Research Article

From Best Friends to Silent Ends: Exploring the Concepts of Ghosting in Non-Romantic Relationships

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ABSTRACT

Ghosting is a popular term in mass media that has continued to baffle many with its ambiguity as a dissolution strategy. Multiple studies in the past have explored ghosting within romantic relationships, examining how this dissolution strategy has impacted the two parties involved: the initiator (ghoster) and the non-initiator (ghostee). However, it has been stated that ghosting can exist outside of romantic relationships as it may also occur within friendships or even if the relationship is questionably nonexistent. The objectives of the paper seek to understand how ghosting happens within these non-romantic relationships, its effects on the initiators and non-initiators, and its possible differences when compared to romantic relationships. Semi-structured interviews were conducted through video communication platforms on thirty respondents ages 18-25 who have experienced ghosting or been ghosted by a friend. Through the use of descriptive phenomenological qualitative study, the results revealed that 1) ghosting in non-romantic relationships occurs on technology-mediated channels, 2) the initiators experienced post-dissolution feelings of regret, 3) the non-initiators experienced feelings of uncertainty, 4) ghosting a friend is more socially acceptable than ghosting a romantic partner, and, 5) ghosting is more frequent in non-romantic relationships due to the lower levels of commitment and expectations. Other recurring themes, such as the common reasons behind ghosting for the initiators and ghosting as a justifiable means of dissolving the relationship, were also found.

Keywords: *ghosting; non-romantic relationship; initiator; non-initiator*

Background

As technology continues to integrate itself into daily interactions, many terminologies are being coined to address new behaviors within relationships (Manning et al., 2019). One of the most notable terms used in online relationships is ghosting. Ghosting is a rising phenomenon widely known as a popular disappearance strategy meant to terminate a relationship (relationship dissolution) by withdrawing communication through a technology-mediated channel (LeFebvre et al., 2019c). The process of ghosting happens unilaterally, emphasizing the existence of initiator and non-initiator roles in the dissolution (LeFebvre, 2017a). A typical ghosting situation is when one partner (initiator) begins the disengagement without confronting the other (non-initiator) for any foreshadowing or proper notification of their interest to break up before the disengagement, making it a one-sided decision of cutting communication through mediated contexts (SNSs, texting, voice mail, email, etc.). In other words, ghosting is regarded as a relationship dissolution that commences exclusively in a technological context (LeFebvre, 2017a).

In light of recent studies, ghosting is well defined as a dissolution strategy that may even happen when the relationship is in question. While most empirical studies conducted on ghosting occurred within the context of romantic partners, very few have explored ghosting in non-romantic relationships. In research done by LeFebvre (2017a; 2019c), she noted that ghosting exists beyond romantic relationships, but it has not yet been thoroughly explored within the context of platonic or non-romantic relationships. Her studies advised future researchers to examine the experiences and accounts beyond romantic dissolution contexts. As a result, this current research tapped into the non-romantic context to further understand ghosting under different nuances and has explored this phenomenon within friendships, mainly focusing on discovering differences and new insights. Specifically, this research answered the following questions:

1) How does ghosting happen in non-romantic relationships?

2) What are the effects of ghosting to initiators and non-initiators in non-romantic relationships?

3) How does ghosting in non-romantic relationships differ from romantic relationships?

Methods

This descriptive phenomenological qualitative research explores the narratives of the thirty respondents (15 initiators and 15 non-initiators), ages 18-25, who have experienced ghosting or been ghosted in non-romantic relationships. The participants were selected through the snowball sampling method and were interviewed through online video communication platforms such as Zoom and Google Meet. The researchers used semi-structured interviews to allow a conversational flow between the respondent and researchers. A select group of individuals validated the interview guide, which included questions such as when they experienced ghosting/being ghosted, how many times they ghosted/were ghosted, how close they were to their friend, how and why they ghosted/were ghosted, how these experiences affected them, and how they perceive ghosting after their personal experiences.

Due to the nature of ghosting as a widely frustrating and immature dissolution strategy (Manning et al., 2019), the researchers understand that the potential respondents who participated in this study may have lingering feelings of distress brought about by their ghosting experiences. The researchers only recruited those willing and comfortable to speak about their experiences to avoid any psychological repercussions. The researchers conducted the interviews under the supervision of a licensed guidance counselor to ensure that any emotional breakdowns will be handled professionally. The study was also approved by the De La Salle University Integrated School Senior High School's Research Ethics Committee.

The data gathered during the interviews were sorted and analyzed by employing reflexive thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2006). Reflexive thematic analysis is a method under phenomenological research used to ana-

lyze qualitative data to answer broad or narrow research questions about people's experiences, views, perceptions, and representations of a given phenomenon. The researchers were able to derive patterns from the recorded and transcribed meetings of the semi-structured interviews utilizing reflexive thematic analysis

The researchers also used narrative analysis in interpreting the stories told by the participants in understanding how they made sense of their ghosting experience. This method of analysis allowed the researchers to make substantial and meaningful interpretations based on the elements present in their storytelling during the interview. Using the collected information and the assigned analysis methods, the researchers were able to describe further the nature of ghosting, why and how it is experienced, and understand the differences of ghosting in non-romantic relationships compared to romantic relationships.

Results and Discussion

Ghosting in Non-Romantic Relationships

Initiators, also known as ghosters, have most, if not all control, in a ghosting situation. They get to determine how they will enact ghosting, its process, and the medium on which it occurs, leaving the non-initiator in the dark as to why they have been ghosted. The data revealed that initiators commonly begin the ghosting process through a technological medium, usually on the platform they often communicate, by either slowly pulling away through slow and late replies or abruptly by blocking them or ignoring them altogether and simultaneously ignoring them in person. In the interview, one ghoster informant said, "He would message me, but I wouldn't reply." Most of the ghoster informants also noted to have put the person they were ghosting under the 'Ignored Messages' tab or muted them in their messaging apps. A smaller number have resorted to blocking their friends on all social media sites. Similar to ghosting in romantic relationships, the processes of this dissolution strategy in friendships follow more or less the same sequence with the initiator enacting the dissolution through the aforementioned channel but is not entirely limited to it.

When initiators were asked for the reasons why they chose to ghost their friends, the most common motivations were: 1) toxic friendship, 2) loss of interest to maintain the friendship, 3) annoying friend, 4) self-preservation, and 5) overstepping boundaries. The method by which they pulled away (gradually or suddenly) was closely related to the length of the relationship they had formed with the person. The researchers noted that the informants were more likely to pull away gradually from someone they had known longer, while shorter relationships tend to end more abruptly and suddenly. An informant who ghosted a friend of 2 weeks noted that she felt no remorse for ghosting this person abruptly. However, another explained in another instance that she hesitated to ghost their friend of 7 years and opted to pull away gradually rather than a sudden termination. The longevity of the friendship is a prime factor as to whether or not they decided to ghost and how the process of ghosting takes place altogether. The longer the friendship was, the initiators felt more hesitance, regret, and guilt. In contrast, the non-initiators felt more sadness, frustration, and hurt than short relationships where they could move on faster with little to no feelings of uncertainty. The data reveals that gradual ghosting happens more often than sudden ghosting. The initiators slowly enact the ghosting process by modifying the communication patterns through absenteeism and inadequate reciprocity, ultimately leading to the complete dissolution of the friendship. Examples of modified communication patterns include purposely replying to slow or late and dry replies. One informant said, "... I gave him dry replies, not like before when we would talk frequently." While the abrupt ghosting took place by immediately severing the communication or relationship by either intentionally not replying or blocking. An 18-years old initiator explained, "I blocked them on all social media."

The non-initiators noted that they sensed the dissolution of the relationship through the aforementioned modified communication patterns. This parallels the strategy that the initiators employ when they decide to terminate the relationship. In several cases, the initiating

points where one was ghosted are recognized as periods where the initiator stopped replying in their messaging channels or was left on seen with no further response or explanation. They also acknowledged that the initiation of the communication or relationship also parallels the dissolution. The researchers then asked the informants how they presumed they were ghosted since ghosting happens unilaterally on the initiator's end. A number of them recognized they were ghosted after several attempts to reach out to their friend through the said messaging channels, only to receive nothing in return. "I was ghosted virtually first then in person," was the explanation of an 18-year old informant. She noted how this friend left her on 'inboxed' and/or on read for 2-3 months online before completely ignoring her in person. Another informant explained, "In general, she just ignored me. She didn't acknowledge my presence. Even if we pass by each other, I got nothing." Non-initiators are typically left hanging with no clue as to why their friendship has ended. However, most informants had a vague idea or speculation on why they got ghosted, drawing conclusions/assumptions based on events prior to being ghosted. Some answered that there was a possibility that the reason why they were ghosted was because of love confessions that may have gotten in the way of their friendship. Other possible explanations based on the perception of the non-initiators included having a drama/a fight prior to the dissolution. A 22-year old female explains, "A lot of drama there... They just stopped talking to me like, at all. Like even in class like, we would sit together, and she would not say a thing to me." While some had a grasp or at least a vague idea of why they were ghosted, others were left completely and utterly confused with no fore-shadowing. "I have no clue, no reason why I was ghosted," as said by a 20-year old male.

Effects of Ghosting in Non-Romantic Relationships

Despite the negative connotation that surrounds the ghosting phenomenon, initiators noted that ghosting does not have to be a bad thing necessarily. Ghosting is generally viewed as one of the worst ways to go about a dissolution, given the lack of clarity this brings, especially for the non-initiator. However, accounts of ghosting from the initiator's perspective argue that ghosting does not always have to be viewed as selfish, especially if the friend they are ghosting is bad for them. Despite uncertainties, hesitations, and apprehensions as an initiator, the participants ultimately reported that this was the best course of action. In the experiences of these informants, they note that ghosting is one of the most effective ways of terminating a relationship with someone who may not be good for your mental and emotional health. Several informants noted that ghosting their said friend was a method of self-preservation or defense mechanism brought about by the toxicity wherein they felt as if they would be better off without this person in their life. An 18-year old female explains, "It [ghosting them] felt good. It felt like a weight was lifted off my shoulders." Each informant seemed to have grounds for justifying why they decided to ghost their friend in the first place. Several instances were mentioned that they felt as if ghosting was their only option and their last resort, ultimately due to the personality/characteristics of the friend that they intended to ghost. Another 18-year old informant expressed: "I felt relieved, safe, and comfortable, after ghosting them. I had no regrets because it was the best option." This realization was present in all the initiator informants, often articulating how they felt guilty at first when they initially began the ghosting process, but in the long run, they realized that they made the right choice of dropping their friend.

Despite thinking it was the best decision, most initiators still wished they had chosen a different method of dissolving the relationship, especially those who had a longer, sustained friendship. One informant explained, "I should've talked to her, but I also think that such a conversation may just harm the relationship further," when asked about their friendship of almost 7 years. Although direct conversation is still the ideal method of terminating a friendship, the participant stated that such a topic might do more harm than good. Some in-

formants resorted to ghosting because they believed that it was the most direct (yet also indirect) way to end the relationship without involving confrontation. They also wished they left some means of closure towards their friend but still opt to end the relationship, rather than just completely disappearing on their friend. There were instances during the post-dissolution period where they felt as if they had unfinished business or were missing out. As for the other participants who dealt with toxic friendships, they explained in the interview that ghosting was the only way to end the relationship. An 18-year old male articulated, "No... Ghosting was the only option left because I confronted him several times, and he didn't change despite being aware of his toxicity." They seem to be content with the way things ended; whether they're happier without them or because of the negativity/toxicity this person brought into their life, ghosting was their preferred dissolution strategy. The gravity to which they wished to return was closely related to the length of the relationship.

The majority of the informants noted that this ghosting experience as an initiator had various effects on them, ranging from simple realizations to lessons learned. The most common epiphanies were positive realizations, allowing one to reflect on the situation they encountered. A 22-year old female noted, "It made me really... weigh... the type of people I surround myself with." She explained how this ghosting experience made her somewhat more selective of the people she chooses to be around since friends are notably major influencers of the character of each individual. Positive personal changes resulted from another ghosting instance, as told by an 18-year old male informant, "It made me a better person. I learned from my mistakes, and I think I no longer act as impulsive as I used to." Most participants were evidently impacted by their decision to ghost a friend, especially those who had longer relationships with their friend. However, despite the relationship's longevity, ghosting is still a possible consequence of a failed friendship. A 21-year old male explained in the interview that he had to ghost his best friend of almost 8 years due to the rising conflict this friend had

with his girlfriend. The same cannot be said for all informants, as some initiators were confident that ghosting their friend(s) seemed to have no impact on their emotional or psychological wellbeing.

Due to the effectiveness of ghosting as a dissolution strategy, many individuals may resort to it as a means of ending a relationship, whether romantic or platonic. As stated by one of the informants, "Ghosting is always an option but not always the best option." The informants were asked if they would use ghosting again to end future relationships, even considering how they felt in their past ghosting experience. A good majority answered yes since ghosting is also easy and efficient. They wouldn't mind using this strategy if a person were toxic or bad for them and especially if it was the last resort. However, a smaller number of informants said that ghosting is utterly unacceptable and only utilized this disappearance strategy since they claimed to have been in a difficult situation or acted on impulse. They believe that confrontation is still the best way to go about it, and communication is still key. Ultimately, the initiators added that ghosting their friend is entirely dependent upon the situation and the person. They reported having strategically used ghosting as a dissolution process due to the character and personality of their friend or simply because it was the easiest way out.

Previous studies revealed that ghosting could be used as either an avoidance strategy (temporarily ceasing communication) or termination strategy (permanently dissolving the relationship) within friendships. Depending on the initiator's discretion with how they choose to enact ghosting, there are certain instances where they can temporarily ghost their friend, possibly due to needing time off, simply feeling as if the relationship is far too high maintenance, or if there was a misunderstanding. In this case, initiators can employ ghosting, but they may still leave a window open if they choose to come back. The informants who reported to have ghosted their friend were all permanent cessation; however, some of the non-initiators have explained that they were on the receiving end of temporary ghosting. A 19-year old male explained the experience, "Maybe

through misinterpretations… Like they thought I did something and they didn't… secure with me… what happened." This factor led to being ghosted for over 2-3 months, according to the informant. Reconciliation is still possible, but as non-initiators, they have little to no control over the situation.

As recipients, the non-initiators were revealed to have had mixed feelings of hurt, shock, sadness, and confusion (LeFebvre & Fan, 2020) after realizing their friend had ghosted them. The usual feelings of uncertainty found in romantic relationships also mimicked those in friendships. The non-initiators reported having initially given their friend the benefit of the doubt before concluding that they were ghosted, hoping against hope that maybe they were just busy or unable to reply due to personal reasons. One informant noted to have feelings of self-blame, often asking herself whether she was a good friend or not, if she had done something wrong, and spiralled occasionally after the dissolution took place, especially since they were close friends before she was ghosted. A 19-year old male said he even felt offended when his close friend ghosted him. For some, the effects of being ghosted took a toll on them. A non-initiator expressed, "My trust issues got worse because of her. It's not fair that they randomly just disappear on you. I guess I'm more careful with my future relationships, and I limit myself." As for those that did not have a deep relationship, the informants explained how they only felt mild sadness. "It was an unpleasant experience," a 22-year old female reported, "but it didn't cripple me as a person." Another informant says that she did not take being ghosted personally. With the ambiguity that ghosting brings and the common feelings of uncertainty, the non-initiators explained in the interview how any form of closure would be appreciated but not necessarily needed. A great majority of the informants wouldn't mind reconciling or reconnecting with the friend that ghosted them, so long as they get an explanation for why they were ghosted in the first place. They seem to have no hard feelings towards their friend. However, a small minority opted to leave things the way they are without this friend returning to them.

As for those who have already resolved the temporary ghosting situation, they explained how they were able to talk it out and rekindle their friendship after receiving the closure they wanted.

Difference of Ghosting in Non-Romantic Relationships

Although the process of ghosting in non-romantic relationships is more or less similar to that of ghosting in romantic relationships (Freedman et al., 2019), the major difference is found in the social acceptability of ghosting in friendships and the varying levels of commitment, intimacy, and closeness. Answers provided by the participants' opinions varied on how they perceive ghosting in romantic relationships compared to ghosting in friendships. Some noted that ghosting among friends is deemed more socially acceptable due to the lessened negative connotation. Many have explained that romantic relationships have higher levels of commitment, intimacy, and additional feelings of sexual attraction that are not present in friendships. One informant differentiates the two, "Romantic partners have commitment that friends don't. I guess that's what makes the circumstances different." A handful of informants noted that one can have several friendships, which increases the frequency of ghosting, but ideally, only one romantic relationship can occur, although this may vary, especially if the individual in question is seeking multiple relational partners before ultimately pursuing one. Romantic ghosting is stigmatized more often because of the commitment both parties involved have agreed to and the intimacy that may have been present. The varying levels of closeness in the relationship are great indicators of the amount of distress that the non-initiators experience. Some note that ghosting in romantic relationships tends to be harsher because there is a belief in a commitment which also influences the weight of the distress.

On the other hand, two informants believed otherwise. They stated that friendship ghosting is possibly more hurtful than romantic ghosting because of the investment in the friendship, ultimately depending on the longevity and

closeness of the parties involved. An 18-year old female notes, "If you're gonna be ghosting in a friendship context, you've already committed to the relationship, and you've already established a relationship." She explains how it is easier to ghost someone in a romantic context since forming shallow romantic relationships is easy. However, the very foundation of the friendship is its commitment and investment. One informant goes as far as explaining the quality of trust in a friendship. He said, "With friends, you can show them your true colors. In romantic relationships, you can hide some things about yourself to make yourself look good." He argues that friendship ghosting hurts more because of the level of trust between friends.

Despite the distinction between romantic relationships and friendships, the other informant explained that they think ghosting is equally as bad, whether romantic or non-romantic. Ghosting to them is simply a means to cut ties or dissolve the relationship, which hurts a person. Both non-romantic and romantic relationships still suffer based on the fact that ghosting was still enacted. An informant puts simply, "I think ghosting is just the same or equal whether romantic or non-romantic."

Though some informants usually take the time to think and decide whether they're going to ghost their friends, some ghosting instances tend to happen accidentally, according to some of the respondents. One ghoster informant said, "Honestly... I've ghosted a lot. Some were intentional, some were not," while another explained, "I didn't actually want to ghost them. I guess it just kind of happened..." A handful of informants noted that they did not intentionally ghost their friend. It just happened because they forgot to respond to the message and the relationship just faded on its own, and they never initiated conversation or reconciliation with the person.

The final difference of ghosting in friendships was addressed by a 22-year old informant. She explained, "I think everybody has done it [ghosting a friend]. It's just they haven't been made aware that it's a thing, to know that they've done it... Friendship ghosting is subconscious, and not everybody knows it, but

romantic ghosting, you know it happened." With the minimal literature conducted on ghosting outside of romantic relationships, several informants noted to have not been aware that ghosting can exist within friendships until the phenomenon was explained to them. As stated by the participant, she notes that friendship ghosting may happen even if the non-initiator was not aware that it occurred.

Conclusion

Ghosting can occur in both romantic and non-romantic relationships and possibly other contexts that are yet to be explored. This study has only scratched the surface on exploring the ghosting phenomenon within the context of friendships, focusing on how this occurs in non-romantic relationships, examining its effects on both initiators and non-initiators, and uncovering the possible differences compared to romantic relationships. Although ghosting in these relationships have their similarities in terms of process, nature, and on the medium on which it occurs, it is worth noting that the underlying difference is found in its frequency and prevalence and how the difference in context makes one more socially acceptable than the other due to the different levels of commitment and expectations. The ambiguous loss and feelings of uncertainty that romantic partners experience post-dissolution are also present in friendships for the non-initiators. At the same time, initiators also experience feelings of regret and hesitation. Since this research only gives a glimpse on ghosting in friendships, future studies can possibly examine this in an in-depth manner, taking into account other factors such as the respondents' demographic, the longevity of their pre-existing relationship, and intimacy and closeness levels, among many others, and to look into how ghosting is used as a tool in online or physical communication without necessarily dissolving relationships. The results of this study are not generalizable and not meant to represent the entirety of ghosting in friendships, given the non-probability nature of the chosen sampling procedure. This paper may possibly serve as a benchmark for future scholars who wish to explore the nuances of ghosting under different contexts

since ghosting can be utilized to terminate relationships due to its effectiveness and convenience. Anyone can fall victim to the ghosting phenomenon despite the longevity, intimacy, closeness, and commitment that has pre-existed in their relationships that can evidently turn them from best friends to silent ends.

Acknowledgment

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