



What is (not) ghosting? A theoretical analysis via three key pillars

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ABSTRACT

Ghosting, unilaterally ceasing communication without providing any explanation, has emerged as a prevalent and perplexing form of relationship dissolution. Despite its increasing occurrence, existing definitions of ghosting remain inconclusive and occasionally contradictory. Theoretical frameworks such as relationship dissolution and social exclusion models are in some ways appropriate for understanding ghosting but fail to provide a fully comprehensive understanding. This theoretical analysis addresses the gaps by delineating the specificities and boundaries of ghosting through three key pillars. First (1), we examine the nature of the social connections and types of relationships in which ghosting occurs, as dissolution dynamics differ across romantic partnerships, friendships, or professional relationships. Second (2), we investigate technology's (potentially) pivotal role in ghosting, considering whether ghosting is as contemporary as the terminology suggests. Third, we explore the temporal elements of ghosting (3) discussing the suddenness and definitiveness of ghosting events. Based on this theoretical analysis, we propose the following renovated definition of ghosting: *Ghosting is a form of ostracism predominantly enacted through digital technology that consists of a unilateral, sudden or gradual cease of communication without explanation to end a meaningful relationship definitively*. Additionally, we discuss neighboring phenomena (e.g., orbiting, breadcrumbing) that are closely similar but distinguishable from ghosting. Lastly, we emphasize the subjectivity of ghosting experiences, highlighting perceptual gaps between ghosters and those being ghosted ('ghostees'). With this contribution, we present a theoretical framework for studying ghosting and establish the groundwork for future research, facilitating a better comprehension of ghosting's definition within various relationship contexts.

In the ever-evolving landscape of digital communication, the ease of connecting with others often paradoxically accompanies a rise in instances of abrupt social disconnection. Recently, the phenomenon of ghosting has become increasingly prevalent. This form of relationship dissolution involves the unilateral cease of communication and frequently leads to several negative consequences for the other party. Compared to other dissolution strategies, indeed, ghosting brings about extraordinary levels of uncertainty and ambiguity that tend to generate prolonged suffering for the person ghosted (Leckfor et al., 2023; LeFebvre & Fan, 2020; Pancani et al., 2021, 2022). Despite its adverse effects, ghosting has emerged as a seemingly prevalent phenomenon. While, to our knowledge, no comprehensive study of the prevalence of ghosting at a global level is available, previous studies have measured what percentage of participants declared to have ghosted or have been ghosted; results are reported in Table 1.

While estimates seem to differ substantially by study, relationship, and role, these data suggest that ghosting is a prevalent phenomenon. Given its prevalence and negative impact, investigating the phenomenon, both empirically and theoretically, is urgent. One aspect that we consider particularly important is the definition and conceptualization of the phenomenon.

Many scholars have constructed a definition of ghosting (e.g., Jonason et al., 2021; Kay & Courtice, 2022; Koessler et al., 2019; LeFebvre et al., 2019). These definitions agree on one crucial aspect about ghosting: The decision to dissolve the relationship and cease all communication is *unilateral*. Consequently, in talking about ghosting, the ghosting initiator is often referred to as the *ghoster*, whereas the person being ghosted is referred to as the *ghostee* (Mehta, 2019). Despite this commonality, existing conceptualizations of ghosting remain elusive, with inconclusive definitions. Through an extensive,

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Table 1
Ghosting frequency rates in prior studies.

Study	Sample size (N)	Surveyed population	Has ghosted	Has been ghosted
Freedman et al. (2019)	Study 1: N = 554; Study 2: N = 247; Study 3: N = 747	United States. Via MTurk and Prolific – no further inclusion criteria	18.9–21.7%	23.0–25.3%
Koessler et al. (2019)	N = 332	United States & Canada. Via MTurk - no further inclusion criteria	64.5%	72.0%
Timmermans et al. (2020)	N = 328	Belgium and the Netherlands. Online recruitment – experience with online dating	63.0%	85.0%
Powell et al. (2021)	Study 1: N = 165; Study 2: N = 247; Study 3: N = 863	United States. Psychology students and via Prolific - no further inclusion criteria	26.1–38.9%	28.5–47.0%
Leckfor et al. (2023)	Study 1: N = 553; Study 2: N = 411; Study 3: N = 545	United States. Emerging adults via Prolific Academic – no further inclusion criteria	62.9-66.2%	66.0-74.9%

non-systematic examination of existing literature, we have identified several areas of contention. One significant area of contention revolves around the *types of relationships* susceptible to ghosting. While traditionally associated with a romantic context, ghosting may extend beyond dating relationships, infiltrating friendships, professional networks, and other social spheres (e.g., Pancani et al., 2021; Thomas & Dubar, 2021). Another question surrounding ghosting is the ambiguous *role of technology* in its manifestation. While digital communication platforms undeniably facilitate the ease and speed of connecting (and disconnecting) with others, it remains unclear to what extent technology is at the core of what ghosting is. This ambiguity adds a layer of complexity to the understanding of ghosting. *Temporal elements* of ghosting further complicate its conceptualization. For example, in defining what is (and is not) ghosting, questions arise surrounding the suddenness and duration of the dissolution process. Addressing these temporal nuances is crucial to recognizing ghosting and comprehending its impact on ghostees' well-being.

In their attempts to construct a conceptualization of ghosting, scholars have also applied several theoretical frameworks, of which Baxter's relationship dissolution model (1985) and the social exclusion framework (Riva & Eck, 2016; Williams, 2009) - specifically ostracism - are among the most commonly used. While some scholars have found that these frameworks are appropriate to address certain aspects of ghosting (e.g., Leckfor et al., 2023), others have raised questions about the ability of these frameworks to adequately capture all dimensions of ghosting (e.g., Campaioli et al., 2022).

The inconsistencies in prior ghosting conceptualizations and the remaining questions regarding the (in)ability of existing theoretical frameworks to capture all of its dimensions prompt the necessity for a more comprehensive theoretical analysis to delineate the specificities and boundaries of this behavior. Thus, in this contribution, we discuss the ways in which the theoretical frameworks of the relationship dissolution model and ostracism do and do not aid the conceptualization

of ghosting. From this discussion, we propose three key pillars in the conceptualization of ghosting and use these pillars to build a comprehensive definition of the phenomenon.

1. Theoretical frameworks to conceptualize ghosting: the relationship dissolution model and social exclusion framework

1.1. Baxter's relationship dissolution model

In explaining ghosting and its impact on the partners involved, several scholars have applied Baxter's relationship dissolution model (1985), a framework delineating the stages of relationship dissolution. While the decision to terminate the relationship may arise from one party or be mutually agreed on, Baxter highlights the unilateral nature of the actual dissolution act. In this stage, several disengagement strategies are proposed, each characterized along two fundamental dimensions: orientation (self vs. other-oriented) and level of directness (direct vs. indirect). Within this model, the concept of orientation describes the extent to which the break-up initiator is concerned with protecting their partner or prioritizing their own needs. Meanwhile, directness refers to whether the partner initiating the break-up engages in clear, open communication about their wish to end the relationship or rather communicates in an implicit, ambiguous, and unclear way.

In relation to ghosting, several scholars have argued that it is represented in the relationship dissolution model as a self-oriented, indirect disengagement strategy (e.g., Koessler et al., 2019; LeFebvre, 2017), classified by Baxter as the avoidance/withdrawal strategy. LeFebvre's (2017) study, specifically, highlighted how the characteristics of ghosting experiences align with those of the self-oriented, indirect disengagement strategy. At the same time, she argued that the model should be reframed to accommodate the unique aspects of dissolution practices commonly observed in a mediated context, aspects LeFebvre describes as the *permanency* (short-term vs long-term) and *execution* (sudden vs gradual) of the dissolution.

Koessler and colleagues (2019) also approached ghosting through the framework of relationship disengagement strategies (or, as they call it, break-up tactics). They investigated whether differences exist in initiators' and non-initiators' experiences of ghosting (or the indirect strategy) compared to direct rejection experiences. They found that ghosting was more commonly used as a breakup tactic in shorter-term relationships with lower intimacy and commitment, reinforcing their conceptualization of ghosting as a self-oriented, indirect disengagement strategy. Nevertheless, Koessler and colleagues found that ghosting also manifested in longer, committed relationships. The examined instances, indeed, occurred in relationships averaging six months in duration, with commitment levels surpassing the median of the measurement scale.

Overall, findings from the discussed studies suggest that the relationship dissolution model and its classifications of disengagement strategies are appropriate for understanding and conceptualizing certain aspects of ghosting, but, at the same time, a complete scope is lacking, leaving some dimensions of ghosting inadequately addressed.

1.2. Social exclusion framework

A different perspective that helps clarify ghosting and its consequences is the study of *social exclusion*, the experience of "being kept apart from others physically or emotionally" (Riva & Eck, 2016, p. 4). Social exclusion encompasses two pivotal experiences: *ostracism*, ignoring and excluding individuals or groups enacted by individuals or groups, and *rejection*, the explicit declaration or implication that an individual or group is not wanted (Riva & Eck, 2016; Williams, 2007; Williams et al., 2005). Different scholars have highlighted that ghosting

can be conceptualized as a form of ostracism (Campaioli et al., 2022; Freedman et al., 2019, 2022; Leckfor et al., 2023; Pancani et al., 2021, 2022). Therefore, it is compelling to understand if ghosting and ostracism are entirely overlapping concepts or whether significant distinctions can and should be made.

In this comparative analysis, we examine the defining features of ghosting and ostracism, considering both the behavior and the individuals involved. As included in all the definitions, at its core, ghosting involves ignoring another person - a behavior synonymous with ostracism. Ghosters exhibit this behavior by refraining from communication, akin to the widely spread ostracism behavior termed the "silent treatment" (Williams et al., 1998), even though, notably, the silence in ghosting is often mediated by technology. Conversely, ostracism encompasses a broader spectrum of acts, including averted eye gaze (Wirth et al., 2010), information exclusion ("out-of-the-loop"; Jones et al., 2009), and linguistic ostracism (Dotan-Eliasz et al., 2009). Furthermore, ostracism involves diverse sources and targets, manifesting as interpersonal (e.g., silent treatment), intragroup (e.g., individual excluded by a group), or intergroup (e.g., marginalized social groups). In contrast, ghosting emerges consistently within a dyadic relationship. Finally, while early research on ostracism focused on in-person interactions (e.g., ignoring someone who verbally asks a question; Sommer et al., 2001; Williams, Bernieri, et al., 2000), more recent studies have examined technology-mediated forms of ostracism. Technology can contribute to ostracism either by disrupting in-person communication - such as in *phubbing*, where one person ignores another to focus on their smartphone (Chotpitayasunondh & Douglas, 2016) - or by hosting the ostracism act in the digital environment, such as ignoring messages in text-based communication (i.e., cyberostracism; Smith & Williams, 2004; Williams, Cheung, & Choi, 2000). Ghosting has gained attention with the rise of social media. Thus, it is often investigated in digital environments, although the specific role of technology in ghosting remains debated and will be explored in Pillar 2.

A secondary examination focuses on the antecedents of these behaviors, particularly their functions. As described by Hales et al. (2014), ostracism serves three main functions. The first is to *protect* individuals from perceived threats, especially from burdensome or norm-violating others (Rudert et al., 2023). Second, ostracism can function as a tool of social influence to *correct* misbehavior (e.g., Carter-Sowell et al., 2008; Riva et al., 2014; Williams et al., 2000b). Finally, ostracism can be used to permanently *eject* someone from the group or distance oneself from an unwanted individual. This third function - permanent exclusion - often follows if temporary ostracism fails to amend the negative behavior. In our view, ghosting is explicitly aimed at ending a relationship, with ejection as its primary purpose. The reasons behind the decision to terminate a relationship by ghosting can be various (Timmermans et al., 2020; van der Zanden & Schokkenbroek, 2024), but will not be discussed in this contribution, as they do not determine whether ghosting has occurred.

Finally, exploring their consequences is a crucial aspect of comparing ghosting and ostracism. Both qualitative (Pancani et al., 2021) and quantitative (Leckfor et al., 2023; Pancani et al., 2022) studies have

revealed that the impact of ghosting on ghostees is highly similar to the effects of ostracism on those being ostracized. Consistent with Williams's (2009) predictions, both elicit a pain reaction characterized by negative emotions and the threat to fundamental psychological needs. Notably, analogous responses are triggered by different social and non-social experiences (Riva et al., 2011), thus challenging the assumption that overlapping consequences suffice to establish overlapping concepts.

In conclusion, empirical findings suggest a considerable overlap between ghosting and ostracism. However, some specific characteristics of ghosting cast doubt on the possibility of using ostracism as an interchangeable term for ghosting. In our perspective, ghosting represents a subcategory of ostracism, as it involves an experience of being ignored, but with some specific features that are always identifiable and allow us to distinguish it from the broader phenomenon of ostracism.

1.3. Three key pillars of ghosting

Ghosting is undoubtedly an indirect dissolution strategy and an instance of ostracism, but the two theoretical frameworks described above are insufficient to account for all the specificities of ghosting. A summary of how the theoretical frameworks previously applied to ghosting contribute to its understanding and the elements that are not sufficiently accounted for in our view can be found in Table 2.

In light of these theoretical challenges to conceptualizing ghosting as a standalone phenomenon, we propose a framework that establishes clear parameters for what does and does not constitute ghosting. In the following sections, we will identify and discuss three pivotal pillars that, from our perspective, are fundamental to defining ghosting.

2. Pillar 1: The role of social connections and communication

The first pillar revolves around the question: What type of connection should there be to define a dissolution as ghosting? Many definitions in the literature employ terms such as "relationship" (e.g., Freedman et al., 2019; LeFebvre & Fan, 2020; Pancani et al., 2021) and "partner" (e.g., Halversen, King, & Silva, 2021; Powell et al., 2022; Timmermans et al., 2020) to describe ghosting as a technique to dissolve an interpersonal relationship. Given its frequent mention by different authors, reflecting on the term "relationship" and its meaning and implications for understanding the ghosting phenomenon is imperative. From a behavioral point of view, an interpersonal relationship implies a series of interactions between two people, which have some degree of mutuality and continuity over time (Hinde, 1997). While ghosting was initially primarily approached as a relationship dissolution strategy in romantic or dating contexts (e.g., Koessler et al., 2019; Navarro et al., 2021), examinations of ghosting have extended to various other types of relationships, including friendships (Pancani et al., 2021; 2022; Yap et al., 2021), platonic relationships (Thomas & Dubar, 2021), work relationships (Wood et al., 2023), and even patient-clinician relationships (Farber et al., 2022). However, most scholars refrain from explicitly mentioning which kind of relationships their definition of ghosting

Table 2
Contributions and limitations of theoretical frameworks in defining and explaining ghosting.

Framework	Contribution	Limitations
Baxter's Relationship Dissolution Model (Baxter, 1985)	Classifies ghosting as an indirect, self-oriented (i.e., avoidance/withdrawal) disengagement strategy Highlights unilateral termination, aligning with ghosting's one-sided nature	Does not account for the contemporary prevalence of computer-mediated communication, which can change the dynamics of the dissolution Lacks emphasis on the temporal elements of the dissolution
Social Exclusion Framework (Riva & Eck, 2016; Williams, 2009)	Ghosting entails ostracism, a form of social exclusion that involves ignoring others Ghosting causes similar emotional pain and unmet psychological needs as ostracism	Ostracism covers a wide range of behaviors irrelevant to ghosting Ostracism can serve multiple functions in social relationships, while ghosting is aimed at dissolving a relationship Does not distinguish between meaningful and casual connections, which is critical for ghosting

refers to (e.g., Kay & Courtice, 2022; LeFebvre et al., 2019; Powell et al., 2021), leaving space for a more general conceptualization.

Sociological and psychological literature emphasizes the importance of the strength of ties in understanding relationships. Specifically, a distinction is made between strong ties – with individuals to whom we feel or desire to be closely connected (i.e., partners, friends, and family) – and weak ties, characterized by “less frequent contact, low emotional intensity, and limited intimacy” (Sandstrom & Dunn, 2014, p. 910). Typical examples of weak ties include acquaintances (e.g., neighbors, service workers, work colleagues, and fellow students) with whom the person might entertain some interactions over time but has not invested resources and developed or intended to develop a strong personal bond. Here lies the distinction between social *connections*, including strong ties, weak ties (and even small talks), and social *relationships*, solely referring to connections with people we feel close to. This distinction raises a critical question: Does ghosting generally pertain to social connections or social relationships? For instance, is it considered ghosting if a work colleague or fellow student ignores somebody and becomes unreachable? Is it intended as ghosting by the source, and is it perceived as such by the target?

To answer these questions, we must again refer to the differences and similarities between ghosting and ostracism. In general, when people are ignored, they notice it immediately (Wesselmann et al., 2012) and experience a pain reaction even when the sources of ostracism are irrelevant (as in the classic ball toss game and cyberball paradigms; Williams et al., 2000b; Williams & Sommer, 1997) or even despised by the individual (Gonsalkorale & Williams, 2007). Hence, there is little to no doubt that being ignored by unimportant social connections can be hurtful. However, for a relationship dissolution (i.e., the goal of ghosting) to occur, a pre-existing bond perceived as meaningful is necessary, and a weak tie does not entail significant emotional closeness. Consequently, we argue that these experiences of being ignored by weak ties can be ascribed to the broad concept of ostracism rather than ghosting. Conversely, when a connection with someone holds personal meaningfulness for the ghostee (i.e., there is a relationship), the disappearance of this particular person can be conceptualized as ghosting.²

In addition to personal meaningfulness, a second element crucial to contextualizing ghosting is the existence of previous bidirectional communication. Expressions like “ceasing communication” or “cutting off communication” are extremely prevalent in the ghosting definitions (e.g., LeFebvre et al., 2019; Forrai et al., 2023; Kay & Courtice, 2022; Timmermans et al., 2020). It follows that previous communication must have existed to make a stop in communication possible. Similarly, for a relationship to be defined as such, some communication between the people involved must have occurred. Therefore, we argue that pre-existing communication prior to the disappearance is necessary to classify an experience as ghosting. This view is supported by recent findings indicating that ghosting can occur at various levels of contact intensity, with many dating app users reporting being ghosted after exchanging more than five messages. In fact, ghosting most frequently occurred after over 31 messages had been exchanged (van der Zanden & Schokkenbroek, 2024).

Given these points, we propose that the concept of ghosting applies solely to (potential) social relationships characterized by some degree of personal meaningfulness and previous bidirectional communication.

2.1. Case studies: Ghosting on mobile dating apps and in the workplace

To further enrich the establishment of Pillar 1, two case studies will be discussed: the contexts of online dating and the workplace. The online dating context is widely acknowledged as a prevalent setting for

² This concept is further expanded in the following subsection, analyzing two case studies: mobile dating apps and the workplace environment (see 2.1 Case Studies: Ghosting on Mobile Dating Apps and in the Workplace).

ghosting (Dean Marshall et al., 2024; Konings et al., 2023; Narr & Luong, 2022; Timmermans et al., 2020). Ignoring other users on dating apps often stems from the affordances of the platforms, which encourage simultaneous initiation of multiple interactions and the abandonment of many as a potential social norm (Narr & Luong, 2022; Timmermans et al., 2020). However, it is essential to discern between various experiences. According to pillar 1, ghosting can only be classified as such when previous communication has happened, and the connection holds personal meaningfulness for at least one of the individuals involved. Therefore, not initiating communication after being matched or discontinuing interactions when both parties find the connection irrelevant would not be interpreted as ghosting. However, suppose there has been bidirectional communication between two people that is discontinued by one of them without any explanation. It should be considered ghosting if one of the two parties attributed a certain degree of personal meaningfulness to the potential social relationship.

The second context we aim to explore is the workplace, a unique setting where individuals may have social connections that may or may not involve interaction and carry personal meaning. From our perspective, being ignored by a work colleague with whom the person did not have a personal connection or previous bidirectional communication is neither intended nor perceived as ghosting, as it is not aimed at dissolving a relationship. Instead, it aligns closely and should be addressed as an act of general ostracism within the realm of workplace ostracism (for a review, see Howard et al., 2020). However, it is important to highlight that in the workplace, specific rules mandate communication between individuals, even when they may prefer not to interact, and measures are implemented when these rules are disregarded. This aspect makes the workplace a challenging terrain to study ghosting, even when the criteria of Pillar 1 are observed.

In summary, the existence of previous communication and personal meaningfulness to the social relationship are necessary (but insufficient) elements to describe a dissolution as ghosting.

3. Pillar 2: The (potential) key role of technology

The use of the term ghosting to describe a relationship dissolution in which one partner suddenly disappears originated in the early 2000s.³ Since then, popular press outlets have published many articles describing the sudden rise of this phenomenon in modern romantic relationships, framing ghosting as a contemporary relationship dissolution strategy. From a scientific perspective, however, this supposed contemporary nature of ghosting and the inherent role of technology in its occurrence can be questioned. Prior conceptualizations of ghosting strongly differ in their specifications of its modality. While some scholars describe that ghosting, by definition, occurs online and through digital technology (e.g., Jonason et al., 2021), others explicitly state that ghosting can occur both online and in person (e.g., Koessler et al., 2019; Thomas & Dubar, 2021) or refrain from explicitly mentioning the modality of ghosting (e.g., Kay & Courtice, 2022; Pancani et al., 2021). Several scholars use a more nuanced approach by stating that ghosting *commonly occurs through* digital technology (e.g., LeFebvre et al., 2019; Timmermans et al., 2020). For example, Timmermans and colleagues (2020) write that ghosting is “commonly enacted via one or multiple technological medium(s)” (p. 784).

Putting to question the contemporary nature of ghosting, it makes sense to point out historical examples of relationship dissolutions, even before the word ghosting was introduced, that were also characterized by a unilateral stop of communication without explanation and occurred in a time when digital technology was yet to come. One example relates to situations in which correspondence occurs through written letters,

³ In Urban Dictionary, the term ghosting was first entered in 2006, describing “the act of disappearing on your friends without notice or canceling plans with little or no choice.”

and one of the two conversational partners unexpectedly stops replying to letters, putting a stop to the exchange. An example of such an experience is detailed in the first sentences of a famous love letter⁴ from author Oscar Wilde to Lord Alfred “Bosie” Douglas, which he wrote in 1897 while being incarcerated for ‘gross indecency’⁵: “*After long and fruitless waiting I have determined to write to you myself, as much for your sake as for mine, as I would not like to think that I had passed through two long years of imprisonment without ever having received a single line from you, or any news or message even, except such as gave me pain.*” Examples such as these show that the act of disappearing and unilaterally cutting off communication has occurred throughout history. Therefore, from a historical point of view, it is definitely possible to find parallels between the relational dissolution experiences of past eras (e.g., letters) and what is today defined as ghosting.

However, digital technology has undoubtedly modified the experience of disappearing and ceasing all communication. First, digital technology shrank the time frame in which disappearing manifests and is detected. The average lag between communicating and receiving a response is much shorter when communication is mediated by text compared to a letter, creating the illusion of constant accessibility and availability (Vorderer et al., 2018). Furthermore, most importantly, digital technologies amplified the ease with which individuals can disappear and cease all communication. This is also evident from the large number of studies that have addressed the occurrence of ghosting in online dating (e.g., LeFebvre, 2017; Timmermans et al., 2020), revealing this dissolution strategy’s (increasing) prominence. Online dating sites offer many potential partners, encouraging users to explore and pursue multiple connections (e.g., LeFebvre, 2017). Often, the connections (or ‘matches’) made on online dating sites are with people outside one’s social network. Rosenfeld and colleagues (2019) found that, in their sample, 89% of couples who met online were strangers before they met. As indirect relationship dissolution strategies, such as ghosting, are more likely to be used if there is a lack of strong social and environmental overlap between two people (Baxter, 1982), this may explain why ghosting is so often observed in the online context.

It is difficult - if not impossible - to come up with a single example in which someone is ghosted online but remains in contact with the ghostee in offline, in-person settings. Additionally, possible (historical) examples of non-mediated ghosting we can think of describe situations that would be highly unlikely to occur in today’s digital age. One way or the other, if the dissolution takes place face-to-face, some kind of bidirectional (as opposed to unilateral) communication is likely to occur. Lastly, recent statistics revealed that messaging apps are the most commonly used apps, and 94.7% of all internet users (aged 18 to 64) indicated that they use messaging apps frequently (Kemp, 2024). Furthermore, a 2017 survey already showed that 65% of young adults (aged 18 to 34) communicated more through digital technology than face-to-face on a daily basis (LivePerson, 2018), a percentage that has likely increased substantially since then. These figures suggest that most interpersonal interactions now occur digitally, making ghosting more prevalent and highlighting digital technology’s integral role in shaping its functional dynamics.

Taken together, it becomes clear that technology nowadays plays a key role in ghosting. Ghosting definitions that do not mention the role of technology (e.g., Koessler et al., 2019) or specify that ghosting is commonly enacted through technology (e.g., LeFebvre et al., 2019) undervalue this key role. Consequently, we argue that ghosting

conceptualizations should emphasize that ghosting as a relationship dissolution practice *predominantly* occurs through digital technologies (and their evolutions).

4. Pillar 3: The temporal elements

A third essential factor to address when conceptualizing ghosting concerns the temporal elements characterizing this phenomenon, which were first explored in the foundational work of LeFebvre and colleagues in 2017. The first temporal aspect to consider is the suddenness of the relationship termination. While many authors emphasize that relationship dissolution through ghosting is abrupt (Alley & Jia, 2023; Di Santo et al., 2022; Kay & Courtice, 2022; Konings et al., 2023), some assert that ghosting can manifest either suddenly, transitioning from presence to disappearance in a moment, or gradually, with detachment occurring by degrees over time (Campaoli et al., 2022; Collins et al., 2023; Halversen et al., 2021; LeFebvre, 2017; Thomas & Dubar, 2021). Thomas and Dubar (2021) refer to this perspective discrepancy when noting different perceptions between ghostees and ghosters recounting past ghosting experiences. Ghostees typically perceived ghosting as sudden and completely unexpected, while ghosters often described their ghosting behaviors as a gradual distancing leading up to the final break. Nevertheless, differences in the length of the detachment process might not be entirely explainable through differences in perceptions depending on the partners’ role (i.e., initiator vs. non-initiator). Indeed, more gradual forms of ghosting might exist where the disengager slowly detaches from the former partner before ultimately disappearing. This hypothesis finds support in the emergence of terms such as “caspering” (e.g., Travers, 2023; derived from the cartoon “Casper the Friendly Ghost”), “slow fade” (e.g., Schaltegger, 2023), and “soft ghosting” (e.g., Brown, 2019), used to denote types of gradual ghosting finally leading up to a permanent disconnection.

The second temporal dimension associated with ghosting centers on the definiteness of the separation. Most definitions of ghosting assert that its primary intention is to terminate a relationship, implying a sense of definitiveness (e.g., Powell et al., 2021). However, it is crucial to acknowledge that individuals may *temporarily* disappear and reappear. In the context of the contemporary expectation of perpetual accessibility (i.e., constant connectivity and online availability; Vorderer et al., 2018), the lack of an immediate response can be viewed as counter-normative, potentially triggering feelings of ostracism (Mai et al., 2015). Nevertheless, the delay between a message and its response is an inherent characteristic of asynchronicity in written communication, and such delays should not be directly equated with ghosting. While these experiences may initially feel like ghosting from the perspective of the person being ignored, the eventual return of their conversation partner means that, from a scholarly perspective, such events lack the definitiveness required to be classified as ghosting. By clarifying this distinction, we also aim to refine the use of the term ghosting, which is often used in popular discourse to describe any situation where someone fails to respond promptly – a behavior fundamentally different from ghosting, where all communication is definitively and unilaterally ceased without explanation.

Furthermore, there are instances where digital silence is strategically employed within a relationship, as observed in practices like “breadcrumbing” (Khattar et al., 2023a; Khattar et al., 2023b; Navarro et al., 2020) or situations where full ghosting episodes are coupled with some kind of simultaneous or subsequent presence (e.g., “orbiting”; Pancani et al., 2021, 2022). In these cases, the absence is not definitive but rather temporary and sometimes even recurrent. Consequently, these phenomena involve a disappearance but also encompass additional dynamics that warrant separate investigation and conceptualization (see “5.1 Neighboring concepts”). These examples highlight that the ability to identify ghosting accurately strongly depends on observing the course of communication over time.

In conclusion, our exploration of Pillar 3 leads us to assert that

⁴ This love letter, later titled “De Profundis” (Latin: “from the depths”) by journalist Robert Ross, comprised 50,000 words detailing Wilde’s relationship with Lord Douglas and his spiritual development in prison. After Wilde’s death, the letter was published as a manuscript and has since become a historical classic novel that has been extensively analyzed for its structure, style, and themes.

⁵ A term that was used back then to describe homosexual acts.

ghosting represents a sudden or gradual, but always definitive, cease of communication.

5. Ghosting definition

The three key pillars of ghosting discussed here emphasize and introduce several elements that are crucial in defining ghosting. Firstly, we concur with and combine seven elements of existing conceptualizations of ghosting: ghosting is a form of ostracism (1) predominantly enacted through digital technology (2) that is characterized by a unilateral (3), sudden or gradual (4) cease of communication (5) without explanation (6) to end the relationship (7). Secondly, we introduce three additional elements we believe are crucial in understanding when behavior is (or is not) ghosting: the *meaningfulness* of the relationship (see pillar 1), the fact that ghosting is not just often but *predominantly* enacted through digital technology (see pillar 2), and the *definitive* nature of the cease of communication (see pillar 3). Consequently, we propose the following definition of ghosting:

Ghosting is a form of ostracism predominantly enacted through digital technology that consists of a unilateral, sudden or gradual cease of communication without explanation to end a meaningful relationship definitively.

Following this definition, situations where communication is unilaterally ceased but where the relationship in question is not meaningful, which might be the case in some work relationships, would not constitute ghosting. As another example, situations in which communication has ceased bilaterally or where no prior communication existed cannot be described as ghosting. Lastly, regarding the definiteness of the relationship dissolution, situations in which the cease of communication is followed by some kind of interaction (e.g., non-verbal interactions on social media such as liking a post or re-establishment of communication) still do not describe ghosting. Rather, such situations are defined by neighboring concepts that closely align with ghosting but have their unique characteristics. To aid the application of our theoretical framework to classify if an occurrence is (or is not) ghosting, we have created a visual classification guide in which we have summarized the various key elements of ghosting through decision pathways (see Fig. 1).

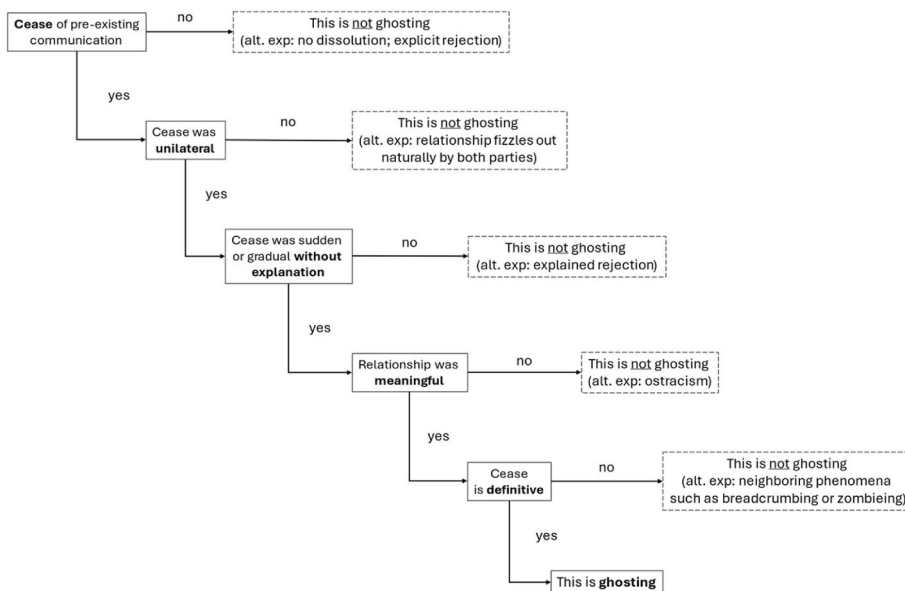
5.1. Neighboring concepts

As stated, some neighboring concepts closely align with the ghosting experience but include additional unique characteristics. In the last decade, many neologisms have emerged to describe social phenomena involving ostracism, in the form of digital silence, within social relationships that cannot be ascribed to ghosting. An overview of the various neighboring phenomena discussed here, their definition, and their differences and similarities to ghosting can be found in Appendix I (see Supplementary Material).

First, it is essential to discuss forms of discontinuous communication, where moments of acknowledgment are alternated with ostracism. Two prevalent concepts in this realm are “breadcrumbing,” defined as the act of sporadically sending non-committal text messages (or “breadcrumbs”) to keep someone interested without exerting much effort (Navarro et al., 2020; Rogers, 2023), and “benching,” the practice of keeping someone on standby and providing attention only when desired (Lee, 2023). Another example is a contemporary version of the silent treatment (Williams et al., 1998), wherein one person temporarily (and not definitively) suspends communication following disappointment with the other’s behavior. Significantly, while ghosting addresses the “eject” function of ostracism, these behaviors are more closely associated with the “protect” and “correct” functions, aimed at preserving a relationship and reasserting control while defending the self or punishing the other (see 1.2 Social exclusion framework), and could be recurrent within the same relationship.

Secondly, there are instances where some form of communication follows a ghosting event. An example of this is “orbiting,” where communication is severed, but the person continues to follow the target on Social Networking Sites (SNSs), occasionally reacting to posted content, thus engaging in subtle ways (Pancani et al., 2021, 2022). Coping with this experience becomes especially challenging due to the ambivalence in explicit absence (i.e., cessation of communication) coupled with implicit presence (i.e., subtle cues related to following the target on SNSs; Pancani et al., 2021; 2022). Additionally, new terms have recently emerged to describe full ghosting events followed by the resurgence or resurfacing of the initiator in the non-initiator’s life (e.g., “zombieing,” “haunting,” and “submarining”) but have not been examined yet.

Most of these phenomena can be conceptualized as variations of



Note. Alt. exp = alternative explanation

Fig. 1. Visual guide to classify if an event is (or is not) ghosting.

ghosting because they involve the same initial dynamics and would, therefore, be perceived similarly by the non-initiator. The difference lies in the fact that, at some point - sooner or later after the initial event, the initiator returns, making the cease of communication non-definitive. With only a limited number of studies investigating the effects of these experiences encompassing absence and additional dynamics, there is a need for new research examining the similarities and peculiarities of their antecedents and consequences with ghosting. Future research on these topics could also inform popular discourse about communication dynamics in social and dating relationships, avoiding the overuse of terminologies.

6. Some remarks on the subjective dimension of ghosting

Before concluding, we wish to discuss some final remarks regarding the subjectivity of ghosting experiences, as this introduces another complex dimension to this phenomenon. Here, we emphasize the inherent variability in how individuals perceive and interpret ghosting. What one person might categorize as ghosting, another may view as a mere lapse in communication or an understandable break in contact. This subjectivity is particularly evident in the perceptual gap between the ghoster and the ghostee. Ghosters often may not recognize or acknowledge their actions as constituting ghosting, perceiving their cease of communication as harmless and justifiable (Timmermans et al., 2020). This is sustained by the perception of ghosting as a normative way to terminate a relationship, especially in some contexts like dating apps, where ghosting seems to be particularly widespread (Powell et al., 2022). Also, in some cases, ghosting may even occur unintentionally, for example, because the ghoster deleted the dating app - and, consequently, all conversations - or they were unable to access their profile anymore (e.g., Timmermans et al., 2020). Conversely, for ghostees, the experience is often marked by a sense of confusion and hurt. This perceptual gap also becomes apparent when ghosters and ghostees are questioned about the intentions behind the ghosting. Whereas ghosters commonly report convenience, lack of interest or attraction, and unfavorable behaviors by the ghostee as motivations for their decision to ghost (LeFebvre et al., 2019; Thomas & Dubar, 2021; Timmermans et al., 2020), ghostees often interpret ghosting behaviors as a sign of “issues” in the ghoster, such as fear of commitment (Timmermans et al., 2020).

Subjectivity also applies to the pillars proposed here. We argue that ghosting occurs in relationships that are considered personally meaningful. Whether or not the relationship is considered meaningful may differ between individuals and between the two relationship partners, introducing yet another potential perceptual gap. Furthermore, we proposed that ghosting can occur suddenly or gradually and is always definitive. Here, a perceptual gap may occur regarding these temporal elements, such that ghosters believe that the ghosting occurred gradually, for example because they had already provided some hints signaling the dissolution, whereas ghostees might perceive the dissolution as much more sudden (Thomas & Dubar, 2021).

We posit that it is important for scholars investigating ghosting behaviors to also delve into the perceived (from the ghostee’s point of view) or actual (from the ghoster’s point of view) *intentions* behind the ghosting behavior and (awareness about the) *consequences* of the experience.

7. Limitations and future directions

This theoretical analysis is not exempt from limitations, which we hope will be addressed by future empirical and theoretical scholarly efforts. First, empirical research is needed to test the sturdiness of the proposed pillars and whether these additional elements to the conceptualization of ghosting allow us to distinguish between ghosting experiences and other forms of social exclusion and relationship dissolution. For example, scholars could apply retrospective methodologies to collect ghosters and ghostees’ experiences. Another example is the

application of experimental methods such as factorial surveys in which the vignettes are made up of ghosting scenarios that vary in the particular elements included in the proposed definition of ghosting. In addition, these examinations could also include vignettes tailored to neighboring concepts, such as orbiting and breadcrumbing, to identify to what extent these phenomena do (and do not) differ from ghosting experiences. Furthermore, technology is always evolving. Therefore, this analysis is time-bound and could be overcome when new technologies are introduced and used by people to connect and disconnect socially. Finally, while our definition descended from the analysis of the literature, we are aware that this conceptualization may not be exhaustive and prompt scholars to continue our work to further enrich our understanding of the phenomenon.

8. Conclusion

In this theoretical contribution, we critically analyzed existing ghosting conceptualizations and identified three key pillars that define this phenomenon. This resulted in formulating a renovated definition of ghosting based on the existing literature. While not exempt from limitations, our theoretical analysis posits an important contribution to the research fields of ghosting, relationship dissolution, and social exclusion. By uniting, comparing, evaluating, and expanding existing conceptualizations of ghosting, we offer a comprehensive insight into what is (and is not) ghosting. We strongly encourage scholars to adopt the proposed perspectives in their future work on this phenomenon, allowing us to work together toward a unified understanding of contemporary relationship dissolution practices in today’s digital society.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Janneke M. Schokkenbroek: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Investigation, Conceptualization. **Alessia Telari:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Investigation, Conceptualization. **Luca Pancani:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Investigation, Conceptualization. **Paolo Riva:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Investigation, Conceptualization.

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Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2025.108637>.

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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