

Phenomenological Studies: Exploring Someone's Reasons for Doing Ghosting

Rizka Widiati¹ | R. Nafa Estrada Agil Hasani¹ | Latipun¹

¹Master of Professional Psychology, University of Muhammadiyah Malang

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Abstract:

This study examines the reasons why someone ghosts, which is the act of ending a relationship suddenly without explanation and withdrawing from all communication. In the era of social media, ghosting has emerged (trending) as a contemporary term for a phenomenon in the real or virtual world that is increasingly growing and believed by the wider community. Although ghosting generally occurs in romantic relationships, it also occurs in other forms of relationships, such as friendship, work, business, and group assignments. Someone who ghosts will suddenly stop communicating without explanation. At the same time, the victim feels a loss of communication for no apparent reason, resulting in different consequences for both parties involved. This study used a qualitative research method and found that there are several reasons why someone ghosts, namely avoiding attachment, relationship incompatibility, avoiding conflict, and relationship dissatisfaction. These findings can provide a better understanding of the ghosting phenomenon and help people understand the reasons behind this behavior.

Keywords: Ghosting, Relationship, Dating, Emerging Adult, Initiator, Communication

Introduction:

Living in the era of social media makes the flow of information so easy and fast to spread from one person to another. Through the role of social media, many contemporary terms have emerged regarding a phenomenon that occurs in the real world and cyberspace so that in the end these terms develop and are believed by the wider community. As social beings who are interconnected with other people, it is not uncommon for problems to arise in the process. One of them is the emergence of the ghosting phenomenon which comes from the word

ghost. The nature of ghosts is not visible when they are there, like to disappear and appear suddenly. So in terms of language, ghosting means disappearing suddenly. Meanwhile, ghosting can be interpreted as the behavior of breaking off a relationship with a romantic partner or friend without giving any explanation and avoiding communication efforts from the victim (LeFebvre, 2017). Ghosting can also be interpreted as the act or practice of ending a personal relationship with someone suddenly without explanation and withdrawing from all communication (McQuillan, 2020).

The use of the term ghosting has grown with the rise of digital technology, such as social networking sites and dating apps that facilitate the implementation of ghosting (Pancani et al., 2022). The existence of dating apps makes it easy for someone to end a relationship with little social impact (O'Brien, 2014). The phenomenon of ghosting often occurs in the general population, such as in the study of Freedman et al. (2019), as many as 554 American respondents were found to have 25.3% experiencing ghosting as victims and 21.7% as perpetrators.

In general, ghosting often occurs in a romantic relationship that someone is in. A romantic relationship is an emotional and physical interaction that is carried out between two people voluntarily and is realized by both. The giving of affection, feelings of love, and two-way attention marks it. This relationship can also be marked by ongoing or anticipated sexual behavior (Collins et al., 2015). However, in its development, ghosting does not only occur in romantic or love relationships but also in relationships in other forms such as friendship, work, business, group assignments, and households. Ghosting can be divided into two different roles, namely as an initiator or "ghoster" who carries out the ghosting act and non-initiator or "ghostee" who is the target of ghosting (Moore, 2014). The initiator is the person who suddenly and without explanation stops communication, while the non-initiator is the person who is left behind and feels the loss of communication for no apparent reason. This shows that ghosting has different consequences for both parties involved.

According to Jewell (2019), some potential causes of ghosting behavior are fear of the unknown, avoiding conflict, feeling there are no consequences for disappearing, and self-preservation if the relationship is negatively impacting quality of life. Some people may lack the social skills to navigate difficult conversations, while others may find it easier to disappear than to explain their feelings or break up with the other person. Digital communication can make ghosting more common, allowing people to avoid face-to-

face interactions and creating a sense of distance and anonymity.

Ghosting has the potential to cause various impacts, such as making the victim feel confused, hurt, and paranoid, resulting in feelings of betrayal and ending up blaming themselves. This continuous feeling of discomfort can interfere with the victim's daily life functions, such as being lazy to eat and do activities, being unable to concentrate, and decreasing work performance. Several studies have also confirmed this, such as individuals who have experienced ghosting and breadcrumbing also tend to have low levels of life satisfaction, feel helpless in living their lives, and always feel lonely, followed by feelings of meaninglessness (Navarro et al., 2020). In addition, individuals who have been ghosted tend to be haunted in the future. This can be an attempt at revenge to restore hurt feelings and seek control over situations that have been experienced. This phenomenon is related to Bandura's Socio-Cognitive theory, which states that behavior learned by a person is behavior that is proven to have functional value. In this context, the functional value of ghosting is to provide control and end the relationship quickly (Navarro et al., 2021).

It is important to note that ghosting is not always a good option to resolve interpersonal relationship issues and can have negative consequences for both parties. Related to this, there is a phase of emerging adulthood, which is the transition from late adolescence to early adulthood between 18-25 years. In this phase, a unique developmental environment is available for the development of an individual's sexual orientation and identity, creating opportunities for increased romantic and sexual exploration and consideration of their relationships and identities (Morgan, 2013). In this phase, there is also Erik Erikson's psychosocial development stage (Orenstein & Lewis, 2021), namely intimacy vs. isolation. At this stage, individuals face a conflict between forming intimate relationships and avoiding isolation, which marks a critical point in forming strong social bonds and laying the foundation for a happy and healthy life (Drew, 2023).

In the emerging adulthood phase, the use of technology is also increasing. So that individuals can communicate more often with others through digital technology in order to maintain their social relationships (Marciano et al., 2022), including with their partners, compared to meeting in person, in addition to communicating through the help of technology can maintain relationships, it can also increase intimacy and development of the relationship (Hertlein & Piercy, 2008). Previous research has found that communicating through technology will improve the quality of relationships, but further research is needed on how emerging adults communicate and end relationships. Communication assisted by technology does not have verbal and nonverbal movements, such as facial expressions, which are very important in social interactions (Schade et al., 2013). A person can easily do this when deciding to end a relationship through technology.

Ending a relationship is an important component of romantic development in emerging adulthood, and it has been found that breakups can lead to lingering and painful feelings (Beckmeyer, 2020). Termination of a relationship through technology can be done remotely, where individuals can physically and psychologically separate themselves from their partner. This behavior can easily lead to ghosting. This study focuses on answering why someone ghosts in a relationship. Therefore, ghosting can be understood as a form of emotional immaturity or fear of intimate relationships. Individuals who can overcome this fear tend to seek to develop intimate and satisfying relationships with others, while those who cannot overcome this fear may avoid the relationship or escape the relationship by ghosting.

Therefore, researchers are interested in examining the increasingly widespread ghosting phenomenon in social life or interpersonal relationships, and researchers here want to focus more on finding out more about the individual's picture. Developing adulthood plays a role as a ghosting perpetrator. In addition to the lack of research exploring this phenomenon in the Indonesian context, existing research also focuses more on ghosting victims.

This study is expected to provide meaning to the ghosting phenomenon, especially in Indonesia, and reveal factors that have the potential to influence it. Then it can also contribute to understanding the ghosting phenomenon so that it can be used as a basis for related professionals to carry out appropriate interventions in overcoming this problem.

Research Methods:

A. Design

This research was conducted using a qualitative research approach through a phenomenological study. Qualitative research is a research method related to understanding the complex and subjective nature of human experience and involves collecting and analyzing data from various sources to develop a rich and nuanced understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). The qualitative research approach is intended to further explore, explain, and describe in more depth and detail the topic that the researcher wants to study, namely individuals who carry out ghosting to break off relationships with others. Meanwhile, this phenomenological study is a method or research process that aims to describe and explain experiences related to a phenomenon experienced by individuals or groups in their daily lives that focuses on exploring the meaning of individuals in the event (Creswell, 2013). Through this type of phenomenology, researchers try to find meaning and descriptions of the reasons for ghosting actions carried out by emerging adulthood individuals in interpersonal relationships according to their experiences as initiators and how it affects their thoughts, feelings, and actions.

B. Research Procedure

The researcher here used unstructured observation and in-depth interview techniques for data collection. Taylor and Bogdan (1998) define unstructured observation as a method in which researchers observe behavior without a predetermined plan or structure to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon being studied. In-depth interviews are a qualitative research

method that involves interviewing individuals to explore their experiences, perspectives, and attitudes in depth (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Participants were asked open-ended questions by the researcher, including "Why did you decide to ghost?", "When did you decide to ghost?", and "How did you feel when you thought about ghosting?" which were then audio recorded according to the permission of the person concerned. The process of observation and interview activities was carried out at a place and time according to mutual agreement. The interview process only involved the researcher as the interviewer and the interviewed participants, so that the results obtained reflect how the researcher interprets the experiences, feelings, and many other things received from the participants, along with observations without anyone else in the process.

C. Participants

Participants in this study were individuals with characteristics of having experienced ghosting behavior in a relationship with another person consisting of 5 people with the following criteria: (1) emerging adults with an age range of 18-25 years, (2) working or studying, (3) actively using social media, (4) having ghosted in a romantic relationship. The sampling technique used purposive sampling, namely selecting participants who were most likely to produce appropriate and valuable information (Kelly et al., 2010) and identifying and selecting cases that would use limited research resources effectively (Palinkas et al., 2015). Finally, participants involved in this study were also given an informed consent form so that they understood and agreed to the data collection process carried out to be used as related research material.

D. Data Analysis

Data analysis uses qualitative steps based on the Creswell model, namely (1) organizing and presenting the data to be analyzed; (2) reading and viewing all data; (3) coding data; (4) using coding as material for making descriptions; (5) connecting between themes; (6) providing interpretation and meaning about the theme. In simple terms, this data

analysis aims to report data from each predetermined theme. These themes are obtained from a general description of the research results which are divided into several content categories. Each content category has a different meaning and supporting data. These content categories are then selected and sorted based on their suitability to the topics discussed in this study.

Results:

Based on the data obtained, there are four themes to explain why someone ghosts to end a relationship with someone else, namely avoiding attachment, incompatibility of needs, conflict, and relationship dissatisfaction. The first theme is avoiding attachment, which refers to a person's reluctance to be tied to someone else. KH explained, "... she asked, how is this clear? I just said it was nothing. The main point is that if I already know that she wants to have status, I'm lazy. I don't want it anymore." and "I don't want to have an official relationship with her. The point is if I already know that she wants it, meaning being tied, I don't want it". In addition, D also explained, "At that time there was a woman, she admired me, liked me. But, I actually didn't have any feelings".

The second theme is mismatch of needs, which refers to individuals who want something from their partners physically and emotionally. However, their partners are unable to fulfill what the individual wants. D further explained, "It's just because there are benefits that I can get from the woman that's why I have a relationship". In addition, E stated, "I need a friend to hang out with. I need a friend to hang out with or whatever". This is also in line with KH who stated, "Basically, I just look for the fun part. I mean hanging out together, chatting, calling, no need for a status", and SP explained, "Yes, meeting other people, and yes as a guy, we definitely need physical touch. Physical touch is important". AF explained, "I want him to spend more time with me but he can't give me that". Furthermore, D explained, "The point is, there is a feeling of mutual love between the woman and the man".

The next theme is avoiding conflict. This theme explains that individuals do not want to get involved in problems so they limit communication with their partners. KH explained, "... Well, I didn't reply anymore. I didn't disappear immediately, but within 1-3 days the intense communication was reduced". Then E also stated, "In the end I left that guy, at that time my reason was only to say I wanted to get married and since then there has been no more contact".

The last theme is relationship dissatisfaction, which leads to individuals and couples getting what they want so that the initiator feels no longer interested in their partner. KH stated, "Well, because without any status, it's already going. That means the relationship is already going, both of us have fun, that's the story". Then E explained, "Then finally we got close and the closeness was also unclear. I don't mean using the words we're dating or whatever, that really doesn't exist, so the main thing is we just go with it."

Discussion:

Ghosting is a strategy to end a relationship indirectly marked by someone disappearing. This is included in Baxter's (1985) explanation of the withdrawal/avoidance strategy. This study attempts to explain the reasons for ending a relationship indirectly from the perspective of the initiator with an approach from the relationship dissolution theory (Bernhard & Glantz, 2021). The relationship dissolution theory can be used to explain the act of ghosting in a relationship carried out by someone. This theory states that ghosting may be a way for someone to avoid the discomfort and conflict that can occur when ending a relationship directly. They may also lose interest in the relationship or even from communicating with their partner so they decide to disappear by ghosting.

Several stages proposed by Thibault and Kelley (1959) regarding relationships, the first is sampling. This stage explains that individuals will conduct an evaluation process and consider the potential benefits in a new relationship. This process is carried out by evaluating direct or

indirect interactions and comparing them with other available relationships. Individuals will analyze the quality of the expected relationship, differences and similarities with previous relationships and other factors. The second stage is bargaining, where individuals try to identify what is most beneficial for themselves and they will also try to pursue a balance of losses and benefits in the relationship that will be formed. The next stage is commitment, a stable relationship that can be maintained with a predictable exchange of rewards. Individuals will show a strong commitment in the relationship formed by formalizing the relationship or establishing a long-term commitment. The last stage is institutionalization, which is the determination of the benefits that individuals get and tend to settle in the relationship.

If someone does not find the ideal expectation, namely there is an imbalance from what is expected, then they will tend to end the relationship and do ghosting. The functional value of ghosting is that it provides control and ends the relationship quickly (Navarro et al., 2021). Ghosting is chosen because of someone's perception that it only requires minimal effort. In addition, someone as the initiator chooses to avoid attachment to their partner because they consider the emotional cost incurred is small so it does not harm the initiator (Retana-Franco & Sánchez-Aragón, 2020). Actually, someone avoids attachment because they do not want to be in a relationship or have status with other people, both desires that arise at the beginning of the relationship and in the process of the relationship due to factors of not having an interest in the person concerned, being forced by circumstances, and so on. Then, they view the relationship as a unilateral fulfillment of material, physical, and emotional needs for themselves. So in the end, they choose to be in a relationship with the other person concerned, even though in the end they feel that the needs sought do not match their preferences.

The initiator (the party who initiates a relationship or a particular action) obtains the desired benefits from his/her partner, and even though the partner obtains fewer benefits, the relationship continues

because the needs of both parties are met, although not in balance (Kreager et al., 2014). The initiator obtains more benefits than the partner, but there is still a sense of "mutual benefit" or fulfillment of needs at a minimal level for the partner. Simply put, there are benefits that can be obtained from the relationship that the initiator has with another person. Then, the initiator tries to end the relationship through a strategy that requires little effort, namely ghosting as an attempt by the initiator to avoid unilateral communication. In addition, the initiator does ghosting to avoid conflict or other possibilities that will occur when they have felt satisfied with getting benefits because their needs in a relationship have been met. Because the initiator has felt that the reciprocal needs of each party have been met, even though he/she gets a higher level from his/her partner, so he/she is no longer interested in his/her partner and chooses to end the relationship (Daraj et al., 2023). Based on the explanation above, it can be seen why an emerging adult prefers to end a relationship by ghosting in an existing relationship.

Conclusions:

Through this study, it can be concluded that someone who is transitioning from late adolescence to early adulthood or emerging adulthood does ghosting as a strategy to end a relationship with someone else for several reasons. Based on the findings obtained from this study, their tendencies are to avoid attachment, mismatch of needs, avoid conflict, and relationship dissatisfaction. This study is expected to be a foundation to help further research in examining psychological interventions regarding effective communication, dealing with conflict, and overcoming uncertainty and emotions that arise in social relationships.

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