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Ghosting: Social Rejection Without Explanation, but Not Without Care

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Many social ties end when one side rejects the other, but rejection does not need to happen directly. Ghosting—the act of ending a relationship by ignoring another person's attempts to connect—is a common way of ending social ties. The present experiments first establish the key characteristics of ghosting and distinguish it from other rejection behaviors (Pilot Studies 1a–1c). The experiments then proceed to explore the relational and motivational implications of this behavior, finding that ghosters (those who ghost) care about the well-being of ghostees (those who are ghosted) more than ghostees realize. This result occurs in recalled instances of ghosting (Experiment 1), when ghosting in real time (Experiment 2), and when refraining from ghosting is monetarily costly (Experiment 3). We find that this occurs partly because ghostees underestimate the other-oriented motives involved in ghosting, misunderstanding that ghosters ghost partly as a way to end a tie while avoiding hurting ghostees' feelings (Experiments 4–6). Indeed, greater other-oriented motives lead to a higher likelihood of ghosting others (Experiment 7). A final experiment finds relational consequences whereby ghostees miss out on opportunities for future help exchange due to their underestimation of the extent to which ghosters care about them (Experiment 8). Ghosting is social rejection without explanation or feedback, but not without care. This study highlights how prosocial motives can drive rejection behaviors and the role of interpersonal accuracy in mitigating the negative effects of social rejection.

Public Significance Statement
Ghosting—the act of ending a relationship by ignoring another person's attempts to connect—is a common way of ending social ties. The present research establishes the key characteristics of ghosting and distinguishes it from other rejection behaviors. The present research also finds a systematic gap between how ghosters (those who ghost) and ghostees (those who are ghosted) experience ghosting. Specifically, ghostees underestimate the extent to which ghosters care about their well-being, a judgment that occurs because ghostees misunderstand ghosters' prosocial motives and leads ghostees to miss out on opportunities for future help from ghosters.

Keywords: ghosting, social rejection, social connection, self-other differences, prosocial motivation

Although all professional and social relationships begin optimistically, many end in rejection. More often than is comfortable to admit, such rejection comes without feedback or explanation. Many romantic hopefuls have gone on dates only to never hear from the other person again. Many people have struck up conversations with others and assumed that friendships were being built only to receive the silent treatment later on. Many scholars have started what seemed to be promising projects only to be ghosted when trying to follow up with would-be coauthors.

Such unexplained rejections are known as ghosting—the act of dissolving a relationship by repeatedly ignoring another person's attempts to connect (LeFebvre, 2017). Ghosting is distinct from other forms of rejection in that it lacks a clear declaration of relationship dissolution (Smart Richman & Leary, 2009), is meant to end the relationship altogether (unlike ostracism; Williams, 2009), and creates an ambiguous void because those who are ghosted ("ghostees") do not immediately know that they have been rejected and why (Freedman et al., 2019, 2022). Research has documented the prevalence of ghosting in romantic relationships–for instance, two-thirds of young adults report having ghosted and three-quarters had been ghosted by others in their romantic relationships (Koessler et al., 2019; Powell et al., 2021). More recent management scholarship—

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while not examining ghosting per se—has demonstrated how newcomers prefer organizations that provide feedback when rejecting their ideas over those that do not provide any feedback in the context of crowdsourcing (Piezunka & Dahlander, 2019). The present data too (Pilot Study 1c and Experiment 4) suggest that ghosting is common and occurs across a diverse set of social and professional relationships.

Ghosting is common partly because it requires seemingly little effort. It is easier to make oneself disappear when a colleague calls than to answer and refuse a proposed outing. It is easier to ignore a text message from a romantic interest than to reply that it might be better if both parties started seeing other people. Although ghosting has been prevalent prior to the emergence of the Internet, the advent of online interactions has made ghosting easier still—with a click of a button or a swipe of a finger a person can end a relationship without notice (Coyne et al., 2011; Fox & Warber, 2013; Morey et al., 2013; Van Ouytsel et al., 2016). Being rejected is painful (Kirkpatrick et al., 2002; Macdonald & Leary, 2005; Twenge et al., 2001; Williams, 2009), and ghosting is rejection without feedback, closure, or explanation. Thus, ghostees cannot be faulted for thinking that those who ghost them ("ghosters") do not care very much about their well-being (Baxter, 1985).

However, we suggest that this inference may be unwarranted and that ghosters care about ghostees' well-being more than ghostees realize. We suggest this happens because the experience of being ghosted blinds ghostees to a very specific aspect of ghosting. We propose that ghosting is a choice that happens due to a mix of other-oriented and self-oriented motives—a combination of the desire to avoid inflicting psychological pain on others and the desire to avoid putting oneself in psychological pain. However, it is particularly difficult to intuit another person's other-oriented motives when one is being ghosted. In other words, ghosters ghost partly to avoid causing pain to ghostees, but this reality is lost on ghostees.

In what follows, we explain the importance of studying ghosting; explain our hypothesis by considering the perspectives of ghosters and ghostees, each in turn; report three pilot studies and eight experiments that test our predictions and their consequences for social and professional relationships; and end by discussing the implications of our findings as they relate to well-being and four subdisciplines in psychology: motivational, moral, social, and organizational psychology.

Ghosting: A Distinct Way to End Social Ties?

Social connection is widely recognized as a fundamental human need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Maslow, 1955). Accordingly, rejection is psychologically painful because people often perceive it as a threat to connection. The aversive effects of rejection include decrements in physical health and increases in stress and anxiety (Williams, 2009), greater aggression (Kirkpatrick et al., 2002; Leary et al., 2003; Twenge et al., 2001), engagement in various types of self-defeating behavior (Twenge et al., 2002), declines in self-esteem (Leary et al., 1995), and lower engagement in prosocial behavior (Macdonald & Leary, 2005).

Existing research defines ghosting as a form of rejection whereby people unexpectedly stop all communication with another person who had reason to expect continued social connection (LeFebvre, 2017). While existing research treats ghosting as different from other ways of ending social ties such as rejection, exclusion, and ignoring (Molden et al., 2009; Timmermans et al., 2021; Williams, 2009), it is not clear precisely how these behaviors are different. Thus, one task of the present research is to empirically document how people perceive the differences between ghosting and other rejection behaviors. In addition, to gain deeper understanding, the present research also measures various characteristics of relationships that end in ghosting, including relationship length, strength, and closeness.

Much of existing research on tie dissolution has been descriptive (e.g., how online social media platforms facilitate ghosting as breakup strategies) (Koessler et al., 2019; Sprecher et al., 2010; Thomas & Dubar, 2021) or has examined the perspective of the person being ignored or rejected (Pancani et al., 2021; Powell et al., 2021). Much less is known about the person doing the ghosting. We suggest that this is an important omission, especially in the case of ghosting. Unlike rejection that is accompanied by explanation, ghosting is characterized by ambiguity and lack of feedback from ghosters to ghostees. Such feedback would have aligned the perspectives of ghosters and ghostees (Eyal et al., 2018; Freedman et al., 2016), but its absence can create a gap between how ghostees and ghosters experience the interaction. Understanding this gap requires considering the perspectives of ghostees and ghosters, each in turn.

The Ghostee's Perspective

Ghostees typically do not have an opportunity to ask ghosters about their motives or state of mind, rendering ghosting an ambiguous behavior from ghostees' perspective. This creates an explanatory void that ghostees are loath to leave unfilled (Kraus & Chen, 2009; Swann Jr. et al., 1994). Indeed, the responsive theory of social exclusion suggests that ghostees are motivated to understand ghosters' intentions and reduce the ambiguity involved in the situation (Freedman et al., 2016), ghostees who have a greater need for closure experience ghosting more negatively than those with lower need (Leckfor et al., 2023), and existing research suggests that people prefer some acknowledgement to none at all (Rudert et al., 2017). Of the judgments ghostees can make about ghosters, one of the least likely is the inference that ghosters care about their well-being. Ghostees may feel that the act of ghosting is an "easy way out," a way to reject them while exerting little effort. Existing research suggests that people like and appreciate others who make an effort to understand them (Goldstein et al., 2014; Heltzel & Laurin, 2021; Klein, 2019), and ghostees may be left with the impression that the other person is unwilling to exert the minimal effort required to notice and listen to their concerns. Moreover, people broadly tend to assume that others' choices are motivated more by self-interest than by other-oriented motives (Fetchenhauer & Dunning, 2010; Kruger & Gilovich, 1999; Miller & Ratner, 1998), suggesting that ghostees may assume that their counterparts ghost out of concern for their own well-being while disregarding that of the ghostees.

This logic is also consistent with existing research on motivated reasoning, which finds that people respond to events that threaten their self-esteem by adopting attributions that neutralize the source of the threat. One of the most common forms of motivated reasoning is making external attributions, whereby people focus on explanations that implicate others for self-threatening events (Malle, 2006; Millimet & Gardner, 1972; vanDellen et al., 2011). Being ghosted can threaten one's self-esteem and therefore ghostees are likely to rationalize this experience in ways that "pin the blame" on ghosters' uncaring attitudes.

In sum, the context surrounding ghosting—the negative experience of rejection and the lack of access to ghosters' perspectives—may make the possibility that ghosters actually care about their well-being the furthest thing from ghostees' minds.

The Ghoster's Perspective

However, we suggest that such an inference may be unwarranted. Classic work theorizes that people are motivated to protect others' feelings (Brown & Levinson, 1978; Goffman, 1967) and indeed psychological research has found that people intrinsically care not only about their own needs but also about others' needs, especially in social relationships (Kogan et al., 2010; Kunda, 1990; Rand et al., 2012; Yamagishi et al., 2014). People feel bad when they hurt others to such an extent that they are willing to endure pain themselves to mitigate others' pain (Crockett et al., 2014). Accordingly, people routinely consider the needs of others when making relationship decisions (Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003, 2008), and decide whether to terminate relationships partly based on their partners' feelings (Joel et al., 2018). People also find it difficult to reject others because they worry about damaging others' well-being (Joel et al., 2014). Rejecting others is a negative experience, characterized by guilt and depletion (Baumeister et al., 1993; Ciarocco et al., 2001; Poulsen & Kashy, 2012). These lines of research suggest that ghosters may ghost others not only for self-oriented motives (such as avoiding discomfort involved in unpleasant conversations about ending a relationship) but also, at least in part, for other-oriented motives (such as aversion to hurting ghostees' feelings).

Moreover, people can experience their own behavior differently from how others experience it. This is because people directly experience their own motivations, whereas others are not privy to such introspections (Pronin & Kugler, 2007). In interpersonal interactions, people generally have a strong aversion to seeing themselves as capable of engaging in ill-intentioned, hurtful, or malicious actions (Klein & Epley, 2016, 2017). This suggests that ghosters are unlikely to view ghosting as originating solely from self-oriented motivations, instead experiencing it as motivated by a mix of self-oriented and other-oriented motives. Ghosters are much more likely to have, notice, and think about other-oriented reasons for their behavior compared to ghostees' perceptions.

This analysis suggests a systematic gap between how ghostees and ghosters experience ghosting. Whereas ghostees are likely to focus on their negative experience and thus attribute it to ghosters' lack of care, ghosters are more likely to attribute their own behavior to a mix of other-oriented and self-oriented motives. Thus, our experiments test two main predictions: (a) Ghosters care about ghostees' well-being more than ghostees realize; and (b) ghostees' underestimation of ghosters' other-oriented motives will partly explain this result. In addition, we test relational consequences of this misperceptions, namely that ghostees may miss out on opportunities for receiving help from ghosters.

Overview of the Present Research

This empirical portion of this article is divided into four parts: (a) identifying the distinct characteristics of ghosting (Pilots Studies 1a–1c); (b) testing the main hypothesis of ghostees' underestimation of ghosters' care for them (Experiments 1–3); (c) testing the mechanism related to the other-oriented motives underlying ghosting (Experiments 4–7); and (d) testing a downstream consequence of ghosting, namely ghostees' underestimation of ghosters' willingness to help them (Experiment 8). Table 1 provides the key details for each experiment.

Transparency and Openness

All materials and data are available in the additional online materials.[1] For each experiment, we report how we determined our sample size, all data exclusions (if any), all manipulations, and all measures.

Pilot Studies 1a–1c

The pilot studies sought to characterize ghosting. Study 1a asked participants to use their own words to explain ghosting and other rejection behaviors. We used prototype analysis to identify the representative and unique characteristics of ghosting (Fehr, 1988; Kearns & Fincham, 2004; Lambert et al., 2022; Maher et al., 2020). Study 1b tested whether participants can distinguish between ghosting and other rejection behaviors based on the representative characteristics found in Study 1a, thus providing precision about the differences between ghosting and other rejection behaviors. Study 1c then provided deeper understanding of ghosting by exploring the types of relationships that end by ghosting. Existing research on ghosting typically focuses on romantic connections (Koessler et al., 2019; LeFebvre, 2017) and we sought to test whether ghosting is common in other domains of social and professional life.

Pilot Study 1a

Pilot Study 1a sought to uncover the characteristics most representative of ghosting relative to other rejection behaviors.

Method

Preregistration is available at https://aspredicted.org/CW2_JPR. Participants ($N = 106$) from the United States were recruited using Cloud Connect for a study on social interactions for $0.70. Relying on existing research (Nault et al., 2023), we recruited 100 participants. Nine participants either failed the attention check or did not complete the study, resulting in a usable $N = 91$ ($M_{age} = 37.37$, $SD_{age} = 11.43$; 46 women, 45 men, zero other; 67 White, four Black, 10 Hispanic, seven East Asian, two South Asian, one Middle Eastern).

We asked participants to imagine explaining ghosting, rejection, exclusion, and ignoring to a foreigner or someone who had never experienced them (instructions adapted from Fehr [1988]). Participants then created separate lists of characteristics they associate with each behavior, with order of constructs counter-balanced. Participants had to write down at least one characteristic for each behavior, but there was no upper limit to the number of characteristics they could include. Participants were instructed to take at least 3–4 min to complete the list for each of the four behaviors.

Finally, participants completed demographic questions (information on race was collected through a multiple-choice question: White, Black, Hispanic, East Asian, South Asian, Middle Eastern,

[1] https://osf.io/t9q4m/?view_only=deac8e888b074317921e4c0985b29ecd.

Table 1
Overview of Experiments

Section	Experiment	Purpose	Method	Hypothesis
Characterizing the construct	Pilot 1A	Characterize ghosting versus other rejection behaviors	Ps defined ghosting and other rejection behaviors in own words	Ending relationship without explanation will emerge as characteristics of ghosting
	Pilot 1B	Validate the characteristics of ghosting identified in Pilot 1A	Ps selected rejection behaviors based on characteristics found in Pilot 1A	Ps will exhibit high levels of accuracy
	Pilot 1C	Document the variety of social situations that involve ghosting	Ps recalled real-life ghosting and provided relevant details about it	Ghosting occurs in a variety of relationships and social contexts
Testing main hypothesis	1	Test main hypothesis in real-life situations	Ps recalled real-life ghosting	Ghostees underestimate ghosters' care for them
	2	Test main hypothesis in real-time experience of ghosting	Ps interacted in electronic chat, in which one P ghosted another	Ghostees underestimate ghoster care for them
	3	Test whether Ps are willing to pay not to ghost	In electronic chat paradigm, Ps could paying to avoid ghosting	Ghostees underestimate ghosters' willingness to pay to avoid ghosting them
Testing mechanism	4	Test mechanism in real-life situations	Ps recalled real-life personal and professional ghosting	Ghostees underestimate the other-oriented motives underlying ghosting
	5	Test mechanism; compare positive versus negative reason for ghosting	Ps judged ghosting based on hypothetical scenario	Ghostees underestimate the other-oriented motives underlying ghosting regardless of reason for ghosting
	6	Test mechanism in real-time experience of ghosting	Ps interacted in electronic chat, in which one P ghosted another	Ghostees underestimate ghosters' other-oriented motives, care, and willingness to pay to avoid ghosting
	7	Test when other-oriented motives predict ghosting	Ps judged ghosting based on hypothetical scenario	When reason for ghosting reflects badly on ghostee, other-oriented motives predict ghosting
Testing downstream consequence	8	Test whether ghostees underestimate ghosters' willingness to help them in future	Ps judged ghosting based on hypothetical scenario	Ghostees underestimate ghosters' willingness to help due to underestimation of care

Note. Ps = participants (N = 2,102).

South American, Native American; information on gender was collected through a multiple-choice question: male, female, other). Exact wordings for all studies' scale and demographic items are listed in the additional online materials, and, unless mentioned otherwise, we use the same demographic measures in the subsequent studies.

Results

Characteristics from all participants were aggregated to create a list for each of the four behaviors: ghosting, rejection, exclusion, and ignoring. Following past studies that used computational text analysis (Nicolas et al., 2022), we used R to first conduct several preprocessing steps (all characters were converted to lowercase, tokenized, stopwords were removed, and words were lemmatized [removal of inflectional endings] and stemmed). We used this preprocessed data to construct term frequency-inverse document frequency (tf-idf) scores, which captures the relevance of words by weighting them by their frequency while also downweighting words that are common across the corpus. Consequently, words with high tf-idf scores imply a strong relationship with the document they appear in, suggesting that they represent the characteristics most distinctive of the construct (Qaiser & Ali, 2018; Ramos, 2003). We used this method to create lists of prototypical characteristics for each behavior (Maher et al., 2020) (see Figure S1 in the additional online materials).

After obtaining the raw tf-idf scores, we eliminated exact duplicates if they were in the same construct and semantic relatives (such as the variants of "disappearing"). We kept duplicates if they were in separate constructs or words that had similar meanings (such as "suddenly" and "abruptly"). From this list, we showed the top 15 of each construct to independent raters.

The word frequency analysis revealed the characteristics prototypical of each behavior. As evident in Table 2, several characteristics were unique to ghosting. First, the words "explanation" and "reason" along with the prominence of the word "without" denote the lack of explanation for the behavior (from the perspective of a person being ghosted). Second, the words "suddenly," "abruptly," and "confusing" denoted the unexpected nature of the behavior. Third, the words "ending" and "disappearing" denoted the tie-ending nature of the behavior. Together, these insights provide a sense of the characteristics that differentiate ghosting from related rejection behaviors.

Pilot Study 1b

Pilot Study 1b tested whether participants can distinguish ghosting from other rejection behaviors based on the characteristics found in Pilot Study 1a.

Table 2
Fifteen Most Common Words Used to Describe Four Rejection Types in Pilot Study 1a

	Rejection type			
No.	Ghosting	Rejection	Exclusion	Ignoring
1	Disappearing	Group	Group	Acknowledge
2	Explanation	Turned	Participate	Pay
3	Closure	Shame	Isolated	Attention
4	Confusing	Told	Status	Passive
5	Without	Veto	Removal	Aggressive
6	Suddenly	Pushing	Prejudices	Phone
7	Respect	Long	Part	Response
8	Inconsiderate	Denied	Inviting	Aside
9	Reason	Always	Invite	Silence
10	Ending	Fear	Gatherings	Thing
11	Abruptly	Wonder	Everyone	Slow
12	Exist	Shaking	Barring	Presence
13	Thoughtless	Said	Ban	Omit
14	Shows	Refuse	Participate	Invisible
15	Read	Decline	Keeping	Distancing

Method

Preregistration is available at https://aspredicted.org/2YS_Q3B. We recruited 100 participants from Cloud Connect for $0.70. Four participants either failed the attention check or did not complete the study, resulting in a usable $N = 96$ ($M_{age} = 36.18$, $SD_{age} = 11.69$; 44 women, 51 men, one other; 65 White, nine Black, six Hispanic, 10 East Asian, one South Asian, one Middle Eastern, four other race).

Participants read that a separate sample of individuals had generated characteristics related to four ways of ending or limiting relationships: ghosting, rejection, exclusion, and ignoring. We informed them that for each behavior, they would read a list of the most common words this separate sample used to describe it. Participants read that they would be tasked with correctly identifying which of these four behaviors is described in each list.

For each behavior, we included the top 15 characteristics from our prototype analysis in Pilot Study 1a. Participants saw each list in a separate screen and were presented with a multiple-choice question about which of the behaviors the list aimed to describe (ghosting, rejection, exclusion, or ignoring).

Results

The vast majority of participants (77.08%) correctly identified ghosting from its characteristic list, $\chi^2(3) = 139.75$, $p < .001$. Accuracy rates were comparably high for exclusion, 75.00%, $\chi^2(3) = 133.08$, $p < .001$; for rejection, 58.33%, $\chi^2(3) = 72.42$, $p < .001$; and for ignoring, 58.33%, $\chi^2(3) = 60.58$, $p < .001$. These results suggest that participants can tell apart ghosting from other related behaviors based on other people's descriptions. Thus, the main characteristics of ghosting are identifiable to people and distinguishable from other rejection behaviors.

Pilot Study 1c

Pilot Study 1c investigated the variety of relationships and social situations that involve ghosting.

Method

We recruited 100 participants per experimental cell as a rule of thumb as we did not have a reliable indication about the expected effect size. Participants ($N = 208$) were U.S. adults who were signed up to M-Turk for a study on social interactions in exchange for $0.54 USD. Thirty-six participants either failed the attention check or provided a nonsensical response in the writing task, resulting in a usable $N = 172$ ($M_{age} = 40.69$, $SD_{age} = 12.80$; 76 women, 95 men, one other; 122 White, 18 Black, five East Asian, one South Asian, 26 other race). Participants were randomly assigned to either the ghoster or ghostee condition.

Participants were asked to recall a particular incident in their lives and describe it using at least 200 characters. Those randomly assigned to the ghoster condition were asked to recall a time when another person initiated contact with them and they ignored the other person's attempts to connect with the goal of ending the relationship. In contrast, those randomly assigned to the ghostee condition were asked to recall a time when they initiated contact with another person and that person ignored their attempts to connect with the goal of ending the relationship. Both ghosters and ghostees read that the person they brought to mind could be a partner, friend, family member, professional contact, or someone they knew for a long or short time.

After describing the ghosting instance, all participants responded to several measures about their interaction partner: how frequently they interacted with the other person at the time of the last interaction (1 = *never*, 6 = *daily*), how long they have known the other person (number of years and months), and what type of relationship this was (1 = *coworker*, 2 = *romantic*, 3 = *friend*, 4 = *family*, 5 = *acquaintance*, 6 = *stranger*, 7 = *other*). Finally, participants completed demographic questions and an attention check (choosing a specific option from a bogus 7-point scale).

Results

Type of Relationship. As Table 3 shows, the majority of ghosting occurred among family or friends. Ghosting has also occurred amongst acquaintances, strangers, professionals, and romantic partners. These results suggest that ghosting can occur in a wide variety of social relationships.

Tie Strength. On average, relationships that were 5.06 years long ended in ghosting. There was substantial variance, with 18.60% of ghosting and being ghosted instances occurring in very short-term relationships (less than a year), 34.31% occurring in medium-term relationships (between 1 and 5 years), and 47.09% occurring in long-term relationships (more than 5 years).

The most common frequency of interaction for relationships ended by ghosting was about 1–2 times a week. There was also substantial variance, with 37.79% of ghosting and being ghosted instances occurring in relationships with frequent interactions (more than 2 times a week), and 62.21% occurring in relationships with infrequent interactions (less than once a week). These findings offer initial evidence that ghosting occurs in diverse types of relationships, suggesting that it is a common method exit strategy that people use to end social ties.

Overall, Pilot Studies 1a–1c provide several insights about ghosting. First, they uncover its distinct properties, specifically lack of explanation, unexpected nature, and relationship-ending consequences.

Table 3
Types of Relationships Ended by Ghosting in Pilot Study 1c

	Type of relationship							Tie strength	
Role	Romantic (%)	Professional (%)	Friend (%)	Family (%)	Acquaintance (%)	Stranger (%)	Other (%)	Relationship length (years)	Frequency of interaction
Ghoster	8.05	17.24	33.33	14.94	12.64	9.20	4.60	5.2	3.0 (1 time a week)
Ghostee	14.12	10.59	43.53	7.06	15.29	2.35	7.06	4.94	3.65 (1–2 times a week)
Total	11.05	13.95	38.37	11.05	13.95	5.81	5.81	5.06	3.32 (1–2 times a week)

Second, they verify that people can readily distinguish ghosting from other types of rejection behaviors. Third, they map the various relationship characteristics that end through ghosting, finding that ghosting affects a wide variety of social ties.

Experiment 1: Recalled Ghosting

As an initial test of our main hypothesis, Experiment 1 asked participants to bring to mind an instance when they either ghosted or were ghosted by another person. This experiment mapped onto the definition of ghosting by asking participants to recall real-life ghosting. This was a basic test of our hypothesis while keeping in mind that ghosters' and ghostees' experiences were not matched in this paradigm (other experiments address this limitation).

Method

We recruited 100 participants per experimental cell as a rule of thumb as we did not have a reliable indication about the expected effect size. Participants ($N = 201$) were working adults in Singapore who had signed up for a university-maintained panel for a study on social interactions in exchange for 3 Singapore Dollars. Thirty participants either failed the attention check or provided a nonsensical response in the writing task, resulting in a usable $N = 168$ ($M_{age} = 33.55$, $SD_{age} = 8.91$; 97 women, 70 men, one other; two White, 146 Chinese, two Malay, seven Indian, 11 other race). Participants were randomly assigned to either the ghoster or ghostee condition.

Participants were asked to recall a particular incident in their lives and describe it using at least 200 characters. Ghosters were asked to recall a time when another person initiated contact with them and they ignored the other person's attempts to connect. In contrast, ghostees were asked to recall a time when they initiated contact with another person and that person ignored their attempts to connect. Both ghosters and ghostees read that the person they brought to mind could be a friend, family member, or professional contact, or someone they knew for a short time.

As the main dependent variable, ghosters rated the degree to which they cared about the well-being of the person they ghosted, whereas ghostees rated the degree to which they believed the person who ghosted them cared about their well-being (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). We also measured additional variables to better understand various facets of the experiences of ghosting and being ghosted. Both ghosters and ghostees rated the valence of their experience and rated their predictions of the other person's experience (−3 = *extremely negative*; +3 = *extremely positive*). Both ghosters and ghostees rated the extent to which this situation made them feel socially connected to the recalled person (−3 = *extremely disconnected from that person*; +3 = *extremely connected to that person*). Ghosters rated the extent to which their recalled experience was accompanied by negative feelings on five dimensions (guilt, pain, distress, contempt, and discomfort; measures adapted from Côté et al., 2011; all scales, 1 = *not at all*; 7 = *very much*). To test whether ease of recall confounds the results (Kahneman, 2012; Newell & Shanks, 2014), we also measured whether it was easier to recall ghosting another person than to recall being ghosted by asking participants how difficult it was for them to recall these experiences (1 = *very difficult*, 7 = *very easy*). Finally, participants completed demographic questions[2] and an attention check (choosing a specific option from a bogus 7-point scale).

Results

Predicted Versus Actual Ghoster Care

As Figure 1 shows, ghosters cared more about ghostees' well-being ($M = 3.53$, $SD = 1.59$) than ghostees expected ($M = 2.07$, $SD = 1.25$), $t(166) = 6.61$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.02$.

Ease of Recall as Potential Confound

Recalling ghosting was no more difficult ($M = 4.94$, $SD = 1.71$) than recalling being ghosted ($M = 4.76$, $SD = 1.64$), $t(166) = 0.72$, $p = .47$, $d = 0.11$. A regression analysis testing the effect of condition (*ghoster* = 0, *ghostee* = 1), ease of recall, and their interaction on predicted and actual ghosters' care revealed an effect for role; ($b = -1.67$, $SE = 0.68$, $p = .016$, 95% CI = [−3.02, −0.32]), no effect of ease of recall ($b = -0.02$, $SE = 0.09$, $p = .849$, 95% CI = [−0.20, 0.16]), and no interaction ($b = 0.04$, $SE = 0.13$, $p = .752$, 95% CI = [−0.22, 0.31]). Ease of recall did not influence the main results of this experiment.

Predicted Versus Actual Experience Valence

Ghosters had a more negative experience ghosting others ($M = -1.21$, $SD = 1.01$) than ghostees predicted ($M = -0.78$, $SD = 1.22$), $t(166) = -2.49$, $p = .01$, $d = 0.38$. Ghostees also had a more negative experience being ghosted ($M = -1.67$, $SD = 1.18$) than ghosters predicted ($M = -1.05$, $SD = 1.41$), $t(166) = 3.11$, $p = .002$, $d = 0.48$.

Predicted Versus Actual Negative Emotions

The negative emotions were averaged into a composite ($\alpha = .77$). Ghosters felt more negative emotions as a result of ghosting ($M = 3.47$, $SD = 1.25$) than ghostees expected ghosters to feel ($M = 2.81$, $SD = 1.33$), $t(166) = 3.33$, $p = .001$, $d = 0.51$.

Closeness

Ghosters felt closer to recalled ghostees ($M = -1.28$, $SD = 1.33$) than ghostees felt toward recalled ghosters ($M = -1.87$, $SD = 1.30$), $t(166) = 2.89$, $p = .004$, $d = 0.45$.

Other-Oriented and Self-Oriented Motives

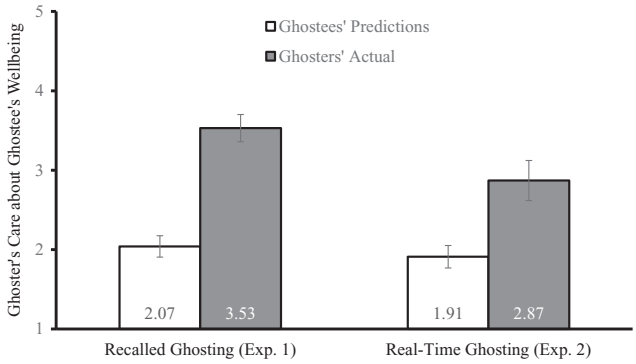
Finally, as an initial test of the mechanism related to other- and self-oriented motives, we tested whether ghosters naturally think about other-oriented motives when deciding to ghost and if ghostees underestimate these motives. A rater blind to the experimental conditions coded participants' written essays on instances of ghosting and being ghosted. Responses were coded as to whether they included other-oriented motives (yes/no), self-oriented motives (yes/no), other motives or no information on motives (yes/no).[3] We coded responses in an inclusive manner so that an individual

[2] For all the studies using the Singapore sample, information on race was collected through a multiple-choice question: White, Chinese, Malay, Indian, other race.

[3] To note, participants often included supplemental details about the interaction or no information on motives because our recall task did not specifically ask them to provide information on (perceived) motives driving ghosting. Therefore, we expected some cases to fall under the other category.

Figure 1

Ghostee Predictions Versus Ghoster's Actual Care in Experiments 1 and 2



Note. Errors bar represent standard errors, and numbers inside bars represent means. Exp. = experiment.

can express either only one motive or both other- and self-oriented motives, as multiple motives can coexist.

Ghosters were more likely to mention other-oriented motives in their responses (31 out of 86, 36.05%) compared to ghostees (12 out of 82, 14.63%), $\chi^2(1) = 10.11$, $p = .001$. Furthermore, ghosters were marginally less likely to mention self-oriented motives in their responses (59 out of 86, 68.60%) compared to ghostees (66 out of 82, 80.49%), $\chi^2(1) = 3.11$, $p = .078$. Finally, there was no significant difference between ghosters (six out of 86, 6.98%) and ghostees (seven out of 82, 8.54%) in mentioning other motives or no motives, $\chi^2(1) = 0.14$, $p = .705$.

An important limitation of this experiment is that the paradigm did not match ghoster–ghostee pairs. This leaves open the possibility of idiosyncratic confounds that can explain the results in alternative ways. Experiment 2 addresses this issue.

Experiment 2: Real-Time Ghosting

Experiment 2 moved from recollections to a real-time task that allowed participants to experience ghosting and being ghosted in matched pairs. The task was designed based on the well-known induced-compliance paradigm (Cooper et al., 1978; Festinger & Carlsmith, 1959; Harmon-Jones et al., 2009). Induced-compliance paradigms have been developed to study behaviors that require the freedom of choice and would otherwise be difficult to study in an experimental (as opposed to correlational) setting. The basic idea is to provide participants with the freedom to choose a specific course of action while also making the choice researchers are interested in studying more compelling for participants.

Here we are interested in the choice to ghost another person. Randomly assigning participants to ghost others is not an accurate reflection of how ghosting happens in everyday life because choosing to ghost is an inextricable part of ghosting. An essential aspect of this experiment was therefore providing some participants with the opportunity and freedom to choose to ghost another person. Participants were recruited in pairs to have two separate conversations with each other via electronic chat. After completing the first conversation, some participants were given the choice of either ghosting their conversation partner by failing to show up to the second conversation or waiting an inordinate amount of time as a "technical difficulty" was being resolved. In keeping with the induced-compliance paradigm, participants thus had the freedom to choose whether to ghost, while also facing substantial costs for the decision of not ghosting. Given our theory that ghosting another person is an aversive experience, we believed that some proportion of participants would choose not to ghost despite these heavy time costs, but that we would have a sufficient number of ghosters in our sample to meaningfully compare their experience to ghostees' experience. This experiment maps unto the definition of ghosting by orchestrating an experience of rejection without explanation, but it creates a stylized context in order to achieve a vivid experience.

After concluding this experiment and analyzing the data, it occurred to us that our participants themselves might not perceive it as instantiating ghosting. We therefore conducted a posttest to verify this important point and we report it at the end of the Results section for this experiment.

Method

We conducted an a priori power analysis using G*Power (Faul et al., 2009) to determine our sample size. This analysis suggested that, to achieve 80% power given a medium-to-large sized (Cohen's $d = 0.60$) effect, at a significance level of $\alpha = .05$, a minimum total sample size of $N = 90$ was necessary. Thus, we aimed to recruit 50 participants per condition but increased this number to account for our software's failure to match pairs of participants. We thus recruited a total of $N = 139$ adults from the United Kingdom who were signed up to Prolific Academic (Carton & Lucas, 2018; Read et al., 2017) for £0.70. Upon signup, participants were matched to converse in pairs via electronic chat. The program failed to match 21 participants and they left the study without completing it, resulting in usable $N = 118$ ($M_{age} = 35.75$, $SD_{age} = 11.73$; 39 women, 67 men, zero other; 96 White, seven Black, one Hispanic, one Asian, one other race; this demographic information does not include 12 participants who chose not to ghost and their partners, $n = 24$ in total—see below for details). Participants were randomly assigned to two conditions in a two-cell (role: ghoster vs. ghostee) design.

We conducted our study using SMARTRIQS, an online interface that allows participants to engage in electronic conversations (Hart et al., 2021; Molnar, 2019). Each participant was paired with another participant based on their arrival time at the SMARTRIQS chat window (i.e., the first-arriving participant was matched with second arriver, the third to arrive was matched with the fourth, and so on). Participants were anonymous to one another and did not know each other before the study, in this respect making this a conservative test of our hypothesis—unlike longer relationships, here ghosters did not have prior emotional attachment that would increase the sense of care toward ghostees.

Participants read they would be engaging in two separate conversations, the first about their favorite TV shows and movies and the second about their favorite food and restaurants. The first conversation was naturally occurring and timed to last 2 min. Upon completing the first conversation, participants randomly assigned to the ghoster condition read that the software was undergoing a "technical difficulty" and waited for 3 min while the page loaded. Afterwards, they received another notification that due to technical difficulties, the connection with their conversation partner would likely not be reinstated for another 20–30 min. Ghosters read that they could choose to leave the conversation at that moment and still receive their full payment,

but if they did so they could not inform their conversation partner that they had left and why. In this way, this procedure created a voluntary ghosting experience, allowing ghosters to freely choose whether or not to ghost their partner (following the standard induced compliance paradigm; Cooper et al., 1978). We surmised that most participants would rather ghost another person and end the study early rather than wait an inordinate amount of time to continue the study as planned. We nevertheless expected some participants would choose to wait 20–30 min because social rejection research suggests that ghosting is counternormative and people prefer conforming to social norms (Miller & Prentice, 1996; Powell et al., 2022). Those participants were coded as ones who chose not to ghost and completed the study without taking the dependent measures.

Participants in the ghostee condition had a different experience. Upon completing the first conversation, ghostees joined the second chatroom alone. After a minute of waiting, they were informed that their partner had decided to leave the conversation. Consistent with the notion of ghosting as unexplained social rejection, ghostees did not receive information about why the ghosters had left the conversation.

As the main dependent variable, ghosters rated the extent to which they cared about the well-being of ghostees, whereas ghostees predicted ghosters' care for their well-being (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). As ancillary measures, participants in both conditions reported the valence of their overall experience and their predictions of their interaction partner's experience (−3 = *extremely negative*, +3 = *extremely positive*). Ghosters also rated their negative emotions on the same scales as in Experiment 1 and ghostees predicted ghosters' negative emotions. Participants also rated how close they felt to each other (−3 = *extremely disconnected*; +3 = *connected*) and their preference for whether relationships in general should be ended through ignoring another person's attempts to connect or through an explanation from the person ending the relationship. Finally, participants filled demographic questions and were debriefed.

Results

Decision to Ghost

The decision to ghost indicates the degree to which the induced compliance paradigm was successful in leading participants to choose to ghost. A majority of participants in the ghoster condition (79.66%) chose to ghost and end the study early without informing their partner why they had left. Although this was a clear majority, we consider the finding that approximately a fifth of participants chose to wait despite the high costs of wasting 20–30 min without extra pay as an indication of the degree to which ghosting is aversive to ghosters. Moreover, the proportion of participants choosing not to ghost is also evidence that participants indeed perceived they had the freedom to make this choice, following the requirements of the induced-compliance paradigm.

The subsequent analysis excludes participants in the ghoster condition who chose not to ghost because they did not have the experience of ghosting (and in any case, probably cared more about ghostees' well-being than ghosters who chose to ghost). Ghostee partners of ghosters who chose not to ghost were also excluded.

Predicted Versus Actual Ghoster Care

As Figure 2 shows, ghosters cared more about ghostees' well-being ($M = 2.87$, $SD = 1.73$) than ghostees expected ($M = 1.91$, $SD = .97$), paired $t(46)$[4] $= 3.38$, $p = .002$, $d = 0.49$.

Predicted Versus Actual Experience Valence

Contrary to our Experiment 1 findings, ghosters had a more positive experience ghosting others ($M = 0.26$, $SD = 1.13$) than ghostees predicted ($M = -0.79$, $SD = 1.44$), paired $t(46) = -4.13$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.60$. We speculate that ghosters may have dreaded the prospect of waiting an inordinate amount of time for the online chat to restart and so ghosting seemed like a more pleasant option by comparison. There was no significant difference between ghostees' actual experience being ghosted ($M = -0.21$, $SD = 1.40$) and ghosters' prediction of ghostees' experience ($M = -0.02$, $SD = 1.17$), paired $t(46) = 0.73$, $p = .47$, $d = 0.11$.

Predicted Versus Actual Negative Emotions

The negative emotions were averaged into a composite ($\alpha = .84$). Contrary to our Experiment 1 findings, ghosters felt less negative emotions as a result of ghosting ($M = 1.70$, $SD = .98$) than ghostees expected ghosters to feel ($M = 2.29$, $SD = 1.20$), paired $t(46) = 2.71$, $p = .009$, $d = 0.40$. This might again be due to the nature of the online chat, in which avoiding the prospect of waiting an inordinate amount of time mitigated the negative emotions associated with ghosting another person.

Closeness

Ghosters felt greater closeness to ghostees ($M = 0.00$, $SD = 1.16$) than ghostees did toward ghosters ($M = -0.74$, $SD = 1.31$), paired $t(46) = -2.86$, $p = .006$, $d = -0.42$.

Preference for Ghosting Versus Explained Rejection

There was no significant difference between ghosters (42 out of 47, 89%) and ghostees (40 out of 47, 85%) in their preference for explained rejection over ghosting, $\chi^2(1, 94) = .38$, $p = .54$, $d = 0.13$. The overwhelming preference for explained rejection over ghosting suggests that ghosting is a socially undesirable means to end a relationship.

In sum, Experiment 2 finds that ghostees underestimated ghosters' care for them in a real-time interaction, replicating the main results from Experiment 1.

Given that the manipulation that led participants to ghost was a situational one (technical difficulty), we conducted Experiment 5 reported later to test whether the situational versus internal nature of the reason for ghosting matters.

Posttest

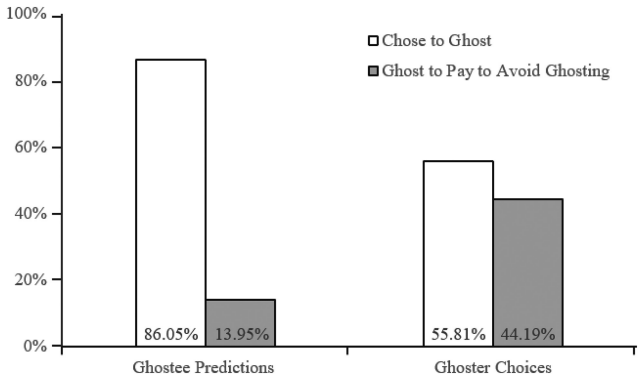
As noted, we conducted a posttest to verify that participants indeed viewed the online chat paradigm used in this experiment as ghosting ($N = 137$; $M_{age} = 38.82$, $SD_{age} = 11.47$; 42.34% women, 57.66% men, 0.00% nonbinary; 68.61% White, 5.84% Black, 8.03% Hispanic, 8.76% East Asian, 1.46% South Asian, 7.30% other race[5]). Participants were randomly assigned to two conditions in a

[4] Notice that a paired *t* test is appropriate here because paired observations are not independent as the two participants in the pair (ghoster and ghostee) had the same conversation which, in turn, affected their judgments in the same way.

[5] "Other race" includes participants who indicated mixed race.

Figure 2

Ghostee Predictions Versus Ghoster Choices of Payment to Avoid Ghosting in Experiment 3



two-cell (role: ghoster vs. ghostee) design. Participants read the details of the online chat paradigm, namely that two people were asked to have two conversations and that the first conversation took place.

Participants in the ghoster condition read that, after the first conversation, the software used to conduct the online chat unexpectedly broke down, requiring downtime of about 20–30 min. They also read that the other person had no knowledge of the software problem and was expecting the second conversation to happen. They were asked to imagine that they chose to leave the study early and then read the definition of ghosting as "the act of ending a relationship with someone unexpectedly and without explanation." They then were asked whether they thought leaving the study early would fairly be described as ghosting (yes/no).

Participants in the ghostee condition read that, after the first conversation, the other person did not show up to the second one and, after a wait, were informed that the other person decided not to have another conversation with them (in keeping with the online chat paradigm, no additional information was given to ghostees). Participants read the same definition of ghosting, and asked whether their experience of being left waiting for the second conversation would fairly be described as ghosting (yes/no).

Results revealed that the majority of participants in both the ghoster condition (50 out of 68 cases, 73.53%) and ghostee condition (52 out of 69 cases, 75.36%) viewed the electronic chat paradigm as ghosting. These rates confirm that our electronic chat paradigm indeed involves ghosting are comparable to other well-known experimental paradigms. For example, the proportion of participants who concur that the trust game—a paradigm widely used for the study of trust—indeed involves trust is found to be 78% (Dunning et al., 2012), on the same general level as the present paradigm.

Experiment 3: Paying Not to Ghost

Although ghosters stated that they care for ghostees' well-being, this may simply be "cheap talk." Communicating care for another person is easy when it is costless. Experiment 3 therefore imposed a cost on the decision to refrain from ghosting. The procedure was similar to Experiment 2 except that ghosters had the option of avoiding ghosting by paying to send an explanatory message to their conversation partners. Such a decision would argue against the "cheap talk" account because it would suggest that ghosters care enough about ghostees' well-being to incur a monetary cost to themselves. We predicted that ghostees would underestimate ghosters' willingness to pay to avoid ghosting. This experiment maps onto the definition of ghosting by creating an experience of rejection without explanation, while also creating a stylized context in order to achieve vividness.

Method

To achieve 80% power (see Experiment 2's power analysis), we aimed for 50 participants per condition but recruited a few more to account for failure to match pairs by the chat software. A power analysis confirmed that our sample size was sufficiently powered to detect small-to-medium effects ($\alpha \leq .05$, $1 - \beta \geq .80$, $d \geq 0.50$).

We recruited a total of $N = 141$ adults from the United Kingdom who were signed up to Prolific Academic for £0.80 (£0.70 and £0.10 bonus). Upon signup, participants were matched to converse in pairs via electronic chat. The program failed to match 23 participants and they left the study without completing it, resulting in usable $N = 118$ ($M_{age} = 37.66$, $SD_{age} = 14.25$; 42 women, 59 men, one other; 90 White, two Black, six Asian, four other race; this demographic information does not include participants who chose not to ghost, $n = 16$). The participants were randomly assigned to either the ghoster or ghostee condition.

We conducted our study using SMARTRIQS and participants were paired with another participant using the same procedure as in Experiment 2 with several important changes. Upon completing the first conversation that lasted for 3 min, participants randomly assigned to the ghoster condition were notified of technical difficulties and told that connection with their conversation partner would likely not be reinstated for another 20–30 min. Ghosters then had three choices: (a) They could choose to leave the conversation at that moment and still receive their full payment without notifying their conversation partner (thus ghosting their partner); (b) they could leave the conversation but send an explanation to their partner that they can type in but which will cost them their bonus (£0.10) in this study (thus paying to avoid ghosting); and (c) they could choose to wait 20–30 min until the technical difficulty is resolved and continue the study as planned. Ghosters who chose to wait 20–30 min (option "c") were coded as ones who chose not to ghost and completed the study without taking the dependent measures. Ghosters who chose one of the other two choices (either ghosting or paying not to ghost) rated the extent to which they cared about the well-being of the ghostee (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*) and the general conversation experience (−3 = *extremely negative*, +3 = *extremely positive*) before completing the rest of the additional measures similarly to previous experiments.

In contrast, participants in the ghostee condition joined the second chatroom alone. After a minute of waiting, they were informed that their partner had decided to leave the conversation. Ghostees read that ghosters had the opportunity to pay their bonus to send a message explaining why they chose to leave without joining the second conversation. Ghostees then predicted whether their ghoster chose to pay to send an explanation (binary measure). As in previous experiments, ghostees also predicted the degree to which ghosters cared about their well-being (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). Ghostees whose counterpart paid to send an explanation message received this explanation after they made this prediction. After seeing their partner's actual message, we asked ghostees how they felt about the ghoster's decision not to join the second chat with them

(−3 = *extremely negative*, +3 = *extremely positive*). Ghostees who did not receive an explanation message from ghosters read a notification that their partner did not pay to send them a message and filled the same measure (−3 = *extremely negative*; +3 = *extremely positive*).

We also measured the same additional variables as we did in previous experiments. New to this study, we also asked about their general conversation experience (−3 = *extremely negative*, +3 = *extremely positive*). Finally, participants filled demographic questions and were debriefed.

Results

Decision to Ghost/Willingness to Pay

A minority of ghosters refused to ghost at all, even with the option of sending an explanation message ($n = 16$, 27.12%). This suggests that participants saw the choice of whether or not to ghost as a real one, given that some of them refused to ghost at all. These ghosters completed the study there and then and were excluded from the rest of the analysis (their ghostee partners were also excluded from the analysis).

Of the rest of the ghosters, 44.19% chose to pay to send an explanation message and avoid ghosting, whereas 55.81% chose to ghost (see Figure 2). These results suggest ghosters' indications of care toward ghostees were not "cheap talk" because here ghosters had to pay to avoid ghosting. In contrast, only 13.95% of ghostees predicted that ghosters would pay to avoid ghosting, whereas fully 86.05% predicted that ghosters would ghost, $\chi^2(1, 86) = 9.53$, $p = .002$, $d = 0.70$.

Predicted Versus Actual Ghoster Care

As before, ghosters cared more about ghostees' well-being ($M = 3.98$, $SD = 1.65$) than ghostees expected ($M = 2.16$, $SD = 1.07$), paired $t(42) = 5.68$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.12$.

Ghostees' Well-Being

Recall that we measured ghostees' well-being at two points: First after they learned whether the ghoster decided to send them an explanation message, and second after they read this explanation message if one was sent. Ghostees felt more positively after learning that ghosters decided to send them an explanation message ($M = -0.79$, $SD = 0.79$) compared to when learning that ghosters decided not to send them a message ($M = -1.71$, $SD = 0.91$, $B = 0.919$, $SE = 0.263$, $p = .001$). This result suggests that the knowledge that ghosters did not ghost them was correlated with an increase in ghostees' well-being even without learning that the reason for discontinuing the communication was a technical problem.

In addition, ghostees who received an explanation message felt more positively after reading it ($M = 1.74$, $SD = 0.87$) than before reading it ($M = -0.79$, $SD = 0.79$), paired $t(18) = 9.80$, $p < .001$.

General Conversation Experience

There was no significant difference between ghosters' overall experience during their first conversation ($M = 1.14$, $SD = 1.34$) and ghostees' overall conversation experience ($M = 1.12$, $SD = 1.28$), paired $t(42) = -0.11$, $p = .91$, $d = -0.02$.

Predicted Versus Actual Experience Valence

Ghosters had a more positive experience ghosting others ($M = 0.05$, $SD = 1.13$) than ghostees predicted ($M = -0.72$, $SD = 1.10$), paired $t(42) = -3.61$, $p < .001$, $d = -0.55$. Ghostees had a more negative experience being ghosted ($M = -1.30$, $SD = 0.96$) than ghosters predicted ($M = -0.14$, $SD = 1.13$), paired $t(42) = 4.95$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.75$.

Predicted Versus Actual Negative Emotions

The negative emotions were averaged into a composite ($\alpha = .72$). Contrary to our Experiment 1 and consistent with our Experiment 2, ghosters felt less negative emotions as a result of ghosting ($M = 1.91$, $SD = 0.87$) than ghostees expected ghosters to feel ($M = 2.49$, $SD = 0.91$), paired $t(42) = 3.12$, $p = .003$, $d = 0.48$. As before, we believe idiosyncratic facets of the paradigm created this result whereby avoiding an inordinate wait time reduced ghosters' negative emotions.

Closeness

Ghosters felt greater closeness to ghostees ($M = -0.42$, $SD = 1.28$) than ghostees did toward ghosters ($M = -1.35$, $SD = 1.25$), paired $t(42) = -3.57$, $p < .001$, $d = -0.54$.

This experiment offers several insights. First, it directly compared predicted versus actual decisions to ghost, finding that ghostees underestimated how likely ghosters are to ghost them. Second, it finds that ghosters were willing to pay to avoid ghosting to a greater degree than ghostees realized, suggesting that ghosters did not engage in "cheap talk" when stating their care for ghostees' well-being. Rather, ghosters were willing to incur monetary costs to avoid ghosting. Third, getting an explanation message from ghosters improved ghostees' well-being, suggesting that not being ghosted was a more positive experience than being ghosted.

Experiment 4: Recalled Ghosting, Take Two

Experiment 4 used the recall paradigm used in Experiment 1 to test whether people who were ghosted underestimate ghosters' care partly because they underestimate ghosters' other-oriented motives. To establish generalizability across types of social relationships, we also manipulate whether participants were asked to recall personal or professional contexts. This experiment maps unto the definition of ghosting by asking participants to recall real-life ghosting experiences. Finally, this experiment measured how common ghosting and being ghosted is. This experiment was preregistered at https://aspredicted.org/blind.php?x=94W_7B9.

Method

Participants ($N = 403$) were working adults in Singapore who had signed up for a university-maintained panel for a study on social interactions in exchange for three Singapore Dollars. After excluding four participants who did not consent to the study, 97 participants who stated that they had never ghosted or been ghosted before, and 17 participants who failed the attention check, our final sample included $N = 289$ ($M_{age} = 30.98$, $SD_{age} = 9.08$; 170 women, 117 men, two other; two White, 258 Chinese, three Malay, 12 Indian, 14 other race). An a priori power analysis was

conducted using G*Power (Faul et al., 2009) to determine the minimum sample size required to test the study hypothesis. Results indicated the required sample size to achieve 80% power for detecting a medium (Cohen's $f = 0.25$) effect, at a significance level of $\alpha = .05$, was $N = 210$. Thus, the obtained sample size of $N = 289$ is adequate to test the hypotheses. We used a 2 (role: ghoster vs. ghostee) × 2 (relationship type: professional vs. personal) between-subjects design.

Participants were first randomly assigned to either the ghoster or ghostee condition. After reading the definition of ghosting (similar to previous experiments), participants were either asked to note whether they have ever ghosted (ghoster condition) or been ghosted by someone else (ghostee condition).

Next, participants were asked to recall a particular incident in their lives and describe it using at least 200 characters. Ghosters were asked to recall a time when another person initiated contact with them and they ignored the other person's attempts to connect for a sustained period of time. In contrast, ghostees were asked to recall a time when they initiated contact with another person and that person ignored their attempts to connect.

We also manipulated relationship type because norms of tie dissolution may differ depending on the context. In the Professional condition, participants (both ghosters and ghostees) were asked to recall a professional contact that was dissolved through ghosting. In the Personal condition, participants recalled a ghosting instance with a personal contact.

Next, participants were asked to think about why they chose to ghost (in the case of ghosters) or why they thought the other party chose to ghost (in the case of ghostees), and write a few sentences describing their thought process. Subsequently, ghosters were asked to assess the extent to which other-oriented and self-oriented motives would drive their decision to ghost, and ghostees predicted the extent to which these motives would drive another person's decision to ghost.

The other-oriented motives were (a) not wanting to hurt the ghostee's feelings and (b) not wanting the ghostee to feel rejected ($\alpha = .93$). The self-oriented motives were (a) not wanting to put oneself in an uncomfortable situation and (b) not wanting to feel awkwardness or pain ($\alpha = .81$). All scales ranged from 1 (*definitely would not be important in ghosting decision*) to 7 (*definitely would be very important in ghosting decision*).

Finally, ghosters were then asked how much they cared about the well-being of the ghostee, whereas ghostees were asked to assess how much the other person cared about their well-being in that situation (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*).

Results

Ghosting Is Common

We first find that ghosting was common in our sample. Fully 71.14% of participants in the ghosting condition had ghosted, and 80.3% in the ghostee condition stated that they had been ghosted. In the subsequent analysis, we excluded participants who stated that they had never ghosted or been ghosted before.

Predicted Versus Actual Ghoster Care

A 2 (role: ghoster vs. ghostee) × 2 (relationship type: professional vs. personal) analysis of variance (ANOVA) on predicted versus actual ghoster care revealed a main effect of role, $F(1, 285) = 37.55$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .12$; no main effect of relationship type, $F(1, 285) = 0.92$, $p = .52$, $\eta_p^2 = .001$; and no interaction, $F(1, 285) = 0.59$, $p = .44$, $\eta_p^2 = .002$. As before, ghosters cared about ghostees' well-being more than ghostees realized, noting the caveat that the experiences of ghosters and ghostees were not matched in this paradigm (other paradigms in this article address this issue). This was true in personal relationships ($M_{\text{ghosters}} = 3.42$, $SD_{\text{ghosters}} = 1.63$ vs. $M_{\text{ghostees}} = 2.21$, $SD_{\text{ghostees}} = 1.38$), $t(145) = 4.86$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.80$, as well as in professional relationships ($M_{\text{ghosters}} = 3.40$, $SD_{\text{ghosters}} = 1.63$ vs. $M_{\text{ghostees}} = 2.46$, $SD_{\text{ghostees}} = 1.29$), $t(140) = 3.81$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.64$.

Other-Oriented and Self-Oriented Motives

We next tested whether ghostees mispredicted ghosters' other-oriented or self-oriented motives or both. Regarding other-oriented motives, a 2 (role: ghoster vs. ghostee) × 2 (relationship type: professional vs. personal) ANOVA on predicted versus actual other-oriented motives revealed a main effect for role, $F(1, 285) = 19.61$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .06$; no main effect of relationship type, $F(1, 285) = 0.55$, $p = .46$, $\eta_p^2 = .002$; and no interaction, $F(1, 285) = 2.30$, $p = .13$, $\eta_p^2 = .008$.

Ghostees underestimated ghosters' other-oriented motives. This was true in personal relationships ($M_{\text{ghosters}} = 4.19$, $SD_{\text{ghosters}} = 1.80$ vs. $M_{\text{ghostees}} = 2.98$, $SD_{\text{ghostees}} = 1.73$), $t(145) = 4.13$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.68$, as well as in professional relationships ($M_{\text{ghosters}} = 4.03$, $SD_{\text{ghosters}} = 1.77$ vs. $M_{\text{ghostees}} = 3.44$, $SD_{\text{ghostees}} = 1.57$), $t(140) = 2.10$, $p = .037$, $d = 0.35$.

Regarding self-oriented motives, a 2 (role: ghoster vs. ghostee) × 2 (relationship type: professional vs. personal) ANOVA on predicted versus actual self-oriented motives revealed a main effect for role, $F(1, 285) = 4.31$, $p = .039$, $\eta_p^2 = .015$; no main effect of relationship type, $F(1, 285) = 1.68$, $p = .20$, $\eta_p^2 = .006$; and no interaction, $F(1, 285) = 0.39$, $p = .53$, $\eta_p^2 = .001$.

Ghostees underestimated ghosters' self-oriented motives in professional relationships ($M_{\text{ghosters}} = 5.29$, $SD_{\text{ghosters}} = 1.30$ vs. $M_{\text{ghostees}} = 4.79$, $SD_{\text{ghostees}} = 1.56$), $t(140) = 2.05$, $p = .042$, $d = -0.34$. There was no gap between ghosters' rated self-oriented motives and ghostees' predictions of the same in personal relationships ($M_{\text{ghosters}} = 5.41$, $SD_{\text{ghosters}} = 1.37$ vs. $M_{\text{ghostees}} = 5.14$, $SD_{\text{ghostees}} = 1.87$), $t(145) = 0.97$, $p = .33$, $d = 0.16$.

Mediation

We next tested whether other-oriented and self-oriented motives mediated ghostees' underestimation of how much ghosters care for their well-being. We used a mediation analysis with role as the independent variable, other-oriented and self-oriented motives as the comediators, and care as the dependent variable (SPSS Process Macro, Model 4; 5,000 iterations). Other-oriented motives mediated ghostees' underestimation of how much ghosters care about them (indirect effect = .48, $SE = 0.12$, 95% CI [0.266, 0.719]), whereas self-oriented motives did not mediate (indirect effect = −.02, $SE = 0.02$, 95% CI [−0.068, 0.010]).

Experiment 4 suggests that ghostees underestimated how much ghosters cared about their well-being partly because ghostees specifically underestimated the other-oriented motives involved in ghosting.

Experiment 5: Hypothetical Ghosting

Notice that our proposed mechanism of underestimating ghosters' other-oriented motives differs from the classic fundamental attribution error whereby people tend to explain other actors' behavior as caused by their stable traits rather than situational constraints (Ross, 1977). This is because the fundamental attribution error implicates the contrast between situational and dispositional explanations for behavior, whereas the current mechanism implicates a specific misunderstanding about ghosters' motives. To verify this reasoning, Experiment 5 tested the possibility that the fundamental attribution error plays a role in ghostees' predictions. Existing research suggests that although people are inclined to explain behavior using stable traits, they nevertheless take into account situational constraints when those are made clear (Gilbert & Malone, 1995; Jones & Harris, 1967). Experiment 5 therefore manipulated the reason for ghosting to be either related to ghosters' situational constraints which we call positive reasons (e.g., lack of time due to a busy schedule) or related to negative reasons (e.g., ghosters' negative judgments of the ghostees). If the fundamental attribution error plays a role, then ghostees' predictions of ghosters' care should be higher when a situational constraint is invoked.

This experiment also aids in addressing a possible confound in Experiment 2 wherein a situational reason led participants to ghost in the electronic chat paradigm. In manipulating a situational versus internal reason for ghosting, this experiment tests whether this moderates the effect. Finally, this experiment maps unto the definition of ghosting by providing a face-valid scenario that depicts ending a relationship without explanation.

Method

Participants from the United States were recruited using TurkPrime for a study on social interactions for $0.65. An a priori power analysis was conducted using G*Power (Faul et al., 2009) to determine the minimum sample size required to test the study hypothesis. Results indicated the required sample size to achieve 80% power for detecting a medium (Cohen's $f = 0.25$) effect, at a significance level of $\alpha = .05$, was $N = 210$. Of 300 participants who completed the study, 28 either did not complete the study or failed the attention check (choosing a specific option from a bogus 7-point scale), resulting in a usable $N = 272$ ($M_{age} = 38.67$, $SD_{age} = 11.91$; 118 women, 154 men, zero other; 193 White, 24 Black, five Hispanic, 24 East Asian, eight South Asian, one Middle Eastern, 17 other race[6]). Thus, the obtained sample size of $N = 272$ is adequate to test the study hypothesis. We used a 2 (role: ghoster vs. ghostee) × 2 (reason for ghosting: negative vs. positive) between-subjects design.

Participants were asked to imagine a social situation in which they had interacted with another person of the same gender and had had reasonably good conversations with that person. Those assigned to the ghostee condition were asked to imagine that they had sent this person a text asking whether they would like to meet to engage in a mutual hobby, but that person was not interested in doing so and did not respond to their text. Those assigned to the ghoster condition were asked to imagine that the person had texted them with the same question, but that they were not interested in doing so and did not respond to that person's text.

We also manipulated the reason for ghosting because ghostees may be able to better predict that ghosters care about their well-being when the reason was externally determined and did not specifically implicate them. Thus, in the positive reason condition all participants (both ghosters and ghostees) were asked to imagine that the ghoster did not have the time to develop a new friendship due to a busy schedule and other commitments—a reason external to the ghostee. In the negative reason condition, in contrast, all participants (both ghosters and ghostees) were asked to imagine that the ghoster did not think the two people were socially compatible with each other—a reason more intrinsic to the ghostee.

Next, ghosters were asked to assess the extent to which other-oriented and self-oriented motives would drive their decision to ghost, and ghostees predicted the extent to which these motives would drive another person's decision to ghost. The other-oriented motives for ghosting another person were (a) not wanting to hurt the ghostee's feelings and (b) not wanting the ghostee to feel rejected ($\alpha = .89$). The self-oriented motives for ghosting another person were (a) not wanting to put oneself in an uncomfortable situation and (b) not wanting to feel awkwardness or pain ($\alpha = .76$). All scales ranged from 1 (*definitely would not be important in ghosting decision*) to 7 (*definitely would be very important in ghosting decision*).

Ghosters were then asked to assess how much they would care about the well-being of the ghostee, whereas ghostees were asked to assess how much the other person would care about their well-being in that situation (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*).

Results

Predicted Versus Actual Ghoster Care

A 2 (role: ghoster vs. ghostee) × 2 (reason for ghosting: negative vs. positive) ANOVA on predicted versus actual ghoster care revealed a main effect of role, $F(1, 268) = 95.23$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .26$; no main effect of reason for ghosting, $F(1, 268) = 0.86$, $p = .36$, $\eta_p^2 = .003$; and no interaction, $F(1, 268) = 0.82$, $p = .37$, $\eta_p^2 = .003$. As before, ghosters cared about ghostees' well-being more than ghostees realized. This was true when the reason for ghosting was positive ($M_{ghosters} = 5.42$, $SD_{ghosters} = 1.26$ vs. $M_{ghostees} = 3.87$, $SD_{ghostees} = 1.52$), $t(129) = 6.36$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.11$, as well as when the reason for ghosting was negative ($M_{ghosters} = 5.42$, $SD_{ghosters} = 1.45$ vs. $M_{ghostees} = 3.55$, $SD_{ghostees} = 1.52$), $t(139) = 7.46$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.26$.

Other-Oriented and Self-Oriented Motives

We next tested whether ghostees mispredicted ghosters' other-oriented or self-oriented motives or both. Figure 3 presents the results.

Regarding other-oriented motives, a 2 (role: ghoster vs. ghostee) × 2 (reason for ghosting: negative vs. positive) ANOVA on predicted versus actual other-oriented motives revealed a main effect for role, $F(1, 268) = 57.27$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .17$; no main effect of reason for ghosting, $F(1, 268) = 0.58$, $p = .36$, $\eta_p^2 = .001$; and no interaction, $F(1, 268) = 2.68$, $p = .10$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$. Ghostees underestimated ghosters' other-oriented motives. This was true when the reason for ghosting was positive ($M_{ghosters} = 5.44$, $SD_{ghosters} = 1.54$ vs. $M_{ghostees} = 4.33$, $SD_{ghostees} = 1.45$), $t(129) = 4.24$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.74$, as well as when the reason for ghosting was negative

[6] "Other race" includes participants who indicated mixed race.

($M_{ghosters} = 5.65$, $SD_{ghosters} = 1.49$ vs. $M_{ghostees} = 3.92$, $SD_{ghostees} = 1.68$), $t(139) = 6.46$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.09$.

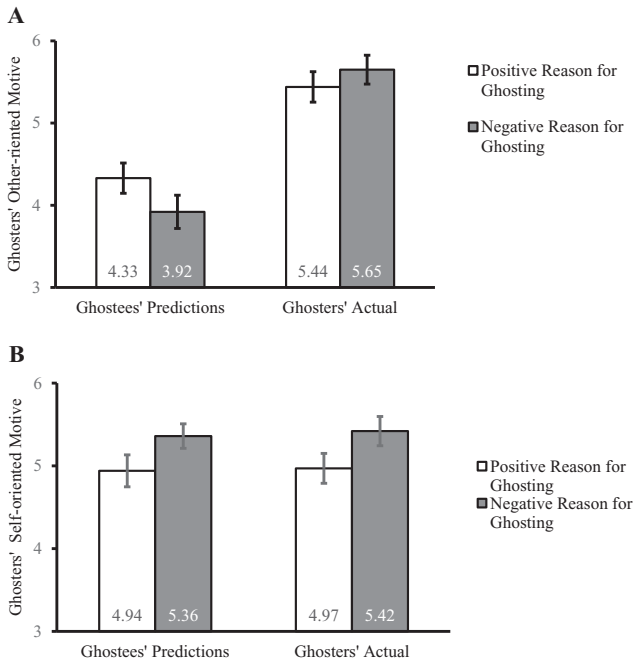
Regarding self-oriented motives, a 2 (role: ghoster vs. ghostee) × 2 (reason for ghosting: negative vs. positive) ANOVA on predicted versus actual self-oriented motives revealed no main effect for role, $F(1, 268) = 0.008$, $p = .78$, $\eta_p^2 = .000$, and a main effect of reason for ghosting, $F(1, 268) = 6.10$, $p = .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .022$, whereby predicted and actual self-oriented reasons were higher when the reason for ghosting was negative. There was no interaction, $F(1, 268) = 0.01$, $p = .91$, $\eta_p^2 = .000$. There was no gap between ghosters' rated self-oriented motives and ghostees' predictions of these motives. This was true when the reason for ghosting was positive ($M_{ghosters} = 4.97$, $SD_{ghosters} = 1.50$ vs. $M_{ghostees} = 4.94$, $SD_{ghostees} = 1.52$), $t(129) = 0.10$, $p = .92$, $d = 0.02$, as well as when the reason for ghosting was negative ($M_{ghosters} = 5.42$, $SD_{ghosters} = 1.50$ vs. $M_{ghostees} = 5.36$, $SD_{ghostees} = 1.23$), $t(139) = 0.30$, $p = .77$, $d = 0.05$.

Mediation

We next tested whether other-oriented and self-oriented motives mediated ghostees' underestimation of how much ghosters care for their well-being. We used a mediation analysis with role as the independent variable, other-oriented and self-oriented motives as the comediators, and care as the dependent variable (SPSS Process Macro, Model 4; 5,000 iterations). Other-oriented motives mediated ghostees' underestimation of how much ghosters care about them (indirect effect = .81, $SE = 0.13$, 95% CI [0.56, 1.07]), whereas self-oriented motives did not mediate (indirect effect = −.002, $SE = 0.01$, 95% CI [−0.04, 0.02]).

Figure 3

Ghostees' Predictions Versus Ghosters' Actual Other-Oriented (Panel A) and Self-Oriented Motives (Panel B) for Ghosting in Experiment 5



In sum, ghostees underestimated how much ghosters cared about their well-being partly because ghostees specifically underestimated the other-oriented motives involved in ghosting.

Experiment 6: Informing Ghostees That Ghosters Know Their Pain

Experiment 6 provides another test of the mechanism using our electronic chat paradigm. We manipulated the information participants received about the magnitude of ghostees' pain from rejection, and tested whether ghostees would realize ghosters' other-regarding motives and care for their well-being when they were aware that ghosters knew of the pain they experienced due to being ghosted. This experiment maps unto the definition of ghosting by creating an experience of rejection without explanation, while also creating a stylized context in order to achieve vividness.

Method

An a priori power analysis was conducted using G*Power (Faul et al., 2009) to determine the minimum sample size required to test the study hypothesis. Results indicated the required sample size to achieve 80% power for detecting a medium (Cohen's $f = 0.25$) effect, at a significance level of $\alpha = .05$, was $N = 210$. We aimed for 50 participants per cell and recruited a higher number to compensate for the chat software failing to match some of them. We used a 2 (role: ghoster vs. ghostee) × 2 (ghostee pain: high vs. low) between-subjects design. We recruited a total of $N = 313$ adults from the United Kingdom who were signed up to Prolific Academic for £0.80 (£0.70 and £0.10 bonus). Upon signup, participants were matched to converse in pairs via electronic chat. The program failed to match 39 participants and they left the study without completing it, and 35 ghosters refused to ghost at all despite the high cost of doing so and thus they and their ghostee partners were excluded. This all resulted in usable $N = 204$ ($M_{age} = 24.87$, $SD_{age} = 7.93$; 159 women, 40 men, five other; 144 White, 13 Black, 12 Hispanic, 18 Asian, one Middle Eastern, 16 other race[7]).

Each participant was paired with another participant using the same procedure as in Experiments 2 and 3 with several important changes. As in Experiments 2 and 3, participants expected to have two conversations with each other via electronic chat. Unlike Experiments 2 and 3, participants were asked to complete a questionnaire assessing their "conversation style" while they waited to be paired with their partner. The questionnaire contained four questions, two of which were about pain experienced due to social rejection ("I experience extreme psychological pain when someone rejects me" and "I feel sad when another person is not interested in connecting with me"). The other two questions were irrelevant and focused on enjoyment when having conversations. All questions had identical scales (0 = *strongly disagree*, 100 = *strongly agree*).

Next, participants completed the first (and ultimately only) conversation via electronic chat about their favorite TV shows and movies. As in Experiment 3, this conversation was capped at 3 min. After they completed their conversation, participants read their own and each other's feedback on their conversation style questionnaires. All participants (both ghosters and ghostees) read that, based on

[7] "Other race" includes participants who indicated mixed race.

the responses, ghosters experienced "average levels of pain and sadness" due to social rejection and that ghosters' "rejection sensitivity score" was average (54%). Participants randomly assigned to the high ghostee pain condition read that ghostees experienced "extremely high levels of pain and sadness" when experiencing social rejection and that their "rejection sensitivity score" was extremely high (92%). In contrast, participants randomly assigned to the low ghostee pain condition read that ghostees experienced "extremely low levels" of pain due to social rejection and that their rejection sensitivity score was low (12%). Note that the terms "ghoster" and "ghostee" were not shown to participants and are used here only for ease of describing the methods of this experiment.

After receiving this (bogus) feedback, participants randomly assigned to the ghoster condition were notified of technical difficulties and told that connection with their conversation partner would likely not be reinstated for over 1 hr. Ghosters then had three choices: (a) they could choose to leave the conversation at that moment and still receive their full payment without notifying their conversation partner (thus ghosting him/her); (b) they could leave the conversation but send an explanation to their partner that they can type in, but which will cost them their bonus (£0.10) in this study (thus paying not to ghost); or (c) they could choose to wait 1 hr until the technical difficulty was resolved and continue the study as planned. Ghosters who chose to wait 1 hr (option "c") were coded as ones who did not have the experience of ghosting another person and completed the study without taking the dependent measures. Ghosters who chose one of the other two choices (either ghost or pay not to ghost) rated the extent to which they cared about the well-being of ghostees (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). Ghosters who chose to pay to provide an explanation wrote it down in an open-ended text box and the program sent it verbatim to their ghostee partners. Ghosters then rated their other-oriented and self-oriented motives in making their decision on the same scale as in Experiment 4.

In contrast, participants in the ghostee condition joined the second chatroom alone. After a minute of waiting, they were informed that their partner had decided to leave the conversation. Ghostees read that ghosters had the opportunity to pay to send an explanation about why they chose to leave without joining the second conversation. Ghostees then predicted whether ghosters chose to pay to send an explanation and the degree to which ghosters care about their well-being (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*). Ghostees who did receive an explanation message from their ghosters saw the message after they made this prediction. Ghostees who did not receive an explanation message from ghosters read that their partner did not send them an explanation message. Ghostees then predicted the extent to which other-oriented and self-oriented motives drove their partner's decision of whether or not to ghost them on the same scales as in Experiment 4. Ghostees then were asked how they felt about their partner's decision not to join the second conversation (−3 = *extremely negative*, +3 = *extremely positive*), which was a measure of ghostees' emotional well-being.

Results

As before, a proportion of ghosters refused to ghost at all, even with the option of sending an explanation message ($n = 35$, 25.55%), suggesting that ghosters believed they had a real choice in whether or not to ghost. These ghosters and their ghostee partners were excluded from the rest of the analysis, resulting in usable $N = 204$.

Decision to Ghost/Willingness to Pay

A binary logistic regression with fixed effects for ghoster–ghostee pairs revealed a main effect of role ($B = 1.723$, $SE = 0.471$, $p < .001$), no effect of ghostee pain ($B = -0.056$, $SE = 0.458$, $p = .902$), and no interaction ($B = -0.822$, $SE = 0.648$, $p = .206$). When ghostee rejection pain was high, 27.78% of ghosters chose to pay to send an explanation message and avoid ghosting, whereas 9.26% of ghostees predicted that ghosters would pay to avoid ghosting ($\chi^2 = 6.14$, $p = .013$). When ghostee rejection pain was low, 45.83% of ghosters chose to pay to avoid ghosting, whereas 10.42% of ghostees predicted that ghosters would pay to avoid ghosting ($\chi^2 = 14.89$, $p < .001$). Ghostees underestimated ghosters' willingness to pay to avoid ghosting even knowing that ghosters were informed of their rejection pain.

Notice that a smaller proportion of ghosters chose to pay to avoid ghosting when they learned that ghostees experienced high amounts of rejection pain. This result may have occurred because ghosters may not have immediately known what to write when led to believe that they caused a substantial amount of pain to ghostees (i.e., ghosters feared "saying the wrong thing").

Predicted Versus Actual Ghoster Care

A 2 (role: ghoster vs. ghostee) × 2 (ghostee pain: high vs. low) mixed ANOVA with repeated measures on the first factor revealed a main effect of role, $F(1, 100) = 23.49$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .190$; no main effect of ghostee pain, $F(1, 100) = 0.33$, $p = .569$, $\eta_p^2 = .003$; and no interaction, $F(1, 100) = 0.55$, $p = .459$, $\eta_p^2 = .005$. Ghosters cared about ghostees' well-being more than ghostees realized, both when ghostee rejection pain was high ($M_{\text{ghosters}} = 3.67$, $SD_{\text{ghosters}} = 1.45$ vs. $M_{\text{ghostees}} = 2.73$, $SD_{\text{ghostees}} = 1.28$), paired $t(53) = 3.21$, $p = .002$, $d = 0.44$, as well as when ghostee rejection pain was low ($M_{\text{ghosters}} = 3.94$, $SD_{\text{ghosters}} = 1.75$ vs. $M_{\text{ghostees}} = 2.66$, $SD_{\text{ghostees}} = 1.32$), paired $t(47) = 3.58$, $p = .001$, $d = 0.52$.

Ghostees' Emotional Well-Being

A linear regression found that ghosters' decision to pay to avoid ghosting increased ghostees' emotional well-being ($B = 2.16$, $SE = 0.26$, $p < .001$). There was no effect of ghostee pain ($B = 0.24$, $SE = 0.253$, $p = .346$).

Other-Oriented and Self-Oriented Motives

Regarding other-oriented motives ($\alpha = .94$), a 2 (role: ghoster vs. ghostee) × 2 (ghostee pain: high vs. low) mixed ANOVA with repeated measures on the first factor revealed a main effect for role, $F(1, 100) = 111.72$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .528$; no main effect of ghostee pain, $F(1, 100) = 0.910$, $p = .342$, $\eta_p^2 = .009$; and no interaction, $F(1, 100) = 0.44$, $p = .509$, $\eta_p^2 = .004$. Ghosters felt greater other-oriented motives than ghostees predicted, both after learning that ghostees experienced high levels of pain due to rejection ($M_{\text{ghosters}} = 3.94$, $SD_{\text{ghosters}} = 1.48$ vs. $M_{\text{ghostees}} = 1.76$, $SD_{\text{ghostees}} = 1.28$), paired $t(53) = 9.36$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.27$; and also after learning that ghostees experienced low levels of pain ($M_{\text{ghosters}} = 4.02$, $SD_{\text{ghosters}} = 1.83$ vs. $M_{\text{ghostees}} = 2.09$, $SD_{\text{ghostees}} = 1.19$), paired $t(47) = 6.06$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.88$.

Regarding self-oriented motives ($\alpha = .86$), a 2 (role: ghoster vs. ghostee) × 2 (ghostee pain: high vs. low) mixed ANOVA with

repeated measures on the first factor revealed a main effect for role, $F(1, 100) = 9.55$, $p = .003$, $\eta_p^2 = .087$; no main effect of ghostee pain, $F(1, 100) = 0.94$, $p = .335$, $\eta_p^2 = .009$; and no interaction, $F(1, 100) = 0.75$, $p = .389$, $\eta_p^2 = .007$. Ghostees directionally overestimated ghosters' self-oriented motives, nonsignificantly so after learning that ghostees experienced high levels of pain due to rejection ($M_{ghosters} = 2.68$, $SD_{ghosters} = 1.91$; $M_{ghostees} = 3.14$, $SD_{ghostees} = 1.48$), paired $t(53) = 1.60$, $p = .116$, $d = 0.22$; and significantly so after learning that ghostees experienced low levels of pain ($M_{ghosters} = 2.78$, $SD_{ghosters} = 1.86$; $M_{ghostees} = 3.60$, $SD_{ghostees} = 1.68$), paired $t(47) = 2.76$, $p = .008$, $d = 0.40$.

Finally, we tested whether other-oriented and self-oriented motives mediated ghostees' underestimation of how much ghosters care for their well-being. We collapsed across low versus high levels of pain because there were neither a main effect nor interaction with this variable. We used a mediation analysis with role as the independent variable, other-oriented and self-oriented as the comediators, and care as the dependent variable (SPSS MEMORE Macro, Model 1; 5,000 iterations). As Figure 4 shows, other-oriented motives mediated ghostees' underestimation of how much ghosters care about them (indirect effect = .878, $SE = 0.278$, 95% CI [0.294, 1.391]), whereas self-oriented motives did not mediate (indirect effect = .043, $SE = 0.059$, 95% CI [−0.052, 0.182]). Altogether, Experiment 6 suggests that ghosters care more about ghostees' well-being than ghostees realize, partly because ghostees underestimate ghosters' other-oriented motives.

Experiment 7: When Do Prosocial Motives Predict Ghosting?

The previous experiments revealed that ghostees underestimate the extent to which ghosters care about their well-being partly because they misunderstand the other-oriented motives involved in ghosting. One question arising from this finding is when other-oriented motives predict the decision to ghost. We hypothesized that other-oriented motives will be potent in leading to ghosting when explaining the reason for rejection is perceived to be particularly painful for the ghostee. Following Experiment 5's wording, we manipulated the reason for ghosting to be either inherently related to the person being rejected (e.g., ghosters' negative judgments of the ghostees) or unrelated to the person being rejected (e.g., incompatible schedules or situational constraints). We hypothesized that other-oriented motives will predict ghosting when the reason for rejection is negative because such reasons can be painful to hear. This experiment maps unto the definition of ghosting by providing a face-valid scenario that depicts ending a relationship without explanation. It was preregistered at https://aspredicted.org/G11_JWW.

Method

Participants from the United States were recruited using Cloud Connect for a study on social interactions for $0.70. An a priori power analysis was conducted using G*Power (Faul et al., 2009) to determine the minimum sample size required to test the study hypothesis. Results indicated the required sample size to achieve 80% power for detecting a medium (Cohen's $f = 0.25$) effect, at a significance level of $\alpha = .05$, was $N = 210$. Of 303 participants who completed the study, 32 either did not complete the study or failed the attention check (choosing a specific option from a bogus 7-point scale), resulting in a usable $N = 271$ ($M_{age} = 39.48$, $SD_{age} = 13.02$; 131 women, 136 men, four other; 179 White, 31 Black, 27 Hispanic, 22 East Asian, eight South Asian, one Middle Eastern, three other race). Thus, the obtained sample size of $N = 271$ is adequate to test the study hypothesis. We used a 2 (role: ghoster vs. ghostee) × 2 (reason for ghosting: negative vs. positive) between-subjects design.

Participants were asked to imagine a social situation in which they had interacted with another person of the same gender and had had reasonably good conversations with that person over a period of time. Those assigned to the ghostee condition were asked to imagine that they had sent this person a text asking whether they would like to meet to engage in a mutual hobby, but that person was not interested in doing so. Those assigned to the ghoster condition were asked to imagine that the person had texted them with the same question, but that they were not interested in doing so.

We also manipulated the reason for the lack of interest in continuing the relationship. When the reason was positive—that is, unrelated to the person being rejected, all participants (both ghosters and ghostees) were asked to imagine that the ghoster did not have the time to develop a new friendship due to a busy schedule and other commitments. When the reason was negative, in contrast, all participants (both ghosters and ghostees) were asked to imagine that the ghoster did not think the two people were socially compatible with each other—a reason more intrinsic to the ghostee.

Next, ghosters were asked to assess the extent to which other-oriented and self-oriented motives would drive their decision to ghost, and ghostees predicted the extent to which these motives would drive another person's decision to ghost. The other-oriented motives for ghosting another person were (a) not wanting to hurt the ghostee's feelings and (b) not wanting the ghostee to feel rejected ($\alpha = .90$). The self-oriented motives for ghosting another person were (a) not wanting to put oneself in an uncomfortable situation and (b) not wanting to feel awkwardness or pain ($\alpha = .91$). All scales ranged from 1 (*not at all; they [I] would definitely not have this motivation*) to 7 (*very much; they [I] would definitely have this motivation*).

Ghosters also rated their preference for whether to end the imagined relationship through ghosting (i.e., forever ignoring the other person's attempts to connect) or by having a conversation and explaining their decision to end the relationship, and ghostees predicted the extent to which ghosters would ignore their attempts to connect versus with an explanation. Ghosters were then asked to assess how much they would care about the well-being of the ghostee, whereas ghostees were asked to assess how much the other person would care about their well-being in that situation (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*).

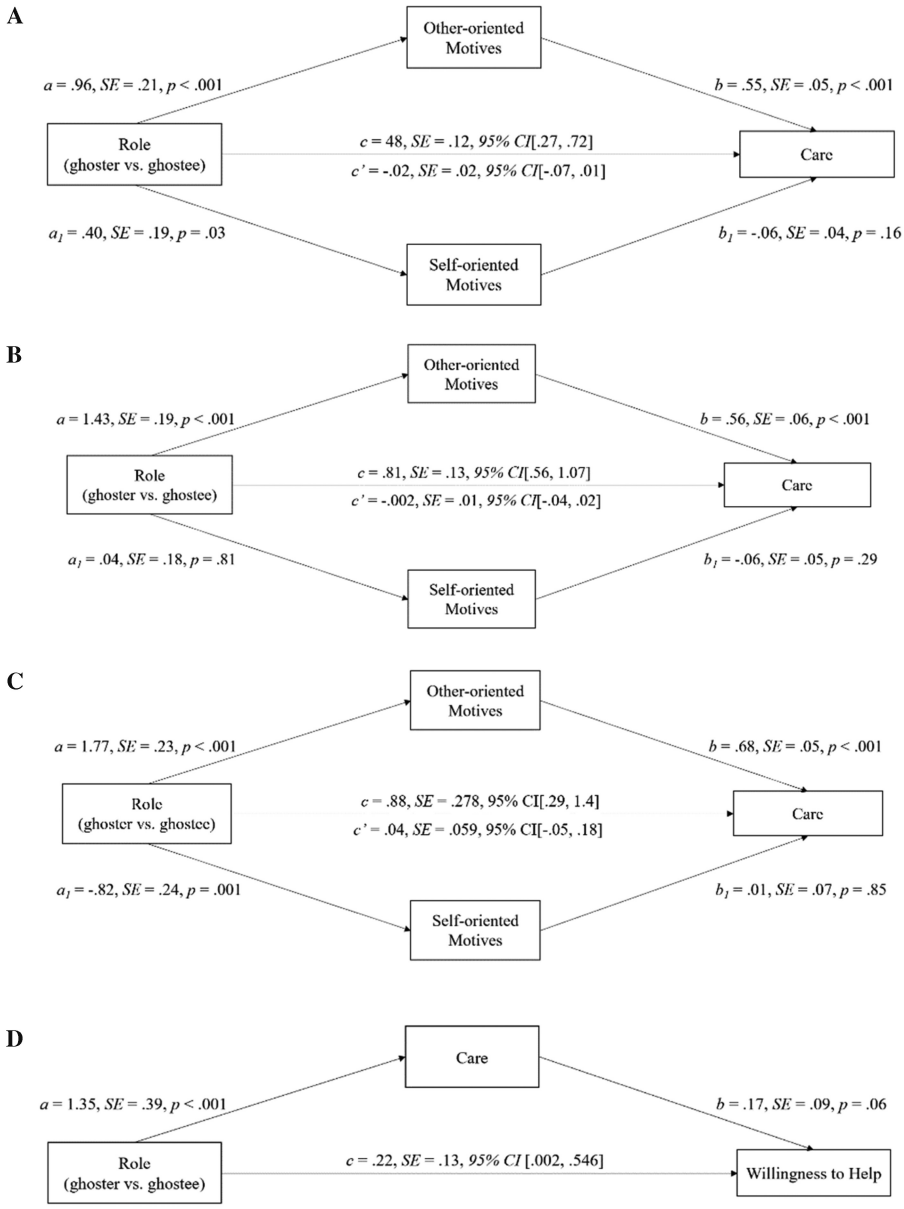
Results

Predicted Versus Actual Ghoster Care

A 2 (role: ghoster vs. ghostee) × 2 (reason for ghosting: negative vs. positive) ANOVA on predicted versus actual ghoster care revealed a main effect of role, $F(1, 267) = 104.46$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .28$; a main effect of reason for ghosting, $F(1, 267) = 60.34$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .18$; and a significant interaction, $F(1, 267) = 4.30$, $p = .039$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$. As before, ghosters cared about ghostees' well-being more than ghostees realized. This was true when the reason for ghosting was positive ($M_{ghosters} = 6.02$, $SD_{ghosters} = 1.12$ vs.

Figure 4

The Role of Other-Oriented Motives in Ghostees' Underestimation of Ghosters' Care and Its Downstream Consequences



Note. The role of other-oriented motives in ghostees' underestimation of ghosters care about their well-being in Experiment 4 (Panel A), Experiment 5 (Panel B), Experiment 6 (Panel C), and its downstream consequences on predictions of willingness to help in Experiment 8 (Panel D). CI = confidence interval.

$M_{\text{ghostees}} = 4.79$, $SD_{\text{ghostees}} = 1.17$), $t(132) = 6.19$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.07$, as well as when the reason for ghosting was negative ($M_{\text{ghosters}} = 5.16$, $SD_{\text{ghosters}} = 1.14$ vs. $M_{\text{ghostees}} = 3.32$, $SD_{\text{ghostees}} = 1.47$), $t(135) = 8.19$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.40$.

Other-Oriented and Self-Oriented Motives

We next tested whether ghostees mispredicted ghosters' other-oriented or self-oriented motives or both. Regarding other-oriented motives, a 2 (role: ghoster vs. ghostee) × 2 (reason for ghosting: negative vs. positive) ANOVA on predicted versus actual other-oriented motives revealed a main effect for role, $F(1, 267) = 38.73$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .13$; a main effect of reason for ghosting, $F(1, 267) = 22.17$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .08$; and an interaction, $F(1, 267) = 6.17$, $p = .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$.

Ghostees underestimated ghosters' other-oriented motives. This was true when the reason for ghosting was positive ($M_{\text{ghosters}} = 6.11$, $SD_{\text{ghosters}} = 1.17$ vs. $M_{\text{ghostees}} = 5.51$, $SD_{\text{ghostees}} = 1.14$),

$t(132) = -2.99$, $p = .003$, $d = -0.52$, as well as when the reason for ghosting was negative ($M_{ghosters} = 5.76$, $SD_{ghosters} = 1.29$ vs. $M_{ghostees} = 4.36$, $SD_{ghostees} = 1.61$), $t(135) = -5.60$, $p < .001$, $d = -0.96$.

Regarding self-oriented motives, a 2 (role: ghoster vs. ghostee) × 2 (reason for ghosting: negative vs. positive) ANOVA on predicted versus actual self-oriented motives revealed no main effect for role, $F(1, 267) = 0.23$, $p = .63$, $\eta_p^2 = .0008$; no main effect of reason for ghosting, $F(1, 267) = 0.50$, $p = .48$, $\eta_p^2 = .002$; and no interaction, $F(1, 267) = 0.01$, $p = .91$, $\eta_p^2 = .000$. There was no gap between ghosters' rated self-oriented motives and ghostees' predictions of these motives. This was true when the reason for ghosting was positive ($M_{ghosters} = 5.54$, $SD_{ghosters} = 1.37$ vs. $M_{ghostees} = 5.60$, $SD_{ghostees} = 1.26$), $t(132) = 0.25$, $p = .80$, $d = 0.04$, as well as when the reason for ghosting was negative ($M_{ghosters} = 5.63$, $SD_{ghosters} = 1.27$ vs. $M_{ghostees} = 5.72$, $SD_{ghostees} = 1.28$), $t(135) = 0.42$, $p = .67$, $d = 0.07$.

When Do Other-Oriented Motives Predict Ghosting?

Finally, we tested whether other-oriented motives predicted ghosters' decision to ghost. We used the subsample of participants randomly assigned to the condition of ghosters and conducted a multinomial logistic regression with the decision to ghost as the dependent variable; and other-oriented motives and reason for ghosting as the independent variables along with their interaction. The results revealed that when the reason for ghosting was negative (and thus reflected badly on ghostees), ghosters' other-oriented motives positively predicted the decision to ghost ($B = 0.544$, $SE = 0.220$, $p = .014$). When the reason for ghosting was positive (and thus did not reflect badly on ghostees), other-oriented motives did not predict the decision to ghost ($B = 0.231$, $SE = 0.323$, $p = .474$).

Together, these results suggest that other-oriented motives can lead people to ghost others, specifically when explaining the reason for rejection is more likely to cause pain and reflect badly on the person being rejected. In other words, people can sometimes ghost others to avoid hurting them.

Experiment 8: Consequences of Underestimating Ghosters' Care for Help Exchange

What are the consequences of ghostees' underestimation of ghosters' care? It stands to reason that any relational behavior that involves care for another person would be affected by ghostees' perceptions that ghosters do not care for their well-being. One such behavior is help, a consequential benefit of social networks (Granovetter, 1973; Montgomery, 1992; Sundararajan, 2020). Existing research on help exchange suggests that people can fail to seek help because of systematic misperceptions about another person's willingness to help (Bohns, 2016; Brooks et al., 2015; Zhao & Epley, 2021). Therefore, one likely consequence of misperceiving ghosters' care may be holding miscalibrated expectations of ghosters' willingness to help in the future.

Such a result would be consistent with existing research on compliance, which finds that people underestimate others' willingness to acquiesce to direct requests for help partly because people underestimate how uncomfortable it is to say "no" (Flynn & Lake, 2008). Adding to that research, we propose that (a) underestimation of others' willingness to help can also occur after social rejection; (b) ghosting, as a unique form of rejection, may also lead to underestimation of others' willingness to help; and (c) underestimation of others' willingness to help can occur partly because of underestimation of care, an additional mechanism not explored by past research, suggesting that this effect may be multiply-determined.

Finally, another goal of Experiment 8 was to compare ghosting to rejection with feedback to test whether underestimation of care occurs to the same degree when feedback is involved. We manipulated whether the feedback was positive or negative to provide several relevant comparison points.

This experiment maps unto the definition of ghosting by providing a face-valid scenario that depicts ending a relationship without explanation. It was preregistered at https://aspredicted.org/XNF_SY7.

Method

Participants were full-time working adults recruited through the study pool at a university in Western Europe for €1.00. An a priori power analysis was conducted using G*Power (Faul et al., 2009) to determine the minimum sample size required to test the study hypothesis. Results indicated the required sample size to achieve 80% power for detecting a small-to-medium (Cohen's $f = 0.20$) effect, at a significance level of $\alpha = .05$, was $N = 244$. We aimed for 50 participants per cell ($N = 300$) and recruited a higher number to compensate for exclusions. Of 338 participants who started the study, 35 either did not complete the study or failed the attention check (choosing a specific option from a bogus 7-point scale), resulting in a usable $N = 303$ ($M_{age} = 26.09$, $SD_{age} = 5.28$; 194 women, 107 men, two other; 291 French, 12 other race). Thus, the obtained sample was adequate to test the hypotheses. We used a 2 (role: rejecter vs. rejectee) × 3 (type of feedback: ghosting vs. negative vs. positive) between-subjects design.

Participants were asked to imagine a social situation in which they had interacted with another person of the same gender and had had reasonably good conversations with that person. Those assigned to the ghostee condition were asked to imagine that they had sent this person a text asking whether they would like to meet to engage in a mutual hobby, but that person never responded to their text, indicating a lack of interest in pursuing the relationship. Similar to real-life ghosting, participants in the ghostee condition were not told of the reason why the other party ended the relationship. Those assigned to the ghoster condition were asked to imagine that the person had texted them with the same question, but that they were not interested in pursuing the relationship and never responded to that person's text.

We also had conditions to test rejection with feedback, and we manipulated the valence of the feedback to explore comparisons with ghosting. Those assigned to the positive rejectee condition were asked to imagine the same scenario but instead of receiving no feedback, they read that the other person responded with relatively positive feedback ("Hi, I do not have the time to develop another friendship due to a busy schedule and other commitments. I'm sorry about that"). In the negative rejectee condition, the same scenario was given but the feedback was relatively negative ("Hi, I do not think we are compatible and so I would rather not take this friendship 'to the next level.' I am sorry about that.") Participants in the positive rejecter and negative rejecter conditions read the same scenarios, respectively, but imagined them from the perspective of the person doing the rejecting. Note that

the labels "positive" and "negative" were not shown to participants and are used here only for descriptive clarity.

Care

Next, ghosters, positive rejecters, and negative rejecters were asked to assess how much they would care about the well-being of the other party, whereas ghostees, positive rejectees, and negative rejectees were asked to assess how much the other person would care about their well-being in that situation (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*).

Willingness to Help

Ghosters, positive rejecters, and negative rejecters were then asked to imagine that after 6 months of no communication, the other party reaches out to them asking for advice in an area they know a lot about and can probably help if they would like to. These participants then assessed their likelihood of helping the other party (1 = *extremely unlikely*, 7 = *extremely likely*).

Ghostees, positive rejectees, and negative rejectees read that after 6 months of no communication, they discover that the other party has knowledge in an area where they could use advice. These participants then assessed the likelihood that the other party would be willing to help them (1 = *extremely unlikely*, 7 = *extremely likely*).

Next, we tested an additional hypothesis on an exploratory basis (as listed in our preregistration). Participants were asked to imagine the opposite situation. Participants who imagined rejecting others (ghosters, positive rejecters, and negative rejecters) were asked to imagine that the rejectee had knowledge in an area where they could use advice. They were asked to assess to what extent rejectees would help them (1 = *extremely unlikely*, 7 = *extremely likely*). Participants who imagined being rejected (ghostees, positive rejectees, and negative rejectees) assessed how much they would be willing to help the rejecters (1 = *extremely unlikely*, 7 = *extremely likely*).

Imagining Feedback

Finally, as an exploratory measure, participants in the ghosting conditions (who did not learn of any explanation for the rejection) were asked to imagine that the reason the other party ended the relationship was either positive or negative (order was counterbalanced), and predicted the other party's care (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*), assessed their likelihood of helping the other party, and assessed the other party's likelihood of helping them (1 = *extremely unlikely*, 7 = *extremely likely*). These measures enabled us to compare rejection without feedback (ghosting) to rejection with feedback on a within-subjects basis. Because the results are secondary to the purposes of the experiment, we report them in the additional online materials.

Results

Care

A 2 (role: rejecter vs. rejectee) × 3 (type of feedback: ghosting vs. negative vs. positive) ANOVA on predicted versus actual rejecter care revealed a main effect of role, $F(1, 297) = 8.20$, $p = .005$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$; a main effect of feedback type, $F(2, 297) = 7.66$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .05$; and a significant interaction, $F(2, 297) = 5.02$, $p = .007$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$.

Figure 5 (Panel A) shows the results. As before, ghosters cared more about ghostees' well-being ($M = 3.60$, $SD = 1.93$) than ghostees predicted ($M = 2.25$, $SD = 0.98$), $t(98) = -4.34$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.87$. In the positive rejection condition, there was no significant difference between rejecters' care ($M = 3.40$, $SD = 2.19$) and rejectees' predictions ($M = 3.62$, $SD = 1.68$), $t(98) = 0.56$, $p = .57$, $d = 0.11$. In the negative rejection condition, rejecters marginally cared more about rejectees' well-being ($M = 4.18$, $SD = 1.97$) than rejectees predicted ($M = 3.58$, $SD = 1.45$), $t(101) = -1.76$, $p = .08$, $d = -0.35$.

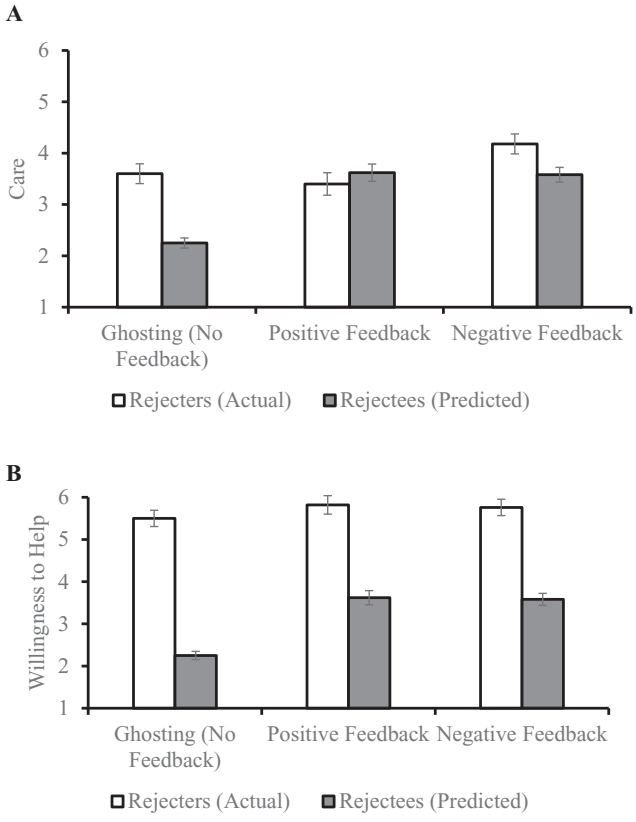
Thus, underestimation of care was particularly stark following ghosting as compared to rejection with feedback. No underestimation occurred following rejection with positive feedback, and nonsignificant underestimation occurred following rejection with negative feedback. Moreover, ghostees were the most pessimistic in assessing the other party's care—ghostees were far less likely to predict that the other party would care about them compared to positive rejectees, $t(96) = 4.91$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.99$, and compared to negative rejectees, $t(98) = 5.33$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.07$.

Ghoster's and Rejecter's Willingness to Help

A 2 (role: rejecter vs. rejectee) × 3 (type of feedback: ghosting vs. negative vs. positive) ANOVA on predicted versus actual rejecter's

Figure 5

Ghostees' Predictions Versus Ghosters' Care (Panel A) and Willingness to Help (Panel B) Compared to the Same Judgments Following Rejection With Positive or Negative Feedback in Experiment 8



willingness to help revealed a main effect of role, $F(1, 297) = 298.30$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .50$; a main effect of feedback type, $F(2, 297) = 4.79$, $p = .009$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$; and no interaction, $F(2, 297) = 1.17$, $p = .31$, $\eta_p^2 = .008$. Ghosters were more willing to help ghostees ($M = 5.50$, $SD = 1.50$) than ghostees expected ($M = 2.54$, $SD = 1.07$), $t(98) = -11.26$, $p < .001$, $d = 2.25$. In the positive rejection condition, rejecters were more willing to help rejectees ($M = 5.82$, $SD = 1.29$) than rejectees expected ($M = 3.12$, $SD = 1.39$), $t(98) = -10.05$, $p < .001$, $d = -2.01$. In the negative rejection condition, rejecters were more willing to help rejectees ($M = 5.76$, $SD = 1.34$) than rejectees expected ($M = 3.38$, $SD = 1.44$), $t(101) = -8.68$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.71$.

As Figure 5 (Panel B) shows, here too ghostees were the most pessimistic, this time in terms of predicting the other party's willingness to provide help. Ghostees were less likely to believe that the other party would give help compared to positive rejectees, $t(96) = 2.30$, $p = .012$, $d = 0.46$, and compared to negative rejectees, $t(98) = 3.29$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.66$.

Mediation

We next tested whether the underestimation of care mediated ghostees' underestimation of how much ghosters were willing to help them. We used a bias-corrected bootstrap mediation analysis with role as the independent variable, care as the mediator, and likelihood of helping as the dependent variable (SPSS Process Macro, Model 4; 5,000 iterations). Ghostees' underestimation of care mediated ghostees' underestimation of how much ghosters were willing to help them (indirect effect = .22, $SE = 0.13$, 95% CI [0.002, 0.546]).

Predicted Versus Actual Ghostee Willingness to Help

Testing our exploratory hypothesis, ghostees were more willing to help ghosters ($M = 3.96$, $SD = 1.69$) than ghosters expected ($M = 2.56$, $SD = 1.24$), $t(98) = 4.75$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.95$. Interestingly, ghosters too underestimated the degree to which ghostees would be willing to help them in the future.

Overall, Experient 8 offers two insights. First, misunderstanding ghosters' care has downstream consequences, namely missing opportunities for help exchange. As noted, these results are consistent with existing research on underestimating compliance with direct help requests (Flynn & Lake, 2008). The present results add to this research in (a) finding that underestimation of others' willingness to help can also occur after social rejection; (b) underestimation of others' willingness to help generalizes to ghosting in addition to direct help requests; and (c) underestimation of others' willingness to help can occur partly because of underestimation of care, an additional mechanism not explored by past research which has focused on assessments of others' positive and negative emotions (Flynn & Lake, 2008; Zhao & Epley, 2021), suggesting that this effect may be multiply-determined.

Second, Experiment 8 provides insight about the effects of ghosting compared to rejection with feedback. Ghosting leads to particularly pessimistic predictions of care and willingness to help compared to rejection accompanied by feedback, even when this feedback is negative. Viewed another way, providing rejection feedback—even negative—to another person communicates greater care than ghosting.

General Discussion

Ghosting is a common way of rejecting others, and one that is familiar to most people, distinguishable from other rejection behaviors, and which occurs across a wide variety of relationships (Pilot Studies 1a–1c). The present experiments suggest that this does not mean that those who ghost do so as uncaringly as those who are ghosted believe. We find this result in recalled ghosting experiences (Experiment 1) and in real-time ghosting experiences (Experiment 2). This result cannot be merely attributed to "cheap talk," for ghosters were willing to back up their statements of care with monetary payment to avoid ghosting (Experiment 3).

We suggest that ghostees underestimate how much ghosters care about their well-being partly because the experience of being ghosted leads one to oversimplify the motives underlying the decision to ghost. Ghostees readily understand the self-oriented motives involved in ghosting, such as the ghoster's desire to avoid having unpleasant or awkward conversations. But ghostees also do not sufficiently appreciate the other-oriented motives involved in ghosting. Ghosters are not oblivious to the pain that rejection causes others—in recalled instances, hypothetical scenarios, and real-time experiences of ghosting, underestimation of other-oriented motives partly explains ghostees' underestimation of the extent to which ghosters care about them (Experiments 4–6). Furthermore, we also establish that other-oriented motives are especially likely to predict ghosting when the reason for ghosting is hurtful to the ghostee (Experiment 7). Finally, we document an implication of underestimating ghosters' care in potential missed opportunities for future help exchange (Experiment 8), suggesting that having accurate perceptions of a ghoster's care would be beneficial for social networks and for organizations.

Our experiments use different methods, including prototype analysis to inductively generate how laypeople understand ghosting and computational text analysis for construct validation, recalled ghosting from real life, hypothetical ghosting decisions, and an online chat paradigm. Multimethod approaches are important for increasing confidence in robustness and replicability of the results and simultaneously provide confidence that the phenomenon of interest does not depend on the method used to study it (Turner et al., 2017). Notwithstanding, each of these methods has advantages and disadvantages. Recalled ghosting draws on ecologically valid real-life experiences but does not match ghosters' and ghostees' experiences. The hypothetical ghosting scenarios offer perfect matching of information for ghosters and ghostees but not the visceral experience of ghosting and being ghosted. The online chat paradigm provides the emotions and social pain involved in ghosting and being ghosted but involves an idiosyncratic context. Although each method alone is imperfect, together they cover various aspects of the ghosting experience and their consistent results provide confidence that being ghosted indeed leads one to underestimate the extent to which ghosters care about one's well-being. Beyond using different methods, our experiments also use samples from different geographies (Southeast Asian, American, British, and Western European), which suggest that the results are consistent across the predominant cultures represented in these locations.

Theoretical Contributions

This research provides several methodological and theoretical contributions. Methodologically, we provide a blueprint of how a comprehensive analysis of a social behavior such as ghosting can

be done through a multimethod approach. Existing research on ghosting has primarily relied on qualitative (Koessler et al., 2019; LeFebvre et al., 2019; Pancani et al., 2021; Timmermans et al., 2021) or correlational surveys (Freedman et al., 2019; Navarro et al., 2020; Powell et al., 2021, 2022), and has mostly focused on the experience of being ghosted with less attention on the experience of ghosting others and to the potential gaps between the two (Pancani et al., 2021). Here we use a prototype analysis to inductively generate how lay people understand ghosting and computational text analysis for construct validation. We also employ experiments using several paradigms to capture ghosting from real life, hypothetical ghosting decisions, and an online chat paradigm. Together these methods provide an understanding of ghosting from the perspectives of both the ghoster and the ghostee.

Our article also contributes theoretically by bridging motivational, moral, social, and organizational psychology.

First, we contribute to research on motivation by providing evidence that other-oriented—or prosocial—motives can in certain contexts lead people to reject others in ways that seem particularly uncaring. Existing research on rejection finds that other-oriented motives make people less likely to reject others (Joel et al., 2014, 2018; Le et al., 2010) and generally do things that please them (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003). Those findings are sensible—caring for others entails a desire to avoid inflicting pain on them by rejecting them. However, the present research suggests that once people have determined that they would like to end a tie, other-oriented motives might lead them to ghost others instead of providing an explanation. This suggests that other-oriented motives can, under certain circumstances, cause people to reject others in ways that, ironically, hurt them more.

Second, the present work contributes to research on how people view themselves from a moral standpoint. Existing research suggests that people go to great lengths protect their moral self concepts (Mulder & Aquino, 2013; Ward & King, 2018), and are especially averse to viewing themselves as immoral (Baumeister, 1999; Klein & Epley, 2016). While that work has largely focused on the self-concept, the present research suggests that the tendency to view oneself as a "good" person also has social consequences—ghosters who reject others are more likely to experience other-oriented motivations as driving their actions than ghostees believe.

Third, we extend research on perspective taking and interpersonal accuracy. One of the core findings in this area is that reading other people's minds is notoriously difficult (Ames, 2004; Epley, 2008), and one of the only ways to reliably increase interpersonal accuracy is through direct feedback (Eyal et al., 2018). We identify ghosting as a social behavior that is particularly likely to create perspective taking failures between ghosters and ghostees because it is definitionally devoid of feedback. We extend findings on perspective taking by focusing on the relational and well-being implications of a common context stripped of feedback.

We also make contributions to organizational behavior by outlining the consequences of ghostees' underestimation of ghosters' other-oriented motives, finding that ghostees can miss opportunities for future help exchange from ghosters due to this misperception. Psychologists interested in organizations have emphasized that exchanging resources between coworkers is essential for an organization to thrive (Flynn, 2006; Lim et al., 2020). We contribute to this work by identifying a psychological barrier that hampers help exchange (Park et al., 2024).

Finally, the present work also contributes to specific research on ghosting, a topic that has received substantial interest in recent years. Researchers have discussed and provided evidence for the largely negative effects of being ghosted—engendering anxiety, uncertainty, avoidance, and stress (LeFebvre & Fan, 2020; Powell et al., 2021; Thomas & Dubar, 2021; Timmermans et al., 2021). Some have gone so far as to refer to ghostees as victims (Pancani et al., 2021). The present experiments suggest that these negative effects of being ghosted can, at least in part, be due to social error: In assuming that ghosters do not care about their well-being, ghostees meaningfully exacerbate an already negative experience. It is possible (indeed our experiments suggest) that had ghostees been more calibrated about the degree to which ghosters care about their well-being, this would have softened the blow of being ghosted. This last point is also relevant to an area which has long held the interest of social psychologists: the effects of social connection on well-being. We turn to this topic next.

Social Rejection Plays a Role in Well-Being?

Research programs on social connection and social rejection have developed somewhat independently despite having the same ultimate dependent variable, namely subjective well-being. Work on social connection focuses on ways to induce people to form and strengthen connections with others because social connection is an important driver of well-being (for review see Regan & Lyubomirsky, 2021). In parallel, work on social rejection focuses on the negative affective and experiential consequences of being rejected (Baumeister et al., 1993; Eisenberger & Lieberman, 2004; Smart Richman & Leary, 2009). Because being rejected detracts from well-being, it is not intuitive to think of social rejection as a component of well-being and happiness. However, like a stock trader who tries to achieve returns by limiting losses in addition to maximizing gains, well-being can also be gained and lost not only when social connections begin and take place, but also when they end.

It is virtually impossible to maintain every connection one has created (Mac Carron et al., 2016), and therefore rejecting others and being rejected are unavoidable experiences. Social connection drives well-being partly because it provides reassurance that other people care about the self (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), whereas rejection detracts from this feeling. This raises the question of whether rejection can be experienced in ways that do not reduce the benefits to well-being that come from sociability. As before, we consider this question from the perspectives of the ghoster and the ghostee, each in turn.

We begin with the ghosters' perspective. Ghosters may have a role in minimizing the negative effects of ghosting on ghostees' well-being. If ghosters could communicate the extent to which they care about ghostees' well-being, ghostees' well-being may improve (Sprecher et al., 2010). In fact, our final experiment suggests that when feedback is optional, the mere act of giving it has value in and of itself. This is especially true when the feedback is negative, where most people would not want to give or receive such feedback—by deciding to give negative relationship feedback, we might show that we care the most.

However, there are both catalysts and obstacles for doing this. In terms of catalysts, the desire to avoid engaging in a socially disapproved behavior such as ghosting might motivate ghosters to

consider communicating that they care. The length and depth of a relationship may also contribute to ghosters' motivation to communicate their care of ghostees despite the impending end of the relationship (Field et al., 2009; Joel et al., 2018; Navarro et al., 2020).

However, there are also obstacles. First, ghosters may simply procrastinate having a conversation with ghostees despite intending to do so in the same way that people procrastinate other unpleasant tasks (Buehler et al., 1995; Gollwitzer, 1999). Second, ghosters may worry about failing to find the "right words" to express their feelings toward ghostees during a difficult conversation (Baxter, 1985). Third, ghosters might fear that ghostees would make the conversation more unpleasant and may even try to "emotionally blackmail" ghosters. Similar to the discomfort people feel toward rejecting others' romantic advances (Bohns & DeVincent, 2019), it is even possible that the act of ghosting itself occurs despite people's best intentions to explain their decision to end a relationship but then failing to do so because of the perceived difficulty of having such a conversation. In general, greater understandings of the motivation for, likelihood of, and effects of the "separation conversations" ghostees and ghosters engage in are promising directions for future research.

We next turn to the ghostees' perspective. Ghostees may also have a role in avoiding being ghosted. The most straightforward way of receiving an explanation for rejection may simply be asking for one (Eyal et al., 2018). It is possible that ghosters would ignore or refuse the request for explanation, but it is also possible that ghostees may underestimate the probability that ghosters would comply (Flynn & Lake, 2008). Another obstacle to asking for feedback after being ghosted may be that ghostees assume that hearing the reason for the ghosting will be more painful than being left not knowing. However, ghostees may underestimate their own ability to engage in cognitive processes that mitigate the intensity and duration of negative affect, a tendency dubbed "immune neglect" (Gilbert et al., 1998).

Nevertheless, avoiding ghosting by having a relationship-ending conversation may not always be the least harmful way to reject others. If the explanation for rejection is very offensive to the ghostee then perhaps it is better for the ghostee to be left wondering than to be told hurtful things, even taking into consideration the operation of the psychological immune system. Moreover, it is also possible that when ghosters do initiate a "separation conversation," they may end up talking about seemingly relevant but ultimately unproductive things, such as apologizing or sugarcoating the real reasons for rejection instead of providing the information ghostees want (Freedman et al., 2017).

Future Directions

Although we have highlighted the potential positive impact that getting an explanation from ghosters can have on ghostees' well-being, it is unlikely that such direct communication between two people who are about to end their relationship will easily become the norm. We therefore encourage future research to test whether ghostees could mitigate the negative experience of being ghosted even without getting feedback and explanation from ghosters. We can think of four ways in which this may happen.

First, ghostees may be prompted to adopt the perspective of ghosters and try to see things "their way." The goal of such an exercise would be to help ghostees realize how ghosters experience the interaction and thus resist the intuition that ghosters do not care about their well-being. However, existing research suggests that even when working to take others' perspective, people remain overly egocentric (Epley et al., 2004). Thus, simply taking ghosters' perspective might not be sufficient to close the gap.

Second, ghostees may be prompted to reflect on their own past behavior of ghosting others, which, in turn, may lead ghostees to appreciate that being ghosted does not necessarily mean that ghosters do not care about their well-being. Because ghosting is common, it is likely that ghostees have themselves ghosted others, and introspecting on such behavior may enable ghostees to better understand ghosters' motives. Supporting this possibility, existing research suggests that people value and gain insight from their own introspections (Pronin, 2009). However, people may judge their own ghosting behavior more charitably than they judge others' ghosting behavior (Messick et al., 1985), which may negate the usefulness of introspection in reducing the gap between ghostees and ghosters. Moreover and interestingly, recent research suggests that people who have both been ghosted and have ghosted others have more negative experience than people who have not engaged in both activities (Powell et al., 2021). Overall, understanding the effects of reflecting on past ghosting on interpersonal accuracy is a promising research direction.

Third, research on people's moral identity also sheds light on ways to reduce ghosting behaviors. Consistent with people's desire to see themselves as moral, scholars have documented numerous ways in which people make attributions that enhance or protect their self-image (Mulder & Aquino, 2013; Ward & King, 2018). Recent findings also suggest that threats to people's moral identity can increase prosocial behavior (Lin et al., 2017). Moreover, people are especially loath to see themselves as doing wrong by others (Klein & Epley, 2016). Applying these findings to the context of ghosting, researchers may be able to design interventions that highlight the (im)moral aspects of ghosting. Such interventions may lessen the negative experience associated with being ghosted by making ghostees feel that they have the "moral high ground" in the relationship, which may boost ghostees' self-image.

Fourth and finally, being ghosted means having at least two deficits in information: Ghostees initially do not know whether the relationship has ended and they do not know the reason why it ended. This framework raises the question of whether simply being notified that the ghoster no longer wishes to continue the relationship is sufficient to improve ghostees' well-being because such knowledge would remove a basic level of uncertainty even without knowing the reason why the ghoster decided to call it quits. Another possibility is that ghostees want to know not only that the relationship has ended, but also why. Understanding the effect of either piece of information on ghostees' well-being is an interesting direction for future research.

Concluding Thought

The analysis of ghosting—an interaction that ends a social connection— mirrors in many ways the analysis of interactions meant to create and promote social connections. Both focus on the motivations, perceptions, and behavior of the two parties, and both contain sources of inaccuracies and misunderstandings between the two parties. It is tempting to view rejection in general and ghosting in particular as barriers to well-being, wholly separate from behaviors

that begin and foster social connections, such as introductions or invitations. However, such a view overlooks the reality that some rejection is inevitable and many rejections occur by way of ghosting. Understanding the factors that affect well-being among ghosters and ghostees is therefore essential for the broader study of the benefits of social connection.

Constraints on Generality

Participants recruited for the experiments reported here were adults hailing from the United States, Western Europe, Southeast Asia, and the United Kingdom. The results are consistent across the predominant cultures represented in these locations, but future research can recruit participants from other cultures to test for generalizability. The experiments use various methods, including recalled ghosting, hypothetical ghosting decisions, and an online chat paradigm. We welcome the use of additional methods to test the hypothesis and we do not currently have reason to believe that the results would not replicate with novel methods. To test for direct replication, interested researchers can use the publicly posted study materials.

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Correction to "The Interpersonal Costs of Dishonesty: How Dishonest Behavior Reduces Individuals' Ability to Read Others' Emotions" by Lee et al. (2019)

The following article is being corrected: Lee, J. J., Hardin, A. E., Parmar, B., & Gino, F. (2019). The interpersonal costs of dishonesty: How dishonest behavior reduces individuals' ability to read others' emotions. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, *148*(9), 1557–1574. https://doi.org/10.1037/xge0000639

Concerns were raised regarding the findings reported in Study 3 related to data exclusions that may have affected the results. As a result, the findings reported in Study 3 cannot be relied upon. The remaining base of empirical evidence presented in this publication, excluding Study 3, supports the assertion that dishonesty reduces empathic accuracy. The authors (Lee, Hardin, Parmar, & Gino) have requested this correction.

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