

INDEFINITE LOSS IN MODERN RELATIONSHIPS: A BRIEF EVALUATION ON GHOSTING

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ABSTRACT

Ghosting is a form of relationship termination characterized by one partner unilaterally cutting off communication or ignoring the other partner's attempts to reach out. In ghosting, the victim cannot make sense of what is happening, cannot end the relationship, and tries to manage the situation with the hope of receiving a response. Therefore, ghosting has negative effects on the psychology of partners. The aim of this study is to examine ghosting behavior through the psychological characteristics of both the individuals who engage in it and those who experience it. The review was conducted by searching key terms in Turkish and English in national and international databases such as PubMed and Google Scholar. The studies reviewed show that individuals subjected to ghosting experience shock, sadness, attempts to repair the relationship and anxiety. The anxiety experienced can carry over into subsequent relationships. When examining individuals who ghost, it is observed that they employ concepts of guilt and relief, attribute behavior to their partner, exhibit egocentric tendencies, avoid conflict, and sometimes act for prosocial reasons. In conclusion, clearly identifying the characteristics of those subjected to and engaging in ghosting, investigating the motivations of perpetrators, and understanding how it affects partners are important. Ghosting should be considered not merely as a personal choice but as a multifaceted phenomenon with psychological, social, and relational dimensions. Developing healthy communication skills is thought to play a key role in reducing the negative effects of ghosting. Awareness-raising initiatives by mental health professionals are recommended in this context.

Keywords: Ghosting, Victim of ghosting, Perpetrator of ghosting, Psychological effects of ghosting

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ÖZET

Ghosting; bir partnerin tek taraflı olarak iletişimi kesmesiyle veya partnerinin ulaşma çabasını görmezden gelmesiyle karakterize bir ilişki sonlandırma biçimidir. Ghosting davranışında mağdur ne olduğunu anlamlandıramaz, ilişkiyi sonlandıramaz ve cevap alma ihtimaliyle durumu yönetmeye çalışır. Bu sebeple ghostingın partnerlerin psikolojisi üzerinde olumsuz etkileri bulunmaktadır. Anlatı derlemesi olan bu çalışmanın amacı ; ghosting davranışını, yapan ve maruz kalan bireylerin psikolojik özellikleri üzerinden incelemektir. Tarama, anahtar kelimelerin Türkçe ve İngilizce dilinde PubMed, Google Scholar gibi ulusal ve uluslararası veri tabanlarında aranmasıyla yapılmıştır. İncelenen çalışmalar ghostinge maruz kalan bireyde şaşkınlık, üzüntü, ilişkiyi onarma girişimleri, kaygı gibi etki ve tepkilerin olduğunu göstermektedir. Yaşanan kaygı sonraki ilişkilere yansiyabilmektedir. Ghosting yapan bireyler incelendiğinde ise suçluluk ve rahatlama kavramlarını kullandıkları; partnerinin davranışlarına atfettikleri, benmerkezci oldukları, çatışmadan kaçındıkları ve prososyal gerekçelerle yaptıkları görülmektedir. Sonuç olarak, ghostinge maruz kalanların ve yapanların özelliklerinin net bir şekilde belirlenmesi, yapanların motivasyonlarının araştırılması ve partnerleri nasıl etkilediğinin anlaşılması önemlidir. Yalnızca bireysel bir tercih olarak değil, psikolojik, sosyal ve ilişkisel boyutları olan çok yönlü bir olgu olarak değerlendirilmelidir. Sağlıklı iletişim becerilerinin geliştirilmesinin ghostingın olumsuz etkilerinin azaltılmasında önemli rol oynayabileceği düşünülmektedir. Ruh sağlığı

çalışanları tarafından, bu bağlamda farkındalık artıran çalışmalar yapılması önerilmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Ghosting, Ghosting mağduru, Ghosting yapan, Ghostingte psikolojik etkiler

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INTRODUCTION

The digitalization of communication has brought forth new forms of establishing relationships as well as new breakup strategies. The most discussed and prevalent of these strategies is the phenomenon known in popular culture as ‘ghosting’¹. Ghosting refers to the situation where one party completely cuts off communication without any notification, explanation, or feedback to the other party². This action involves abruptly ending phone calls, messages, and social media interactions. While traditional breakup methods usually involve some form of closure or confrontation, ghosting leaves the victim (ghostee) in a void of uncertainty and silence. For the exposed party, this situation is not merely a disappointment but a social exclusion experience that can lead to deep psychological distress³. The aim of this study is to examine ghosting behavior through the psychological characteristics of both the perpetrators and the victims.

METHODS

This study is designed as a narrative review of the academic literature published on the phenomenon of ghosting between 2015 and 2026. Due to the strong connection of the phenomenon with the modern and digital age, studies conducted especially in the last decade have been designated as the focal point.

Data Screening Strategy

National and international databases such as Google Scholar, PubMed, PsycINFO, ScienceDirect, and Web of Science were utilized for the literature review. During the search process, keywords such as “ghosting”, “relationship dissolution”, “digital dating abuse”, “ostracism”, “social exclusion”, “ambiguous loss”, “hayaletleşme”, “dijital flört şiddeti”, and “ilişki sonlandırma stratejileri,” along with various combinations of these terms, were searched in both Turkish and English.

Inclusion Criteria:

- Being an original research article, review, or meta-analysis published in a peer-reviewed journal.
- Studies that directly define, measure, or establish a theoretical framework for ghosting.
- Studies that empirically examine the psychological, behavioral, or social consequences of ghosting.

In line with these criteria, the sources were analyzed in depth as full texts. The primary findings and theoretical frameworks used in this review are based on the synthesis of these sources.

The Concept of Ghosting

Derived from the word ghost, meaning “hayalet,” ghosting is generally defined as one partner unilaterally cutting off communication or ignoring the other partner’s attempts to make contact. Today, this behavior is mostly carried out through technological tools¹⁻³. Due to the ease of communication established through technological tools, along with anonymity and surveillance features, individuals can easily reject suitors, cut off communication, delete, or block them^{1,4,5}. In virtual environments, the ability to conceal one’s real identity reduces social responsibility and distances individuals from empathy. Within the surveillance aspect, a person may monitor their partner’s activity on social platforms, see that messages have been read, yet still not respond. This situation creates the perception that the individual is free to terminate communication whenever they wish. These conveniences provided by technology contribute to the more widespread use of ghosting⁵⁻⁷. In technological environments and virtual dating applications, ghosting is perceived as a normal way of ending a relationship. Changing this perception is highly important for reducing ghosting behavior^{8,9}. Although ghosting is often viewed as a new relationship termination strategy¹⁰, it is a behavior that has existed for a long time through letters or various other forms of communication. Defined as the unilateral and unexplained cessation of communication, this phenomenon has become more visible with the use of technology.¹¹ Ghosting is most commonly associated with romantic relationships; however, it also occurs within families, workplaces, friendships, and even academic settings. This diversity shows that ghosting is not only an individual but also a social and theoretical phenomenon¹²⁻¹⁵. Although many authors define ghosting as the abrupt ending of a relationship^{12,16-18}, many others argue that it may also appear as a gradual distancing process^{4,5,11,19-21}.

The Ghosting Process and Its Psychological Consequences

When ghosting is evaluated in the context of gender, it has been observed that women engage in ghosting behavior more often in order to punish men or protect themselves, whereas men tend to practice ghosting more frequently in short-term relationships or when they have an avoidant attachment style^{22,23}. In general, no significant difference has been found between women and men in terms of the rate of exhibiting this behavior. Both genders consider ghosting to be more acceptable when it is carried out by individuals of their own gender and view it as more acceptable in short-term relationships compared to long-term Relationships²⁴⁻²⁶.

Ghosting is particularly common among young adults. A study conducted with 332 participants aged between 18 and 35 showed that 64.5% had ended a romantic relationship or interest through ghosting, while 72% had been exposed to ghosting²⁴. Another study examining individuals who engage in ghosting found that they had generally been exposed to ghosting previously²⁷. In a study conducted by Jaspal and Lopes (2025), it was determined that participants aged 18–30 experienced more ghosting than those aged 31–40, and that experiencing ghosting had more negative consequences than being directly broken up with²⁸. Among adolescents, ghosting behavior has been found to be practiced mainly for two reasons: difficulties in expressing emotions and minimizing the negative aspects of ending a relationship²⁹.

Although ghosting is a form of relationship termination, it differs from other termination strategies because when victims are ghosted, they are often unable to define what has happened, attempt to understand and manage what the lack of communication means, and are unable to end the relationship themselves¹. With

the possibility of receiving a response, they feel the need to contact their partners.³⁰ In this context, ghosting has disturbing causes and consequences for the psychological state of partners.^{22,31,32} Studies examining victims show that immediately after being ghosted, a sequence of reaction stages emerges, characterized respectively by shock, confusion, anger, sadness and guilt, attempts to repair the relationship, and acceptance³³. Ghosting may also lead to physical problems such as loss of appetite and sleep disturbances³⁴.

In studies examining experiences, individuals who ghosted others reported feelings of guilt and relief more frequently, whereas ghosting victims reported sadness, anxiety, self-blame, and feelings of hurt more frequently. Those who were exposed to ghosting perceived greater threats to their basic needs (control, self-esteem, self-concept, and meaningful existence) compared to those who engaged in ghosting.^{35,36} Due to the anxiety that develops, managing anxiety in subsequent relationships may become more difficult, and individuals may display self-protective behaviors by emotionally withdrawing or exhibiting egocentric behaviors³⁷. From a therapeutic perspective, it is important to remind the victim that ghosting is not caused by themselves but rather stems from the personal characteristics of the individual who engaged in ghosting. While coping with this situation, victims display behaviors such as normalization, seeking social support, distancing themselves from virtual dating, or attempting to contact their partner in search of meaning. Ghosting is thought to be associated with depression and anxiety, and uncertainty regarding this issue continues^{38,39}.

Individuals who are subjected to ghosting may become anxious that others could harm them, and their personal characteristics may be affected, leading to paranoid thoughts. For this reason, it is thought that providing psychological support can help prevent the development of paranoia.⁴⁰ The psychological effects are generally observed to increase when the experience is perceived as unexpected and surprising⁴¹. Studies examining individuals who engage in ghosting have found that those who are selfish, aggressive, attention-seeking, and fearful of missing opportunities are more prone to exhibit ghosting behavior^{25,42}.

Another study examining the reasons for ghosting found that individuals often attribute their behavior to the characteristics and actions of the other party, stating that they acted to protect themselves, avoid conflict, and prevent hurting others^{21,41}. Individuals with high prosocial motives, such as concern for others and avoidance of causing harm, are also more likely to engage in ghosting. Thus, ghosting can be motivated not only by selfish behavior but also by the intention not to hurt someone. Accurately understanding the intention and perceiving ghosting as a termination strategy that can be misunderstood may reduce its negative effects⁴³.

Avoidant attachment style is more frequently observed in individuals who engage in ghosting, whereas anxious attachment style is more common among those who are ghosted^{16,44}. Ghosting behavior cannot be explained solely by personality traits; social and cultural factors also play a role. Strong, wealthy individuals, and even women, have been found to feel more freedom to engage in this behavior⁴⁵. Current studies have been insufficient in investigating non-romantic types of relationships. Ghosting in friendships, for example, shows a prevalence rate similar to that in romantic relationships.⁴⁶ In the study by Pancani et al. (2021), 46% of participants reported experiencing ghosting in a friendship rather than a romantic relationship³³. Ghosting also harms fundamental relationship principles such as trust, fairness, participation, transparency, autonomy, and respect⁴⁷. These findings highlight the importance of examining relationships formed through different

types of bonds.

Discussion

The findings addressed in this study demonstrate that the phenomenon of ghosting in the digital age has evolved beyond being a mere ‘relationship dissolution strategy,’ becoming a complex structure that leaves profound effects on individuals’ psychological well-being and patterns of social interaction. The observations that the anonymity and physical distance provided by digital platforms weaken individuals’ sense of social responsibility parallel the concept of the ‘online disinhibition effect’ in the literature. LeFebvre et al. (2019) emphasize that the convenience provided by technology allows individuals to avoid the burden of confronting the other party. However, this convenience creates an ‘ambiguous loss’ effect based on uncertainty for the victim, preventing the healthy completion of the grieving process ⁴.

The relationship between individuals’ attachment styles and ghosting behavior is of critical importance in understanding the psychological roots of this phenomenon. Studies conducted by Powell et al. (2021) confirm that individuals who engage in ghosting generally possess an avoidant attachment style, whereas victims of ghosting tend to exhibit higher levels of anxious attachment. As an interesting paradox, it is observed that some individuals choose this method with prosocial motivations, such as ‘avoiding conflict’ or ‘not hurting the other party through direct rejection.’ However, the intense guilt and loss of self-esteem experienced by victims prove that this ‘well-intentioned’ silence creates a much more traumatic impact on the victim than direct rejection. The fact that ghosting is no longer limited to romantic relationships and is observed with similar prevalence rates (approximately 46%) in friendship and professional environments indicates that this behavior is beginning to become a social norm. Pancani et al. (2021) state that ghosting experienced in the context of friendship can be as, and sometimes even more, destructive than romantic ghosting, as it directly targets the victim’s social support networks³⁵.

Conclusion

Clearly identifying the characteristics of both those who are subjected to ghosting and those who engage in it, as well as investigating the motivations of individuals who ghost, is crucial for understanding why it has become widespread and how it affects partners. Increasing knowledge and awareness on this topic is highly important, as it can contribute to implementing preventive and restrictive measures, thereby minimizing negative psychological effects. It is recommended that mental health professionals carry out studies aimed at raising awareness in this context.

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