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Original Paper

Disclosing and Disappearing: The Relationship between Self-disclosure and Intentions to Ghost

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Abstract

Two studies conducted here to test the relationship between the level of self-disclosure and ghosting intentions. Ghosting, the act of terminating a relationship by abruptly cutting off all communication. Although ghosting has become a common dissolution strategy across digital communication environments, little is known about how personality is relate to intention to ghost and the likelihood of engaging in ghosting behavior. The present research focuses on self-disclosure, a interpersonal process that reflects how openly individuals share personal information. We also examines how disclosure level contribute to ghosting behaviors and frequency. Study's participants focus on emerging adults. Across both studies, self-disclosure can be seen as a predictor for ghosting intentions. However the association between ghosting behavior was unsure, there was a mix result.

Keyword

Relationship termination, Self-Disclosure, Ghosting intention, Romantic relationship, Friendship

1. Introduction

1.1 Ghosting

The emergence of ghosting as an interpersonal phenomenon reflects the evolution of interpersonal communication dynamics in the digital age. Ghosting refers to one party cutting off all contacts without any explanation (for example, not answering the phone or not replying to text messages), thus ending a friendship, love relationship or dating relationship. This phenomenon is increasingly common in online and offline interactions, especially in the context of dating and friendship (LeFebvre, Allen, & Rasner, 2019). Unlike other ways of breaking up relationships, ghosting lacks a clear explanation or notice (Koessler et al., 2019). The term originates from the digital dating platform. Users can easily end contact by ignoring messages or blocking profiles. But recent evidence shows that the phenomenon of ghosting has expanded from romantic relationships to friendship and other social relationships (Leckfor, Wood, &

Slatcher, 2023).

Scholars regard “ghosting” as a form of passive rejection or avoidance relationship breakdown (LeFebvre et al., 2019). This strategy allows individuals to feel comfortable and in control while getting rid of social responsibilities or emotional conflicts (Halversen, King, & Silva, 2022). The difference between ghosting and direct rejection is that it will cause ambiguity - unlike straightforward rejection, ghosting will make the party who is broken up uncertain whether the relationship has ended or what is the reason behind it (Szczesniak & Pierce, 2025). This ambiguity distinguishes ghosting from other ways of ending relationships and exacerbates its psychological complexity. From the perspective of communication, ghosting includes two levels: behavior and symbolism: at the behavioral level, ghosting refers to disconnection; at the symbolic level, it refers to the individual indicating that someone does not exist in his social world (Pancani et al., 2022).

In recent years, the “ghosting” phenomenon has often been used to interpret the problems of social exclusion and isolation that people encounter. Pancani et al. (2022) found that people who had experienced being “ghosted” felt a stronger sense of rejection and betrayal than those who were directly rejected. This kind of reaction is in line with the view of the social exclusion theory, which states that being ignored or excluded by others poses a threat to basic psychological needs such as a sense of belonging and self-esteem (Williams, 2007). Similarly, Langlais et al. (2024) also found that when people experience the pain brought by “being gghosted”, they will show psychological distress symptoms similar to those of physical trauma, such as sadness, anxiety, and enhanced physical responses. An important finding of their research is that the inherent uncertainty brought about by “being ghosted” further intensifies these reactions, suggesting that the ambiguity of silence may be more uncomfortable than a clear rejection. This result supports the view that “being ghosted” is not merely a communication choice or a single event, but an experience that has an actual psychological impact on the recipient and the initiator.

For those ghosters, this is a way to protect themselves from emotional discomfort and avoid hurting others or themselves. For people with avoidance tendency, ghosting may be a convenient way to reduce anxiety associated with conflict or emotional vulnerability (Fanti et al., 2022). In contrast, for ghostee, this process often triggers a series of ruminations, accompanied by very uncomfortable experiences, such as confusion, anger, sadness and self-doubt (Freedman, Powell, & Le, 2024). The difference between the liberation of the ghoster and the emotional turmoil of the ghostee reveals a key feature of ghosting: its asymmetrical emotional consequences. This asymmetry is aggravated in the context of science and technology media, in which people who have lost contact quickly return to anonymity, leading to an increase in uncertainty and hindering the possibility of repairing the relationship (Leckfor et al., 2023).

In addition, the increasing popularity of online platforms such as dating apps and social media has accelerated the change of interpersonal relationships and reduced the social cost of breaking interpersonal relationships (LeFebvre et al., 2019). These digital environments often promote superficial or short-term connections, thus reducing people’s perception of emotional responsibility (Zhu, 2025). In

this case, users can end the interaction and completely cut off the relationship without having to communicate face-to-face or bear any social consequences, which contributes to Pancani et al. (2022) describes the "disposable culture" in interpersonal relationships. This environment regards "ghosting" as an acceptable and effective way to end a relationship, and strengthens the concept of avoidance and emotional alienation as coping mechanisms.

Although the phenomenon of ghosting is very high, it has rarely been involved in communication and psychological research in the past. Most of the existing research focuses on romantic and non-love relationships, such as friendship. Some studies have explored how individual factors such as emotional expression and the need for the end of the relationship (Leckfor, Wood, & Slatcher, 2023) affect the behavior and experience of ghosting. When it comes to understanding ghosting, there is still the demand of incorporating theory regarding communication processes (e.g., disclosure/avoidance) and emotional outcomes (e. g., hurt/confusion/anger) into the aforementioned studies. By situating ghosting within theories of relational communication and social exclusion, researchers can better explain how digital environments reshape emotional connections and disengagement behaviors. As research continues to expand, it becomes essential to explore how relational variables and personal traits interact with ghosting tendencies and emotional outcomes.

1.2 Ghosting Behavior: What Influences Ghosting Behavior

Ghosting arises from a complex interplay of situational, relational, technological and personal traits forces. In this sense, ghosting is a structurally and socially conditioned behavior.

1.2.1 Relational

The relationship have always been a powerful indicator to predicting the ghosting likelihood. LeFebvre et al. (2019) demonstrated that ghosting is more likely to occur in low-commitment or early-stage romantic relationships. Especially, the online relationship that with limited emotional investment. In this case, people think that the cost of using ghosting to break away from a relationship is relative low. Similarly, Pancani et al. (2022) found that individuals are easier to ghost when the relationship lacks depth or emotional reciprocity is unbalance. This is agree with Baxter's (1982) framework for relationship dissolution. The study indicate that weak emotional bonds can lead to indirect strategies such as withdrawal, avoidance.

The relational context may also influence ghosting. For example, In romantic relationships, people usually see ghosting as an avoidance strategy aim to reduce awkwardness or emotional confrontation (LeFebvre et al., 2019). In friendships or familiar relationships, ghostly behavior can serve as a boundary management tool to reduce the frequency of interaction without explicit conflicts (Avalos, 2023). Also, Coyle (2021) discovered that people who see relationships in the digital world as "fluid" or "substitutable" are more likely to ghost. They see ending contact as a normal part of online interaction. Thus, relationship seriousness, perceived obligation, and communication frequency collectively influence the perceived legitimacy of ghosting.

Asymmetric interaction can also lead to ghosting behavior. When someone perceives communication is

unbalanced, for example too frequen, emotionally intense or invasive. They might choose to suddenly end the interaction. Pancani et al. (2022) emphasized that ghosting often occurs after a reciprocal imbalance, where the effort someone puts in no longer matches the rewards they get.

1.2.2 Emotional

Emotional factors can also influence ghosting. Park (2025) found that ghosting behavior often occurs after a period of emotional overload, especially in an online dating environment. In online dating, users try to manage multiple interactions simultaneously. This is called “digital burnout”. Because of this emotional factor, people withdrawal from relationship in order to conserve emotional resources. Furthermore, Zhu (2025) proposed that there is an accelerated sense of intimacy in online relationship, which is known as “anonymous intimacy”. This “anonymous intimacy” leads to unstable emotional connections. In other word, individuals develop a bond quickly and then break it quickly. This is common in digital age. To conclude, When people’s emotion in a relationship seems not good they may turn to ghosting to shield themselves.

1.2.3 Communication

The way to communication provide a important insight into ghosting. Many study find that the way to communication may influence a person’s ghosting tendency. According to the Uncertainty Reduction Theory (Berger & Calabrese, 1975), individuals are likely to reduce ambiguity in relationships. It is a critical way to develop a relationship. To reinforce the relationship people should do the information exchange work such as self disclosing. However, The digital communication reduced nonverbal feedback a lot. With limited contextual cues, this process became more complicate. Leckfor (2024) noted that online communication can make people feel close. However, this also increase misunderstandings. In online communication ghosting may occur when people’s expectations diverge. In this sense, ghosting can be understood as an outcome of a bad communication between the relationship.

1.2.4 Online Self-image

Additionally, the Hyper personal Model (Walther, 1996) points out that communication via computers can easily foster idealization. It also insreace the subsequent disappointment. Since users can highly selectively present themselves, which may give a chance for users to come up unrealistic expectations. Once these expectations are not met, individuals may adopt the strategy of ghosting to avoid negative emotions. The research by Haversen, King, and Silva (2022) also found that users often interpret ghosting as a strategic of maintaining an idealized online self-image. Therefore, ghosting is not a method to end a relationship but also a way in communication to management self image. Aiming to maintain one’s personal image in digital social interactions.

1.2.5 Technological

Apart from the interaction process in interpersonal relationships, The technological environment also play an important role. In modern interpersonal communication environment, the design architecture of digital communication platforms makes ghosting more easier. The plat form design some function to cut

off contact easily, and even makes it a norm. Gonzalez (2024) emphasized that functions such as “blocking”, “silencing”, “deleting conversations”, and “canceling pairing”, providing users with convenient ways to exit. These functions significantly reduce the social cost of non-response, transforming silence into a widely accepted form of communication. Therefore, ghosting is not only a psychological choice of behavior but also a structural behavior supported by platform design.

Leckfor (2024) also pointed out that online dating platforms create an illusion of “always having better options”, that is, the “choice paradox”. In an environment with many potential partners, it is easy to foster a mentality of replaceability and ease of giving up, making it a low- cost decision to break off the current connection and turn to others. Pancani et al. (2022) further argued that such an environment weakens the social norms regarding ending and responsibility in traditional relationships, thereby promoting short-term and temporary interaction patterns.

Additionally, the emotional distance, asynchronous communication characteristics, and absence of face-to-face interaction brought about by digital media also reduce the individual’s empathetic experience and the immediacy of interaction, thereby reducing the psychological burden caused by avoidance behaviors. Therefore, in the digital age, the functions, and environmental characteristics of technology itself constitute an important contributing factor to ghosting.

1.2.6 Cultural and Social Norms

Cultural expectations also influence the acceptability of ghosting behavior and its occurrence frequency. Jaspal and Lopes (2025)’s research shows that people from collectivist and religious cultural backgrounds tend to have a lower tolerance for ghosting and are more likely to view it as an immoral behavior. On the contrary, in individualistic societies, ghosting is more likely to be regarded as a choice that respects individual autonomy and emotional self-protection. The normalization of ghosting in Western dating culture also reflects that the norms of relationship responsibilities are gradually evolving. As LeFebvre (2017) pointed out, in an environment where digital communication values efficiency and individual autonomy rather than relationship maintenance, the traditional expectation of a successful conclusion of a relationship has weakened.

Prasertwit (2019) found in his study of Thai participants that although collectivist values and the emphasis on relationship harmony reduced the occurrence of explicit conflicts and played a certain regulatory role, it did not prevent individuals from directly avoiding conflicts through ghosting. In this cultural context, ghosting was instead given a positive meaning of maintaining dignity and avoiding shame. This conclusion was further supported in the cross- cultural comparative study by Pancani et al. (2022): Western samples tended to interpret ghosting as an expression ofpersonal boundaries, while Eastern samples more commonly regarded it as a strategy to avoid direct conflicts. Therefore, ghosting is not a purely individual choice, but a communication norm shaped in specific cultural contexts.

Dating app’s Social norms also further reinforce this behavior . Users report that ghosting is often considered “standard practice” when interest declines, particularly during early communication stages (LeFebvre et al., 2019). In online dating communities, silence is frequently interpreted as implicit

rejection rather than a social violation (Coyle, 2021). Such normalization blurs moral boundaries between politeness and indifference, making ghosting a socially sanctioned, if emotionally ambiguous, strategy.

1.3 Personal Traits and Ghosting Intention

The tendency to "ghosting" - the possibility that someone, influenced by various psychological, relational, technological factors and so on. suddenly ends a relationship by remaining silent and vanishing. After extensive research, scholars increasingly regard ghosting not as a random behavior but as a predictable interpersonal strategy influenced by many factorsespecially personal traits. There is emerging empirical evidence and the theoretical framework that links personal traits to analyze the main predictors of ghosting tendencies.

A explanation of ghosting behavior lies in the avoidant coping and attachment theory. People with an avoidant attachment style often feel uncomfortable in intimate relationships and tend to protect themselves through avoidance (Nelson, 2024). According to a study by Leckfor et al., in online dating, cutting off relationships through silence rather than confrontation can make them more satisfied, and they believe that ghosting is a very efficient exit strategy that can minimize conflicts. Avoidant attachment people usually disclose less personal information and often keep an emotional distance from others in relationships, which reduces their sense of obligation to provide an ending. In contrast, people with anxious attachment style will keep in touch when they feel pain. They are less likely to initiate ghosting, but they show higher emotional responses when ghosted.

Beyond attachment styles, some other personality traits also have an impact on ghosting behavior. Pancani et al. (2022) compared ghosting behavior with other distancing behaviors and found that ghosting behavior is somewhat associated with "Dark Triad traits" (especially narcissism and Machiavellianism). Individuals high in manipulativeness, self-centeredness, and lack of empathy are more likely to ghost（Gonzalez, 2024）.

Gonzalez (2024) discovered that people who use social media frequently and have strong self-monitoring skills are more likely to rationalize ghosting behavior as socially acceptable or harmless. This precisely confirms LeFebvre, Allen, and Rasner's (2019) definition of ghosting behavior: "digital dissolution disappearance strategy", meaning that users exit to maintain autonomy while avoiding negative emotions.

Ghosting could be a manifestation of "Need for Closure" proposed by Leckfor et al. (2023): those who are uneasy about uncertainty usually end interactions with high uncertainty or high emotional demands suddenly to start a new and gain psychological control. Individuals with higher closure needs prefer definitive ends to uncertain interactions and thus perceive ghosting as a way to restore psychological certainty. The result of the study is a mix result. The role of the need for closure is still unclear.

A number of studies have attempted to find the relationship between some stable personal traits and the individuals ghosting behavior. However, many study in this area remain were fail to find a relative relationship. For example, Navarro et al. (2021) systematically assessed several commonly studied

individual differences, including self-esteem, assertiveness, sense of power and empathetic concern.the study try to identify personality-based predictors of ghosting intentions. Contrary to expectations, their results failed to find significant correlations between these traits and the likelihood of intending to ghost a partner. These results suggests that ghosting may not be readily explained by trait-level characteristics. These findings imply that situational dynamics, relational contexts, platform-specific and so on may play a more decisive role in shaping ghosting behavior. The absence of significant trait effects also highlights the complexity of ghosting. However, the number of this kind of study is not enough to prove that personal traits is usefulness to predict ghosting.

Self-disclosure, while central to intimacy development, may function as a psychological vulnerability that infIuences one's approach to relationship termination. Traditional relational theories such as Social Penetration Theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973) conceptualize disclosure as a method to develop intimate relationship. Halversen, King, and Silva (2021) in their study of Bumble users. They analyzing how perceive self-disclosure of each others predicted rejection strategies on the platform. Their findings revealed that women who engaged in higher levels of perceived partner disclosure, and pre rejection stress were more likely to delete a partner direcly just like ghosting, rather than direct communication. Participants who perceived disclosure imbalance reported higher discomfort and avoidance motivation. Building upon this, we can presume that there may exist some relationships between self disclosure and ghosting.

1.4 Self-disclosure

Self-disclosure refers to the act of an individual actively and voluntarily sharing their own situation, inner feelings, viewpoints, ideas and life experiences with others (Altman & Taylor, 1973). In the relevant research on interpersonal communication, this behavior is recognized as the core way to shorten the distance of relationships, build trust Bridges, and promote the continuous warming of intimate relationships (Wheeless & Grotz, 1976). At present, academic research on self-disclosure mainly focuses on two core dimensions: one is breadth, which refers to the scope involved in the topic of disclosure; The second is depth, which is mainly reflected in the degree of privacy of shared information and its special significance to individuals (Greene et al., 2006; Low, 2022). According to the social infiltration theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973), as interpersonal relationships progress gradually, people's self-disclosure will change - from information exchange with a narrow topic range and simple content to in-depth sharing with rich topics and profound content. This gradual process can not only make the emotional connection between people stronger, but also expose more of an individual's inner vulnerabilities, thereby increasing the potential risk of being rejected by others or leading to the breakdown of the relationship.

Recent relevant studies have also emphasized that the key to self-disclosure lies not only in the amount of information shared, but also in the quality of the disclosed content and the truemintentions behind it.Take the research of Lin & Utz (2017) as an example. They found that although intimate disclosure on social networking sites can enhance interpersonal familiarity, once it is judged by others as

"excessive sharing", it will instead weaken the attractiveness of the revealer. Baruh & Cemalcilar (2018) once conducted an experiment and concluded by manipulating the breadth and depth of personal homepage information on social networking sites: The expansion of information breadth has a positive effect on interpersonal attractiveness. However, in a highly open online environment, overly in depth disclosure sometimes has a negative impact on attractiveness.

All these research results indicate that the effect of self-disclosure is subject to many subtle conditions: insufficient disclosure will restrict the progress of interpersonal relationships; However, revealing too much, too deeply or at too early a time can easily cause discomfort in others and even prompt them to deliberately distance themselves.Furthermore, the "online disinhibition effect" also mentions that people are more likely to actively expose themselves in the online environment and often skip the gradual relationship development process as described by the social infiltration theory (Low et al., 2022).

From the perspective of practical application, self-disclosure can meet various needs in interpersonal relationships. In the early stage of mutual interaction, it can help reduce the sense of uncertainty between both sides (Berger & Calabrese, 1975) - by sharing personal information, everyone can predict and understand each other's behavior more accurately; When the relationship stabilizes, it can convey its commitment, help both sides build a common understanding and lay the foundation for maintaining the relationship. At the same time, it can also help individuals regulate their emotions, making people willing to show their vulnerable side and thereby establishing genuine interpersonal connections. However, self-disclosure also hides many risks: if the shared information is personal privacy or sensitive information, one may face problems such as relationship damage, rejection, trust collapse, or emotional hurt (Altman & Taylor, 1973). Research also confirms that when one's disclosure is responded to by the other party, the quality of the relationship will improve accordingly. However, if the disclosure does not receive equivalent feedback, individuals often feel troubled and even choose to actively distance themselves from the relationship (Wheeless & Grotz, 1976).

In scenarios of ghosting and relationship breakdown, the degree of self-disclosure becomes particularly crucial. If the disclosure is relatively shallow, the individual will feel less vulnerable in the relationship and have relatively fewer emotional entanglements. This might make it easier for them to suddenly break away from the relationship. Conversely, deep self-disclosure will increase investment in the relationship and also raise expectations for its continuation - once the relationship ends unexpectedly or comes to nothing, the emotional impact may be even stronger. Therefore, research related to relationship maintenance indicates that people who are willing to reveal themselves more usually value reciprocal responses, emotional resonance, and mutual commitment, and these traits often do not align with the way of "silence and withdrawal" that leads to detachment from the relationship. Theoretically speaking, a higher level of self-disclosure reduces the feasibility of ghosting as a relationship exit strategy, as this sudden loss of contact goes against the principles of open communication and mutual honesty that highly disclosed individuals adhere to.

Based on this theoretical reasoning, the present study proposes Hypothesis 1:

H1:

Within romantic relationships, individuals who report higher levels of self-disclosure will show lower intentions to use ghosting.

Building on this logic, it is important to note that ghosting is not confined to romantic relationships. A lot of research conceptualizes ghosting as a general relationship dissolution strategy. Many study seen ghosting as a behavior that can be used to end romantic, platonic, and other types ofties (Freedman & Powell, 2024). Qualitative work on non-romantic relationships similarly shows that ghosting frequently occurs within friendships: young adults report being ghosted or ghosting close friends via technology-mediated channels, often describing the dissolution as more common and socially acceptable in friendships than in romantic relationships, partly because expectations of commitment and obligation are perceived as lower in the friendship domain (Yap, Francisco, & Gopez, 2021). Other studies on everyday experiences of ghosting likewise highlight that friendships are a central context in which silent withdrawal is used and experienced, with friendship ghosting eliciting substantial uncertainty and hurt for those who are ghosted (e.g., Wu, 2023; Pancani et al., 2022). Some research we mention before, such as the need for closure, suggests that dispositional factors may shape both intentions to ghost and reactions to being ghosted, although the overall pattern of findings remains mixed across studies and relational contexts (Leckfor, Wood, Slatcher, & Hales, 2023).

Given that friendships can also involve substantial emotional investment and ongoing self- disclosure, it is plausible that similar mechanisms operate in this relational context. Friends who share more personal information may come to view their relationship as more meaningful and mutually accountable, making abrupt and unexplained disengagement feel less acceptable as an exit strategy. Thus, higher self-disclosure in friendships should likewise be associated with a lower willingness to rely on ghosting to end the relationship. Accordingly, the present study proposes Hypothesis 2:

H2:

Within friendships, individuals who report higher levels of self-disclosure will show lower intentions to use ghosting.

2. Present Research

Study 1 was an exploratory investigation conducted with emerging adults in China (N = 300) that examined ghosting in romantic relationships using validated measures of self-disclosure (Wheeless & Grotz, 1976) and ghosting intentions (Leckfor, Wood, & Slatcher, 2023).

Study 2 was a confirmatory study with a separate sample (N = 300) that replicated the negative association between self-disclosure and romantic ghosting intentions and extended the analysis to friendships, a domain in which ghosting is also increasingly common.

the present research offers an early step toward understanding how interpersonal communication patterns relate to modern digital disengagement strategies and clarifies the conditions under which

self-disclosure is linked to the use of ghosting as a relationship- dissolution mechanism.

2.1 Study 1

The first study explored the association between the level of self-disclosure and ghosting intentions within romantic relationships. We hypothesized that a higher level of self-disclosure would be associated with lower ghosting intentions.

2.1.1 Method

2.1.1.1 Participants

Study 1 recruited 300 Chinese emerging adults, aged 19 to 30, through university social- media groups and online communities. This age range was intentionally selected because research shows that ghosting is most common among emerging adults, who frequently navigate digital communication, casual dating, and technology-mediated relationship maintenance (LeFebvre et al., 2019). The final sample included 300 participants(48.67% men; 51.33% women). Most of the sample was heterosexual (81.4%), followed by 9.17% bisexual, 8.26% lesbian or gay, and 1.17% were another sexual orientation. More than half of the sample (52. 13%) had a bachelor's degree or higher. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and no exclusion criteria were applied. Age and gender were recorded for later use as covariates.

2.1.2 Measures

2.1.2.1 Self-Disclosure

Self-disclosure was measured using the 18-item Revised Self-Disclosure Scale developed by Wheeless and Grotz (1976). The scale captures several dimensions of disclosure—

intentionality, depth, honesty–accuracy, valence, and amount—using a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Example items include, "I usually disclose positive things about myself "and " On the whole, my disclosures about myself are more negative than positive" .Negatively worded items were reverse-coded and all items were averaged to form a total score. Internal reliability in this study was excellent (Cronbach's $\alpha > .85$).

2.1.2.2 Ghosting Intentions (Romantic Relationships)

Ghosting intentions were assessed using 13 items adapted from Leckfor, Wood, and

Slatcher (2023). we first provided participants with a definition of ghosting: "Ghosting is when someone ends a friendship, romantic relationship, or casual dating situation by cutting off all communication without explanation (e.g., not responding to calls or text messages, blocking on social media or dating apps).(Leckfor et al., 2023)" Items assessed participants ' likelihood of using ghosting to terminate romantic relationships under various conditions (e.g., short-term vs. long-term relationships, before vs. after intimacy). Responses were made on a 7-point scale1 (1= Very unlikely,7= Very likely), and items were averaged to produce an overall intention score.

Reliability was high (Cronbach's $\alpha > .88$).

2.1.2.3 Ghosting Behavior

Considering the possible gap between the ghosting intention and the actual ghosting behavior, we

added a list of questions to measure ghosting behavior. Participants indicated whether they had ever ghosted someone (0 = no, 1 = yes), how recently the event occurred, and how frequently they had ghosted in the past. The binary variable and a continuous frequency index were used in analyses.

2.1.3 Procedure

Participants completed the study online. After consenting, they first completed the self- disclosure scale, followed by the romantic ghosting intention measure. They then responded to the ghosting behavior questions and demographic items. The study took approximately 8–10 minutes.

2.1.4 Results

Descriptive analyses showed that all variables demonstrated acceptable distributions and strong internal consistency. Participants reported moderate levels of self-disclosure ($M \approx 3.97$, $SD \approx .75$) and moderate romantic ghosting intentions ($M \approx 3.96$, $SD \approx .81$). Age and gender were minimally related to the main variables. And correlation analyses revealed that self- disclosure was significantly and negatively associated with romantic ghosting intentions, $r = -.43$, $p < .001$. Participants who disclosed more were less willing to ghost a romantic partner.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations (N = 300)

Variable	Mean(M)	SD	1	2	3	4
Self-Disclosure (SD_total)	3.97	.75	—	—	—	—
Ghosting Intentions (G_total)	3.96	.81	-.43***	—	—	—
Age	24.69	3.31	-.03	.09	—	—
Gender (1 = male, 2 = female)	—	—	.01	.01	.01	—

Note. *** $p < .001$.

Based on the correlation analyses, a regression analysis predicting ghosting intentions from self-disclosure, age, and gender indicated that self-disclosure remained a strong negative predictor, $\beta = -.43$, $p < .001$, whereas age and gender were nonsignificant predictors (ps > . 10). Thus, self-disclosure emerged as a robust predictor of ghosting intentions, independent of demographic characteristics.

Table 2. Regression Predicting Ghosting Intentions from Self-Disclosure (N = 300)

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p
Constant	5.338	.415	—	12.859	< .001
Self-Disclosure (SD_total)	-.465	.056	-.43	-8.268	< .001

Age	.0178	.013	.08	1.394	.164
Gender	.0197	.085	.01	.233	.816

R^2 =0 .194; F(3, 296) = 23.68, p < .001

We next examined whether self-disclosure differed between individuals who had previously ghosted someone and those who had not. An independent-samples t-test showed a significant difference, with participants who had ghosted reporting lower self-disclosure (M ≈ 3.03, SD = .29) than those who had never ghosted (M ≈ 4.20), t(298) = 2.96, p = .001. However, self- disclosure was not significantly associated with the frequency of ghosting (Spearman's ρ ≈ –.031, p > .597). These results indicate that while self-disclosure predicts intentions to ghost and distinguishes individuals with ghosting history, it does not predict how often those individuals enact the behavior. Study 1 therefore provides initial evidence for an emerging intention– behavior gap.

Table 3. An Independent-samples t-test for Ghosting Behavior

Group	Mean(M)	SD	t
Never ghosted someone (0)	4.20	.27	2.96
Has ghosted someone (1)	3.03	.29	—

Note. Individuals who have ghosted someone show significantly lower self-disclosure than those who have not.

Table 4. Spearman's Rank-order Correlation Coefficient

Variables	ρ (Spearman)	p-value
Self-Disclosure (SD_total) × Ghosting Frequency (var64)	-.031	.597

Note. Self-disclosure was not significantly correlated with ghosting frequency.

2.2 Study 2

2.2.1 Method

2.2.1.1 Participants

Study 2 recruited a separate sample of 300 Chinese emerging adults aged 19 to 30, using the same recruitment methods as Study 1. The same age range was chosen for comparability and because emerging adults are the demographic most likely to engage in ghosting both in romantic and friendship relationships. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, with no exclusions.The sample consisted of 157 males and 143 females.

2.2.2 Measures

2.2.2.1 Self-Disclosure in Romantic Relationships

Participants completed the 18-item Revised Self-Disclosure Scale (Wheeless & Grotz, 1976), this time

instructed to reflect specifically on communication with romantic partners. Items were rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = Very unlikely, 7 = Very likely), reverse-coded for negative statements as needed, and averaged to form a romantic self-disclosure score (Cronbach's $\alpha > .85$).

2.2.2.2 Self-Disclosure in Friendships

The same scale was administered again with instructions to respond about close friendships, enabling direct comparison of disclosure tendencies across relational contexts. Reliability remained excellent (Cronbach's $\alpha > .85$).

2.2.2.3 Ghosting Intentions in Romantic Relationships

Participants completed the same 13-item romantic ghosting intention measure used in Study 1 (Leckfor et al., 2023). Items were rated on a 7-point scale and averaged. Reliability remained high (Cronbach's $\alpha > .88$).

2.2.2.4 Ghosting Intentions in Friendships

To extend the investigation to friendships, participants completed six items measuring the likelihood of ghosting a friend under different circumstances. Items were rated on a 7-point scale, and internal consistency was strong (Cronbach's $\alpha > .80$).

2.2.2.5 Ghosting Behavior

Participants again reported whether they had ghosted someone, when it occurred, and how frequently. Measures were identical to Study 1 for consistency.

2.2.3 Procedure

The study was administered online. Participants completed the romantic and friendship self- disclosure scales, followed by the romantic and friendship ghosting intention measures, then the ghosting behavior items and demographic questions. Completion required 10–12 minutes.

2.2.4 Results

Preliminary analyses indicated acceptable variable distributions and high internal reliability across all scales (Cronbach's $\alpha s > .80$).The reliability coefficients for each scale are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Reliability of Measures in Study 2 (Cronbach's α)

Scale	Number of Items	Cronbach's α
Self-Disclosure (Romantic context)	18	.94
Self-Disclosure (Friendship context)	18	.93
Ghosting Intentions – Romantic	13	.89
Ghosting Intentions – Friendship	6	.74

Participants reported similar levels of romantic and friendship self-disclosure, as well as similar levels of romantic and friendship ghosting intentions (see Table 6). As in Study 1, age and gender were minimally related to the primary constructs.

Table 6. Descriptive Statistics for Self-Disclosure and Ghosting Intentions

Variable	M	SD
Self-Disclosure (Romantic)	3.95	0.74
Self-Disclosure (Friendship)	3.97	0.69
Romantic Ghosting Intention	4.02	0.78
Friendship Ghosting Intention	3.94	0.77

Correlation analyses replicated Study 1's key findings (see Table 7). Romantic self- disclosure was negatively correlated with romantic ghosting intentions ($r = – .21$, $p < .001$), and friendship self-disclosure was negatively correlated with friendship ghosting intentions ($r = –.28$, $p < .001$). Participants who disclosed more—whether to romantic partners or close friends— reported weaker intentions to ghost in those relationships. No significant correlation was found between romantic and friendship ghosting intentions ($r = .00$, $p > .05$).

Table 7. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations (N=300)

Variable	1	2	3	4
Self-Disclosure (Romantic)	-	.41**	-.21**	-.16**
Self-Disclosure (Friendship)	.41**	-	-.15**	-.28**
Romantic Ghosting Intention	-.21**	-.15**	-	.00
Friendship Ghosting Intention	-.16**	-.28**	.00	-

Note. **$p < .05$; rom_SD × GIrom $r = -.213$, $p = .0002$; fri_SD × GIfri $r = -.280$, $p \approx 7.9\times10^{-7}$.

Regression analyses showed that self-disclosure remained a significant predictor of ghosting intentions after controlling for age and gender (see Table 8 and Table 9). Romantic self- disclosure predicted romantic ghosting intentions ($\beta = -.21$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .05$), and friendship self-disclosure predicted friendship ghosting intentions ($\beta = -.28$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .08$). Demographic variables did not significantly predict intentions in either model.

Table 8. Regression Analysis: Romantic Self-Disclosure Predicting Romantic Ghosting Intentions

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p	R^2
Constant	4.90	.24	-	20.44	< .001	-
Self-Disclosure (Romantic)	-0.22	.06	-.21	-3.77	< .001	.05

Table 9. Regression Analysis: Friendship Self-Disclosure Predicting Friendship Ghosting Intentions

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p	R^2
Constant	5.18	.25	-	20.78	< .001	-
Self-Disclosure (Friendship)	-0.31	.06	-.28	-5.04	< .001	.08

Paired-samples comparisons revealed no significant differences between romantic and friendship self-disclosure (t= 1.12, p = .263), or between romantic and friendship ghosting intentions, (t= 1.58, p = .115). These findings suggest that ghosting is perceived as an equally plausible dissolution strategy in both relational contexts.

Table 10. Paired-Samples t-Test Results for Self-Disclosure and Ghosting Intentions Across Relational Contexts (N=300)

Comparison Variable	Relational Context	M	SD	t(299)	p	Cohen's d
Self-Disclosure Level	Romantic Relationship	3.95	.74	1.12	.263	.06
	Friendship	3.97	.69			
Ghosting Intentions	Romantic Relationship	4.02	.78	1.58	.115	.09
	Friendship	3.94	.77			

In contrast to Study 1, self-disclosure did not differ between participants who had ghosted someone and those who had not, either in romantic self-disclosure (t= –0.25, p = .800), or friendship self-disclosure (t = –0.41, p = .680).

Table 11. Comparison of Self-Disclosure Between Ghosting and Non-Ghosting Individuals

Variable	Ghosted (1)	Never Ghosted (0)	t	p
Self-Disclosure (Romantic)	M ≈ 3.95	M ≈ 4.00	-0.25	.800
Self-Disclosure (Friendship)	M ≈ 3.96	M ≈ 4.01	-0.41	.680

Likewise, self-disclosure was unrelated to ghosting frequency. Although Study 2 replicated the strong associations between self-disclosure and ghosting intentions, it did not replicate Study 1's behavioral findings, reinforcing the inconsistency between intentions and enacted ghosting behavior.

Table 12. Spearman Correlations Between Ghosting Frequency and Self-Disclosure

Relationship	ρ (Spearman)	p-value	Significance
Ghosting Frequency × Self-Disclosure (Romantic)	.014	.811	Not significant
Ghosting Frequency × Self-Disclosure (Friendship)	.015	.799	Not significant

3. Discussion

In our study, we explore the relationship between self-disclosure, the core interpersonal communication process, and ghost-related intentions and actual behaviors in romantic
relationships and friendships among emerging adults. In two studies, we found a consistent yet complex pattern: self-disclosure can stably and negatively predict intentions of ghosting, but its association with actual ghosting behavior is ambiguous and inconsistent. The result not only
links the individual differences of interpersonal communication with the avoidance strategy of interpersonal relationship breakdown in the digital age, but also highlights that in the digital space, there still a profound gap between intention and behavior in the process of relational decision-making.

3.1 Self-Disclosure as a Stable Predictor of Ghosting Intentions

In our studies, whether in romantic relationship or friendship, a higher level of self- disclosure consistently predicted weaker intentions of ghosting. This is consistent with the interpersonal theory, which believes that self-disclosure is the foundation of interpersonal relationships. According to the theory of Social Penetration, self-disclosure is an important behavior for establishing and deepening intimate relationships. When considering ending a relationship, those who may openly share their ideas and emotions (with a higher level of self- expression) may be more resistant to be a ghoster because they respect and sympathies with their partners. Our research results show that a person's level of self-disclosure--not just a specific relationship state or environment--is a key factor in predicting how they will consider ending a relationship.

3.2 Generality Across Relationship Types

The findings of study 2 show that there is no statistical difference between the level of self- disclosure and ghosting intended in the romantic relationships and friendship. The results showed that for emerging adults in China, ghosting is no longer peculiar to breakups of romantic relationships but has evolved into a commonly accepted distancing strategy that transcends relationship types. This finding holds theoretical importance. Regarding strategies for ending relationships it questions the separation between romantic bonds and friendships in traditional relationship research. This suggests that in interactions primarily shaped by communication, the upkeep and dissolution of relationships might be

less bound by conventional social role expectations and more shaped by typical digital communication behaviors (like the delayed and fleeting qualities of text messaging) and mutual communicative challenges (such as steering clear of, in-person disputes). The “de-differentiation” phenomenon of ghosting may be a microcosm of the fluidity and blurred boundaries of interpersonal relationships in the digital age.

3.3 The Intention-Behavior Gap

Study 1 and Study 2 collectively confirmed that the level of self-disclosure can reliably predict intentions to ghost but does not predict the frequency of ghosting. Given that Study 1 established those who had ghosted in romantic relationship reported significantly lower self- disclosure than those who had not, a logical inference would be that self-disclosure should, at least, be able to distinguish people have ever carried out the ghosting behavior. However, Study 2, using the same measurement for romantic relationships, found no such difference. The same null result occurred in the newly added friendship context. This takes us to a core conclusion: self-disclosure can reliably predict intended ghosting, but not reliably predict actual ghosting behavior (whether one has ghosted or how frequently).

Regarding the measurement-level explanations ofthe divergent findings, two possibilities warrant considerations. First, we must admit is that the change in measurement framework in Study 2 might caused interference. That is, the result in Study 2 might be a statistical anomaly, while the result in Study 1 is more generalizable. Study 2 added measurement of self-disclosure in friendships. Although the measuring tool for romantic relationships was constant, the extension of the task framework might have subtly change participants ‘ responding pattern or diluted their concentration on romantic relationship behaviors. Alternatively, the result of Study 1 could itself be a statistical anomaly, and the result of Study 2 is more generalizable. That is to say, considering the low base rate of ghosting behavior and the limitation of retrospective self- report, the result observed in Study 1 may not be robust.

Beyond these methodological considerations, the very inconsistency between studies is theoretically informative. It highlights an important pattern commonly observed in decision making research: intention does not always translate into behavior. The “intention-behavior gap” may be especially evident in ghosting: the level of self-disclosure could stably predict ghosting intention but not behavior. That is because a decision to ghost is commonly made in moments of emotional discomfort, relational ambiguity, or low investment relationship. We propose that this gap can be explained through an integrative framework: self-disclosure, as a stable trait, shapes the long-term cognitive intentions of an individual towards relationship dissolution, but the immediate situational factors directly influence the fianl behavioral output. More concretely, even a person who generally inclined toward open communication (high self-disclosure, low ghosting intention), when encountering high-intensity conflicts, emotional exhaustion, or perceiving a threat to personal safety, the low-threshold escape availability provide by digital media will instantly magnify the appeal of ghosting. In such moments,

situational pressures (e.g., fear of immediate confrontation) can overwhelm the stable personal dispositions, leading to ghosting behavior. That is why it is possible for intentions not to be fully executed.

3.4 Practical Implications

This study provides an empirical basis and reference path for understanding and responding to the phenomenon of relationship termination in the digital age. On the one hand, by improving the individual's willingness to express themselves frankly and emotional communication skills, it can help them identify the actual state and end signals of the relationship more clearly, to reduce the tendency to choose avoidance behaviors such as ghosting at the end of the relationship. Meanwhile, enhancing empathy can also promote mutual respect during breakups and reduce the harm caused by direct avoidance of communication.

On the other hand, ghosting may have adaptability in certain specific situations. For example, in relationships with harassment or security threats, ghosting can be used as a strategy to protect mental and physical safety. Therefore, in the context of social overload in the digital age, shadow can be regarded as an effective boundary protection tool. Especially for highly sensitive people, it provides a low-energy way to end a relationship, avoiding more complicated conflicts and explanations.

Therefore, digital platforms can introduce more user-friendly features. For example, before the user chooses to end contact with others, the platform can provide option tips, such as sending shutdown reminders, starting the cooling period, or providing a one-click "stealth" mode to ensure security. This will create a buffer for users and reserve a secure exit path for individuals in high-risk situations, balancing communication ethics and protecting personal security.

3.5 Limitations and Future Directions

There are several limitations to this study, which also provide several directions for future research. The main limitation of current research is the measurement of avoidance behaviors such as ghosting. Existing behavioral studies often rely on retrospective self-reporting to obtain data on these behaviors, but these methods are vulnerable to sample fluctuations, social expectation bias, and recall bias. Because ghosting is often regarded as impolite and harmful behavior, participants may hide or downplay their relevant experiences due to the pressure of social expectations, resulting in a lower frequency of behavior than real data, which may obscure the true correlation between self-expression and actual avoidance behavior. Therefore, future research needs to adopt more sophisticated methods, such as anonymous real-time daily behavior records, situational simulation experiments or indirect interviews, to reduce the impact of errors.

Secondly, cross-sectional design is difficult to establish causal relationships. Although the theory supports self-disclosure will have an impact on the intention of ghosting, it may also involve other variables. Future research should further explore the interaction between self- disclosure and psychological factors such as attachment style, conflict avoidance tendency, relationship involvement,

etc., and establish a more comprehensive ghosting model. Meanwhile, using longitudinal research methods can also examine whether changes in self disclosure led to changes in ghosting intention.

Finally, cultural background is another key condition. This study focuses on emerging adults in China, whose communication style is influenced by collectivist cultural values that emphasize harmony and avoid direct confrontation. This may also make ghosting more easily seen as a face-saving relationship strategy, thereby potentially enhancing the applicability of our research findings in similar cultures. However, in individualistic cultures that tend towards more direct expression, the relationship between self-disclosure and ghosting may differ. Therefore, conducting cross-cultural comparative research will have significant value.

4. Conclusion

In a word, this study believes that self-disclosure is a key personal characteristic for predicting ghosting intentions. It also finds that in the context of the digital age, there is an obvious disconnect between people's behavioral intentions and actual behaviors, that is, there is an "intention behavior gap". This gap shows that even people who are willing to take the initiative to communicate may choose ghosting to cut off relationships under the pressure of specific situations or because digital media makes avoidance easier. Nowadays, ghosting nolonger only appears in romantic relationships, but has become a more common problem in modern interpersonal communication. Understanding its intrinsic reasons is very important for cultivating healthy interpersonal relationships, designing a more ethical communication platform, and carrying out more effective interpersonal communication education. Therefore, future research should be based on the intention-behavior gap, and deeply study the psychological and social factors that trigger ghosting behavior at critical moments.

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