

“Something Would’ve Been Better Than Nothing”: An Analysis of Young Adults’ Stories of
Being Ghosted

A Senior Project Presented to
The Faculty of the Communication Studies Department
California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Bachelor of Arts

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Winter 2022

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Abstract

Utilizing the Narrative Paradigm (Fisher, 1984) and thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), the present study seeks to explore and analyze stories of being ghosted from the perspective of young adults and to identify the themes that may animate these experiences. Recorded qualitative interviews with 21 young adults who had previously been ghosted resulted in 4 emergent themes: a) justifications b) confusion over responsibility c) avoiding future vulnerability and d) contribution of technology. Findings are consistent with previous research concerning ghosting and attachment theory, destiny beliefs, implicit theories of relationships, the role of technology, and more. Directions for future research and limitations of the present study are discussed.

Keywords: ghosting, young adults, the Narrative Paradigm, technology, dating apps

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Romantic relationships are some of the most difficult and emotional parts of the human experience. From meeting to breaking up, making up, and beyond, the life cycle of romantic relationships is variable. No matter the trajectory, the end of a romantic relationship is usually painful. One study found that being judged as un-dateable or experiencing rejection, especially when unexpected, can trigger cardiac deceleration and activates areas of the brain that are involved in the experience of pain (Timmermans, et al., 2020). Indeed, relational termination is a difficult experience for all parties involved.

The technological boom of the 21st century has introduced new ways of relationship termination and ghosting is one of these new break-up strategies. Ghosting first came about in 2006 on Urban Dictionary and since has entered dating vernacular, especially that of young adults (LeFebvre, et al., 2019). Ghosting is defined as “a relatively common and an indirect form of relationship termination where one person simply stops communicating with the other and often ‘unfriends’ and ‘unmatches’ them on social media” (Jonason, et al., 2021, p. 2). What makes ghosting different is the complete lack of communication with the ghostee (person who is being ghosted), where there is no explanation for or declaration of break up (Koessler, et al., 2019).

Given the surge in popularity of ghosting as a relationship dissolution strategy and the formative nature of emerging adulthood, it is worth examining young adults’ stories of being ghosted. The Narrative Paradigm has the potential to generate valuable knowledge about how young adults perceive and understand these difficult life experiences. Thus, the present study

seeks to explore and analyze stories of being ghosted from the perspective of young adults and to identify the themes that may animate these experiences.

Literature Review

The experience of being ghosted has steadily been on the rise. In a 2014 survey of US adults, 13% of respondents had previously been ghosted, but in a study only five years later, that number jumped to 72% (Koessler, et al., 2019). In fact, another study found that participants were more likely to have experience as a ghostee rather than a ghoster (someone who ghosts a partner) (Powell, et al, 2021). Ghosting can happen at any point in a romantic relationship—after a first date, a few months, or even years (Powell, et al, 2021). Ghosting does not even require a labeled relationship, just the expectation of continued communication (LeFebvre & Fan, 2020). In addition, there is no significant difference in the likelihood of being a ghostee across gender, sexual orientation, or current relationship status (Navarro, et al., 2020).

To date, scholars have used a variety of theoretical frameworks to understand and predict ghosting behaviors. The first of which has to do with implicit theories of relationships. Freedman, et al. (2019) used the dichotomy between fixed mindsets (the relationship will either work or not) and growth mindsets (relationships grow with time and effort) to explain the phenomenon. They found that participants with a fixed mindset, or stronger beliefs in destiny, were 63.4% more likely to think that ghosting is an acceptable way to end a long-term relationship, whereas participants with growth mindsets, or stronger beliefs in growth, were 38.4% less likely to think that ghosting is an acceptable way to end a long-term relationship (Freedman, et al., 2019).

The Dark Triad traits, narcissism (i.e., superiority, entitlement, selfishness), psychopathy (i.e., lack of empathy, callousness, antisocial behavior), and Machiavellianism (i.e.,

manipulativeness, cynicism) have also been found useful in research regarding ghosting behaviors. Jonason, et al. (2021) found that the presence of the Dark Triad traits is correlated with greater approval of ghosting as a relationship dissolution strategy in the context of a short-term relationship. Men who score high for narcissism and psychopathy are especially likely to use ghosting to rid themselves of casual partners in pursuit of other opportunities or to avoid commitment (Jonason, et al., 2021).

Interest and intimacy can also factor into the choice of breakup strategy. Relationships with low intimacy often led to the choice of ghosting, as it provides closure and control to the ghoster, who is not concerned about leaving the ghostee in the dark (Koessler, et al., 2019). In addition, Koessler, et al. (2019) found that simple disinterest in partners motivated ghosters to select ghosting as a breakup strategy significantly more than the ghostees in the study had perceived.

Lastly, attachment theory has greatly contributed to the scholarly research surrounding ghosting. Different attachment styles are defined by “separate continuous dimensions of anxiety and avoidance, or model of self and other, with anxiety reflecting negative self-views in relationships and avoidance characterized by negative views of others” (Powell, et al., 2021, p. 2226). According to Powell, et al. (2021), “ghosting is a relationship dissolution strategy that is a modern-day manifestation of avoidance/withdrawal” (p. 2227). Individuals high in avoidant attachment are more likely to use indirect relationship determination strategies like ghosting, and people who had been a ghostee or a ghoster reported higher avoidant attachment than participants who had experienced neither (Powell, et al., 2021). Additionally, ghostees reported significantly more anxious attachment than participants who had not been ghosted (Powell, et al., 2021).

The effects of being ghosted are far-reaching. Many ghostees make changes in their communication and relationship investment due to high levels of uncertainty and ambiguous loss, that is, “uncertainty or lack of information about the whereabouts or status of a loved one, where the true loss remains unclear” (LeFebvre & Fan, 2020, p. 436). Participants in LeFebvre & Fan’s study (2020), because of being ghosted, reported keeping their distance from potential partners and being more afraid that someone will leave “just like that” (p. 441). Others say that they “try not to get serious too fast with anyone” and are “definitely less trusting and more suspicious” (LeFebvre & Fan, 2020, p. 441 & 449). Ghostees may modify their communication with future potential partners in breadth (i.e., type and topic), depth (i.e., amount and length), and medium (i.e., channel or platform) (LeFebvre & Fan, 2020, p. 441).

On a psychological level, there are especially strong potential effects for young adults. Research has revealed that young adults who experience ghosting report less life satisfaction, and more feelings of helplessness and self-perceived loneliness (Navarro, et al., 2020). Another study found that being a ghostee is associated with ghosting intentions and initiation, meaning that having been previously ghosted would make an individual more likely to ghost a future partner (Navarro, et al., 2021). The explanation of these results was justified by Social Cognitive Theory, which explains that “learned behavior patterns are those that prove to have a functional value or deferred reciprocity” (Navarro, et al., 2021). An example of deferred reciprocity in the context of ghosting is a ghostee retaliating by ghosting their next partner in order to restore their hurt feelings (Navarro, et al., 2021).

Orbiting andBreadcrumbing

While ghosting is a broad concept, there are several specific subcategories of ghosting that young adults may experience and that have been largely ignored by scholars. The first of

which is orbiting. Pancani, et al. (2021) define orbiting as a specification of ghosting aftermath, where the ghoster continues to follow the ghostee on different types of social media, occasionally interacting with, commenting on, or liking their content. They explain how ghostees who are orbited can experience more uncertainty and ambiguousness surrounding the end of the relationship, because of the contradictory behavior of the ghoster (Pancani, et al., 2021). This is especially applicable to young adults, as they are the primary users of social media (Pancani, et al., 2021).

Breadcrumbing is also a variant of ghosting, one in which the perpetrator continues to send “flirtatious, but non-committal text messages (i.e., ‘breadcrumbs’) to lure a sexual partner without expending much effort or when the ‘crush’ has no intentions of taking things further...they flirt here or there, send DMs/texts just to keep the person interested” (Navarro, et al., 2020, p. 2). The outcome of this is a significant decrease in life satisfaction and an increase in feelings of loneliness and helplessness for the breadcrumbing victim (Navarro, et al., 2020).

Young Adults and Mobile Dating

With the advent of complex social technology has come an entirely new way to communicate and meet, and therefore new ways to form and terminate romantic relationships (LeFebvre, et al., 2019). At the forefront of this are dating apps and dating websites, as well as social media. Digital environments are associated with less depth in connections, less life satisfaction, and more loneliness, which only worsen with the experience of something like ghosting (Navarro, et al., 2020). Several participants of a study done by LeFebvre, et al. (2019) even tell stories of finding out they were ghosted by seeing a former partner’s relationship status on social media change. This is perhaps because behaviors considered rude or unacceptable in a face-to-face context can be enabled by the anonymity and ease provided by electronically

mediated communication, especially in online dating (Timmermans, et al., 2020). This leads to the gamification of dating and risky behaviors (like sexual victimization, disclosing personal information, stalking, etc.) in addition to ghosting and breadcrumbing (Navarro, et al., 2020).

It is important to note that young adults are heavy users of dating apps, with the mean age of dating app users being from 24 to 31 years old (Navarro, et al., 2020) and young adults being classified as ages 18 through 29 years old (LeFebvre, et al., 2019). One study found that 35.5% and 34.1% of their two samples of young adults 18 to 35 years old who had just experienced a non-mutual breakup met their former partner on a dating app (Koessler, et al., 2019). Because “the least caring and compassionate, indirect, self-oriented, and distancing strategies often involve actions that utilize [things like]...texting, instant messaging, voice mail, e-mail, or social networking sites,” young adults are more likely to ghost as a way to terminate a relationship (LeFebvre, et al., 2019). Timmermans, et al. (2020) found that for every decrease in year of age, the odds to ghost increased by 1.08.

While using these apps, young adults simultaneously experience a period of sexual and romantic exploration, where they have continuous opportunity to shape and re-evaluate their identity and relationships (LeFebvre, et al., 2019). This makes their online dating experiences especially impactful.

Understanding Experiences through The Narrative Paradigm

In general, the romantic relationships of young adults are tumultuous, fragile, and often end (LeFebvre, et al., 2019). Around 70% of college students experience breakups with multiple turnovers and great instability (LeFebvre, et al., 2019). Many young adults in this age group report feelings of sadness, hurt, anger, disappointment, and disillusion after being ghosted, as well as long-term effects on mental health like lower self-esteem, distrust in the world and

others, and even depression and panic attacks (Timmermans, et al., 2020). There is a lot of processing to come with that chaos, and it is important that young adults have a way to understand their emotions and experiences. One way to do that is through narrative.

The Narrative Paradigm is a communication theory developed by Dr. Walter Fisher in 1984. It is centered around the idea that humans are natural storytellers and therefore understand and experience life through stories and narratives (Fisher, 1984). The meaning and significance of symbols—which Fisher (1984) defines as words, actions, events, etc.—are developed and communicated through stories, meant to help organize the human experience. He even states that “enacted dramatic narrative is the basic and essential genre for the characterization of human actions” (Fisher, 1984, p. 2). The Narrative Paradigm does include reason and logic, but it is not based on only that, like the Rational World Paradigm (Fisher, 1984). It recognizes the big-picture and full range of human experiences. For example, people often use stories to illustrate difficult yet factual concepts. Instead of reading the definition of ghosting to someone unfamiliar with it, it is much more effective to explain a situation in which it happened to someone and how.

Fisher (1984) also explains that the themes and details of narratives are meaningful across time, culture, communities, etc., because we experience our own lives as many narratives, which generates understanding for the narratives and actions of others. In summary, “people are reflective and from such reflection, they make the stories of their lives and have the basis for judging narratives for and about them” (Fisher, 1984).

With the Narrative Paradigm in mind, it is important to explore the thematic elements of our own narratives, especially those about our romantic relationships. The way we understand these experiences will shape how we understand ourselves, others, and the world. One study that conducted a thematic analysis of narratives, more specifically those of mobile daters’ ghosting

experiences, provided a lot of insight into the stories ghostees tell themselves and how they understand the ghoster's motivations. Timmermans, et al. (2020) surveyed 328 Dutch dating app users and found that 85% of participants had been ghosted in the past. Three main themes emerged for their narratives: blame toward other, blame toward self, and affordances of dating apps (Timmermans, et al., 2020).

The first theme, that of blame toward other, was used by 59% of the participants to understand their experience (Timmermans, et al., 2020). This theme was characterized by thoughts that the ghoster was talking to, dating, or in a relationship with someone else; that the ghoster had commitment or other issues that prevented them from directly breaking up; that the ghoster was a coward, lazy, childish, disrespectful, and rude; and finally, that the ghoster was simply too busy or no longer interested (Timmermans, et al., 2020).

The theme putting blame toward self was second most popular, and observed in 37% of participants (Timmermans, et al., 2020). This theme was characterized by ghostees thinking that they were not good enough for the ghoster; that they were not interesting enough, not muscular enough, not tall enough, not attractive enough, too fat, or too ugly to be desirable; that they unknowingly did or said something wrong that upset the other person; or, finally, that other reasons like refusal of sex, prestige of job, etc., led the ghoster to ghost them (Timmermans, et al., 2020). The third and final theme in the stories of ghosting was blame toward the affordances of the dating apps, wherein 17% of the participants attributed the ghosting to the ease of it on various online platforms (Timmermans, et al., 2020).

The present study will add to the minimal scholarship concerning ghosting, which is crucial as ghosting increases so dramatically in popularity as a relationship dissolution strategy. Analyzing young adults' stories of being ghosted will also contribute to the understanding of the

Narrative Paradigm as themes in their stories emerge. Thus, I propose the following research question:

R1: What themes animate young adults' stories of being ghosted?

Method

Sample

Participants were 21 young adults who had previously experienced being ghosted, including 13 women (61.9%) and 8 men (38.1%). Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 25 years ($M = 21.24$, $SD = 1.58$) and most participants identified as White (81%, $n = 17$), with 2 identifying as Asian (9.6%), 1 identifying as Hispanic (4.8%) and 1 identifying as Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (4.8%). Participants identified as heterosexual or straight (66.7%, $n = 14$), homosexual or gay/lesbian (14.3%, $n = 3$), bisexual (14.3%, $n = 3$), and asexual (4.8%, $n = 1$). Most participants had completed some college (85.7%, $n = 18$) while 3 participants had already achieved an undergraduate degree (14.3%, $n = 3$). All participants resided in the Western United States.

The amount of time elapsed since the ghosting experience ranged from one week to 5 years among participants ($M = 17.58$ months, $SD = 17.01$ months). The length of time the participant had been in communication with the ghoster ranged from 2 days to 2 years ($M = 3.62$ months, $SD = 5.11$ months). Participants reported meeting their ghoster on a dating app (47.6%, $n = 10$), at a party (19.05%, $n = 4$), at school (19.05%, $n = 4$), or through a mutual friend (14.3%, $n = 3$). 14 participants are currently single (66.7%) and 7 are in exclusive relationships (33.3%).

Procedures

Participants were recruited via various social media pages, social groups, and snowball convenience sampling. Once recruited, the researcher conducted in-depth, semi-structured

interviews with each participant (Baxter & Babbie, 2004). All 21 interviews were conducted via Zoom. Interviews lasted 10-30 minutes each. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, resulting in 79 pages of single-spaced text.

Data Analysis

To investigate the research question, I had to conduct a thematic analysis of the interview data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The first task was to extensively review the transcripts until I was familiar with the information, noting any initial ideas or apparent themes. Next, I dug deeper into the transcripts, recording any “interesting features” of the data, and categorized them (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87). From here, I determined if any of those features could be broad themes defining the experience of ghosting for young adults. To qualify as a theme, these features had to be recurrent, repetitious, and forceful (Owen, 1984). In the next stage, I completed a constant comparative analysis, checking the themes against each other to determine similarities and differences amongst them (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). From here, each theme was deeply analyzed and the story it represented was explained and identified. Each theme was titled, and I selected exemplars from the interview transcripts to demonstrate each theme.

Data Verification

Three validation processes certified the credibility of my findings and interpretations. First, the constant comparison validity technique, which involves checking and re-checking themes against raw data (Suter, 2009). After completing these steps, I made sure to compare the proposed themes so that no two had similar meaning (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Next, I used descriptions, quotations, and narratives to confirm and support each theme. Finally, participants were asked to evaluate the accuracy and validity of the interview findings (Creswell, 2007). Participants were asked to fill out a Google form with a summary of the results and indicate

whether each theme resonated with their experience being ghosted. 18 (85.7%) participants completed the follow-up survey and 18 (100%) reported the findings somewhat or wholly consistent with their experience of being ghosted.

Results

In the current study, I sought to discover what themes animated young adults' stories of being ghosted. Findings indicate four major themes: a) justifications b) confusion over responsibility c) avoiding future vulnerability and d) contribution of technology.

Justifications

Many ghostees noted a reason, besides being ghosted, that their relationship with the ghoster would have failed anyway. As Robert explained, "I think in the back of my head I kind of knew that that we had a few things in common that we hit it off with, but that in total, we weren't that similar." He also recalled telling himself that the relationship "wasn't going anywhere anyway."

Justifying being ghosted can serve a variety of purposes. Finding a reason that the relationship would have failed anyway can cushion the loss that ghostees might feel. It is a coping mechanism. Claire expressed, "ultimately, as I was reflecting back, I realized there were a lot of red flags and that I actually didn't like him that much." One participant, Trevor, mentioned politics as justification. "I was not too bummed," he said, "because she was Republican, she was hardcore Republican." With this, ghostees subscribe to fate in some way, which makes the end of the relationship easier to accept.

Justifications were also a way for ghostees to save face, and many did it by evaluating the character of the ghoster. "I think the way people respond to certain things, tells a lot about themselves," Sarah mentioned. James recalls, "I definitely leaned more into the narrative of

clearly this person doesn't treat other people well enough to be straight up about their interest level. So that was a good rationalization for not being interested in them either. Basically, if you're not even willing to tell me you're not interested, you're probably not a good match for me." By appraising the ghoster unworthy of their attention, the ghostees self-preserve. Ghostees maintain respect for themselves as well as avoid humiliation. As Elizabeth revealed, "I just was genuinely like, he just sucks, like he's a fucking loser." With this justification, there is truly no loss and the ghostee's dignity is preserved.

Confusion Over Responsibility

Additionally, ghostees experienced a mental tug-of-war between *did I do something wrong* and *there is nothing wrong with me* after being ghosted. Ghostees found themselves confused about whose responsibility the ghosting was, especially when it first happens. "At first I was pretty upset," Emily said, "just because I didn't know what I did wrong." Having someone simply disappear from their life leaves ghostees uncertain and answerless, and they often blame themselves. As Heather noted, being ghosted, "made me second guess myself and doubt a lot of how I communicated with him and, you know, what I did wrong." Some ghostees even went as far to devalue themselves in the process. Elizabeth reflected, "I see myself as very naive, first of all. I look back at it, and I'm like, you idiot." She even recalled being angry with herself for "for not figuring it out sooner and for actually believing what [the ghoster] had said." However, there is a second piece to this puzzle.

While most ghostees wondered what they did wrong to cause the ghosting, they also expressed self-assurance. "As I talked about it with friends and with my therapist," Claire revealed, "I realized that I didn't do anything wrong. I did everything right. I was honest in the beginning, saying what I wanted and what I expected." Ghostees were able to treat themselves

with kindness in addition to blame. Some even had advice for other ghostees. “I think the biggest thing to remember,” Elizabeth said, “is it's not your fault...I feel like it's so easy to be say ‘I'm not cool enough or pretty enough or fun enough’ or whatever the not enough of something is. It's not really ever you.”

This back and forth of responsibility was regarded by ghostees as the most traumatic and frustrating part of being ghosted. Many recall tears, racing thoughts, and staying up late analyzing the events of their relationship. One participant, Jessica, animated this experience particularly well. “I've never lost sleep over a guy before,” she said, “but this time, I was staying up late. When I was lying in bed, my mind was just like a hamster running in a wheel. I just could not stop thinking about it.” This confusion and rumination about responsibility for the ghosting is a common theme amongst the ghostees' experiences.

Avoiding Future Vulnerability

Being ghosted left a real imprint on ghostees, and one consequence is a change in approach to romantic relationships going forward. Many ghostees experience increased hesitance and caution. As Stephanie put it, “I just have to go into things like romantic relationships, and hookups of any sort, with an incredibly open mind and very low expectations.” A change in expectations, specifically, was popular amongst ghostees. Trevor expressed similar sentiment. “I just have zero expectations now,” he said, “going into meeting someone.”

The next level of change was a type of self-protection, in the form of restricting self-disclosure. Being ghosted “definitely made me more on guard and made me think less of what potential partners tell me,” Elizabeth said. William explained that “it makes [him] hold back because, if you don't open yourself up to that kind of vulnerability, when the relationship does eventually end, you don't feel as bad about it. The less invested you are, the less hurt you are

going to get.” “And I don't try to do it,” William continued to say, “it just naturally kind of kicks in.” This can develop into a sort of paranoia and insecurity, where ghostees are afraid to communicate with future partners, thinking that they will be a burden or bother the other person. Ghostees also report trusting future partners much less than before and waiting a very long period of time to date again after being ghosted.

Contribution of Technology

The final shared theme among ghostees was the role of modern technology and dating apps in their experience. The emergence of dating apps and new technology has changed the trajectory of romantic relationships and the nature of communication forever, and ghostees were sure to mention it. As stated by Amanda, “I don't think anybody knows how to communicate anymore, at all...guys especially have figured out it's such an easy cop-out to ghost. It's so easy to just be like, well, even if they text me 100 times, I can just not respond. And then it's just not my problem.” Matthew noted that “in the modern age of technology, I could swipe out of this call and text, you know, five different people, and you would never know.” He even brought the interviewer into the uncertainty of the experience.

Other ghostees spoke to the anonymity and ease provided by online environments as well. Anna explained that “because of social media, people are just not as connected with one another. You don't have to see people in person, you don't have to see their reactions to you literally just disappearing from their life. I think people are more motivated to just not really care because they won't see the consequences of their actions.” Dating apps especially cater to this type of mentality. Many ghostees expressed whatever or it doesn't matter attitudes regarding the seriousness of dating apps. In reflecting on his experience being ghosted, John said “I wish that he would have just been honest and been like, hey, I'm not interested. But also, with the culture

of online dating he has really no obligation to do that.” Ghostees reported that the culture of online dating and dating apps makes ghosting easy, even encourages it.

Discussion

The current study investigated what themes animated young adults’ stories of being ghosted to understand more about how young adults experience and understand being ghosted. Guided by the Narrative Paradigm, ghostees’ qualitative interviews were analyzed to find common themes that were recurrent, repetitious, and forceful (Owen, 1984). Findings confirm the results of previous research. The current study corroborates the connection between ghosting and implicit theories of relationships as well as furthers research concerning ghosting and attachment theory. Results also add to previous narrative and thematic research concerning ghosting.

The emergent theme of *justifications* found in the present study contributes to previous research about destiny beliefs and implicit theories of relationships. Many ghostees in the present study used some explanation (i.e., not having enough in common, political difference, etc.) to indicate that their relationship was destined for failure. This is in alignment with the findings of Freedman, et al. (2019) that stronger destiny beliefs are associated with greater likelihood of thinking ghosting is an acceptable relationship termination strategy. It could be that developing destiny beliefs makes being ghosted easier to accept, but the direction of the relationship is unclear at this time.

One connection that does seem to be clear is between being ghosted and anxious and avoidant attachment. Powell, et al. (2021) found that participants who had been ghosted reported significantly more anxious and avoidant attachment than those who had not ghosted or had not been ghosted and the current study furthers this research, with an emergent theme being a change

in communication and attachment. *Avoiding Future Vulnerability* represents an increase in anxious attachment (i.e., anticipating partner will leave, insecurity, paranoia) and in avoidant attachment (i.e., restricting self-disclosure, maintaining distance). Changes in attachment could be a self-protective response to being ghosted. In addition, the changes uncovered by this theme are consistent with post-ghosting communication modifications found by LeFebvre & Fan (2020).

Results also show similarity to the work of Timmermans, et al. (2020) and LeFebvre, et al. (2019). Ghostees in the present study noted the contribution of technology to the phenomenon of ghosting and explained how the anonymity and ease of ghosting is perpetuated by the online environment and dating apps. This is similar to *Affordances of the App*, a theme identified by Timmermans, et al. (2020) in analysis of participants' ghosting experiences. In fact, three of the four emergent themes of the present study are identified in the results of Timmermans, et al. (2020) although their work separates blaming the self and blaming the other, whereas the present study combines them and presents them as a dialectical tension.

Between the present study and that of Timmermans, et al. (2020), ghosting has proven to be a valuable application for the Narrative Paradigm. Both studies were able to identify clear themes in the stories of participants and thus generate a deeper understanding of how ghosting is experienced by young adults. For the field of communication studies as a whole, results provide valuable information about the role of the Narrative Paradigm in understanding and retelling stories of difficult experiences like being ghosted, especially for young adults. Given that young adulthood is such a formative time of sexual and romantic exploration as well as identity formation, it is important to pay attention to the results of the present study and ponder their

implications on the future of young adults and their romantic relationships (LeFebvre, et al., 2019).

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Although young adults who had been ghosted were recruited as a whole for the present study, there were demographic disadvantages in the sample. Only 8 (38.1%) participants were male and only 4 (19%) participants identified as a racial minority. More male and minority race participants would have generated a more holistic view of the experience of being ghosted across race and gender.

The present study utilized a convenience sample, which meant that most participants were current or former students at an undergraduate university. Young adults who have not attended any college or who have attended graduate school may understand being ghosted differently. Future studies including participants of all educational levels could generate a more inclusive picture of the phenomenon. Because participants were selected from the same university and social circles, they also may have differences from the general population of ghostees that influenced the results of this study.

Valuable directions for future research include comparison of narratives between genders and method of meeting. Considering the culture of dating apps explained earlier in this study, it would be interesting to investigate the differences between occurrences of ghosting wherein the partners met on a dating app versus in-person. And given the well-established gender stereotypes in the United States, pursuing research that compares the narratives of men and women as well as non-binary individuals could be valuable. There is potential as well for important findings regarding the dichotomy of blaming the self versus blaming the other person when it comes to

ghosting. Future research could focus on factors contributing to blame assignment such as childhood trauma, attachment style, self-esteem, previous relationships, etc.

Ghosting as a relationship dissolution strategy is snowballing in popularity, and the consequences for both the ghostee and the ghoster as well as society as whole remain truly unestablished. In order to understand this phenomenon, future research is required.

Conclusion

The present study sought to investigate what themes animated young adults' stories of being ghosted. Guided by the Narrative Paradigm and Braun & Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis, four common themes emerged: a) justifications b) confusion over responsibility c) avoiding future vulnerability and d) contribution of technology. Findings corroborate previous research concerning ghosting in connection to implicit theories of relationships, attachment theory, modifications to communication, and more.

The unstoppable boom of technology and social media has generated completely new human experiences—ones like being ghosted—that can make miserable events, like the end of a romantic relationship, even more difficult. While ghosting may just be the tip of the iceberg for what is to come in how technology complicates human life, it is important that we seek understanding of these phenomena sooner rather than later. Further research on ghosting and how individuals experience and make sense of it is crucial for understanding the future of romantic relationships and society at large.

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Appendix A

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL DON'T FORGET TO PUSH RECORD ON THE ZOOM MEETING! TURN ON TRANSCRIPTION.

Hi, (INSERT PARTICIPANT'S NAME)! Thanks again for agreeing to participate in this study! This interview should last approximately 30 minutes and will be recorded. I am going to ask you some questions about your experiences of being ghosted by a romantic partner. If at any point you do not want to answer a question, that is totally fine. Names will be changed to preserve confidentiality. Are you ready to begin?

1. For this research project we are specifically interested in learning more about what your experiences of being ghosted by a romantic partner were like, and how you felt about them.
2. That said, would you mind sharing a story or stories with me about a time (or times) that you have been ghosted by a romantic partner?
 1. IF UNCLEAR TO PARTICIPANT: How did you feel being ghosted, when someone suddenly ended a romantic relationship with you by withdrawing from communication? Would you mind sharing that story with me?
 2. If unclear on definition: **ghosting**--the practice of ending a personal relationship with someone by suddenly and without explanation withdrawing from all communication.
 3. Tell me about the interpersonal context of a time that you were ghosted.
 1. How did you meet this person?
 2. How long had you known each other?
 3. What was your relationship like?
 4. How did the ghosting occur?
 5. How did you feel about the ghosting when it happened?
 6. How do you feel now about the ghosting?
 7. Are there contexts in which you think ghosting is acceptable?
 8. How do you feel now about romantic relationships in general?

Debrief

So that is officially the end of the interview! Are there any other details you would like to provide or questions you would like me to revisit? Any questions you have for me?

If anything comes up, please don't hesitate to contact us via email: lrnelson@calpoly.edu or kholme06@calpoly.edu.

Before I let you go, would you be willing to review the results of this study at a later date – likely in a few months? Basically, we will send you a summary of our findings and ask you if they ring true to your experience.

- IF YES: Can I get a good email address for you?
- IF NO: I totally understand, thank you anyway!

Would you also be willing to share this study opportunity with others you know who may qualify? If so, that would be great! Please share the link to the survey you completed.

Thanks so much for sharing your experience with me. I hope you have a wonderful day/night!