, and the postdissolution process reflects distinct breakup roles (Doering, 2010). This study focused on initiation by one partner and reaction from one partner to another.

Distress over a breakup depends on the dissolution strategy, time since breakup, initiator role, relationship feelings, and feelings of betrayal (see Field, Diego, Pelaz, Deeds, & Delgado, 2009). Baxter (1985) determined that dissolution strategies vary along two basic dimensions (see Figure 1). The x-axis represents self- or other-orientation; this dimension indicates the degree to which an initiator protects the partner. The other-oriented approach attempts to decrease hurt by avoiding embarrassment or manipulation of the partner, whereas the self-oriented approach displays concern for self at the partner's expense. The y-axis represents indirectness and directness; this dimension refers to the extent the partner communicates the desire to exit the relationship. Direct strategies are explicit, straightforward, and candid, whereas indirect strategies are implicit,

Direct

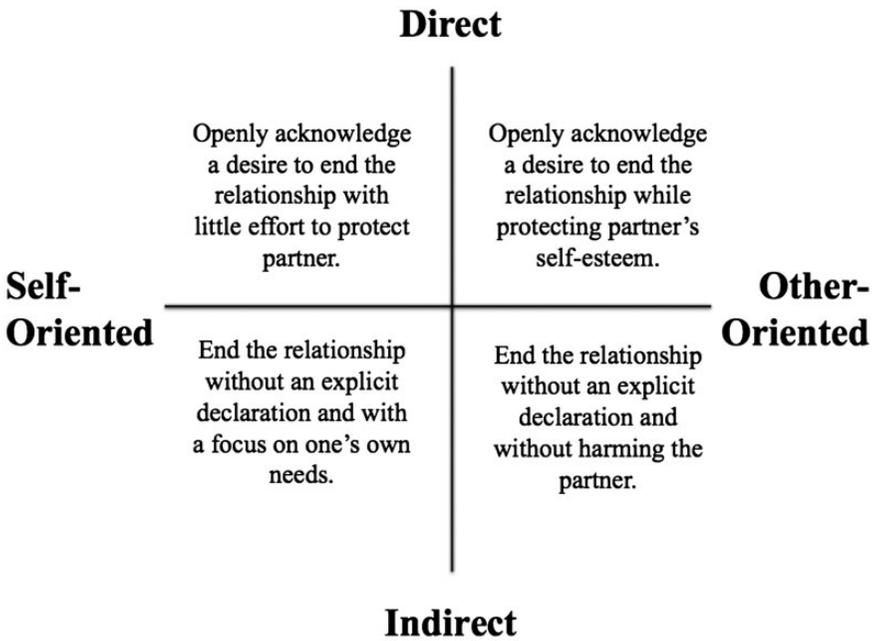| Self-Oriented | Openly acknowledge a desire to end the relationship with little effort to protect partner. | Openly acknowledge a desire to end the relationship while protecting partner's self-esteem. | Other-Oriented |
| | End the relationship without an explicit declaration and with a focus on one's own needs. | End the relationship without an explicit declaration and without harming the partner. | |

Indirect

Figure 1. Baxter's model of disengagement strategies. See Baxter (1985).

ambiguous, and unclear. The two dimensions combine to form four disengagement strategy categories (for review, see Baxter, 1985; Zimmerman, 2009). This study investigates indirect disengagement strategies of the initiator and oscillates between self- and other-orientations applied through technological affordances surrounding ghosting.

Previously, Baxter (1979) found that withdraw/avoidance tactic is a preferred strategy for casual or intimate relationship. However, Cody (1982) called into question the types of strategies individuals employ in order to disengage or dissolve their intimate relationships. As such, Cody utilized two studies to derive a five-factor typology of disengagement strategies: positive tone, justification, de-escalation, behavioral de-escalation, and negative identity management. Positive tone refers to initiators who express grief over the disengagement, or report caring, liking, or loving toward noninitiators. Justification suggests initiators provide rationale or reasons for desiring termination. De-escalation demonstrates initiators request seeing each other less. Behavioral de-escalation describes initiators withdrawal/avoidance from the target while offering no verbal statement. Negative identity management pinpoints a strong dislike for noninitiators or demonstrates a lack of concern for their feelings. Cody found that greater intimacy led to increased obligation; in turn, greater intimacy was related to more positive tone, de-escalation, and justification. Conversely, behavioral de-escalation and negative identity management indicate no explicit desire to see the partner again or even communicate. As such, these two strategies imply little regard for the noninitiator and that the termination is imminent (Cody, 1982). In sum, initiators who disengage from their relationships, especially those with lower intimacy, may feel less obligation to justify their intentions. These implications offer understanding into ghosting practices.

One indirect self-oriented strategy is *withdrawal* (Regan, 2017) that involves reducing communication frequency or intimacy without informing the partner about disengagement reasons (Baxter, 1984). Indirect strategies involve other-orientation—*fading away* does not require explicit termination, instead the initiator slowly and implicitly withdraws (Regan, 2017). Sprecher, Zimmerman, and Abraham (2010) found that direct and other-oriented strategies were kindest, whereas indirect and self-oriented were the least compassionate. Moreover, Cody (1982) highlighted behavioral de-escalation and negative identity management exemplify initiator-focused strategies that disregard noninitiators. Therefore, when applying indirect self-oriented methods from face-to-face (FtF), relationships ended without acknowledging partner concern or their feelings.

Emerging Adults

The advent of emerging mediated technologies increased access and opportunities for relationship initiation (LeFebvre, 2017b) and subsequently dating dissolution opportunities. As relationships become more multimodal, people draw

on various interactive media at different access points in their relationships. Emerging adults (EAs) frequently integrate contemporary technologies to define, clarify, and communicate relationships (Stanley, Rhoades, & Fincham, 2011).

Emerging adulthood, a transitional life course period from 18 to 29 years, is the life stage between adolescence and adulthood (Arnett, 2000, 2015). Currently, EAs have a high-level technology use, for instance, 97% own a computer and 94% a mobile smartphone (Pew Research Center, 2018). EAs have been technologically connected most of their lives, particularly throughout adolescence and early adulthood. For instance, popular social networking sites (SNS) began in the early 2000s with MySpace and Facebook (Digital Trends, 2016), and EAs grew up relying on technology and applications (e.g., Snapchat, Instagram, Facebook, etc.).

Emerging adulthood includes a period of romantic and sexual exploration, where individuals encounter increased opportunities to consider their relationships and identity (Morgan, 2012). EAs have less structured and scripted relationship development (Stanley et al., 2011). Prior traditional FtF romantic relationship searches for a partner relied on places shared in common that permitted persons to meet through closed-field partnering (e.g., church, school, and employment; see Bredow, Cate, & Huston, 2008). The development of social networking technology (i.e., Internet, phone applications, SNS, etc.) pushed relationship initiation beyond FtF contact (Collins & Gillath, 2012; LeFebvre, 2017b). While previous emerging adulthood scholarship discussed first romantic events and turning points leading toward escalation, minimal empirical research has investigated how EAs communicate and manage dissolution and how their relationships dissolve (Morgan, 2012). EAs' romantic relationships are fragile, unstable, and often terminate (Fincham & Cui, 2011; van Dulmen, Claxton, Collins, & Simpson, 2014). Approximately 70% of college students, typically EAs, have experienced a romantic relationship breakup with many experiencing multiple turnovers and instability (Knox, Zusman, & Nieves, 1998; Reifman, 2011). Breakups are emotionally painful, frequently cited among life's most distressing psychological events (Kendler, Hettema, Butera, Gardner, & Prescott, 2003; Lukacs & Quan-Haase, 2015). Emerging adulthood represents a transition time open to learning how to breakup with ICTs (Meier & Allen, 2007).

Relationship Dissolution for EAs

Weisskirch and Delevi (2013) found that dissolution, as with initiation and maintenance, is shifting to incorporate more technology, particularly for EAs. Prior findings indicate that the least caring and compassionate, indirect, self-oriented, and distancing strategies often involve actions that utilize ICTs: texting, instant messaging, voice mail, e-mail, or SNS (Sprecher et al., 2010).

Texting is utilized most frequently (Weisskirch & Delevi, 2013). Breaking up via technology may emulate avoidance via distant communication, where individuals separate themselves physically and psychologically from their partners (Sprecher et al., 2010). ICTs afford individuals easier ghosting ability (Gershon, 2010). This study explores what ghosting is.

Research Question 1 (RQ1): How is ghosting conceptualized by EAs?

Many popular press articles discussed ghosting as a relational withdrawal practice, where the initiator ends the relationship with an indirect strategy, and the noninitiator becomes hurt, lacks closure, and might confront the initiator (Borgueta, 2015). The authors define the *ghoster* as an individual initiating the disappearance or ceasing communication, whereas the noninitiator is someone who has been ghosted or *ghostee*. Individuals can enact relationship dissolution roles as initiator and noninitiator, thereby identifying with both roles. Ghosting may create ambiguity and uncertainty in noninitiators wherein they are unable to achieve closure after the indirect breakup. Particularly, if behavioral deescalation or negative identity management strategies (see Cody, 1982) are employed by the initiators. Initiators do not communicate nor explain. Noninitiators therefore must decide how to proceed when sensemaking the disengagement in an attempt to reduce uncertainty. Uncertainty in this context by noninitiators constitutes a lack of confidence about how to proceed (Berger & Bradac, 1982; Berger & Calabrese, 1975). Therefore, this study examines these roles, initiator and noninitiator, separately to determine how ghosting is enacted and observed.

This study focused on two stages: *avoiding* (removing physical connection and closing off communication channels) and *terminating* (ceasing romantic communication and dissolving the relationship; see Knapp & Vangelisti, 2010 for all five processes). The initiator, paired with technology, actively refrained from contact, and usually the noninitiator experienced uncertainty about what went wrong. Cupach and Metts (1994) critiqued the relational dissolution stages, arguing that the model failed to highlight the noninitiator in a unilateral, one-person initiated breakup. Dissolution research should further examine the unilateral process for both initiator and noninitiator and their separate processes. This study begins to address the gap in dissolution research surrounding the ghosting experience, especially as many noninitiating partners disapprove of technological dissolution, whereas initiators may prefer it. The following questions explore the intersection of technology surrounding the interpersonal dissolution process of ghosting for both initiator and noninitiator.

Research Question 2 (RQ2): How (A) and why (B) do EA initiators enact ghosting?

Research Question 3 (RQ3): How do EA noninitiators observe ghosting?

Method

This inductive exploratory investigation offers the ability to understand how individuals have experienced ghosting. The methodology provides grounds for constructing meaning through an interpretative process. The open-ended questions illuminate respondents' personalized accounts of ghosting, the communicative process for each role, and the emergent implications therein.

Sample

Participants ($N = 99$) were EAs ranging from 18 to 30 ($M = 22.16$, standard deviation $[SD] = 0.49$, $Mdn = 21$).[2] Ethnicities included 86.9% Caucasian, 5.1% multiracial, 4% Hispanic, 2% African American, and 2% Asian American. Education levels varied: 33.3% high school diploma/GED equivalent, 18.2% associates, 35.4% baccalaureates, 6.1% masters, 1% doctoral, and 5.1% other (e.g., some college, technical degrees, or unidentified). They resided in 48.5% rural, 38.4% suburban, and 13.1% urban.

Participants identified as 61.6% females and 38.4% males. Participants self-identified sexual orientations as 92.9% mixed sex, 3% same sex, 3% bisexual, and 1% unidentified.[3] On average, participants experienced two relationships ($M = 2.19$, $SD = 1.33$) in their dating history, which ranged from zero to five relationships. Relational status consisted of 33.3% not in a relationship, 31.3% committed relationship (one person), 9.1% married, 10.1% casually dating (multiple people), 7.1% never been in a romantic relationship, 5.1% casually dating (one person), 3% separated, and 1% engaged. Participants checked-all-that-apply for relationship initiation modes through their relationship history: 96% face-to-face, 46.5% mobile dating applications, 18.2% online sites, 13.1% blind dating, 2% speed dating, and 3% unidentified.

Procedures

EA undergraduate and graduate students[4] ($N = 18$) enrolled in an advanced interpersonal communication course assisted in data collection to fulfill a course requirement at a mid-sized mountain university. Following the University's Institutional Review Board approval, students received training on collection procedures. Each student recruited approximately five individuals utilizing both convenience and snowball sampling strategies. *Anyone familiar with the ghosting phenomenon was eligible*;[5] many participants recruited from their immediate personal and social networks of EAs with any sexual orientation. See the next note[6] for further clarification about the eligibility—inclusion and exclusion processes.

Participants voluntarily arranged a time to meet with researchers FtF or via technological media (e.g., Skype, Facetime, etc.) to allow for recordability of their responses. Participants unfamiliar with ghosting or outside the age

requirements were excluded. Thus, *only* those participants familiar with the ghosting phenomenon were eligible. After completing a consent form and demographic survey, participants were prompted to answer open- and closed-ended questions about whether they had experienced ghosting as initiator, noninitiator, or both. Those participants who had *not* participated as initiator or noninitiator were eliminated from the remainder of the survey.

Participants answered open-ended questions that included: "Why did you choose to ghost another?" "Why did you choose to ghost rather than directly indicate your intentions?" and "When did you decide (or at what point) to ghost?" Then, participants answered questions about ghosting from their perspective as a noninitiator. Open-ended questions read, "Why do you think you were ghosted (in the past)?" "What do you feel are the reasons or motivations as to why you were ghosted?" and "In what specific conditions (e.g., time of day, location, etc.) or mediums (e.g., text, Facebook, FtF, etc.) did the ghosting occur?" Participants were asked one final question, "After completing the survey, is there anything we should consider about the ghosting experience that we have not asked you?" Participants could clarify any information.

Analysis

This study employed thematic analysis and descriptive statistics to analyze the findings. We qualitatively reviewed participants' responses for thematic qualities utilizing analytic induction (Bulmer, 1979). Results identified how participants conceptualized ghosting (RQ1), why and how initiators enacted ghosting (RQ2), and how noninitiators observed ghosting (RQ3). All participants were included in the conceptualization of ghosting to answer RQ1 but not for RQ2 to RQ3. Only those participants that were familiar with the initiator (RQ2) and noninitiator roles (RQ3) were included for each question. Initially, the undergraduate and graduate students transcribed screening questions, and then the primary researcher and a graduate student read through the transcriptions to ensure clarity and accuracy with the recorded interviews and open-ended responses. Screening and open-ended survey responses were open coded, which allowed sharing and discussion of all experiences. This process was first completed individually by all researchers. Undergraduate, graduate students, and primary experienced researchers outlined possible responses from that discussion, whereby groupings started to emerge. From these groupings, we performed axial coding, which helped to identify codes that created linkages between data and themes, and themes that formulated a coding scheme. After reviewing the themes and discussing similarities and differences, we ensured that all data fit into the coding scheme—the primary researcher and graduate student designed a coding scheme. The undergraduate and graduate students then tested the coding scheme to ensure all data fit. Some modifications were necessary to

collapse, integrate, and finalize the coding scheme. Grammatical errors in responses were corrected.

Results and Preliminary Discussion

Results and discussion are intertwined to consider the findings and simultaneously interpret their meaning in relation to the larger interpersonal and technological frameworks. To delineate the findings, RQ1 provides the holistic conceptualization of ghosting including all responses from participants, RQ2 explores the initiator perspective determining how and why they performed ghosting, and RQ3 provides the noninitiator perspective.

Conceptualizing Ghosting (RQ1)

Participants conceptualized ghosting and indicated ghosting was avoidance or withdrawal strategy, primarily enacted using mediated communication. The ghosting phenomenon remained fairly ambiguous, yet encompassed synonyms such as avoid, disappear, disengage, exit, separate, or stop.[7] A 19-year-old female articulated:

> . . . Ghosting is essentially the act of not returning someone's calls, messages, essentially cutting off all contact with that person, whether that is in an [old] relationship or a new relationship. In the end, it just removes you from the relationship all together.

Participants expressed that ghosting was undesirable or surrounded misunderstood behavior(s) online, off-line, or in multiple modalities early in relationship development. A 21-year-old female expressed, "... You want to have more control of the situation. You want them to be the person to do it so you don't have any regrets . . . " Initiators control the exit in ghosting by applying the use of ICTs.

Participants frequently discussed the use of technology with the ghosting phenomenon. As a 23-year-old female noted, "I definitely think it's appropriate if you like find someone on like Tinder. You start talking for a little bit but you're not into it, you can just start ghosting them." Affordances garnered through technology provide a new platform for ghosting representing that someone is there but also not (only a form remains of what was). Ghosting was enacted through private media (e.g., mobile phone, e-mail, or voice mail) or public venues (e.g., SNS). Participants utilized mobile communication (texting) as a frequent medium for ghosting. When partners did initiate communication or showed a lack of texting, calling, *Snapchat*, *Tinder*, or FtF communication, ghosting became evident. Basically, participants retrospectively noted that initiators made less time for them or provided no response (e.g., "When I text her

the next day saying that we 'had fun' last night and I was looking forward to seeing her again. No responses for a few days = ghosted!"). Often ghosting was enacted one-on-one in private media. A 29-year-old female described ghosting as, "When you completely cut off all contact with someone. Whether it is social media, phone, [or] avoiding them in person." Ghosting predominantly occurred through a mediated context, and in rare cases, initiators physically disappeared (e.g., "Going to bed alone in the apartment we rented for the third time in a row," said a 22-year-old male). As noted by another 22-year-old male, "Ghosting 'began' late at night, and all mediums of communication were impacted, online, over text, and face-to-face." Throughout mediated platforms, ghosting occurred at any time, day or night, at the initiator's discretion. Initiator's decided how to enact ghosting and when to avoid or reduce communication via technological platform—limiting communication both FtF access and other SNS contact.

Many accounts offered by participants, from both initiators and noninitiators, exemplified behavioral de-escalation and negative identity management strategies (Cody, 1982) concurrently and sequentially occurring—initiator withdraws from noninitiator without any verbal confirmation, all communication is simply cutoff by initiator, and the initiator demonstrates a lack of concern for the noninitiator. To summarize, in ghosting situations, communication ceased without warning, either suddenly or via gradual reductions initiated through or with assistance from mediated contexts. Drawing from the participants' responses, the authors determined a definition to conceptualize ghosting. Although the authors recognize the popular use of ghosting, this conceptualization offers a definitive definition that extends popularized media phenomena. This definition extends the layperson definition as it brings to the forefront ghosting initiation that originates through mediated communication. Therefore, the authors offer this definition for the verb, ghosting.

> Ghosting: 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).

Descriptives

Participants responded to whether they experienced ghosting as initiator, non-initiator, or both roles. They reported 29.3% initiator (ghoster), 25.3% non-initiator (ghostee), 44.2% both roles, and 4% no role. The four (4%) participants who were familiar with, but not experiencing, ghosting were excluded for RQ2 to RQ3. The majority of participants (74%) indicated that ghosting was an inappropriate breakup strategy. Initiators ($n = 69$) on average had

ghosted 3.65 ($SD = 2.84$) times (range from 1 to 12), while noninitiators had been ghosted 2.39 ($SD = 1.79$) times (range from 1 to 10). Noninitiators ($n = 67$) experienced the last ghosting anywhere from 1 week to 9 years ago ($M = 26.01$, $SD = 28.25$, $Mdn = 12$ months). Interestingly, participants' experiences paralleled the genesis and adoption of online dating, mobile dating apps, and 4G mobile communication.

How the Initiator Enacts Ghosting (RQ2A)

Initiators described decision-making dissolution processes. Three themes emerged: (a) *selecting a medium*, (b) *choosing the interval to implement*, and (c) *implementing dissolution permanency*.

Individuals maintained differing medium preferences when ghosting. The medium involved a strategic choice to utilize a mediated context. A 22-year-old female noted that ". . . ghosting has occurred entirely on Facebook, which incidentally, is where we met." Sometimes the initiation of the communication or relationship paralleled the dissolution. Another participant, a 27-year-old male, stated, "I was just talking to her on Tinder and stopped talking to her." He had met the potential partner through Tinder and felt no need to continue communication, thus ceasing the initiation process of a relationship. The lack of obligation to maintain contact could be a reason why individuals find ghosting without FtF initiation easier to accomplish.

Participants noted that ghosting occurred along an *interval* from sudden to gradual (on a continuum). Sudden ghosting appeared as halting or stopping, whereas gradual ghosting involved slowing or fading intervals. Sudden ghosting, represented by a 20-year-old female, ". . . you are going to ghost, don't text the person. I would not text the person back, I would drop them completely." Two females noted that expedience determined dissolution: "I think you could slowly drift apart and stop talking but I don't know if that's really ghosting. So maybe it's more out of the blue and sudden," or "I think the person decided they weren't interested. Instead of letting me know; it's easier for them to let the relationship 'fizzle' and slowly disappear or stop talking/responding." Unlike the sudden ghosting, a gradual ghosting slowly decreases communication over a period of time and extends uncertainty during the dissolution process.

Ghosting occurred as *permanency* along a continuum from the short term (i.e., ephemeral) to long term (i.e., permanent). Short-term ghosting transpired around situational factors (e.g., vacations, travel, or inebriation) or less innocuous or intentional rationale (e.g., distraction or forgetfulness). As one 29-year-old male stated, "If I ghost them, yeah, it's like a temporary shutdown just for the time being." Technology provides the ability for easy access; however, participants noted that does not mean they cannot disappear or cease communication as needed. Long-term ghosting from a 24-year-old male meant, "I would consider ghosting is going like cold turkey and quit talking to a girl completely, just shut

her out of your life." Permanent dissolution denies resurrection or the hope that communication between partners (or relationships) would come back to life. Ghosting allows initiators to determine, temporary to permanent status, or the degree for ending communication with the noninitiator. Ghosting primarily resides at the end points without much latitude between—either without intention (permanent) or temporary (based on current convenient). Noninitiators did not often recognize forewarning from initiators along the continuum which created no ability to decrease uncertainty.

To summarize, ghosting for the initiator frequently occurred as a sudden action. The action is meant to permanently cease communication between initiator and noninitiator.

Why the Initiator Enacts Ghosting (RQ2B)

Participants who initiated ghosting discussed why. Five themes emerged: *convenience*, *attractiveness*, *negatively valenced interaction*, *relationship state*, and *safety*. The first theme, *convenience* refers to participants favoring practicality of ghosting over other dissolution strategies. An 18-year-old male explained, "I wanted a way to end the relationship that did not involve anything face-to-face. It was easier this way . . . . " A 22-year-old male said, "Ghosting was easier to do rather than setting up a time to end the relationship or deal with the emotions of either myself or the current partner." Thus, ghosting provided a more convenient alternative than FtF dissolution.

The second theme, *attraction* refers to the selection process centering on physical, emotional, or intellectual appeal. Relationship initiation on online dating and mobile apps facilitates access to more dating and mating opportunities, thereby expanding information available (e.g., appearance, occupation, interests, etc.) and delaying initial FtF interaction (Bredow et al., 2008). Gate features help users decide to approach or avoid potential partners (Regan, 2017). A 25-year-old male expressed his ghosting strategy, "When the attraction to the person becomes nonexistent and you can tell that it is not going to be a good match." Ghosting may occur as virtual proximity provides access to potential partners beyond physical constraints, widening the field, and increasing accessibility (LeFebvre, 2017b; Regan, 2017) but not decreasing the limited or minimal desire to commit or maintain a relationship. Some participants described their lack of attraction varying from immediate to gradual—demonstrating a loss of investment or increased boredom. For instance, a 21-year-old male said, "I chose to ghost because I was no longer interested and the relationship wasn't serious enough to warrant a more personal medium." Interest did not exist; therefore, avoidance via technological outlets appeared the easiest exit.

The next theme, *negatively valenced interaction* summarized participants' disinterest after unfavorable behaviors from the noninitiator. Commonly, the

initiator expressed negative interactions that caused anger, frustration, or toxicity. These interactions produced the tendency for the initiator to desire withdrawal leading to dissolution and no further communication. A 22-year-old male said, "A change in someone's feelings towards the other person, maybe an embarrassment or a sudden distaste for another person that they'd rather not actually, like, discuss or confront," justified the decision to ghost. Ghosting afforded an acceptable strategy to avoid uncomfortable or negative interactions.

The fourth theme, *relationship state* refers to the type (e.g., romantic partner, friends, or acquaintances) and length (e.g., amount of time). Ghosting occurred across a variety of relationship types rather than acknowledging the end or change to relationship status (e.g., romantic to platonic); sometimes initiators opted to neglect the relationship outright. Transitional changes included shifts in relationship type, from an acquaintance or platonic relationship to a romantic relationship, which often led to ghosting rather than a difficult define-the-relationship conversation. When initiators enacted ghosting, they considered the time investment and involvement in the relationship. For example, a 27-year-old female said, "I chose to do it because I had only been on one date and did not wish to continue to lead him on but felt awkward having that conversation so I instead just stopped talking to him." She used a singular interaction (a date) to define what she believed to be the appropriate amount of time to ghost a potential partner. A 21-year-old male expressed:

> I mean if you get someone's number on a Saturday night and you start talking to them and then by like Wednesday they're being a little weird. I guess that's fine to stop talking to them but I mean I think if you're actually going to date someone for awhile, then at least have the common courtesy to say hey I don't want to do this anymore.

This participant refers to an appropriate time line for ghosting. A brief period of communication was not considered a significant enough amount of time to require a formal breakup and thus ghosting was the chosen dissolution strategy. Alternatively, when a relationship had formed and a couple dated for an amount of time, ghosting was no longer considered a fitting dissolution strategy. The proper time depended on the relationship type and length and fluctuated depending on the medium in which the interaction originated.

The last theme, *safety* involved questions surrounding security, dangerous situations, self-protection, or personal well-being. Ghosting allows individuals a practical, easy way to ensure safety. One 21-year-old explained, "fear of the person going crazy," warranted the decision to ghost especially "if somebody's being like inappropriate, creepy, or weird" (female, 18-years-old). Another participant indicated that when personal safety is threatened, ghosting was suitable. Ceasing communication through technological media provided a feeling of

safety that in-person interactions did not. Overall, initiators provided rationalizations for enacting ghosting.

How the Noninitiator Observes Ghosting (RQ3)

When experiencing ghosting, noninitiators emphasized how and when they knew ghosting had occurred, and whether they were forewarned. Three themes, *modified communication, lessening interest,* or *change in relationship status* emerged.

The noninitiator recognized *modified communication* patterns through three potential sources: *absenteeism in communication, inadequate reciprocity*, and *epiphanic communication*. Noninitiators' discussion of enacted ghosting time line varied greatly from one to multiple nonresponses on one medium or several media. The time spanned over hours, days, and months. Participants expressed understanding that ghosting may involve multiple communication forms. Most often, the initiator ceased communication. For instance, *absenteeism in communication* is where initiators become absent in all media and communication. In addition, initiator communication may decrease gradually rather than abruptly creating *inadequate reciprocity* in communication. Noninitiators realized dissolution changing from normative to irregular communication patterns. A 22-year-old female expressed, "They would not make an effort to start conversation and would give me one-word responses. They would also only sometimes respond to me or text me." Another noninitiator, a 29-year-old male, indicated the dissolution was not clear:

> I was not sure initially. This young woman was very quiet, introvert (seemingly), so when I didn't hear anything for a day I wasn't too concerned. But thought after a day when I didn't hear from her that it was a strange that she didn't respond. Even with a quick text, "Yeah that was fun and we will talk soon/I will see you soon."

After nothing for 48 hours, he figured it was over. His partner decreased in reciprocity until none existed. Modified communication stimulated either immediate or retrospective insights or *epiphanic communication*. A revelation retrospectively identified relationship dissolution. Retrospectively, noninitiators realized the initiator communicated an intention—because noninitiator messages were unanswered and ignored. A 25-year-old female said, "I knew from the moment that I received his text and then I never heard anything from him again. I never got a reason for why he wanted to end things . . . " Modified communication patterns prompted uncertainty, leaving noninitiators to navigate the consequences.

Contrarily, noninitiators observed *lessening interest* to various degrees. Relational de-escalation may forewarn the termination. One 25-year-old female described, "I had to buy my own drinks after dinner," while a 21-year-

old female stated, "We talked about how our relationship was not going any-
where . . . " Participants did not anticipate indirect technological withdrawal or
ghosting—the forewarning was not exclusive to mediated communication rather
transpired through multiple mediated and FtF communication. A 20-year-old
female said, "I knew that he was not entirely happy with the speed of the rela-
tionship, so I knew something was bound to happen. I did not expect ghosting,
though." Without explicit forewarning, noninitiators were unlikely to expect
ghosting but felt the decrease in intimacy, connection, or attentiveness.
Noninitiators discussed instances where no forewarning occurred; partners van-
ished without trace from technological media and physical forums, often
simultaneously.

Noninitiators experienced indirect notions of ghosting through partners'
change in relationship status on a mediated platform. EAs exploring dating
may have one or more relational partners, pursuing other options before
making a longer term selection. Therefore, ghosting may easily dissolve relation-
ships with multiple partners through noncommunication. Several participants
noted that the previous partners' relationship status changed from "single" to
"in a relationship." Only "When they got into a relationship with someone else,"
did a 22-year-old female realize she had been ghosted. Ghosting became trans-
parent when the noninitiator, via a public technological venue, became aware of
a commitment to another person.

Summative Discussion

Ghosting describes a relationship dissolution strategy enabled through mediated
communication. Nuances afforded by emerging social networking and technol-
ogies alter the means and methods for interpersonal communication; as many
relationships start via technology, the ability to dissolve via the same medium is
desirable for EA initiators.

In this section, we expand the results by offering larger contributions and
implications. To begin, we delineate how ghosting intersects with two theoretical
frameworks, relationship dissolution theory and imagined interactions. From
these discussions, a conceptual distinction is offered to highlight unique differ-
ences embodied in ghosting. We answer questions about how ghosting deviates
from relationship constructions and meets interpersonal communication con-
ceptualizations. Last, we offer practical and relationship implications, limita-
tions and future directions, and conclude with the discussion of the digital
dissolution disappearance strategy.

Relationship Dissolution Theory

Ghosting resembles withdrawal and avoidance dissolution strategies, although it
exclusively focuses on indirect strategies through mediated channels.

Specifically, Baxter (1984) outlined the relationship dissolution theory that includes the complex path for both partners. She identified six features: timeliness (i.e., sudden or gradual), role (i.e., initiator or noninitiator), action (i.e., direct or indirect), negotiation (i.e., rapid or protracted), repair ability (i.e., present or absent), and outcome (i.e., continuation or termination). She later connected the features to disengagement strategies (see Baxter, 1985). Similarly, Cody (1982) expanded on Baxter's (1979) understanding by offering behavioral de-escalation and negative identity management strategies that indicated little or no regard for noninitiators. Drawing on previous scholarship, this study connects ghosting to previous dissolution theory and strategies. Previously, Baxter (1985) examined both initiators, direct or indirect orientations, while Cody (1982) offered a typology to better understand the distinctions between initiators and noninitiators. The present findings narrow in on the indirect disengagement strategies from the initiator's perspective. Ghosting strategies operate only in indirect quadrants, as ghosting uses specific media to formulate four specific indirect ghosting dissolution strategies.

We concentrate on two new indirect dimensions that combine to form four ghosting disengagement strategy categories (see Figure 2). The new *x*-axis represents *permanency* (short term to long term) indicating the degree or time period in which dissolution exists. Short term, or temporary ghosting, appears to operate
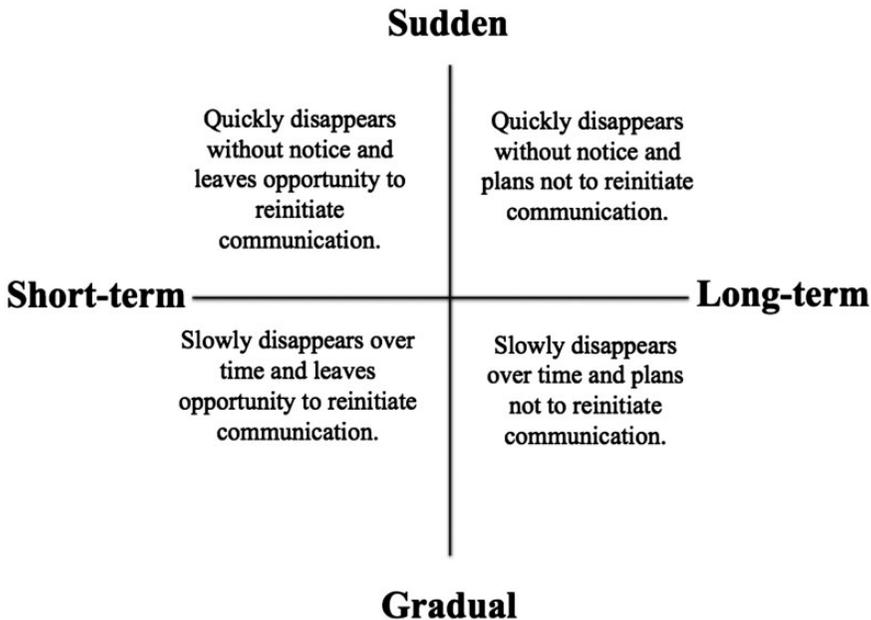

Sudden

Quickly disappears without notice and leaves opportunity to reinitiate communication.

Quickly disappears without notice and plans not to reinitiate communication.

Short-term ———— **Long-term**

Slowly disappears over time and leaves opportunity to reinitiate communication.

Slowly disappears over time and plans not to reinitiate communication.

Gradual

Figure 2. Indirect ghosting disengagement strategies.

based on the initiators' desires (e.g., self-oriented), whereas, in the long term, initiators chose to terminate the relationship without providing any lingering hope or leaving an opening to rekindle the relationship with the partner (e.g., other-oriented). These orientations take into consideration Baxter's (1985) self- and other-oriented quadrants. The y-axis overlays the *execution* (indirectness to directness); specifically, it represents the interval initiators who choose to dissolve from sudden to gradual. The sudden strategy is closer to a direct strategy, although initiators do not specifically communicate to the noninitiator. The gradual strategy applies an indirect approach, opting out of any confrontation, by slowly de-escalating the quality and quantity of communication.

This extension further delineates how previous dissolution scholarship informs contemporary practices while simultaneously demonstrating how indirect ghosting strategies function differently in a mediated context.

Imagined Interactions

These findings offer distinctions between how initiators enact and noninitiators observe ghosting. Ghosting offers a sequential process, especially in mediated asynchronous communication; the delay may offer cognitive space between initiator and noninitiator exchanges. Imagined interactions (IIs) may inform processes between intrapersonal and interpersonal communication in this context (Honeycutt, 2003, 2019). In IIs, proactivity and discrepancy represent social cognitive and communication conversational characteristics. Proactivity illustrates the intrapersonal communication prior to an anticipated experience (Honeycutt, 2003, 2010), whereas discrepancy describes how closely intrapersonal communication aligns with the actual communicative outcomes or the incongruence (Honeycutt, 2003, 2010). Although other IIs characteristics also describe IIs, these two characteristics inform the anticipation of an interaction and the disappointment from the discrepancy.

For instance, noninitiators may perceive the communication progressing toward a relationship. Again Figure 2 begins to offer initial distinctions between the types of ghosting. From these distinctions, this figure could determine how the level of distress may vary for initiator and noninitiator. For noninitiators who may have already begun to engage in proactive IIs, their outcomes might be highly discrepant as the initiator may have prematurely ended the relationship without the noninitiators knowledge. IIs help create relationship expectations and can keep relationships alive, especially by replaying prior emotions and conversations or rehearsing anticipated encounters. Noninitiators' expectations build from intrapersonal communication and may help maintain the notion of a relationship through inadequate reciprocity, lessening interest, or absenteeism that does not exist.

Specifically for noninitiators, the anticipated imagined interaction regrettably continues as an intrapersonal dialogue. Thus, noninitiators may develop

discrepant IIs through unrealized and unresolved communication developed in proactivity without interpersonal communication.

Conceptual Distinction—Communication or Relationship

In the conceptualization of ghosting, we implicitly assume the existence of a relationship and what constitutes the minimum standard for being a relationship. Unlike previous scholarship which often posits relationship dissolution as withdrawal and avoidance posited within a relationship context. Relationship dissolution scholars have focused on interpersonal relationships and communication practices within the relationship without specifically asking what constitutes a *relationship*. Thus we ask: Does the use of ICTs afford opportunities for *interpersonal communication* without a *relationship?* We argue yes. Dissolution does not mandate a relationship rather only interpersonal communication. When considering our findings, interpersonal scholars must further specify the quality and quantity of communication exchanged. As participants' interactions suggested, ghosting occurred frequently in shallow relationships or those with low-level intimacy and a short time length from the initiator's perspective. The initiator and noninitiator may differ as to whether a relationship existed particularly when ghosting occurs in the early initiation stage. Interpersonal communication occurs prior to ghosting, but the perception that a relationship has been dissolved may differ depending on the perspective. When further conceptualizing ghosting, merit exists to better understand whether a relationship existed or rather only interpersonal communication. Miller and Steinberg (1975) suggested that relationships progress along a developmental continuum from noninterpersonal to interpersonal. Often relationships begin noninterpersonally, impersonally, or nonintimately, and only social interactions qualify as interpersonal (Miller & Steinberg, 1975). Relationships are locatable at a particular stage of development because of discernable ways of communicating, even during the initiation process at impersonal, shallow, or low-level commitment to more interpersonal intimacy and established higher level commitment. Ghosting questions whether a relationship is locatable in its absence. Although the establishment of a relationship may still be in question, this does not discount ghosting as a dissolution strategy. Thereby, clarifying these conceptualization distinctions or determining different levels within initiation and developing processes may warrant when ghosting is culturally inappropriate. Furthermore, further distinctions may provide practical recommendations for mediated ghosting implementation and practices.

Practical and Relational Implications

Ghosting may cause uncertainty and pain for both initiators and noninitiators, as ghosting is a form of social rejection. The subsequent romantic breakup can

be emotionally distressing (Kendler et al., 2003). Meanings people derive from their communication help determine their understanding of relationships and simultaneously their associated uncertainty.

Ghosting can hurt and help both partners. If individuals are unable to directly confront their partner, Sciortino (2015) offered a differentiation between ghosting and soft ghosting, which occurs when an individual disappears in a relationship but with reasonable forewarning (as reflected in the indirect other-oriented strategy, fading away). Forewarning may be a secondary option to direct confrontation, as indirect forewarning still provides at least some retrospective behavioral justification for noninitiators. Relationship partners do not always accurately report their dissolution initiation; however, initiators may consider how best to save their partner's face (Sprecher et al., 2014).

Ambiguous loss refers to uncertainty without finality or resolution that remains unclear (Boss, 2007). Individuals use communication as a means of acquiring information and decreasing uncertainty. Ghosting lacks guidelines on how to react, as the noninitiator does not always know why the initiator is not responding. Questions may arise, in which noninitiators wonder why they became victims and what caused the sudden quiet treatment, such as: "What did I do to cause this?" "What is wrong with me?" and "Why was I unable to read the situation?" Noninitiators do not obtain closure or the ability to learn from internal inadequacies or situational contexts and are no longer with a partner rather possibly experiencing abandonment and ostracism. Ghosting creates ambiguity and uncertainty in the noninitiators denying closure after the indirect breakup (LeFebvre, 2017a). Ambiguity freezes the grief process. Previously conceptualized, ambiguous loss refers to physical absence with psychological presence or psychological absence with physical presence (Boss, 2007); ghosting now enables physical and psychological absence with technological presence (LeFebvre, 2017b).

Limitations and Future Directions

Advent of new and emerging technologies increases generational differences and gaps in relational experiences. Current EAs appear to have less structured and scripted relationship development patterns (Stanley et al., 2011). Emerging adulthood is a training ground for navigating interpersonal relationships and determines how individuals communicate their relationship understanding throughout their lives and applies technological etiquette (McDaniel & Coyne, 2014; Veksler & Meyer, 2014). Future research should further examine the dissolution strategies per generational partitions by illuminating how the ghosting phenomenon has changed with current EAs versus people from generations prior to the Internet and SNS. In addition, this study uses a specific population derived from a convenience community sample. Participants may change their ability to apply ghosting strategies depending on life span

variations (e.g., socioeconomics, sexual orientation, location, etc.). Ghosting may be an emerging adulthood term; hence, the frequency and prevalence may change. Future research should examine the experiences beyond romantic dissolution contexts.

Individuals experiencing ghosting are often left without closure and ask themselves questions about the ended relationship. As technological dissolution lacks immediacy, individuals often have few options to seek information and reduce their uncertainty. Future studies should examine the uncertainty of noninitiators experience, specifically how uncertainty determines noninitiators' experience in the dissolution process. Mutual friends or overlaps in social networks are limited and do not enable individuals to find evidence supporting assumptions and diminishing lingering emotions. Future research should examine the information-seeking following ghosting as a means to adapt to the uncertainty and IIs discrepancy. Furthermore, the uncertainty ghosting prompts may cause internalized noninitiator self-blame. Future research should explore how perpetual uncertainty functions through blame and internal attributions. Multiple noninitiator experiences may result in perpetual uncertainty leaving individuals with psychological distress. Retroactive IIs may cause people to relive conversations or mitigate reminiscence on communication that never occurred through IIs (Honeycutt, 2019). Further research should explore associations between uncertainty and attributions, and how noninitiators recover from ghosting, the effects on future relationship initiations, and impacts of subsequent ghosting. In addition, further research should explore mediating factors in the previous state of the relationship (e.g., commitment, length, intensity, investment, trust, etc.) to determine antecedents and outcomes of ghosting.

This study indicates *new terminology* (albeit not a new process) for indirect disengagement processes within relational scholarship scripts; however, future research should examine the previous conceptualizations associated with dissolution and differentiations for variations of ghosting. Individuals rotate through relational stages with the same person repeatedly, as with on/off relationships. On-again/off-again relationships are relationships where multiple transitions occur that include breakups and renewals as well as other turning points (Dailey, Brody, LeFebvre, & Crook, 2013). Similarly, ghosting alludes to relationship temporary dissolution, which may resemble on/off relationships, or referred to as—haunting. For others, ghosting often does not allow for further interaction with a previous partner but may allow for a persistent mediated presence and continued communication with less investment via technological interaction. This practice ultimately enables the ability for initiators to resurrect a relationship when convenient or zombie-ing. These extensions of ghosting have not arisen in common and popular media vernacular surrounding ghosting. The nuances between permanent dissolution (i.e., ghosting), recurrence (i.e., haunting), and possible relationship resurrection (i.e., zombie-ing) should be examined in conjunction with the dissolution and reinitiation time line

(see *Guardian* by Haynes, 2017, or *Cosmopolitan* by Smothers, 2017). Future research should continue to explore nuances from and to dissolution scholarship and assess the construct in which ghosting differs from interpersonal avoidance.

Conclusion

The ghosting phenomenon involves avoiding and disengaging from a relationship as initiated first through mediated forms. Ghosting became the term that EAs use to describe their modus operandi of mediated relationship dissolution. In ghosting, the relationship dissolution process involves vanishing without notice, which equates to avoidance. EAs must decide to enact ghosting by direct or indirect strategies, FtF, or via technology. This study aimed to further clarify the connections to previous relationship dissolution literature—although ghosting is closely related to previous scholarship, novel distinctions exist. Ghosting commonly leaves the noninitiator with questions or uncertainty, while the ghoster or initiator disappears. Conceptualizing the ghosting phenomena in romantic relationships demonstrates evolving relationship processes while adapting to emerging ICTs that offer digital affordances to escape unwanted relationships without ever having to breakup.

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Notes

1. Ghosters and ghostees are colloquial terms used to refer to initiators and noninitiators. Moreover, the use of popular culture terminology parallels other relationship dissolution literature (e.g., Doering, 2010) where initiators are coined dump*ers* and noninitiators are dump*ees*.
2. The sample fits within the purview of qualitative interviews and thematic analyses. Sandelowski (1995) argued for the sample size to be small enough to manage material and large enough to provide nuanced understanding of the experience. This sample fits the large category for screening interviews (6 to 10) and moderate category for

participant-generated text (greater than 50) for thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Thereby, small for quantitative analyses, yet appropriate for this exploratory qualitative study.

3. The authors assessed gender identity and sexual orientation. Blair (2014) recommended that relationship researchers become more inclusive of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer populations by including sexual identity (gay, lesbian, straight, queer, bisexual, etc.) and sexual orientation (mixed sex, same sex, bisexual, queer, or other). The authors added inclusivity using mixed sex to avoid the gender binary used with opposite-sex linguistics.

4. The authors utilized the same recruitment strategies utilized in a previous study's methodological approach (e.g., Myers, Goodboy, & Members of COMM 201, 2013).

5. Participants (7.1%) reported never being in a romantic relationship. Ghosting only occurs in the context of a "relationship," these participants were still included as they only needed to be familiar with the phenomenon, even if they did not experience it firsthand.

6. The inclusion criteria or screening helped determine eligibility for study participation. The survey included detailed specifics about ghosting for each role. If the participants had no knowledge of the ghosting phenomenon, they were excluded.

7. Ghosting terminologies do not exclusively refer to relationship dissolution; our participants acknowledged other meanings for ghosting exist. A small minority of participants (<5%) who described ghosting differently (i.e., bathroom behavior, paranormal phenomena, party leaving, or vaping) were excluded.

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