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Double Blue Ticks: Reframing Ghosting as Ostracism Through an Abductive Study on Affordances

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Abstract

Ghosting is a slang term associated with ceasing mediated communication to dissolve a romantic relationship. The phenomenon is discussed in popular culture and scientific inquiry in relation to digital communication technologies and mobile dating, but little is known about ghosting in other relationship types and the role of specific affordances. This study investigated personal experiences of ghosting with an abductive approach to consider alternative frameworks which may enhance our understanding of ghosting. We collected 23 episodic interviews with Italians aged 21 to 34 and analyzed data with a qualitative abductive approach. Findings suggest that ghosting takes place in different relationship types, though its detection and effects may differ, and that digital affordances of visibility like awareness cues, informing about others' availability, play a central role in detection of ghosting. We propose that theories of ostracism provide a useful framework to understand the dynamic of ghosting across relational contexts, complementing existing literature.

Keywords: ghosting; affordances; awareness cues; ostracism; online dating; abductive approach

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Introduction

Ghosting is a slang term originating from the transformation of the noun "ghost" into a verb (Riotta, 2016). The term became popular around 2015 when the popular press used it to define the breakup strategy of a Hollywood celebrity (Davis, 2015; Edwards, 2015). Since then, social scientists have been studying definitions of ghosting, motives, psychological consequences, psychological predictors, and the role of social media (Freedman et al., 2019; Koessler et al., 2019; LeFebvre, Allen, et al., 2019; LeFebvre, Rasner, et al., 2019; LeFebvre & Fan, 2020; Navarro et al., 2020; Pancani et al., 2021; Thomas & Dubar, 2021; E. Timmermans et al., 2020). Most studies frame ghosting as a breakup strategy, referring to the literature on romantic relationship dissolution (Koessler, 2018; Koessler et al., 2019; LeFebvre, Allen, et al., 2019; Manning et al., 2019; Navarro et al., 2020) or as rejection on dating apps (de Wiele & Campbell, 2019).

Despite this framing, ghosting may resemble other phenomena of social exclusion that extend across different relational contexts; thus, an abductive approach can make available other theoretical frameworks to help understanding ghosting. Considering the popularity of ghosting on social media, popular press, and grey literature, where the discussion about ghosting presents polarized opinions such as, for example, that ghosting would be a form of psychological violence (Bazzi, 2018), or a common practice that people should get used to (Bartz & Ehrlich, 2011; Hansen-Bundy, 2016), scientific research can offer a complex understanding of the phenomenon. Our

constructivist approach to experiences of ghosting, drawing on how participants used the term *ghosting* in relation to their experience, can account for the diversity of ghosting experiences and narratives. Finally, since ghosting is discussed as linked to recent technological developments (Artana, 2022; De Simone, 2018; Giovinazzo, 2018; Hansen-Bundy, 2016; Peters, 2017; Safronova, 2015), investigating the role of affordances allows to understand how technological innovation and social practices reciprocally influence each other, and explain the context where a new term is developed and used.

Grey literature suggests that ghosting can also happen in friendship (Bassil, 2019; Page, 2015) and work relationships (Bariso, 2018; Nemko, 2018), but very few studies have considered ghosting in these relational contexts. LeFebvre, Allen, et al. (2019) acknowledged that ghosting can take place in friendship relationships or even in the absence of a relationship (i.e., history of shared interactions) if there are expectations of continued interaction (LeFebvre & Fan, 2020). Thomas & Dubar (2021) conducted a thematic analysis of 76 open-ended interviews with emerging adults and found that for some participants ghosting could take place also within friendship and familial relationships. Freedman and colleagues (2019) compared perception and intention of ghosting, finding that participants considered ghosting a friend more acceptable and more likely to happen than ghosting a romantic partner, despite the length of the relationship. Most studies have studied ghosting in romantic contexts, but more research is needed to understand if and how ghosting takes place also in other types of relationships.

Ghosting has been associated with innovations in mediated communications and social media (de Wiele & Campbell, 2019; LeFebvre, Allen, et al., 2019). Ghosting seems to be the most common rejection strategy within mobile dating apps (de Wiele & Campbell, 2019) and a study suggests that dating apps affordances may motivate some users to ghost (E. Timmermans et al., 2020). Social media and mobile dating would enable individuals to disengage from others effortlessly and covertly “behind a screen” (de Wiele & Campbell, 2019; Thomas & Dubar, 2021) and favor “relational tourism” (Quiroz, 2013) through increased possibilities of interaction, favoring indirect, mediated rejection strategies like ghosting (E. Timmermans et al., 2020). However, some studies suggest that ghosting should not be considered a brand-new phenomenon, rather a form of interpersonal rejection with specificities connected to the role of new digital technologies of communication (Pancani et al., 2021; Thomas & Dubar, 2021). Thomas and Dubar (2021) suggested that social media play a role by enabling expectations of immediate response, creating social pressure to respond within a given time frame, and by allowing recipients to track disengagers’ behaviors. Digital information and communication technologies seem to play a central role in ghosting, but more research is needed to understand the role of specific affordances, which can be described as a function of the interaction between the objective qualities of technology and the individual’s subjective perception of utility (Gibson, 1986). Thus, an affordance framework can show how affordances “set limits on what it is possible to do with, around, or via the artifact” (Hutchby, 2001, p. 453).

If most studies on ghosting referred to the literature on romantic relationship dissolution, some associated ghosting with ostracism (Freedman et al., 2019; Pancani et al., 2021). From their thematic analysis of interviews, Freedman et al. (2019) concluded that ghosting and ostracism are different phenomena. Differently, Pancani et al. (2021) showed several similarities between ghosting and ostracism. The authors qualitatively analyzed accounts of either rejection, ghosting, or orbiting (i.e., the disengager of ghosting continues to interact indirectly with the recipient through social media) in a sample of Italians ($N = 208$, $M_{age} = 24.12$). They compared psychological and behavioral reactions among the three conditions and evaluated the temporal sequence of these events based on the Temporal Need-Threat Model (Williams, 2009). They found that ghosting and orbiting resemble ostracism in their psychological consequences (feeling ignored, invisible) and temporal process of enactment, with initial surprise and confusion, followed by sadness, anger, and guilt, ending with acceptance and outreaching for new investments. Therefore, alternative theoretical framings of ghosting may help better understand this phenomenon.

The objective of this research was three-fold: exploring experiences of ghosting in diverse relational contexts, understanding the role of digital affordances, and considering alternative theoretical framings considering existing scholarship on ghosting. Therefore:

RQ1: Does ghosting happen in different types of relationships? If so, how?

RQ2: What is the role of digital affordances in ghosting?

RQ3: Can ghosting be framed through other theoretical models? If so, how?

Method

Research Design

We designed a qualitative study on ghosting with an abductive approach, to collect rich accounts of ghosting experiences and consider theoretical integration (Gough & Lyons, 2016). If induction is based on developing theories from data, and deduction is based on testing hypotheses through empirical observation, abduction is a process that starts with theoretical conceptualizations and aims at generating theories from surprising observations (Tavory & S. Timmermans, 2014). Reasoning through abduction means reframing a phenomenon with a new explanation, or with existing theories of similar phenomena, or with new general descriptions (S. Timmermans & Tavory, 2012).

We prepared a semi-structured episodic interview on experiences of ghosting that aimed to yield episodic and semantic knowledge connected to experiences of ghosting (Flick, 2000; Flick, 2014). The interview (Appendix A) included 11 open-ended questions on personal experiences of ghosting and personal definition of ghosting, questions exploring the relationships between actors in the narratives, similarities between ghosting and other life experiences, psychological consequences of ghosting, recounted and imagined scenarios following the episodes, and the role of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in the ghosting event. Participants were invited to speak freely and in detail about their experiences of ghosting, recounting as many episodes as they wanted. After the interview, participants completed a brief demographic questionnaire (Appendix B).

Recruitment

Sample recruitment followed snowball sampling, contacting people from the researcher's social circle through face-to-face and mediated channels, and then asking them to pass on the invitation. The only inclusion criterion was age—18 to 35 years, an age range of experimentation, enlargement, and refinement of social relationships (Lanz & Tagliabue, 2007; Piumatti et al., 2014), as well as of consistent use of dating apps (Navarro et al., 2020; Stephure et al., 2009) and ICTs in general (Istat, 2019).

Sample Description

We interviewed 24 participants aged 21 to 34 years ($M = 26.58$, $SD = 3.03$). All participants had Italian citizenship or had lived in Italy for more than 20 years. One participant was familiar with the term ghosting but did not have any personal experience of ghosting. We decided to exclude this interview because it was the only item where episodes did not refer to the participant's personal experience, thus our final sample was of 23 participants.

Gender and sexual orientation were left to participants to define (open-ended question); 11 participants identified as woman or female (47.8%), 10 identified as man or male (43.4%), one identified as queer (4.3%), and one did not respond (4.3%). As for sexual orientation, 10 participants identified as heterosexual (43.4%), seven as homosexual (30.4%), three as bisexual (13%), and one as questioning (4.3%). Two participants did not respond. Participants were mostly students (39.1%), freelance workers (34.8%), or teachers (13%). The sample was characterized by a high level of education, with only one participant having less than a bachelor's degree and more than half having a master's degree. Participants came from different fields of study (humanities, arts, economics, sciences, and philosophy), although psychology was the most common field (34.8%). All participants were unmarried and two were cohabitating with a partner. As for religious creed, about half were atheists (47.8%), followed by agnostics (26.1%); only four participants (17.4%) declared to have religious creed (Christian, Jewish, or other) and one participant did not respond.

Data Collection

The study followed the American Psychological Association's Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct and the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. Participants were informed about the study aims and procedures and were assured that participation was voluntary, and the confidentiality of their responses was guaranteed.

Data collection occurred during the first Covid-19 lockdown (March–May 2020). Interviews lasted one hour and took place on video-calling platforms, allowing us to overcome the limitations of lockdown while maintaining a good level of audio-visual communication with participants to talk about intimate experiences (Gough & Lyons, 2016; Janghorban et al., 2014; Silverman, 2016).

Data Analysis

Interviews were audio-recorded and fully transcribed verbatim by the principal investigator. Interviews and questionnaires were rendered anonymous through pseudonyms. We analyzed the interview transcripts qualitatively with an abductive approach comprising three methodological steps: (a) revisiting the phenomenon and (b) defamiliarizing it and considering alternative cases in light of theoretical knowledge in (c) an iterative process of double-fitting data and theories (S. Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). If existing theories can be used to describe data, the research simply offers further support for those theories. Various plausible explanations might exist (Lipscomb, 2012). If various hypotheses are valid, abductive efforts seek to construct the one that solves the problems arising from surprising observations, making them fit into the new order (Marková, 2012; Reichertz, 2007).

We used the software Atlas.ti to organize and code data, though qualitative analysis depends on the researcher (Zamperini et al., 2016). In the first step, one researcher conducted a qualitative and exploratory analysis of interview transcripts using various analytical tools: thematic coding and affective coding (Saldaña, 2009), metaphor analysis (Mininni, 2013), and discursive analysis of positioning (Wetherell & Potter, 1988). Interviews were analyzed referring to the analytical categories developed by previous studies on ghosting (Koessler et al., 2019; LeFebvre, Allen, et al., 2019) while looking for unexpected observations. The second step involved discussing the preliminary results and considering alternative theoretical approaches to explain ghosting, including unexpected observations; this discussion brought to considering ostracism as a possible framework. The third step involved a qualitative analysis of data considering the literature on social exclusion.

Results

Out of 23 participants, 21 were familiar with the term ghosting (91%) and defined it as a dissolution strategy that happens mainly via mediated communication and without explanation. Those who were not familiar with the term were asked: “Did it ever happen to you that with someone communications stopped completely, without forewarning and explanation?” Then, participants were asked to recall personal experiences of ghosting; some participants reported more than one episode. Eleven participants recounted stories of ghosting as both disengager and recipient (48%), nine only as recipient (39%), three only as disengager (13%). Table 1 presents a summary of results.

RQ1: Does Ghosting Happen in Different Types of Relationships? If So, How?

Relational Context

When asked to narrate an episode of ghosting, most participants began with a story of romantic relationships or online dating, though in five cases (22%) the first story concerned a different type of relationship (friendship, family, or work). All participants were asked if they had experienced ghosting also in different types of relationships from that of their first story; 12 participants (52%) could recall at least one example. Overall, participants' stories of ghosting were not confined to romantic relationships, although these were the most frequent (30 episodes); 14 episodes regarded friendship, 3 work, and 2 family relationships. Participants individuated ghosting as the unilateral cessation of interactions, mainly in technology-mediated communications. Avoidant behaviors persisted when the parts met in person out of chance, duty, or recipient's request (e.g., leaving the room, giving a cold look).

The relational context of ghosting influenced participants' detection and experience of ghosting. In romantic relationships, especially when at an initial stage, lack of an answer was considered communication of disinterest and thus an indirect form of rejection. Contrarily, in friendships participants reported tolerating longer periods of contact interruption, especially when there was geographical distance. Some participants suggested that romantic relationships need more continuity than friendship: “The continuity that you need in a relationship is different from the one you have with your friends” (Daniela, 25), which for another participant is connected to the need of

exclusivity: “The affective relationship is at least tendentially exclusive so you are less prone to accept an absence in that field than in a friendship” (Marco, 30).

Table 1. Summary of the Results of the Qualitative Abductive Analysis.

RQ1: Does ghosting happen in different types of relationships? If so, how?	
Episodes of ghosting: 30 romantic/sexual, 14 friendship, 3 work, 2 family	
Differences between relational contexts	Similarities between different relational contexts
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Process of detecting ghosting (recipient’s perspective) depends on relational context - Recipient’s self-esteem more affected in romantic context - Recipients may refrain from recontacting disengager in romantic context vs seeking confrontation/reconciliation with friends and family → may affect permanency of ghosting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Dynamic of ghosting: silence in mediated communication signified as unilateral and intentional withdraw from interactions - Meaning: dissolution, punishment, disinterest, unavailable/not ghosting, defensive/self-defense - Low to high negative psychological consequences (recipient) depending on the relevance of the relationship - Can be a manipulative strategy (asymmetric relationship, recurring ghosting)
RQ2: What is the role of technological affordances in ghosting?	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Disappearing easily behind a screen: interaction is mediated, lack of non-verbal cues - Disappearing in the age of hypervisibility: ghosting is an old dynamic made more visible by social media - Detecting ghosting: minimal signals (read receipts) and social surveillance on social media to understand intentionality of silence - Extent of boundary (blocking): partial vs total 	
RQ3: Can ghosting be framed through other theoretical models? If so, how?	
Perspective differences, psychological consequences (recipient), metaphors, punitive motive/antecedent → ostracism (Williams’ Temporal Need-Threat Model, 2009)	
Similarities with ostracism	Differences with ostracism
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Dynamic of ghosting: silence/absence as boundary - Perspective differences/disjunctive views of ghosting (role influences account) → negative social valence of ghosting - Recipient’s perspective: detection of ghosting and psychological consequences - Antecedents (why disengagers ghost): disengager-related (e.g., personality) - Meaning of ghosting: relationship dissolution, disinterest/oblivious, punitive and/or manipulative, unavailable/not ghosting, defensive/self-defense, self-isolation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ostracism is generally studied as a group phenomenon, except for the silent treatment - Ostracism model does not include romantic rejection or relationship dissolution, self-isolation, and self-defense from harassment as antecedents

Permanency of Ghosting and Recurring Ghosting

Participants claimed that ghosting can happen suddenly or gradually, and that it can be temporary, permanent, or recurring. Episodes of permanent ghosting (i.e., no renewed interaction) were rare, and they mostly involved blocking on social media or interactions that had started on mobile dating apps. Episodes of temporary ghosting (i.e., renewed interaction following ghosting) were common, but differed based on the relationship. In romantic/sexual contexts, the renewed contact rarely led to restoring the original relationship, though it often allowed confrontation and apology: “After I disappeared completely I realized that this (...) also because I was told how she was (...) it hurt her very much (...) because of the lack of understanding, so I asked her to meet (...) and I apologized” (Amanda, 24). In friendship and family relationships temporary ghosting was more often followed by partial or total recovery of the relationship, though this often involved a process of reconciliation.

Different types of relationships yielded different behaviors from the recipients, possibly affecting the permanency of ghosting:

“If the ghoster is someone you like is one thing, if the ghoster is a friend is another thing, you can distinguish these two forms (...) because with a friend you (...) feel freer to try and retrieve that person

who disappeared, while if it is from someone you liked there is that sort of embarrassment (...) so probably you start ghosting too" (Roberta, 27).

Recontacting someone for whom there is romantic interest is portrayed as a greater threat of "losing face" than recontacting a friend or a family member, especially in the initial stages of frequentation, where the two parts are trying to understand the reciprocal interest.

The historical context in which the research took place, the first Covid-19 lockdown in Italy, might have played a role in the permanency of ghosting; some participants reported recontacting or being recontacted for reasons connected to the pandemic, for example health-related worries: "Maybe because of the situation of fear caused by this coronavirus etcetera she recontacted me" (Alice, 27). Other reasons for recontacting connected to the pandemic were the lockdown and social distancing, the increased use of social media, and the perception of increased time and decreased distances.

Participants defined some stories as recurring ghosting, characterized by a cycle of events: not receiving an answer for what the participant considered to be a long time in the context of the relationship, not receiving an explanation about the disengager's behavior, sometimes being blocked on social networks, followed by renewed contact by the disengager. Experiences of recurring ghosting were only reported in the position of recipient. Three stories were about sexual relationships, two about friendship, and one about work. Recurring ghosting was not necessarily a form of relationship dissolution:

"A job that happens sometimes when (...) now I talk to him pretending nothing happened you know? it's a dynamic that later, when he needs me, he writes me (...) so, yes, it's a strategy of his, this thing of ghosting, I find out that he doesn't do it only with me but also other colleagues (...) I found out that (...) it's really a strategy: that of disappearing" (Franco, 28).

Franco suggested that ghosting can be a "strategy" that characterizes an ongoing relationship, in this case his boss with the employees. Independently from the type of relationship, recipients attributed recurring ghosting to the disengager's personality and/or regarded as manipulation: "She would start responding and I fell for it (...) we would sleep together and from the next morning she disappeared (...) and a friend he told me she does it with everyone" (Alice, 27).

RQ2: What Is the Role of Technological Affordances in Ghosting?

Disappearing Easily Behind a Screen

Various participants suggested that digital technologies make disappearing easier because interaction is filtered by a screen, which allows to withdraw from stressful interactions (e.g., breaking up): "The fact that the phone exists allows you to do something which on one hand is a great way to communicate easily but on the other hand allows you to disappear" (Giorgia, 27). One participant also suggested that mediated communication lacks nonverbal cues like eye gaze (which would allow to understand the other's emotions), contributing to the ambiguity of ghosting for recipients.

Disappearing in the Age of Hypervisibility

Some participants suggested that ghosting resembles experiences of abandonment or "disappearance" that always existed, but become more evident due to the greater "visibility" of the disengager afforded by new communication technologies:

"If we imagine the situation we are in the '50s no? so telephone (...) even then two people (...) one may decide not to respond to the phone anymore (...) maybe because with texts if you visualize but not respond you know it's like a ghost I mean you think that there is still a presence which you don't see" (Franco, 28).

In particular, older participants (27–33) suggested the continuity of the phenomenon of ghosting in spite of innovations that they had witnessed in communication technologies: "When I was younger we didn't have blue ticks, we didn't have whatsapp, we had calls which the person didn't answer or messages that weren't answered" (Ester, 32).

Detecting Ghosting

Communication technologies seemed to play a central role in the process of detecting ghosting from the perspective of recipient. When asked what ghosting made them think of, participants often provided a definition of ghosting that entailed a technological “proof” that the disengager is intentionally ignoring the recipient, like visualizing messages or stories and not responding: “I connect it to (...) very visual images of chat in which I write something to somebody (...) and I see that the other person visualized and does not respond and (...) and I receive no answer” (Filippo, 34). The first sign of ghosting is the proof that the other person read the message and did not respond, a function played mostly by read receipts: “A person disappears and the other tries to have contact but doesn't find (...) finds double blue ticks” (Ester, 32). The read receipts thus become a sign of the intentionality of the lack of answer, and a first sign for recipients to detect an episode of ghosting. Read receipts seemed to trigger frustration and anger because they signify that the disengager is (probably) intentionally ignoring the recipient's communications:

“Maybe you get mad when someone sees the message and you know they saw it and maybe they don't answer (...) at the same time, it is like having an answer, I mean, like having a trace that they certainly saw it and that certainly that message was read.” (Giorgia, 26).

However, silence is ambiguous and confusing, as it may signify relationship dissolution, unintentional lack of answer, or even punishment. Roberta (27) proposes these three possibilities throughout her interview:

“Ghosting is disappearance but it's also self-consciousness because you think you are the problem (...) but maybe you are not the problem because you don't know what happens on the other side, then most times your intuition is right, that you are not a priority for that person anymore.”

[later] “The first thing that comes to your mind is what did I do wrong why because the relation is A and B and if B does not respond anymore then A must have done something wrong.”

To make sense of the silence, recipients considered the relationship with the disengager (i.e., history of shared interactions): “When you have an intimate relationship you don't talk every day (...) it's the friend that's always there so when a week had passed I wasn't worried at all actually” (Alice, 27). Relationships considered intimate and strong would tolerate contact interruption because there is trust that the lack of answer does not immediately threaten the relationship.

To understand if the lack of answer was intentional, participants also relied on their knowledge of how the disengager typically used social media:

“It must be related to the type of relationship that a person has with technologies if it's a person that you see through group chats or Facebook Instagram if they are always connected very active when they don't answer then yes in that case I would say that is ghosting, if you see a person who doesn't use social media or is not very active (...) you accept more deferred answers” (Marco, 31).

Not only read receipts, but any digital activity of the disengager concurrent to the lack of answer could become a sign of ghosting because it allowed to reject alternative explanations:

“I mean you understand that a story on Instagram this plus the fact that a person does not respond to you removes from your head the idea that question (...) that maybe he has a problem maybe something happened because I'm sorry but now you either not post anything and I don't know what you are doing but if now I know what you are doing you are even more responsible of your behavior towards me” (Roberta, 27).

Silence is ambiguous not only because it can be unintentional, but also because it can have different meanings, which, however, did not seem to make the ghosting “less ghosting”; intentional silence could mean disinterest, relationship dissolution, anger/punishment, or self-protection, or a combination of these, for both recipients and disengagers; still, all were recognized as ghosting in the sense that the disengager is intentionally ignoring the recipient, or the recipient believes so.

Recipients recounted gathering all the available information on the disengager to understand the intentionality and meaning of silence, using social media for social surveillance:

“She was away for a while (...) without telling me and I understood because she wasn't responding (...) and also because I could see her friend's stories and in these stories I saw details that reminded me

of her (...) I felt like a detective (...) maybe a bit obsessive but I mean at some point you want a sign of presence" (Dimitri, 29).

Even though the disengager is physically distant, like in Dimitri's story, they can be digitally present not only in direct communications with the recipient (e.g., IM chat), but also through traces of digital activities that can be more or less voluntary (e.g., posting a story, being in someone else's story, online status). Some participants showed ambivalent attitudes towards innovations of communication technologies, expressing at the same time the desire to know if the other person read the message, and the fear of becoming paranoid from feeling ignored, especially in interactions with somebody they liked romantically and/or sexually. Some participants mentioned feeling pressured to respond and being always available, and for this reason some reported changing settings of their instant messaging apps to conceal awareness cues (read receipts, online status, last access).

Extent of Boundary

Episodes of ghosting sometimes involved blocking on social media, which could be partial (e.g., on one social media, other contacts remain available) or total (e.g., blocking on every platform or blocking on dating app and having no other contact). Total block brought to permanent ghosting. As disengagers, participants presented the act of blocking as the last resort when the recipient made them feel unsafe or uncomfortable, while recipients expressed astonishment for receiving such treatment.

RQ3: Can Ghosting Be Framed Through Other Theoretical Models?

Our abductive analysis brought us to consider the possibility of framing ghosting as a form of ostracism. We recognized a discursive pattern of disjunctive views of ghosting with respect to roles: as recipients, participants tended to present ghosting as cowardly, uncompassionate, unfair, mean, immature or irrational, and expressed negative opinions on ghosting: "It's the fact that is a practice? (...) violent like very psychologically violent it's the psychological violence typical of the twenty-first century" (Giorgio, 25). As disengagers, participants tended to justify the behavior as legitimate or necessary. For example, Giorgio began with two stories as recipient where he discussed how much he had suffered from this "psychological violence"; then, he recounted an episode as disengager where he configured ghosting as a legitimate act of self-defense: "I'm actually in the phase of ghosting him in the sense that I understood that he is a person that makes me feel more bad than good". Despite the role strongly influenced accounts of ghosting experiences, all participants expressed a negative opinion of ghosting, even the three participants who only positioned as disengagers: "It can be necessary (...) where it is possible to have a dialogue in my opinion it should be avoided as much as possible" (Marco, 31); "Certainly it is a negative thing but (...) it's hard to avoid these things sometimes" (Miriam, 28); "In the moment I have to analyze the situation with an external eye I don't think it's a healthy nor mature nor de-blaming dynamic" (Amanda, 24). These perspective differences showed similarities with other phenomena of social exclusion, especially from the perspective of recipients and regarding the psychological consequences and the process of detecting and understanding ghosting. Thus, we present results regarding the two different perspectives separately.

Recipient's Perspective

In recipients' accounts, ghosting was represented as a "wall", a "door on the face", a "limbo", a "shield", a "backstab", or as "having their hands tied". These metaphors condense the meaning and psychological consequences of ghosting expressed by participants as recipients: ghosting is a boundary (wall) that the disengager imposes on the recipient (door on the face) unexpectedly (backstab), leaving the recipient wonder why the silence and what is the meaning of the silence (limbo). The metaphor of the limbo represents the lack of closure, which participants described as more upsetting than explicit dissolution: "It is a very strong weapon it's very much like (...) I mean gives you the possibility to hold a person in your hands" (Dimitri, 29).

Various participants described ghosting as a form of power: "It's a form of power sometimes this is what scares me to leave someone there depending on on on your ehm response" (Filippo, 34). The power of ghosting resides first in the absence of the disengager: "And this this obscuration (...) this (...) this black so strong that then becomes powerful (...) maybe you also stand out more not being there anymore" (Fiona, 28). Through their absence, the disengager becomes more (rather than less) visible; but this depends on the recipient's attitude towards them:

“The silence or anyway the disappearance is one of the worst punishments (...) or anyway treatment that you can give to a person like that of not being there if then the other person wants you (...) or anyway wants to continue communicating you refuse” (Fiona, 28).

The power of silence of the disengager resided in the asymmetry that is characteristic of the ghosting situation, where the recipient desires interaction with the disengager, but not vice versa. This feature of ghosting was so salient that participants did not consider situations of reciprocal lack of communication (e.g., “conversation died out”) as ghosting.

For recipients, ghosting is a strategy that the disengager uses to avoid negative emotions and difficult conversations, like breaking up or discussing problems (shield). However, some participants reported episodes where they received an explanation, a forewarning, or an excuse from the disengager; this did not make the episode “less ghosting”, as they presented the explanation as incomprehensible, false, or inexhaustive.

Moreover, by “imposing their absence” to the recipient, the disengager exerts another form of power, the power to silence: “I felt inexistent and without any possibility of doing (...) anything (...) I didn't feel legitimated to write him again to do anything” (Cristina, 26); “[I felt] angry because you know that the person exploits their power to remain passive (...) the absence becomes power no? and it's a context where you can never have confrontation” (Franco, 28). The power to silence makes the recipient feel inexistent, their voice unheard, and powerless, as it denies the process of negotiation (of a conflict, a working condition, the relationship status):

“When a person says look sorry but right now I don't feel like it or (...) I don't want to hear you because I don't like you enough at that point it returns a shared thing no? like there's me there's the other person and I have the right to think you are an asshole or be mad or be sad or even to think it's fine” (Cristina, 26).

The exclusion from the negotiation made recipients feel powerless (having hands tied).

Not all episodes of ghosting had the same psychological effects on recipients; the extent of the psychological consequences seemed to depend on the relevance of the relationship and on the inferred motive. For example, Mattia compares how being ghosted by a close friend was much more painful than being ghosted by a cute stranger on Grindr:

“With the cutie it passed in ten minutes and two cigarettes (...) the frustration of not having an answer (...) it's that thing of dating apps (...) that sort of micro rejection you get any time you are ghosted (...) yes it hurts but, especially in large cities, it's almost irrelevant, you forget about it because you can move on, there's other ten cuties you can go out with (...) though I wouldn't underestimate the effects of many micro-rejections on your self-esteem (...) with Caterina on the other hand there weren't other ten caterinas who meant what she has meant for me” (Mattia, 25).

Being rejected can hurt self-esteem and a “lost chance” can be frustrating, but it can be replaced with new interactions; an important relationship cannot be easily replaced or repaired, so it is a greater threat to the need of belonging. However, being ghosted could make participants feel frustrated, angry, or stressed even when the relationship was irrelevant, if there was some interest towards the recipient. Plus, being ghosted could affect self-esteem, especially when rejections in the romantic context accumulate. Mattia reported how, at the beginning of the lockdown, Caterina reappeared, telling him she had been self-isolating out of depression. They agreed to meet on videocall, and this is how he recounts their dialogue:

“Then I told her I will change the way I approach this I mean I gave it a meaning that derived from my visceral feeling of anger and frustration for being ignored but now I understood that it says a lot more about you than me (...) now I know that when you disappear you are unwell so I will call you twice next time (...) and she was like (...) thanks for understanding that” (Mattia, 25).

By understanding Caterina's ghosting as a modality of dealing with psychological pain, Mattia was able to reconfigure ghosting as something that did not have to do with him or the relationship between them, mitigating his hurt feelings. The inferred motive could help mitigate the negative effects of the ghosting on recipients if the explanation attributed ghosting not to recipient-related factors (e.g., personality, behavior, appearance, etc), but to contextual factors (e.g., distance) or disengager-related factors (e.g., personality, psychological problems, immaturity).

Disengager's Perspective

From the perspective of disengager, ghosting was represented as a “shield”, an “escape hatch”, a “barrier”, “walls”; these metaphors configure ghosting as a defensive action from a difficult situation, either through a boundary (walls, shield, barrier) or through a way out (escape hatch). Various participants, as disengagers proposed the idea that ghosting is easier than confrontation, which involves emotional effort. Some also argued that they ghosted to avoid being “the bad guy”, which portrays open rejection as a mean act, thus making indirect rejection less mean. However, disengagers recognized that the ambiguity of ghosting could be worse than being openly rejected and that, empathizing with the position of recipient, they would prefer an “ugly truth” to uncertainty:

“[Ghosting] is something divided between rational and emotional (...) it saved me when confronting a certain theme was intolerable, so the escape hatch becomes safety okay? A great liberation (...) rationally, you think yes but this liberation hurt someone very much, is it fair? No, absolutely, so you can also connect it to a sense of guilt, though the guilt was never as strong as the liberation in my case (...) and also the guilt of (...) when you don't give explanation this doesn't allow the person to understand and in the moment someone did it to me, and I wasn't able to understand, and I see the other person detaching from me, it would certainly hurt” (Amanda, 24).

Despite recognizing the uncertainty of ghosting, some disengagers reported episodes of ghosting where they gave an excuse, a forewarning, or even an explanation of cutting off communications; this did not make the episode “less ghosting” in their perception, because they recognized ghosting as the act of intentionally putting the boundary of silence between them and the recipient. As disengagers, participants often reported they ghosted to dissolve a romantic relationship or to reject someone (e.g., strangers), or for self-defense. Rare, but present, were accounts of disengagers who reported ghosting to punish someone they knew or to retaliate against someone who had ghosted them previously. Participants proposed various motivations to legitimate ghosting, from contextual factors (e.g., online context of interaction, strangers, distance), disengager-related factors (e.g., busy, personality trait, annoyed), or recipient-related factors (e.g., intrusive, aggressive, blameful, psychologically unstable). The negative qualities or behaviors of the recipient were recognized both by recipients and disengagers, but while recipients believed they were ghosted for being “not enough” (e.g., unattractive, disinteresting, inadequate), disengagers tended to present recipients as “too much” (arrogant, manipulative, insistent).

Finally, there were situations described as ghosting which involved enacting ghosting as a form of self-defense from harassing or violent recipients; harassment went from unwanted sexual approach, request of intimate pictures, unrequested pornographic pictures, and even threats of physical violence. We identified differences connected with gender and sexual identity: these episodes were only reported in the position of recipient by participants who identified as woman/female and heterosexual, or as man/male and homosexual or queer, and the recipient in the story was always identified as a man. Viceversa, only two participants from the position of recipient reported that they might have been ghosted for being insistent, insulting, or aggressive towards disengagers; these two participants identified as heterosexual and man/male and the disengagers in the stories were identified as women, ex-partners, or women they had liked romantically.

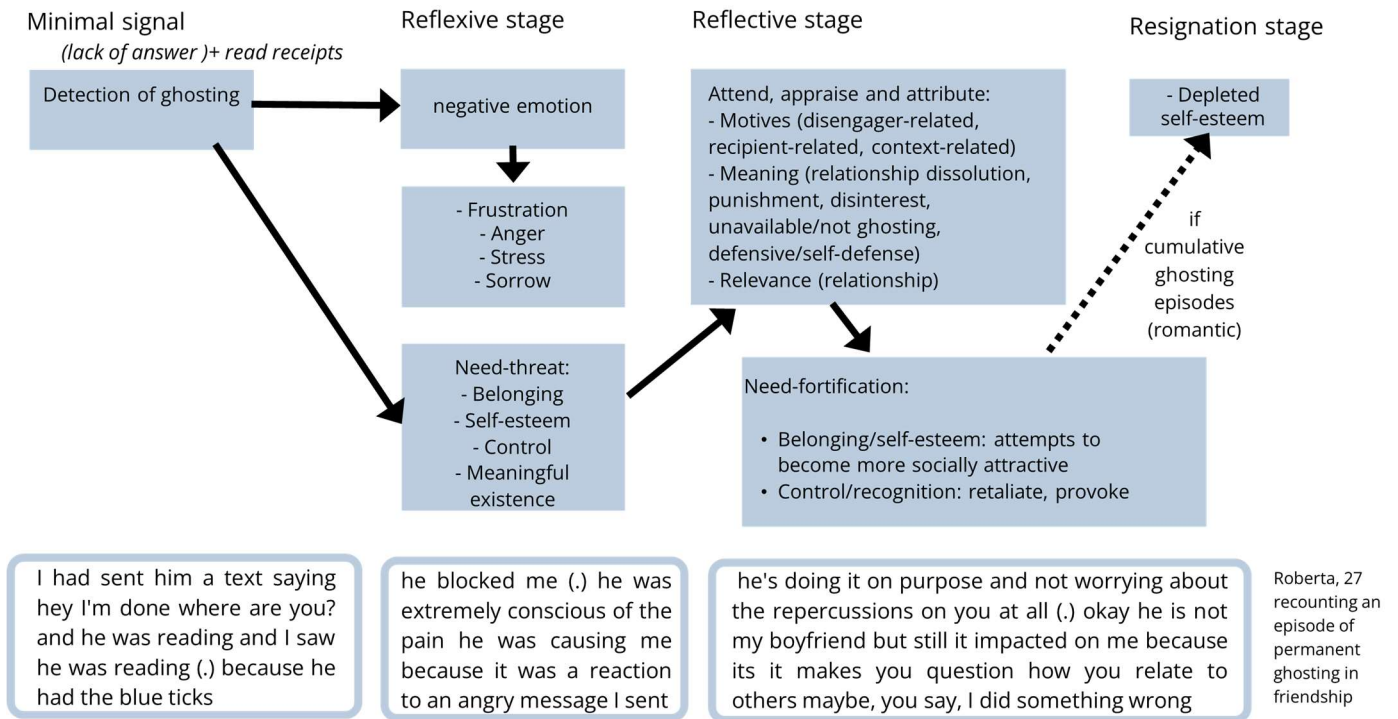
Discussion

Ghosting has been framed as an avoidant dissolution strategy enabled by new technologies, and it has mostly been studied in intimate interactions or relationships. With this qualitative study we aimed to explore personal experiences of ghosting to understand if and how ghosting takes place also in other relational contexts, and the role of technological affordances. We adopted an abductive approach to consider alternative theoretical frames which could enhance our understanding of this social phenomenon, largely discussed on social media and popular press.

Our findings support that ghosting can be framed through the theoretical model for ostracism, though this reframing complements, rather than replace, previous framings of ghosting as a dissolution strategy in romantic contexts (LeFebvre, Allen, et al., 2019). Figure 1 presents how ghosting resembled the Temporal Need-Threat Model of ostracism (Williams, 2009) in our findings.

Figure 1. Temporal Need-Threat Model applied to Ghosting.

TEMPORAL NEED-THREAT MODEL



Note: Elements of ghosting are presented with William's (2009) temporal need-threat model of ostracism, and boxes present one retrospective account of an episode of ghosting that exemplifies how we identified the process of detecting ghosting in participants' narratives.

Participants identified ghosting primarily as romantic rejection or dissolution, though they also experienced ghosting in friendship, family, and work contexts. Episodes of ghosting in friendship, work, and family relationships were more difficult to detect and more often temporary, with possible reconciliation and recovery of the relationship. The historical moment when the research took place, the first Covid-19 lockdown, might have played a role in the permanence of ghosting, with some examples of disengagers recontacting or responding. Especially during extreme lockdown, mediated communication was central, health-related fears were high, and many experienced a sense of loneliness (Canale et al., 2021, Rogers & Cruickshank, 2021; Pietrabissa & Simpson, 2020), all possible reasons to recontact somebody.

According to Knapp and Vangelisti (2008), different types of relationships have different patterns of interaction, which may influence the detection of ghosting. Romantic relationships would have greater expectation of time convergence and frequency of interaction, making a silence more noticeable than in relationships that tolerate longer periods of silence (e.g., friendship). Different types of relationships may also have different implicit (or explicit) norms, and romantic relationships are usually characterized by an unspoken rule of exclusiveness (Koerner, 2019). The exclusiveness of romantic relationships reinforces one's sense of being special (Koerner, 2019), which may explain why receiving ghosting in the romantic context was reported to affect recipients' self-esteem more than in other contexts. Finally, different types of relationships hold different relevance, and though the relevance of a relationship is certainly personal (Blumer, 1969), romantic relationships are particularly valued in our society (Brake, 2012; Reynolds & Wetherell, 2003). *Amatonormativity* is a concept used by Brake (2012) to describe a set of assumptions regarding *relationships of care*, through which some relationships are constructed as superior to others. Amatonormativity values love relationships as superior to all others (e.g., friendship), it assumes that love is a universally shared goal, and that love relationships must be prioritized over other relational spheres of life. Thus, ghosting in this context may be more meaningful, noticeable, painful, and pose greater face-threat (Goffman, 1955) than in other relational contexts (Reynolds & Wetherell, 2003).

Ghosting has been previously associated with technological innovations, as an avoidant practice enabled by the minimal social cues offered by computer-mediated communication (de Wiele & Campbell, 2019; Thomas & Dubar, 2021; E. Timmermans et al., 2020), as participants also suggested in our study. However, the idea that computer-mediated communication is impersonal and favors depersonalized interaction because of the minimal social cues

(Kiesler et al., 1984) fails to recognize that today's social media and communication technologies afford rich and various social cues, from personal content sharing (De La Vega et al., 2021) to minimal signs of availability, like awareness cues (Cecchinato et al., 2015; Oulasvirta, 2008). Recipients showed to use all the available social cues, in a sort of "everyday" social surveillance (Marwick, 2012), to gather a social awareness of disengagers (Levordashka & Utz, 2016; Oulasvirta, 2008). Ultimately, this social surveillance served to understand if the lack of answer was a sign of ghosting. This uncertainty reduction strategy (LeFebvre & Fan, 2020) started when recipients detected the minimal sign of ghosting, which we identified as the lack of answer combined with read receipts (e.g., double blue ticks). As recipients, participants seemed to interpret this indicator of message opening as a first sign that the disengager was intentionally ignoring them, and thus probably ghosting. This interpretation seemed to happen not through a conscious reasoning but through a process of social inference (Oulasvirta, 2008; Walther, 2012) based on shortcuts and simple rules; as one participant put it, ghosting is when one person tries to have contact but does not find an answer, finds double blue ticks.

This minimal sign seemed to be enough to generate feelings of frustration, distress, anger among recipients, who first tried to understand if the lack of answer meant what they feared it meant. Once dissolved the ambiguity, and clarified that the disengager was intentionally ignoring them, participants did not feel relieved; instead, they expressed feeling unworthy, guilty, invisible, and powerless, suggesting that ghosting can threaten fundamental needs of belonging, control, self-esteem, and meaningful existence.

Pancani et al. (2021) brought evidence that ghosting resembles ostracism in its psychological consequences and in the process of detecting ghosting (from the recipient's perspective) referring to the Temporal Need-Threat Model of Ostracism (Williams, 2009). Our abductive study brings further evidence in support of this interpretation, adding that read receipts may play the role of minimal signals (Williams, 2009), which trigger a process of detecting ghosting with immediate negative affection. Experimental research using minimal cues paradigms suggests that humans are hypersensitive to rejection and may over-detect ostracism (Williams, 2009; Wirth et al., 2010) as an evolutionary strategy to minimize the risk of "social death" (Williams, 2007). Participants reported disabling awareness cues to avoid feeling ignored or, vice versa, pressured to respond; thus, read receipts may function as a minimal cue of ghosting and contribute to over-detection of ghosting. The over-detection of ghosting would explain why participants reported that read receipts triggered the feeling of being ignored in situations that eventually turned out not to be ghosting, and why some reported disabling awareness cues on their devices.

According to Williams et al. (1998), the effects of ostracism on targets depend also on the causal clarity, in other words the ambiguity of the behavior as a function of the number of other plausible motives that could account the ostracism; increased ambiguity seems to increase the negative effects of ostracism on target. Indeed, participants reported ghosting as stressful also because of the lack of closure, the uncertainty, the rumination, to which they said to prefer explicit rejection.

Causal clarity depends on the visibility of the source of ostracism (Sommer et al., 2001; Williams et al., 1998). Williams' model of ostracism includes visibility of the source as physical (when ostracism determines physical absence), cyber (over computer-mediated communications), or social (when the act of ignoring happens when source and target are physically present and so visible to each other); the last is claimed to be more threatening than the other two. Today's computer-mediated communication and social media platforms allow to gather a mediated "visibility" of others, something that Thomas and Dubar (2021) described as "disappearing in the age of hypervisibility" and that we abductively individuated in our findings. In the event of ghosting, the distant source may be "visible" through digital channels, thus increasing the target's perception of being intentionally ignored.

The reported psychological consequences seemed to be the outcome of a process of appraisal and attribution based on the relevance of the relationship and the inferred motive. According to Williams (2009), during the reflective phase, people consider the situational context in which the episode happened, which may bring to recovering from the distress of ostracism if, for example, the source of exclusion is someone who the target despises or is indifferent to. The target also uses available information to infer the motive for ostracism, which can bring some relief if unrelated to them. Some participants signified ghosting as a form of social punishment where the disengager intentionally ignores the recipient to hurt, punish, or influence them, similarly to the silent treatment (Williams et al., 1998). This conception was expressed in both positions, recipient, and disengager, though more often from the position of the recipient. Ghosting, like ostracism (Williams et al., 2002), exerts the power of silence and to silence: the ambiguity of silence may be interpreted as a form of social punishment, making the recipient feel dehumanized, ignored, and silenced, their desire for relational negotiation denied. Recurring ghosting was portrayed as a manipulation strategy that leverages on the asymmetry of a relationship

(e.g., employer-employee, asymmetrical investment in a romantic relationship) suggesting a similarity with the silent treatment (Williams, 1997).

Participants' accounts of ghosting were influenced by the role, which we recognized as a pattern of disjunctive views of ghosting (Manning et al., 2019) or, as defined in ostracism scholarship, perspective differences (Sommer et al., 2001). Considering speech as a social act (Wetherell & Potter, 1988), participants used different discursive resources to position themselves in a way that maintains the negative social valence of ghosting, also associated with ostracism (Williams, 2009).

Despite similarities, ostracism is most investigated as a group dynamic (except for the silent treatment), while ghosting appeared as a one-to-one dynamic. Moreover, the model of ostracism does not consider romantic relationship dissolution, romantic rejection, or self-protection from harassment as possible antecedents and/or inferred motives. Finally, our study does not allow us to support similarities between long-term effects of ghosting and the third phase of the Temporal Need Threat-Model, though some participants suggested that being repeatedly ghosted from various potential partners could have a cumulative effect on one's self-esteem, in a similar way to cumulative experiences of ostracism (Zamperini et al., 2020).

Limitations and Future Directions

Starting from rich narratives of ghosting, the abductive approach of this study allowed us to consider and illustrate ostracism as an appropriate framework for ghosting. However, the qualitative nature of this research allows to generate hypothesis, but not to test or generalize findings, and retrospective accounts of ghosting do not allow us to appreciate the process of ghosting detection as it takes place. Future research using experimental paradigms could shed light on the process of ghosting detection and test if read receipts constitute minimal signs of ghosting.

The qualitative nature of this study justifies the limited number of participants, but results cannot be generalized. In our study, ghosting as self-defense from insisting and/or harassing men showed gender differences coherent with the literature on gender-based violence which deserve to be further investigated with larger samples. Our sample was quite homogenous in terms of nationality, age, civil state, level of education, and religious creed; this homogeneity may be due to snowball sampling, which may reflect the educational homogeneity of friendships among young adults/collegial students. Moreover, participants were recruited starting from people within the social network of the main researcher, which can explain the high percentage of participants who studied psychology ($n = 8$, 34.8%). Further research should consider if these factors influence accounts of ghosting.

Conclusions

Ghosting is a slang term that commonly individuates an avoidant dissolution strategy enabled by new communication technologies. This research used a qualitative abductive approach to understand if and how ghosting takes place in different relationship types and the role of technological affordances, considering previous and alternative theoretical frameworks. We collected 23 episodic interviews with young Italians aged 21 to 34. Our qualitative data analysis suggests that ghosting is a social phenomenon transversal to relational context, characterized by (temporary or permanent) silence in mediated communications. Despite perspective differences about the inexplicability of ghosting, the term was used to individuate the unilateral and intentional withdraw from interactions, may it be referred by disengagers or inferred by recipients. Digital affordances play a central role in the detection of ghosting from recipients' perspective: read receipts are interpreted as a sign of intentional lack of answer, similarly to minimal cues of ostracism in Williams' (2009) Temporal Need-Threat Model. Our abductive analysis brought us to consider ostracism as a complementary framework to describe ghosting, considering perspective differences between recipients and disengagers, psychological consequences on recipients, process of ghosting detection, and recurring ghosting as a manipulative strategy. This theoretical framing could help better understand ghosting and its possible consequences, as well as suggest further research on the relation between awareness cues and phenomena of social rejection.

Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

Authors' Contribution

Giulia Campaioli: conceptualization, methodology, formal analysis and investigation, writing—original draft preparation. **Ines Testoni:** writing—review and editing, resources, supervision. **Adriano Zamperini:** conceptualization, methodology, writing—review and editing, supervision.

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Appendix

A: Semi-Structured Interview Script

In this interview I am going to ask you to tell me about experiences that can be described as ghosting for you. Precisely because these are personal stories, there are no right or wrong answers. I will not provide you with a list of answer options to choose from, as my interest is in collecting stories of ghosting that you have encountered in your life. You will be the one to guide me through these stories; I will interrupt, only if necessary, to suggest some aspect that may be interesting to explore. Anything you have to tell in this area is of great interest to me; the more you refer to specific situations, rather than typical ones, the more helpful you will be to me. That is why I ask you for the effort not to leave out any aspect of the stories you will tell me, especially the details. Try to imagine telling a story to someone, referring to its development over time. Everything we tell each other in the course of this interview will remain between you and me and will be used with full respect for your privacy. Do you agree to proceed with the interview? Thank you, then we can begin.

1) To begin with, I ask you to recount everything that comes to mind starting with the word ghosting.

1a) Had you ever heard of it?

Where did you get information about it...

When (before or after I asked about the interview)...

1b) If you had never heard of it, introduce the following question: Did it ever happen to you that with someone communications stopped completely, without forewarning and explanation?

2. Ghosting Experiences

2a) If the person has had personal experiences of ghosting, the following question is introduced: Can you recount any of these ghosting episodes? I ask you to refer to specific situations/anecdotes. Try to imagine telling a story to someone, referring to its development over time and not leaving out details.

2b) If the person has never personally experienced ghosting: have you ever heard about it?

Talk about it from others? In what way? Tell about it.

3. How did this experience make you feel?

4. Imagine you had a magic wand; how would you have used it within your experience of ghosting?

What would you have changed...

What would you have done differently....

5. 5a) How would you describe the relationship that existed between the people involved in these stories?

How did it begin...

How long it lasted...

When and how you realized that the relationship had changed...

And how you used technology within the relationship....

5b) If the person has already expressed the type of relationship that existed between the people involved, you can ask: did this ever happen to you in other types of relationships? This is asked even if you had not already expressed it, but after asking question 5a.

6. Did it ever happen to you to meet these people offline?

If yes, what happened, what did you feel ...

If no, what do you imagine would happen?

And if this person turns up again in some way, what would happen ...

7. What experiences are similar to ghosting but are not *ghosting*?

What makes them similar?

And how are they different?

8. Communication technologies have become part of our lives, although in different ways for each of us.

How would you describe your relationship with technology?

What about your relationship with social networks?

Have you ever used dating apps? Which ones?

9. Now I ask you for a little imagination: thinking about ghosting and communication technologies, is there any innovation that you hope will never happen? What about something you would wish for instead?

10. Right now we are living in a very particular historical moment, in which most of our relationships have to take place through digital means, instead of face-to-face.

Has this situation changed your relationship with the virtual? If so, in what ways?

Do you feel that it has led to a reevaluation of one way of being in relationship over another?

Do you feel that somehow the perception of distance has changed?

Have you happened to recontact someone? If so, for what purpose?

Did you happen to have someone recontacting you after a long time? How come?

11. If not previously expressed: what is your opinion about ghosting?

B: Socio-Demographic Questionnaire

Gender (free answer)

Age (free answer)

Nationality (free answer)

Educational qualification (earned or currently pursuing, if currently enrolled): (multiple choice: Compulsory schooling; High school diploma; Bachelor's degree; Master's degree; Doctorate; Specialization; Other)

Study address (multiple choice: School of Agriculture; School of Business and Political Science; School of Law; School of Engineering; School of Medicine and Surgery; School of Science; School of Psychology; School of Humanities; Social and Heritage Sciences; Other)

Professional activity (multiple choice: Student; Freelancer; Teacher; Employee; Health care worker; Other)

Marital status (multiple choice: Unmarried; Married; Divorced; Separated; Cohabiting; Widow)

Sexual orientation (free answer)

Religious belief (multiple choice: Christian; Muslim; Jewish; Agnostic; Atheist; Other)

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