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R E V I E W

A systematic review of ghosting as a relationship dissolution method in emerging adults' relationships

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Abstract | **Introduction/Objective:** Ghosting, defined as the abrupt termination of a relationship without explanation or further contact, has become increasingly common among youth and emerging adults, largely due to the widespread use of digital platforms. This systematic review aims to synthesise empirical evidence on the characteristics of individuals involved in ghosting, their motivations, emotional and psychological consequences, and the instruments used to assess the phenomenon. **Method:** A total of 11 studies published between 2019 and 2024 were analysed, including 4,981 participants up to 29 years of age. The selected studies employed quantitative, qualitative, mixed, and experimental methodologies. **Results:** Ghosting is associated with avoidant attachment styles, the need for closure, and specific personality traits among those who ghost, while victims tend to display anxious attachment and high levels of social comparison. Motivations for ghosting are diverse and include conflict avoidance, emotional self-protection, disinterest, and poor communication. Although it is often perceived as a quick and less confrontational way to end a relationship, ghosting can lead to significant psychological effects for both the initiator and the recipient, including anxiety, sadness, guilt, or relief. Digital communication facilitates this behaviour by minimising the discomfort of direct confrontation. Normative perceptions and cultural factors influence its acceptance and emotional consequences. A notable lack of validated and consistent instruments for assessing ghosting was identified. **Conclusions:** Ghosting can affect the mental health of those involved. Its inclusion in affective-sexual health interventions is recommended, along with the development of valid instruments that allow for rigorous evaluation.

Keywords: Relational psychology, emotional impact, social dynamics, digital communication, breakup strategies

Revisión sistemática del *ghosting* como método de disolución de relaciones en adultos emergentes

Resumen | **Introducción/Objetivo:** El *ghosting*, entendido como la finalización abrupta de una relación sin explicación ni contacto, se ha vuelto cada vez más frecuente en jóvenes y adultos emergentes, en gran parte debido al uso de plataformas digitales. Esta revisión sistemática tiene como objetivo sintetizar la evidencia empírica sobre las características de las personas implicadas en *ghosting*, sus motivaciones, consecuencias emocionales y psicológicas y los instrumentos utilizados para su evaluación. **Método:** Se analizaron 11 estudios publicados entre 2019 y 2024, con 4981 participantes de hasta 29 años. Los estudios aplicaban metodologías cuantitativas, cualitativas, mixtas y experimentales. **Resultados:** El *ghosting* se asocia con apego evitativo, necesidad de cierre y ciertos rasgos de personalidad en quienes lo ejercen, mientras que las víctimas presentan apego ansioso y altos niveles de comparación social. Las motivaciones son variadas e incluyen la evitación del conflicto, la autoprotección emocional, el desinterés y la mala comunicación. Aunque suele percibirse como una forma rápida y menos confrontativa de terminar una relación, el *ghosting* genera efectos psicológicos relevantes tanto en quien lo

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sufre como en quien lo ejerce, como ansiedad, tristeza, culpa o alivio. La comunicación digital facilita este comportamiento al reducir la incomodidad del enfrentamiento directo. Las percepciones normativas y los factores culturales influyen en su aceptación y consecuencias. Se identificó una carencia de instrumentos validados y consistentes para su evaluación. **Conclusiones:** El *ghosting* puede afectar a la salud mental de los implicados. Se recomienda su inclusión en intervenciones de salud afectivo-sexual y el desarrollo de instrumentos válidos que permitan su evaluación rigurosa.

Palabras clave: Psicología relacional, impacto emocional, dinámicas sociales, comunicación digital, estrategias de ruptura

In the past decade, romantic and friendship relationships have undergone a significant shift with the rise of online dating applications (Binnatov, 2022; Gori et al., 2024; Vera Cruz et al., 2024). These platforms have revolutionised the way people meet, interact, and form relationships, facilitating quick and accessible connections with potential partners (Broeker, 2023; Hobbs et al., 2017; Kwok & Wescott, 2020). However, this shift has also introduced new dynamics and challenges in the formation and dissolution of romantic relationships (Phan et al., 2021).

The rise of online dating platforms and social media has transformed interpersonal relationships, enabling individuals to initiate and dissolve connections with minimal emotional investment and confrontation, unlike traditional face-to-face interactions (Castro & Barrada, 2020; LeFebvre, 2017; LeFebvre et al., 2019; Steinsbekk et al., 2024). This shift has facilitated relation dissolution methods such as ghosting, a phenomenon that carries significant psychological and social implications for both initiators and recipients (Daraj et al., 2024; Freedman et al., 2024; Koessler et al., 2019; LeFebvre & Fan, 2020).

Ghosting refers to abruptly ending a relationship without explanation by cutting off all communication (Collins et al., 2023; Dean Marshall et al., 2025; LeFebvre et al., 2019; Navarro et al., 2021). In contrast to other methods of relational disengagement, such as direct rejection, ghosting leads to a complete emotional and social disconnection between individuals (Freedman et al., 2024; Kay & Courtice, 2022). This form of rejection has become a topic of interest in recent years due to its psychological and social implications for those who experience and initiate this phenomenon (Koessler et al., 2019; Langlais et al., 2024; Pancani et al., 2022).

The repercussions of ghosting are significant for both the person who ghosts and the one who is ghosted (Daraj et al., 2024; Forrai et al., 2023; Thomas & Dubar, 2021). For the person who is ghosted, the emotional impact can be substantial, including feelings of rejection, distress, and insecurity in future relationships (Langlais et al., 2024; Manning et al., 2019; Powell et al., 2021). Those who ghost may also experience negative consequences, such as feelings of guilt and remorse, as well as positive emotions such as relief (Daraj et al., 2024; Freedman et al., 2024; Thomas & Dubar, 2021). Additionally, this practice can reflect patterns of conflict avoidance and other traits associated with difficulties in interpersonal communication (Astleitner et al., 2023; Fanti et al., 2023; Leckfor et al., 2023).

The phenomenon of ghosting can be understood through psychological and communicative frameworks. Attachment theory, developed by Bowlby (1969) and Ainsworth et al. (2015), suggests that early interactions with caregivers shape individuals' expectations and behaviours in later relationships. These early bonds influence individuals' approaches to intimacy and conflict, making attachment styles central to understanding how individuals handle relationship dissolution. In the case of ghosting, individuals with avoidant attachment styles are more likely to disengage from relationships without direct communication, minimising emotional closeness and avoiding confrontation (Brewer & Abell, 2017; Chen & Lu, 2024; Monaco et al., 2021). Digital communication further facilitates this behaviour by reducing the perceived obligation to provide closure (Thomas & Dubar, 2021).

Simultaneously, interpersonal communication theory (Canary & Dainton, 2003) examines how individuals create and manage relationships through verbal and nonverbal exchanges, emphasising the importance of self-disclosure, feedback, and conflict resolution in maintaining connections. Ghosting represents a significant departure from these communicative norms, as it involves the cessation of all communication without explanation, thereby disrupting the processes that foster healthy interpersonal relationships (Koessler et al., 2019; LeFebvre, 2017; Thomas & Dubar, 2021). By analysing ghosting through the lenses of both attachment and interpersonal communication theories, researchers gain critical insights into the motivations for relational disengagement, its emotional repercussions, and the impact of evolving communication practices in the digital age.

Recent research efforts have sought to quantify and assess ghosting behaviours through validated psychometric tools. The Ghosting Questionnaire (GHOST; Jahrami et al., 2023) was developed to measure individual tendencies toward ghosting, examining factors such as emotional regulation, communication style, and attachment-related behaviours. Understanding ghosting through structured assessment tools such as GHOST provides valuable insights into its prevalence and psychological predictors, reinforcing the role of attachment and communication styles in shaping relation disengagement behaviours.

The reasons for ghosting are diverse (Dean Marshall et al., 2025; Manning et al., 2019; Timmermans et al., 2021). Among the most common are conflict avoidance and lack of interest in the relationship (James-Kangal & Whitton, 2019; Koessler et al., 2019; Thomas & Dubar,

2021). Other factors include emotional overload, fear of confrontation, and the perception that the relationship has no future (LeFebvre et al., 2019; Manning et al., 2019). These reasons underscore the complexity of ghosting as a psychological and social phenomenon.

Despite the increasing prevalence of ghosting among emerging adults, several important aspects remain underexplored, particularly the characteristics of individuals who engage in ghosting, the motivations behind it, and its psychological consequences. While much has been studied in relation to adult populations, there is a critical gap in understanding how ghosting specifically affects emerging adults. Given the complex nature of this phenomenon and its potential impact on emotional and social development during this stage of life, the following guiding question arises: *How do the characteristics, motivations, and consequences of ghosting manifest among emerging adults (ages 18-29), and what methods are used to evaluate this behaviour in contemporary relational contexts?* This question serves as the foundation for the current review, which aims to synthesise existing literature on ghosting among this demographic to provide a clearer understanding of its prevalence, dynamics, and broader implications.

To date, no systematic reviews have specifically examined the impact of ghosting on young adults, leaving a critical gap in understanding this phenomenon within this population. This systematic review aims to synthesise existing research on ghosting among emerging adults (aged 18 to 29), focusing on their characteristics, motivations, consequences, and the instruments used to assess this behaviour. Emerging adulthood is a life stage characterised by significant developmental transitions, during which relationships—both friendships and romantic partnerships—play a pivotal role in shaping social and emotional development (Syed, 2015; Shulman & Connolly, 2013). By examining ghosting across both relational contexts, this review seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of its prevalence, dynamics, and broader implications within this critical demographic.

The increasing prevalence of ghosting, particularly among emerging adults (Astleitner et al., 2023; Freedman et al., 2019; LeFebvre et al., 2019), has become a critical focus within psychological research. The abrupt and often unexplained nature of ghosting can leave recipients grappling with profound feelings of rejection, insecurity, and unresolved emotional distress (Campaioli et al., 2022; Langlais et al., 2024; Navarro et al., 2020). Furthermore, this study addresses the transformative impact of digital communication platforms on the nature of relationship dissolution, especially among emerging adults. As ghosting becomes increasingly commonplace (Konings et al., 2023; LeFebvre et al., 2019; Widianti et al., 2024), it is vital to investigate its psychological, emotional, and social consequences within this demographic (Freedman et al., 2024; LeFebvre et al., 2020). Unlike previous studies that merely document the occurrence of ghosting, this review aims to explore its wider implications, providing insights into conflict avoidance behaviours and the evolving norms of relational engagement in the digital age.

Method

For clarity, throughout this review, the term "ghoster" will refer to the individual initiating the disengagement, while "ghostee" will refer to the individual who experiences the abrupt termination of the relationship.

Sample of studies

Searches for studies were performed using several strategies: (1) Searches in electronic databases (EBSCO, PubMed, Scopus, Cochrane Library, Web of Science, Dialnet, and Academic Google) through June 29, 2024. An example of research equation is ((TITLE-ABS-KEY ("young people") OR TITLE-ABS-KEY (adolesc*) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY(teen*)ORTITLE-ABSKEY(youth)ORTITLE-ABS-KEY ("young adults") OR TITLE-ABS-KEY ("emerging adults") OR TITLE-ABS-KEY (adult*))) AND ((TITLE-ABS-KEY (communication) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY ("romantic relationships") OR TITLE-ABS-KEY (friendship*) OR TITLE-ABS-KEY ("social media") OR TITLE-ABS-KEY ("social network"))) AND (TITLE-ABS-KEY (ghosting)).

The study adhered to the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines to ensure methodological rigour in the selection and exclusion of studies. A PRISMA flow diagram (Figure 1) was employed to track the identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion of studies. Given the emerging nature of research on ghosting, we also considered whether a scoping review framework might be more appropriate. However, we opted for a systematic review format to focus on empirical findings and to ensure a rigorous selection process. Additionally, the process involved title, abstract and full-text screenings to assess study eligibility more thoroughly.

Selection criteria

The inclusion criteria of the studies were: (1) to evaluate the phenomenon of ghosting within the context of romantic and friendship relationships, (2) to examine risk factors associated with ghosting, profile characteristics of involved individuals (both initiators and recipients), motivationsforengagement,consequencesofghosting,or describe or validate instruments to assess ghosting, (3) targeted to emerging adults up to 29 years old, and (4) studies were included only if they were published in English or Spanish, ensuring consistency in the study selection process and avoiding language barriers. There is no restriction on the publication year, as most relevant studies are from recent years.

Excluded were studies reporting: (1) samples older than 29 years old, or studies that do not present results by age of the participants; (2) the addressing of romantic and friendship relationships, but do not specifically focus on the phenomenon of ghosting; and (3) Systematic reviews or meta-analyses, editorials, commentaries, letters to the editor, and opinion articles solely defining ghosting, as some of these types of publications may lack rigorous peer review; (4) that are published in languages other than English or Spanish, ensuring consistency in the study selection process and avoiding language barriers. From the literature, 626 studies

were identified; of which 11 studies were included, using a sample of 4,981 emerging adults up to the age of 29 (Figure 1).

Study information

The process of the screening and coding of studies was guided by manual coding. During the screening pro-

cess, two reviewers independently read 106 abstracts to determine the inclusion of studies. A total of 36 completed studies were reviewed, of which most were discarded for not meeting the criteria (Figure 1). A significant percentage (58.33%) of the data were discarded because they provided data of adults over 29 years old. Data from 11 studies were codified by two independent
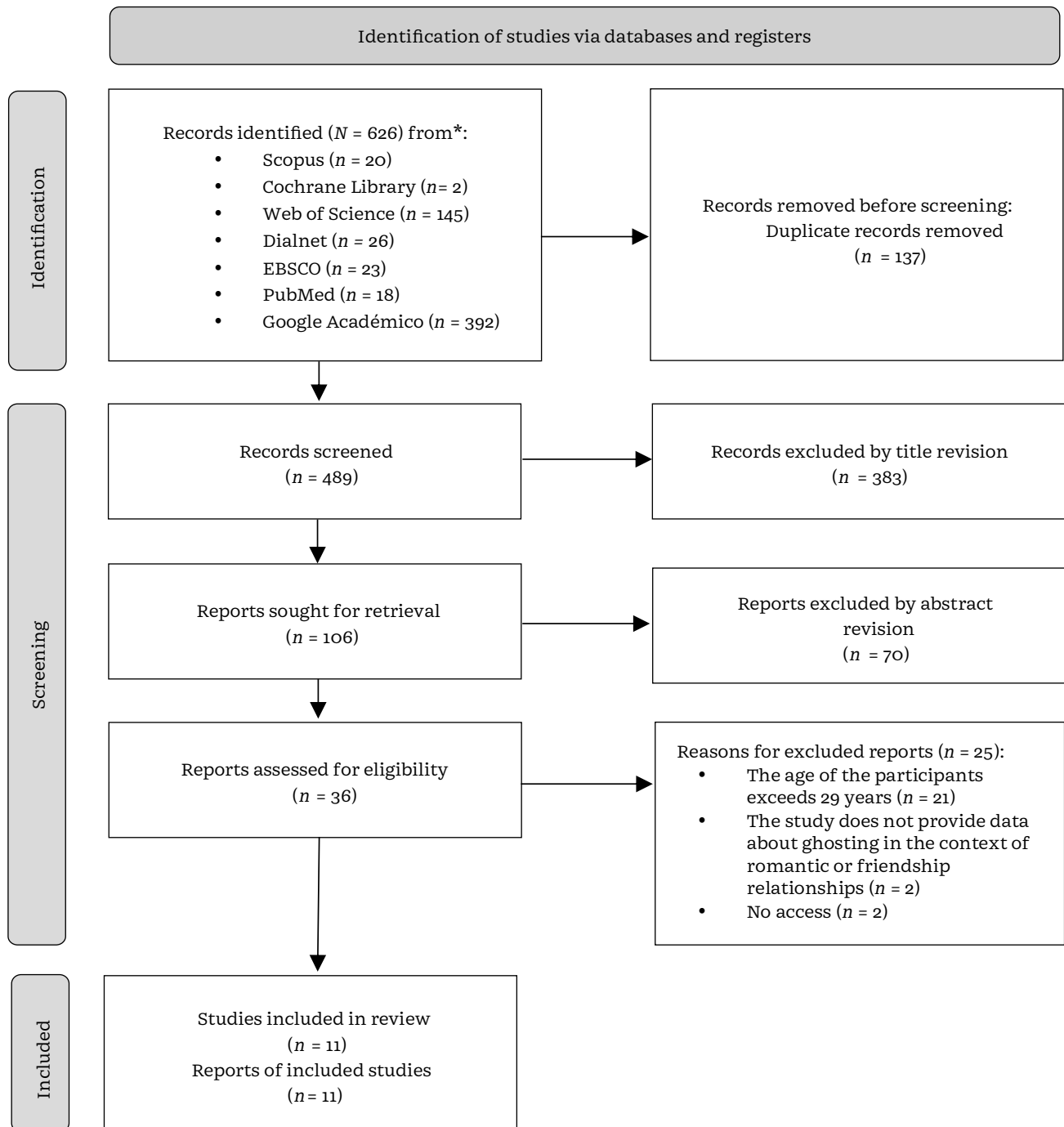

Identification of studies via databases and registers

Identification

Records identified (N = 626) from*:
- Scopus (n = 20)
- Cochrane Library (n= 2)
- Web of Science (n = 145)
- Dialnet (n = 26)
- EBSCO (n = 23)
- PubMed (n = 18)
- Google Académico (n = 392)

Records removed before screening:
Duplicate records removed
(n = 137)

Screening

Records screened
(n = 489)

Records excluded by title revision
(n = 383)

Reports sought for retrieval
(n = 106)

Reports excluded by abstract revision
(n = 70)

Reports assessed for eligibility
(n = 36)

Reasons for excluded reports (n = 25):
- The age of the participants exceeds 29 years (n = 21)
- The study does not provide data about ghosting in the context of romantic or friendship relationships (n = 2)
- No access (n = 2)

Included

Studies included in review
(n = 11)
Reports of included studies
(n = 11)

Figure 1. PRISMA 2020 flow diagram for new systematic reviews which included searches of databases and registers only
* The number of records identified is reported separately for each database searched. All screening and exclusion processes were conducted manually by human reviewers.
Source: Page et al. (2021).

coders, aiming to reduce the risk of errors. To calculate reliability, all studies were screened and coded by another encoder independently. The Spearman-Brown formula was used to calculate the reliability for continuous variables, and Kappa (*k*) for categorical variables. Reliability was good, ranging from 0.90 to 1, with a mean of 0.95 across categories. Any disagreements regarding study selection were resolved by a third reviewer, ensuring unbiased decision-making, following the conflict resolution protocol of Morales et al. (2018).

Results

The analyses included 11 studies (Table 1) published between 2019 and 2024. There was one that was published in 2019 (James-Kangal & Whitton, 2019), three were published in 2021 (Powell et al., 2021; Thomas & Dubar, 2021; Yap et al., 2021) and two in 2022 (Binnatov, 2022; Kay & Courtice, 2022). Four articles were published in 2023 (Astleitner et al., 2023; Fanti et al., 2023; Forrai et al., 2023; Leckfor et al., 2023), and one in 2024 (Langlais et al., 2024). This suggests that it is a current topic that has gained significant interest in recent years.

Of the 11 articles, ten were published in scientific journals (Astleitner et al., 2023; Fanti et al., 2023; Forrai et al., 2023; James-Kangal & Whitton, 2019; Kay & Courtice, 2022; Langlais et al., 2024; Leckfor et al., 2023; Powell et al., 2021; Thomas & Dubar, 2021; Yap et al., 2021), while one was published in a master's thesis repository (Binnatov, 2022). Five were conducted in the United States (James-Kangal & Whitton, 2019; Langlais et al., 2024; Leckfor et al., 2023; Powell et al., 2021; Thomas & Dubar, 2021), one used a sample from Germany (Forrai et al., 2023), one in Italy (Fanti et al., 2023), one in Russia and the Czech Republic (Binnatov, 2022), one in Canada (Kay & Courtice, 2022), one in the Philippines (Yap et al., 2021) and one of the studies had a sample of participants from 45 different countries (Astleitner et al., 2023).

Table 1. Studies included in the systematic review

Author and year	Country	Sample (*N*) Mean age and *SD*	Study purpose	Measures for ghosting	Results
Astleitner et al. (2023)	Austria	*N* = 995 (79% girls) 18 - 29 years old *M* = 22.93; *SD* = 2.98 The sample included participants from 45 countries	Examine whether social media use and related experiences (fear of missing out [FOMO], being a victim of ghosting, and vaguebooking) mediated the relationship between personal characteristics and personality traits with mental health.	*Being a victim of ghosting*: 13 self-designed items inspired by a model of Ostracism (Williams, 2009) and its transformation in social media experiences. For validity purposes, the results of the scale were compared to the 8 items from the Ostracism Experience Scale for adolescents (Gilman et al., 2013).	Social media use is positively associated with being a victim of ghosting, FOMO, and vaguebooking. These experiences negatively affect mental health. FOMO increases the likelihood of being ghosted and engaging in vaguebooking, negatively impacting mental health. Men experience more ghosting, vaguebooking, and FOMO than women. A higher need to belong is associated with increased FOMO but less ghosting and vaguebooking. Social comparison drives FOMO, vaguebooking, and ghosting, harming mental health. A histrionic personality is linked to higher levels of vaguebooking, ghosting, and FOMO. Greater social identity correlates with increased ghosting and FOMO but better mental health.
Binnatov (2022)	Russia	*N* = 10 (70 % girls) 20- 25 years old *M* = 22.1; *SD* = 1.85	Study of the motivations and consequences of online dating on young people. Differences in online and offline dating and attraction. Explore the motivations and consequences of ghosting.	Qualitative interviews: Participants discussed their experiences with ghosting, including whether they had ghosted someone or been ghosted themselves. This section aimed to address the secondary research question, which refers to whether the partner is dateable or not.	Introverts feel more comfortable communicating online, making it easier to connect and build rapport. Some prefer online dating as it reduces the fear of rejection, with mutual attraction being clearer through matching features. Women may ghost if they don't feel a connection, lose interest, or dislike how they're treated, and some ghost if replies take too long. They are less likely to ghost someone they've met in person. While ghosting is common and somewhat accepted, it can still be upsetting, especially after meeting offline. Participants generally find ghosting more acceptable early in a conversation but prefer to offer an explanation if a connection has formed.

(Continued)

Author and year	Country	Sample (*N*) Mean age and *SD*	Study purpose	Measures for ghosting	Results
Fanti et al. (2023)	Italy	*N* = 608 (77.3 % girls) 18- 29 years old *M* = 22.3; *SD* = 2.74	Explore the effects of psychological personality traits in psychological reactions to interpersonal rejection.	Measures focused on borderline and narcissistic traits.	Participants felt stronger anger, anxiety, and paranoia when they were ghosted compared to a direct breakup, though their levels of sadness, pain, guilt, and shame were similar in both situations. Individuals with borderline traits and vulnerability were more likely to experience intense negative emotions like paranoia, anger, anxiety, sadness, pain, guilt, and shame. Neither borderline nor narcissistic traits affected how people reacted to ambiguous versus direct rejection.
Forrai et al. (2023)	Austria	*N* = 978 (54.81 % girls, 44.48% male, 0.72% non-binary) 16- 21 years old *M* = 19.08; *SD* = 1.57 *N* = 415 of the initial participants (58.31% girls, 41.69% male) 16- 21 years old *M* = 18.91; *SD* = 1.55	Examine cognitive and self- conceptual antecedents and consequences of ghosting in interpersonal relationships from the ghoster perspective.	*Ghosting*: Self- constructed items to measure frequency of ghosting and ghosting within romantic and friendship relationships.	Communication overload is a strong predictor of ghosting in romantic relationships but not in friendships. Self-esteem does not significantly influence ghosting in romantic relationships, but people with higher self-esteem are more likely to ghost their friends. Depressive tendencies do not predict ghosting in either context. Ghosting others doesn't impact the ghoster's self-esteem, and ghosting in romantic relationships doesn't lead to depression, but ghosting friends can lead to increased depressive tendencies over time. Older respondents are more likely to ghost, while those with higher education are less likely to ghost in romantic relationships. Self-esteem, depression, and ghosting in friendships don't vary by sociodemographic factors.
James-Kangal & Whitton (2019)	U.S.A.	*N* = 45 (60 % girls) 18- 25 years old *M* = 19.80; *SD* = 2.04 All the participants identified as heterosexual.	Examine how emerging adults handle conflicts in low-commitment relationships and manage issues in ambiguous relationships, identifying the factors that influence their conflict-resolution strategies.	Qualitative and quantitative data: *Communication competence*: willingness and perceived efficacy (Rubin et al., 1993). Focus group protocol to answer open-ended questions.	Communication competence was greater in committed relationships, where individuals were more likely to address concerns and manage issues compared to non-relationships. Conflicts in non-relationships often arose when participants believed they were moving towards a committed relationship. In non-relationships, people commonly avoided conflict, used ineffective communication, and rarely employed constructive methods. Motivations for handling problems in non-relationships included fear of breaking social norms, low commitment, and fear of negative evaluation.
Kay & Courtice (2022)	Canada	*N* = 499 (64.5 % cisgender women, 35.1% cisgender men, 0.2% gender-queer/ non-binary and 0.2% did not report their gender). 17- 29 years old *M* = 19.14; *SD* = 1.81	Provide a definition of ghosting accessible to people with no background in ghosting research, assessed by young adults.	Background questionnaire: closed and open-ended questions, that consisted in ghosting definitions and behaviors associated with ghosting.	Ghosting has behavioral components, such as ending a relationship by blocking or deleting, not giving an explanation, and cutting off communication suddenly. Its contextual components involve when, where, and how it happens (online, in person, or both) usually between people getting to know each other. It can occur suddenly or gradually, though sudden ghosting is more common. While typically a unilateral decision, some consider it a bilateral choice.

(Continued)

Author and year	Country	Sample (*N*) Mean age and *SD*	Study purpose	Measures for ghosting	Results
			Acknowledge the behavioral and contextual components of ghosting, and the emotional valence or morality given by the ghosters.		Emotional valence or morality includes judgments on its acceptability, motivations, and consequences. Though not essential to ghosting's definition, it is seen as a cruel or dysfunctional way to end relationships.
Langlais et al. (2024)	U.S.A.	Study 1: *N* = 30 (100% girls) *M* = 19.52; *SD* = 1.24. Study 2: *N* = 40 (90% girls) *M* = 19.70	Acknowledge the psychological and physiological consequences of ghosting.	Study 1: Participants were asked to imagine being ghosted. Study 2: An undergraduate research assistant started to communicate with them on Snapchat while in a different location. They would communicate with their match for 15 min before the research assistant would immediately stop talking to the participant.	The first study found that ghosting led to higher anxiety and lower self-esteem, though it did not significantly impact stress or depression. The second study revealed physiological changes, with heart rate decreasing and blood pressure increasing after ghosting. Ghosted participants had higher heart rates and blood pressure at 15 minutes and post-test compared to the control group. However, there were no significant differences in cortisol levels, baseline heart rate, or blood pressure before or 30 minutes after the experiment. Overall, the findings suggest moderate physiological effects of ghosting from pretest to posttest and in comparison, to the control group.
Leckfor et al. (2023)	U.S.A.	Study 1: *N* = 553 (49.0% women, 47.69% men, 3.44% other/non-binary) 18- 29 years old *M* = 23.95; *SD* = 3.17 Study 2: *N* = 411 (48.90 % women, 47.90% men, 3.16% other/ non-binary) 18- 29 years old *M* = 24.23; *SD* = 3.11 Study 3: *N* = 545 (51.38% women, 45.50% men, 3.12% other/non-binary) 18- 29 years old *M* = 24.68; *SD* = 3.23	Examine the relationship between Need for closure, motivations and experiences of ghosting.	*Ghosting intentions*: Rate in a Likert scale from 1-7 how likely they were to use ghosting in 19 situations, modified from previous research (Freedman et al., 2019), including short and long-term relationships with friends and romantic partners. *Direct rejection intentions*: participants were given a definition and then used a 7-point Liker scale to indicate how likely they were to use direct rejection using the same 19 situations from the *ghosting intentions measure*. *Experimental manipulation*: autobiographical reliving paradigm from the ostracism literature, where they revealed a personal situation	The first study found that individuals with a greater need for closure were more likely to use ghosting to end relationships, with no difference between romantic and friendship contexts or past ghosting experiences. Participants were more willing to ghost friends than romantic partners. In the second study, no significant link was found between need for closure and ghosting intentions, and past experiences of ghosting did not influence this relationship. Emerging adults preferred direct rejection over ghosting when ending relationships. The third study showed that being ghosted led to lower needs satisfaction compared to direct rejection or inclusion. While a higher need for closure worsened the negative effects of ghosting, it also amplified the negative effects of direct rejection and the positive effects of being included, regardless of relationship type or prior ghosting behavior.

Author and year	Country	Sample (N) Mean age and SD	Study purpose	Measures for ghosting	Results
				to receive one of the three prompts: included (control condition), directly rejected condition and ghosted condition.	
Powell et al. (2021)	U.S.A.	Study 1: N = 165 (46.7% women, 53.3% men) M = 19.34; SD = 1.20	Examine the associations between attachment and ghosting, and implicit theories of relationships and ghosting.	*Perceptions of ghosting and experiences. Ghosting and attachment*: Participants were asked if they were familiar with the term 'ghosting,' provided with a definition, and then asked how long ghosting typically lasts and if they had been ghosted or had ghosted someone. 36- items Experiences in *Close Relationships Scale* (Brennan et al., 1998).	Most of the participants had heard of ghosting and agreed on the meaning of ghosting and perceived ghosting as permanent. In terms of attachment styles, ghostees reported higher anxiety, while ghosters reported greater avoidance.
Thomas & Dubar (2021)	U.S.A.	N = 76 (70% women) M = 19.98; SD = 1.28	Define the term "ghosting", study the motivations for ghosting, evaluate the role of social media and/or technology in ghosting; and examine its perceived psychological consequences.	Research question 1: definition of ghosting. Research question 2: reasons or motivations for ghosting. Research question 3: the role of social media/ technology in ghosting. Research question 4: psychological consequences of ghosting for both actors involved.	Ghosting occurs when someone abruptly ends communication, ignoring all contact attempts. While the ghostee perceives it as sudden, the ghoster may see it as gradual. It happens in various relationships, including familial ones. Motivations for ghosting include disinterest, avoiding conflict, emotional intimacy issues, communication difficulties, and safety concerns. It is often viewed as a low-effort breakup method, though some use it to establish dominance or cope with digital overwhelm. Technology facilitates ghosting by reducing accountability, though it can happen offline. Psychological effects vary: ghosters may feel anxiety, guilt, or relief, while ghostees often experience self-criticism and hopelessness, though some develop resilience over time.
Yap et al. (2021)	Philippines	N = 30; 18-25 years old. (15 ghosters and 15 ghostees)	Examine how ghosting occurs in non-romantic relationships, its impact on both initiators and non-initiators, and how it may differ from ghosting in romantic relationships.	Semi-structured interviews were conducted through video communication platforms.	Ghosting is more common in non-romantic relationships due to lower commitment levels. It often begins with subtle communication changes, such as reduced texting, and tends to be more gradual in longer friendships. Common reasons include toxic dynamics, loss of interest, and self-preservation. While ghosters may later feel regret, especially in meaningful friendships, ghostees often experience hurt, confusion, and sadness, particularly after long-standing relationships.

(Continued)

Author and year	Country	Sample (*N*) Mean age and *SD*	Study purpose	Measures for ghosting	Results
					Many ghosters justify ghosting as a way to protect their mental and emotional well-being, especially in toxic situations. Some see it as an easy way to avoid confrontation, while others find it unacceptable and prefer direct communication. Interestingly, many ghostees are open to reconciliation if given an explanation. While ghosting is more accepted in non-romantic relationships, it carries greater stigma in romantic ones due to the deeper commitment, though both can lead to significant emotional fallout.

M = Mean; *SD* = Standard Deviation.

Therefore, North America had the greatest number of studies (45.45%); Italy and Canada each represented 9.09% of these studies; Russia and the Czech Republic were represented in the same study by a 9.09%; the Philippines also represented 9.09% of these studies; as mentioned, one of the studies included a sample of participants from several geographic regions, and it also represented 9.09% of the studies. The final sample included 4,981 participants (66.4% female; mean age 21.29 years, *SD* = 2.09). Due to the unavailability of data from the study of Yap et al. (2021), the percentages related to the proportion of women, the mean age of the sample, and the corresponding standard deviation could not be included.

Of the 11 studies, four used a quantitative methodology (Astleitner et al., 2023; Forrai et al., 2023; Leckfor et al., 2023; Powell et al., 2021), four a qualitative one (Binnatov, 2022; Kay & Courtice, 2022; Thomas & Dubar, 2021; Yap et al., 2021), one a mixed methodology (James-Kangal & Whitton, 2019), and two used both a quantitative and experimental methodology (Fanti et al., 2023; Langlais et al., 2024). Additionally, nine of the studies used a cross-sectional design (Astleitner et al., 2023; Binnatov, 2022; Fanti et al., 2023; James-Kangal & Whitton, 2019; Kay & Courtice, 2022; Langlais et al., 2024; Leckfor et al., 2023; Powell et al., 2021; Yap et al., 2021), one used a longitudinal design (Forrai et al., 2023), and one used a different design (Thomas & Dubar, 2021).

Characteristics of young people participating in ghosting

The studies explored several factors related to ghosting, including personality traits, self-esteem, communication skills, and attachment styles. Individuals with higher social comparison, social identity, and histrionic personality traits were more likely to be victims of ghosting, while women tended to experience fewer ghosting events (Astleitner et al., 2023). Self-esteem was linked to the likelihood of ghosting in friendships, but not in romantic contexts (Forrai et al., 2023). This study also found that individuals were more likely to engage in ghosting, but higher educational levels correlated with a lower likelihood. James-Kangal and Whitton (2019) found no significant differences in communication skills, gender, relationship status, or race between ghosters and ghostees.

The need for closure, which refers to the desire to avoid ambiguity and obtain a definitive answer, has been linked to the phenomenon of ghosting. The results regarding this relationship are contradictory. In a study by Leckfor et al. (2023), it was found that people with a higher need for closure were more likely to use ghosting as a method of ending relationships. However, other sub-studies did not show a clear association between the need for closure and the intention to ghost, although it was determined that the need for closure significantly influences the satisfaction of psychological needs after experiencing ghosting or direct rejection.

Shyness or a lack of social skills may make digital media a more comfortable environment for interaction, facilitating ghosting (Thomas & Dubar, 2021). Additionally, attachment styles were relevant, with ghosters tending to have avoidant attachment styles, while ghostees often had anxious attachment styles (Powell et al., 2021).

Motivations for participating in the phenomenon of ghosting

The motivations for ghosting are diverse and personal, with studies pointing to reasons such as lack of interest, low commitment, poor communication, avoidance of conflict or intimacy, and seeking mental well-being as a protective measure. In general, ghosting is perceived as a quick and effective way to end a relationship and protect the feelings of the ghostee (avoiding making them feel rejected) (Thomas & Dubar, 2021) or even to protect their own mental and emotional health, or a way to cut off the relationship without direct confrontation (Yap et al., 2021). Reasons for ghosting include lack of connection, disinterest, poor treatment, delayed responses, toxic dynamics, or self-preservation (Binnatov, 2022; Yap et al., 2021). Other less prevalent motivations for

ghosting include establishing dominance in the relationship, as an alternative if direct communication fails to resolve conflicts, and because sometimes people feel overwhelmed by social media and technologies (Thomas & Dubar, 2021).

Consequences of ghosting

The consequences of ghosting have been explored for both the ghoster (the initiator) and the ghostee (the recipient) (Thomas & Dubar, 2021). To enhance clarity, this section is structured into two main subsections: psychological and emotional consequences, and physiological effects.

Psychological and emotional consequences. The consequences for each actor involved (the initiator and the recipient) in ghosting have been explored (Thomas & Dubar, 2021). Both positive and negative consequences have been identified for the perpetrator and the victim of ghosting. These consequences can vary depending on the actor, whether there has been a first in-person meeting, or the expectations of those involved.

Being ghosted in the context of relationship dissolution is associated with the development of mental health problems (e.g., depression) and a more intense grieving process (e.g., self-criticism, anger). Fanti et al. (2023) concluded that people who had been ghosted showed greater intensity of anger, anxiety, and states of paranoia compared to those who experienced a direct breakup of their interpersonal relationships. However, there were no differences in levels of sadness, pain, remorse, or shame between the two groups.

These results are consistent with those obtained by Langlais et al. (2024), who found that participants experienced significantly higher anxiety and lower self-esteem due to the ghosting experiment, however, they found no significant differences in stress and depression. Additionally, the results align with Yap et al. (2021), who reported that individuals who are ghosted often feel hurt, confused, and sad, particularly when the relationship was long-term, even though their study focused on ghosting in friendships, this confirms that both types of relationships can experience significant emotional fallout from the phenomenon of ghosting.

Another relevant study by Leckfor et al. (2023) observed that being ghosted can lead to worse mental health outcomes compared to being directly rejected. Additionally, having higher levels of need for closure is related to greater negative consequences after experiencing ghosting. Thomas and Dubar (2021) concluded that the ghostee is exposed to internalised feelings of self-criticism, doubts, and hopelessness about future relationships. Among the positive aspects of having been ghosted is the opportunity for self-reflection, resilience, and growth for future relationships.

Engaging in the phenomenon of ghosting also has consequences for the person who abruptly ends the relationship. On the one hand, there is evidence that the ghoster also experiences intense emotions such as anxiety, remorse, or guilt, or avoidance and discomfort when seeing the ghosted person again due to a perceived lack of communication skills (James-Kangal & Whitton, 2019; Thomas & Dubar, 2021). On the other hand, ghost-

ing is also associated with positive consequences for the perpetrator, such as the feeling of relief for ending an unsatisfactory relationship, which is reinforced by the perception of ghosting as normative in our time. Moreover, there are consequences for those who engage in ghosting within the context of friendships, for instance, Yap et al. (2021) provided evidence that ghosters may later experience regret, especially if the friendship was significant. Currently, people generally consider ghosting as an accepted and widespread phenomenon, although it is not considered appropriate if the two people have met in person and/or already have a formed bond (Binnatov, 2022). In addition, ghosting is generally more accepted in non-romantic relationships, where expectations are lower, due to the fact that it carries more stigma in romantic relationships due to the deeper commitment involved (Yap et al., 2021).

Physiological consequences. In addition to psychological consequences, recent research has explored the physiological impact of ghosting. Langlais et al. (2024) investigated changes in physiological markers and found that ghostees experienced increased heart rate and elevated systolic and diastolic blood pressure at the moment of ghosting and during the post-test period. However, heart rate significantly decreased after the experiment, whereas blood pressure remained elevated, suggesting a prolonged physiological response to social rejection.

Instruments used to evaluate the phenomenon of ghosting

The reviewed studies have employed different instruments and methods to measure ghosting. Notably, there is a lack of a valid and reliable tool for various cultural and geographical contexts. Each study employed a distinct measurement instrument or methodological approach. For clarity, this section is structured into three main categories: (1) self-report scales, (2) qualitative methodologies, and (3) experimental designs.

Self-report scales. Astleitner et al. (2023) employed the *Being a victim of ghosting scale*, which was designed ad hoc and based on William's (2009) tool for measuring ostracism. This phenomenon consists of the deliberate exclusion of an individual by a group, which can cause negative effects on mental health, such as depression and anxiety. The instrument consists of 13 items and, to ensure its validity, the scale's results were compared to the 8 items from the *Ostracism Experience Scale for Adolescents* (Gilman et al., 2013).

Leckfor et al. (2023) designed a tool to measure ghosting intentions, where participants rated on a Likert scale from 1 to 7 how likely they were to ghost another person in 19 situations. These scenarios were modified from previous research (Freedman et al., 2019), including short- and long-term relationships with friends and romantic partners. Additionally, in the third study of the same article, an experimental situation was used where participants were asked to engage in an autobiographical reliving paradigm from the ostracism literature. They shared a personal experience before being assigned to one of three prompts: included (control condition), directly rejected, and ghosted. Participants

were asked to describe the affective states and thoughts they would have experienced if they had been the person in the target scenario.

Forrai et al. (2023) designed an instrument that measured the frequency of ghosting, covering both romantic and friendship relationships. Moreover, the study of Langlais et al. (2024) examines the impact of ghosting by evaluating both psychological and physiological responses. Psychological measures assess changes in depression, anxiety, stress, and self-esteem before and after the ghosting experience, providing insight into the emotional effects of ghosting. Physiological measures, on the other hand, focus on stress-related responses such as variations in heart rate, blood pressure, and cortisol levels. Together, these measures offer a detailed understanding of how ghosting affects individuals on both mental and physical levels.

Qualitative methodologies. Studies with a qualitative design employed interviews or focus groups where participants were asked if they had been the perpetrator or the victim of ghosting, along with their experiences related to ghosting (Binnatov, 2022). Similarly, Thomas and Dubar (2021) used audio-recorded data for qualitative interpretation, asking participants several research questions, including the definitions of ghosting, the reasons or motivations for ghosting, the role of social media and new technologies in ghosting, and the psychological consequences for those involved. In addition, Yap et al. (2021) conducted semi-structured interviews through video communication platforms, further exploring the phenomenon of ghosting.

Other researchers preferred to use open-ended questions about the definition of ghosting and behaviours associated with the phenomenon (Kay & Courtice, 2022). Similarly, Powell et al. (2021), in the first of the studies included in their article, measured perceptions and experiences of ghosting. Participants were asked if they were familiar with the term "ghosting" and were provided with a definition of it, how long ghosting usually lasts, and if they had experienced or used ghosting in past relationships.

Experimental designs. Some articles employed experimental situations to evaluate participants' reactions to ghosting. For example, Fanti et al. (2023) evaluated psychological reactions to interpersonal rejection using an experimental situation. Participants were asked to read a hypothetical scenario and identify with the main character of the described interpersonal situation. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions: in the direct break-up condition, the scenario described a situation in which the person was left by their romantic partner, who provided an explanation; and in the ghosting condition, the scenario described a situation in which the person was left by their romantic partner, who did not provide an explanation for the dissolution and simply interrupted all contact.

Finally, James-Kangal and Whitton (2019) used a mixed methodology where participants first answered a questionnaire about their communication competencies and then participated in a focus group protocol to answer open-ended questions. They addressed ghosting in one of the emerging subthemes, which is the ending of interpersonal relationships.

Quality of the studies

The Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT), version 2018, is a valuable resource created to help evaluate the quality of mixed methods research. This tool plays a key role in assessing how well these studies are conducted, focusing on important elements such as research design, sampling techniques, data collection, and analysis. Given the diverse methodologies employed in ghosting research, the MMAT allows for a structured comparison of study strengths and limitations. Table 2 summarises the quality assessment scores assigned to each study.

Screening questions. Firstly, all the studies included clear research questions, and the collected data allowed to address the research questions, as a result, they all received two points in this category of the quality of their studies.

Qualitative studies. As mentioned before, four articles used a qualitative methodology (Binnatov, 2022; Kay & Courtice, 2022; Thomas & Dubar, 2021; Yap et al., 2021). All of them used an appropriate qualitative approach to answer the research question, used adequate data collection methods to address the research question, derived all findings adequately from the data, and maintained coherence between qualitative data sources, collection, analysis, and interpretation. However, only one of them (Kay & Courtice, 2022) provided an interpretation of results sufficiently substantiated by data. Thus, Kay and Courtice (2022) received five points for the quality of their study, while Binnatov (2022), Thomas and Dubar (2021) and Yap et al. (2021) received four points due to limitations in data interpretation.

Quantitative descriptive studies. Four articles employed a quantitative methodology (Astleitner et al., 2023; Forrai et al., 2023; Leckfor et al., 2023; Powell et al., 2021). While all studies implemented appropriate statistical analyses, their quality scores varied based on sampling strategy and representativeness of the target population.

Among them, two received five points due to their relevant sampling strategy, representative sample of the target population, appropriate measurements, low risk of nonresponse bias, and suitable statistical analysis to address the research question (Forrai et al., 2023; Leckfor et al., 2023). However, Astleiner et al. (2023) did not utilise a relevant sampling strategy for addressing the research question, resulting in a score of four points for the quality of their study. Powell et al. (2021) used a convenience sample recruited from a Psychology Department subject pool at the third author's institution via the SONA system, moreover their sample was not representative of the target population, leading to a score of three points for the quality of their study.

Mixed methodology. Only one study adopted a mixed methodology (James-Kangal & Whitton, 2019) and received five points for their study quality, since they employed an adequate rationale for using a mixed methods design to address the research question. The different components of the study were effectively in-

tegrated to answer the research question, the outputs of the integration of qualitative and quantitative components were adequately interpreted. Divergences and inconsistencies between quantitative and qualitative results were adequately addressed, and the different components of the study adhere to the quality criteria of each tradition of the methods involved.

Other methodology. Finally, two of the studies used both a quantitative and experimental methodology (Fanti et al., 2023; Langlais et al., 2024). To evaluate their quality, specific criteria for experimental research were considered, such as sampling strategy, representativeness, measurement validity, and risk of bias.

Fanti et al. (2023) obtained all five points in this section because the sampling strategy was relevant to address the research question, the sample was representative of the target population, the measurements were appropriate, the risk of nonresponse bias was low, and the statistical analysis was appropriate to answer the research question. However, Langlais et al. (2024) received four points for the quality of their study since their sample is not representative of the target population.

Discussion

The systematic review conducted on the phenomenon of ghosting among emerging adults has provided significant insights into its causes, effects, and dynamics. The findings highlight the prevalence of ghosting in romantic and friendship relationships within this age group and underscore its profound psychological implications for both the initiator and the recipient.

Attachment theories and personality traits

Attachment theory provides a useful framework for understanding ghosting, as it explains how early relational experiences shape behaviours in close relationships (Bretherton, 1992). Given that ghosting often involves avoiding confrontation, attachment styles can help explain why some individuals prefer disengagement over direct communication when ending a relationship.

Research indicates that avoidantly attached individuals are more likely to ghost, as they tend to withdraw from relationships to maintain independence and avoid emotional discomfort (Koessler et al., 2019; Powell et al., 2021). Digital communication further facilitates this avoidance. In contrast, anxiously attached individuals experience greater distress when ghosted, often struggling with rejection and seeking reassurance (Brewer & Abell, 2017; Timmermans et al., 2021). Those with secure attachment styles favour direct communication, making them less prone to ghosting, while disorganised attachment may lead to inconsistent relational behaviours, including impulsive ghosting (Powell et al., 2021).

Research has also indicated that high levels of Machiavellianism are associated with avoidance/withdrawal and distant/mediated communication strategies when ending a relationship (Brewer & Abell, 2017) and narcissistic men perceived ghosting as an acceptable relationship dissolution method (Jonason et al., 2021). While personality traits like Machiavellianism and narcissism offer valuable insights, discussing how these traits interact with situational factors (e.g., online anonymity, perceived relational investment) would enhance the complexity of this analysis.

Table 2. Summary of Quality Assessment (MMAT 2018 Scores)

Study	Methodology	Quality score (out of 5)	Key strengths	Limitations
Binnatov (2022)	Qualitative	4	Coherent methodology	Limited interpretation of findings
Kay & Courtice (2022)	Qualitative	5	Strong data interpretation	None
Thomas & Dubar (2021)	Qualitative	4	Well-structured design	Limited interpretive depth
Yap et al. (2021)	Qualitative	4	Adequate methodology	Insufficient depth in analysis
Astleitner et al. (2023)	Quantitative	4	Valid measurement tools	Sampling limitations
Forrai et al. (2023)	Quantitative	5	Strong statistical methods	None
Leckfor et al. (2023)	Quantitative	5	Representative sample	None
Powell et al. (2021)	Quantitative	3	Sound statistical methods	Convenience sample
James-Kangal & Whitton (2019)	Mixed-Methods	5	Effective integration of methods	None
Fanti et al. (2023)	Experimental	5	Strong methodological rigor	None
Langlais et al. (2024)	Experimental	4	Robust experimental design	Sample not representative

Building on these theoretical insights, it becomes evident that ghosting is not merely a personal coping strategy but also a broader social phenomenon that warrants further investigation to fully understand its long-term impacts on emerging adults (Jahrami et al., 2023; Timmermans et al., 2021; Wood et al., 2023).

Motivations for ghosting

Ghosting is a frequent phenomenon among emerging adults, driven primarily by conflict avoidance and convenience, lack of interest in the relationship, being in a short-term relationship, emotional overload, personal wellbeing and even having a third person involved in the relationship (James-Kangal & Whitton, 2019; Koessler et al., 2019; Thomas & Dubar, 2021). These motivations align with previous studies on adults (Daraj et al., 2024; Dean Marshall et al., 2025; LeFebvre et al., 2019) and highlight the complexity of ghosting as a psychological and social behaviour (Di Santo et al., 2022; Navarro et al., 2021; Petric, 2023).

The findings of this review are in line with previous research on ghosting, but they also provide new insights. For example, Jonason et al. (2021) found that ghosting is often perceived as a more acceptable way to end short-term or newly initiated relationships than long-term relationships. This is consistent with Binnatov (2022) regarding the acceptability of ghosting when there is no connection or bond between the people involved. To further contextualise these findings, it would be beneficial to discuss how relationship length and investment levels influence perceptions of ghosting's ethicality and emotional impact. This aligns with the current review's findings on the motivations for ghosting, such as conflict avoidance and emotional overload.

Psychological impact on those involved and the role of digital communication

Although the primary interest in ghosting often lies in the negative repercussions for the person who is ghosted, our findings suggest that the psychological impact of this phenomenon is significant for both parties involved. Recipients of ghosting often experience feelings of rejection, distress, and insecurity in future relationships (Forrai et al., 2023; Kay & Courtice, 2022; Langlais et al., 2024; Thomas & Dubar, 2021), which can lead to mental health issues such as depression and anxiety, and interpersonal difficulties in the future (Freedman et al., 2024; Konings et al., 2023; Timmermans et al., 2021). This is consistent with previous studies with adult samples aged 18 and 40 (Herrera-López et al., 2024; Navarro et al., 2021). Several studies concluded that those who initiate ghosting may also face negative emotions like guilt and remorse, although some may feel relief from ending an unsatisfactory relationship (Dean Marshall et al., 2025; Freedman et al., 2024). These findings suggest that ghosting is not a consequence-free action and that its emotional toll can be substantial for all individuals involved.

The convenience and anonymity provided by digital communication tools facilitate this behaviour, allowing individuals to disengage from relationships without direct confrontation (Konings et al., 2023; LeFebvre et al., 2019). As online communication increases, the emotional barriers to ghosting diminish, thereby reducing the perceived discomfort or guilt typically associated with relationship disengagement (Broeker, 2023; Hobbs et al., 2017; Kwok & Wescott, 2020).

However, while digital communication plays a crucial role, a more nuanced discussion of how specific platforms (e.g., dating apps vs. social media) may differentially influence ghosting behaviours would strengthen the analysis. This reflects a broader transformation in how interpersonal relationships are managed, particularly in environments where face-to-face confrontation is increasingly avoided (Chadwick et al., 2024; Chen & Lu, 2024).

The reliance on digital platforms fosters greater emotional distance between the ghoster and the ghostee, leading to distinct consequences for both. For the ghoster, relational abandonment becomes less emotionally burdensome, as the ease of disengagement minimises guilt or discomfort (Timmermans et al., 2021). However, this same emotional distance intensifies the harm for the ghostee, who experiences greater feelings of rejection and emotional distress due to the abrupt and unresolved nature of the break-up (Navarro et al., 2020; Pancani et al., 2021; Petric, 2023). Given these emotional consequences, it is essential for clinicians working with emerging adults to recognise the psychological distress caused by ghosting and to incorporate therapeutic strategies aimed at fostering resilience, enhancing self-worth, and developing emotional regulation in the face of relational rejection.

These findings emphasise the importance of recognising ghosting as a form of relational dissolution with potential psychological consequences. Its ambiguous nature can hinder emotional processing and contribute to dysfunctional coping, particularly in individuals with relational vulnerability. Therapeutic work with emerging adults could benefit from addressing the emotional impact of ghosting, promoting self-worth, and supporting the development of healthy closure strategies.

Normative perceptions and cultural factors

The normative perceptions of ghosting vary widely based on individuals' prior experiences. Those who have ghosted or been ghosted tend to view the practice as more common and acceptable compared to those with no prior experience (Astleitner et al., 2023; Binnatov, 2022; Forrai et al., 2023). This highlights the influence of personal experience on attitudes toward ghosting, suggesting that interventions aimed at reducing its prevalence should address these normative beliefs to be effective, in line with the theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen & Schmidt, 2020).

Cultural differences significantly affect both the perception and practice of ghosting. In collectivist cultures, where group harmony and interpersonal relationships are prioritised, ghosting may be seen as a major social violation, leading to greater stigmatisation of ghosters and increased emotional distress for ghostees. In contrast, in individualistic cultures, where personal

autonomy is valued, ghosting may be viewed as more acceptable, particularly in low-commitment situations. Studies like those by Powell et al. (2021) emphasise how cultural values shape not only the frequency of ghosting but also the psychological impact on both parties involved. These cultural differences underline the importance of culturally tailored interventions to mitigate the effects of ghosting. Future research should explore these variations through both cross-sectional and longitudinal studies across diverse regions.

One of the strengths of this review is its comprehensive inclusion of studies employing diverse methodologies and cultural contexts. This broad approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of ghosting, particularly within the context of emerging adults, an age group particularly affected by this behaviour (Freedman et al., 2019; Koessler et al., 2019; LeFebvre et al., 2019). By incorporating these varied perspectives, this review provides valuable insights into how ghosting is perceived and experienced across different contexts.

Methodological limitations of ghosting studies

However, there are several limitations to consider. The studies included in the review vary widely in their methodologies and measurements, making direct comparisons challenging. The lack of a standardised tool for assessing ghosting across different studies also poses a limitation (Herrera-López et al., 2024; Husain et al., 2024; Jahrami et al., 2023). This methodological inconsistency limits the ability to draw definitive conclusions and underscores the need for the development of validated instruments that can be applied across diverse populations. While there is a growing body of research using tools like the Ghosting Questionnaire (GHOST) (Jahrami et al., 2023), which is available in multiple languages, including English, Urdu, and Arabic, its wider use could standardise assessments and improve the comparability of results. By utilising established instruments like GHOST, researchers can better capture the nuances of ghosting across cultural and linguistic groups, allowing for more robust findings. Additionally, future research could benefit from randomised controlled trials (RCTs) that evaluate interventions targeting ghosting behaviours, such as conflict resolution training or digital communication skills. RCTs would help establish cause-and-effect relationships and provide strong evidence for the efficacy of these interventions in reducing the prevalence and psychological impacts of ghosting.

Although the search was conducted in various databases and documentary sources, it is possible that studies meeting inclusion criteria were missed. The reliance on self-reported data in many studies may introduce bias, as participants may not accurately recall or may misrepresent their experiences. This limitation is particularly relevant given the emotional nature of ghosting, which may lead to retrospective distortions in reporting. Finally, a meta-analysis was not possible because the studies included in this systematic review vary widely in their objectives, methodologies, and measurements. This makes direct comparisons and the integration of results into a single statistical analysis challenging.

Despite these limitations, this review highlights the significance of ghosting as a social and psychological phenomenon, especially among emerging adults. The findings emphasize the need for further research to address gaps and develop effective interventions. Future studies should prioritise longitudinal designs to explore the long-term emotional and relational consequences of ghosting, as well as experimental methodologies to understand the mechanisms involved (Freedman et al., 2019; Jahrami et al., 2023; Langlais et al., 2024; Timmermans et al., 2021; Wood et al., 2023). These limitations underscore the importance of rigourous methodological approaches in evidence synthesis. Accordingly, the decision to conduct a systematic review, rather than a scoping review, was based on the need to answer specific research questions and critically assess study quality. This approach, aligned with PRISMA guidelines (Moher et al., 2009), allows for more robust and evidence-based conclusions.

Implications for intervention and future research

Future research should aim to address the identified gaps by developing standardised measurement tools for ghosting that can be used across different cultural and geographical contexts (Herrera-López et al., 2024; Husain et al., 2024; Jahrami et al., 2023). Cross-cultural research is particularly necessary to explore variations in the perception and impact of ghosting beyond Western contexts, as cultural norms influence relational expectations and dissolution strategies (Astleitner et al., 2023; Daraj et al., 2024; Herrera-López et al., 2024). To further this line of inquiry, the development of standardised measurement instruments for assessing ghosting in varied settings is imperative (Herrera-López et al., 2024; Husain et al., 2024; Jahrami et al., 2023). Such tools should effectively capture the multifaceted nature of ghosting, encompassing its psychological, emotional, and social dimensions. Longitudinal studies are needed to understand the long-term effects of ghosting on both initiators and recipients (Freedman et al., 2024). Additionally, future research should focus on adolescent and older adult populations to determine whether ghosting is a phenomenon unique to emerging adulthood or if it varies across developmental stages (Freedman et al., 2019; Wu & Bamishigbin, 2023).

Intervention studies could explore the effectiveness of educational programmes that teach conflict resolution and emotional regulation skills (LeFebvre & Fan, 2020; Monaco et al., 2021; Pauw et al., 2024; Tran et al., 2024). Research should also investigate the role of digital communication platforms in facilitating ghosting and how these platforms can be designed to promote more respectful and direct forms of relationship dissolution.

Understanding the normative perceptions and motivations for ghosting can help in developing interventions aimed at reducing its prevalence and mitigating its negative effects (LeFebvre & Fan, 2020; Zhang, 2017). For instance, some applications have already implemented features that remind users to communicate

respectfully before disengaging from a conversation, which may reduce the likelihood of ghosting (Powell et al., 2021).

Additionally, educational and therapeutic programmes should prioritise the development of conflict resolution and emotional communication skills among emerging adults (Jone et al., 2017; Taylor et al., 2017), as such competencies may contribute to reducing the prevalence of ghosting and mitigating its associated psychological consequences (George, 2024; Jahrami et al., 2023). In this regard, psychological counseling services within educational and community contexts could incorporate targeted modules to address relational distress specifically linked to ghosting experiences. Moreover, psychoeducational interventions that focus on digital relationship dynamics may provide emerging adults with practical tools to manage breakups in a healthier and more constructive manner. Ghosting can also be understood within broader conceptual frameworks of conflict avoidance (Canary & Dainton, 2003; Folger et al., 2021; Hocker & Professor, 2017), highlighting the relevance of fostering adaptive interpersonal strategies in contemporary relational contexts.

This review contributes to the theoretical understanding of ghosting by situating it within models of conflict avoidance (Canary & Dainton, 2003; Folger et al., 2021; Hocker & Professor, 2017) and attachment theory (Ainsworth et al., 2015; Bowlby, 1969). Ghosting can be conceptualised as a conflict-avoidance strategy that mirrors broader trends in digital communication, where interpersonal interactions are increasingly mediated and impersonal (Chadwick et al., 2024; Pauw et al., 2024; Steinsbekk et al., 2024).

By addressing these methodological limitations and diversifying the scope of research, future studies can build a more robust and comprehensive understanding of ghosting, ultimately leading to more effective interventions and support strategies for those affected by this phenomenon.

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