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The Pain of Ghosting?

People Underestimate How Bad Their Conversation Partners Feel About Not Responding

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Abstract

Although online communication platforms provide convenience, they also bring a risk of *ghosting*, when one person unexpectedly stops responding to another without explanation. Extending prior research that examines the pain of *being* ghosted, we instead examine whether the act of ghosting itself is emotionally painful – and whether people recognize the extent of ghosters' bad feelings. Across three studies – recalled real ghosting experiences (N = 195), imagined ghosting scenarios (N = 601), and induced ghosting in a live interaction (N = 350) – we find that people who are ghosted underestimate how bad their conversation partners feel about ghosting them. This underestimation is larger when the ghosting is unintentional and mitigated when communicators do not perceive their actions as ghosting or send a short response (e.g., "sorry, can't talk") instead of ghosting. Overall, this research provides a window into the overlooked pain of ghosting others.

Keywords: Social Exclusion / Rejection, Communication, Interpersonal Relationships, Social Interaction, Well-being

Imagine that you are messaging a friend about something, and they don't respond - a phenomenon that is colloquially known as being "ghosted." You might assume that your friend forgot about your message and moved on, or purposefully didn't want to respond; in either case, you may think they don't feel particularly bad about "ghosting" you. Now imagine the roles reversed: your friend has messaged you, and you don't respond - perhaps you forgot to respond, didn't know exactly how to respond, or actually wanted to end the relationship. Regardless of the exact reason, when you think about not responding to your friend, you probably do feel bad (e.g., guilty, embarrassed, and/or remorseful) about it.

The current paper examines the empirical evidence underlying this thought experiment: Do "ghosters" (those who do not respond to a message) tend to feel worse about their lack of response than "ghostees" (those who do not receive a response) realize? At a time when romantic, social, and professional communication increasingly occurs online and ghosting is the easiest form of rejection, it is important to understand when and why people ghost and their feelings about doing it. Indeed, ghosting has negative psychological consequences not only for those who are ghosted (Lutz, 2023; Telari et al., 2025) but also for those who ghost. People who ghost others may experience guilt (Freedman et al., 2024) and even depressive symptoms (Forrai et al., 2023), consistent with the idea that hurting others can hurt oneself (Legate et al., 2013).

Conducting research on ghosting presents a conceptual challenge, as the definition of the term remains a subject of ongoing academic debate (Forrai et al., 2023; Freedman & Powell, 2024; Schokkenbroek et al., 2025). Although scholars generally agree that ghosting involves unilaterally ceasing communication without explicit closure (e.g., Kay & Courtice, 2022), they diverge on whether the non-response must be permanent (Freedman et al., 2019) or can be temporary (LeFebvre et al., 2019), and whether it applies only to established relationships,

mainly in romantic contexts (Koessler et al., 2019), or can extend to less closely acquainted or even previously unacquainted pairs (Park & Klein, 2024). Traditional views often equate ghosting with relationship dissolution - a final, purposeful exit. Yet, emerging research suggests that the moment at which a "delayed response" feels like "ghosting" may be ambiguous from the perspective of the person expecting a response (Büttner & Lutz, 2025; Freedman et al., 2019; LeFebvre & Fan, 2020).

In this paper, we adopt a subjective and process-oriented conceptualization of ghosting. The experience of ghosting arises during an unexplained lack of response in which at least one conversation partner believes that either they or the other person may never respond again. Our definition differs from most prior conceptualizations in two related aspects, each of which is grounded in prior work. First, it posits that ghosting is a subjective perception rather than an objective milestone. This aligns with LeFebvre and Fan's (2020) assertion that "if non-initiators (ghostees) do not expect or desire a response, and if no one feels the loss, ghosting does not occur" (see also LeFebvre, 2017; LeFebvre et al., 2019; LeFebvre et al., 2020). Similarly, Büttner and Lutz (2025) argue that ghosting "is not an objective or externally defined event but a subjective interpretation… it hinges on the ghostee detecting that they are no longer being responded to." Second, we define ghosting based on the communicative process of non-response rather than the relational outcome. Although extended silence may sometimes culminate in relationship dissolution, it can also be followed by eventual reconnection. By including temporary non-responses that feel like ghosting, we align with prior work such as LeFebvre's (2019) identification of a continuum of short-term (temporary) to long-term (permanent relationship dissolution) ghosting, and Kantola and van Zoonen's (2025) definition of workplace ghosting as

"intermittent disengagement, where the ghoster temporarily cuts communication without explanation but may have to re-engage".

Our definition provides several advantages. Principally, it allows us to study experiences beyond only the termination of relationships, in contrast to other studies that defined ghosting solely as relationship dissolution (e.g., Campaioli et al., 2022; Forrai et al., 2023; Freedman & Powell, 2024; LeFebvre & Fan, 2020; Pancani et al., 2021; Timmermans et al., 2021). Related to this, it also allows us to examine situations in which ghosters and ghostees differ in their perceptions of whether ghosting has occurred (Büttner & Lutz, 2025; Freedman et al., 2019; LeFebvre et al., 2019; LeFebvre & Fan, 2020; Navarro et al., 2021). For example, one person can *believe* they have been ghosted when their partner does not respond for some period of time even if their partner knows they intend to respond in the future (and/or actually does respond in the future). Another advantage of studying subjective ghosting is it allows us to consider cases of unintentional ghosting, e.g., when someone sees a message but is simply busy or forgets to respond (LaRose et al., 2014)[1]. We expect these cases to be particularly prevalent in less established relationships where partners lack the contextual trust to dismiss a silence as a mere delay.

Existing literature has focused on the consequences of ghosting primarily from the perspective of the person being ghosted (the *ghostee*). Undoubtedly, the feeling of being ghosted is a negative experience: painful (Campaioli et al., 2022; Freedman et al., 2019, 2024; Timmermans et al., 2021), anxiety-provoking (Powell et al., 2021), and embarrassing (Powell et al., 2021). After all, being ghosted is a form of social rejection, which is psychologically

[1] We think that a permanent non-response may have meaningfully different consequences than a temporary non-response, but both actions can be perceived as ghosting by one communication party and thus both are in our field of inquiry.

damaging (e.g., Eisenberger & Lieberman, 2004; Kross et al., 2011; MacDonald & Leary, 2005; Williams et al., 2013). The current paper instead considers the perspective of the person doing the ghosting (the *ghoster*). Some prior research suggests ghosters might also experience negative emotions (Pancani et al., 2021; Wu & Bamishigbin, 2023) such as guilt (J. O. Thomas & Dubar, 2021; Yap et al., 2021), but also somewhat more positive emotions like relief (Freedman et al., 2024). We think it is important to consider the perspective of ghosters not only because prior literature has largely overlooked their perspective but also because ghosting is a common behavior in asynchronous, online communications (almost everyone has done so, even inadvertently). We hope to shed light on the psychology of this common social transgression.

Even if people who ghost do feel bad about not responding, their conversation partners may not recognize quite *how* bad. In general, people tend to underestimate the strength of others' affective reactions (what has been called the "lesser minds problem"; Waytz et al., 2013). Prior research has found that people typically underestimate how *good* others will feel as a result of receiving a prosocial gesture. For example, people underestimate how good others will feel after receiving gratitude letters (Kumar & Epley, 2018), social support (Dungan et al., 2022), and compliments (Boothby & Bohns, 2021; Zhao & Epley, 2021). They also underestimate how good people feel after being prosocial themselves (e.g., what has been called the "warm glow" of giving; Andreoni, 1990), such as after spending money on others (Dunn et al., 2014), donating blood to others (Ferguson et al., 2012), or doing other small acts of kindness towards strangers (Zhao & Epley, 2022). Building on this line of inquiry specifically in the context of ghosting, Park and Klein (2024) demonstrated that ghostees tend to underestimate how much ghosters actually care about them, a misperception of ghosters' other-oriented motives that can exacerbate the pain of the rejection.

The current paper examines the inverse: whether people also underestimate how bad others will feel after knowingly engaging in an antisocial act (i.e., ghosting). In general, people tend to feel bad about behaving antisocially, also known as the "hurting you hurts me too" effect, where hurting others imposes psychological costs on the actor as well (Baumeister et al., 1994; Legate et al., 2013; Monin & Jordan, 2009). Understanding the ghoster's perspective is useful because their internal emotional state - rather than just the outward act of silence - likely dictates the possibility of future reconciliation. However, because any negative feelings of an antisocial actor are internal, they may not be fully recognized by the person receiving the act. Indeed, victims tend to underestimate how guilty their transgressors feel for everyday social transgressions (Adams & Inesi, 2016). For example, in one study, people underestimated how guilty a colleague would feel about breaking their mug. Extending from this research on minor everyday transgressions to the antisocial act of ghosting, we think people may feel worse about ghosting (committing a social transgression) than their conversation partners who are being ghosted (the "victims") realize.

We specifically hypothesize that people will underestimate how bad their conversation partners (i.e., ghosters) feel about their lack of response. Such emotional miscalibration is worth studying because it may undermine willingness to reconnect with a seemingly indifferent ghoster. We further examine several possible moderators of this hypothesis. In particular, how bad ghosters feel is likely to be a function of their *subjective perception* of how severely they transgressed in the conversation. This suggests at least two potential moderators. For one, the underestimation of ghosters' pain might be stronger for unintentional ghosting, because ghosters who did not mean to ghost may feel worse about their bad behavior (but ghostees may not

recognize this). Second, if ghosters do not perceive their own behavior as ghosting – for example, not realizing that the other person was expecting a response - they will likewise probably feel less bad about their behavior, bringing their emotional response into more alignment with their conversation partner's expectations. A third possible moderator we test is whether a short, low-effort response can mitigate the emotional miscalibration regarding ghosters. Because perfunctory responses can also seem potentially rude (e.g., "busy!"), responders may still feel bad when sending them (e.g., because the response feels suboptimal) but they might not feel *as* bad as if they had not responded at all, and their conversation partners might be more accurate in recognizing their emotional reaction.

We test our hypotheses, and the exploratory moderators, in three experiments. Study 1 uses a recall paradigm to examine whether ghosters do indeed feel worse than ghostees realize in real-world situations. It also examines whether any potential underestimation of ghosters' pain is stronger for unintentional ghosting. Study 2 conceptually replicates this misprediction in a scenario study between people imagining ghosting or being ghosted, and between people imagining giving or receiving a short response instead, testing a broader array of situations and further testing whether sending a low-effort response can mitigate the misprediction. Finally, Study 3 tests our hypotheses in live conversations by pairing people to have conversations and encouraging one person to ghost the other. Study 3 also examines whether the effect is moderated by how much a ghoster recognizes their own behavior as "ghosting" and whether people's beliefs about how bad ghosters feel relate to their interest in developing a future relationship with the ghoster. See Table 1 for an overview of studies with the key results.

The current research offers several contributions. First, we advance the ghosting literature by shifting the focus from the *outcome* of relationship dissolution to the subjective *process*

occurring during the silence. This captures the psychological dynamics that define communication lapses (Brazeau et al., 2024; Büttner & Lutz, 2025), regardless of whether they result in a finite ending or a temporary delay. Second, we expand affective misprediction research by examining when people may fail to fully recognize the "transgressor distress" (Legate et al., 2013) and guilt (Baumeister et al., 1994) that ghosters internalize following an antisocial act. Finally, this work has potential implications for improving social reconciliation. By revealing that ghosters feel worse than ghostees realize, our findings suggest a potential for relationship reconciliation. Bridging the affective gap between conversation partners could help people preserve potentially reparable connections and foster more resilient social bonds.

Table 1

Summary of results

Study and Sample	N	Description of Tested Paradigm	Ghosters' or Responders' Actual Bad Feelings *M (SD)*	Predictions of Ghosters' or Responders' Bad Feelings *M (SD)*	Comparison of Actual and Predicted Ghoster (or Responder) Feelings
1 (Recall) – All participants	195	Participants recalled a time when the participant ghosted (n = 101) or was ghosted (n = 94)	2.27 (1.07)	1.56 (0.73)	$t(177.22) = 5.41$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.77$
1 (Recall) – Participants who perceived *unintended* ghosting	84	→ Participants who ghosted (n = 34) or were ghosted (n = 50), and perceived the ghosting to be unintentional[1]	2.62 (1.18)	1.50 (0.76)	$t(51.58) = 4.87$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.17$
2 (Scenario) – All participants (imagining ghosting)	601	Participants imagined ghosting (n = 301) or being ghosted (n = 300)	3.23 (1.19)	1.94 (1.01)	$t(584.68) = 14.20$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.16$
2 (Scenario) – All participants (imagining responding)	601	Participants imagined sending (n = 301) or receiving (n = 300) a short response	2.33 (1.18)	1.82 (0.85)	$t(545.29) = 6.06$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.49$
3 (Live Ghosting) – All participants	350	Participants ghosted their partner (n = 175) or were ghosted (n = 175)	3.26 (1.11)	3.35 (0.86)	paired $t(174) = 0.92$, $p = .357$, $d = 0.07$
3 (Live Ghosting) – Participants who perceived the lack of response as ghosting	121	→ Participants who ghosted (n = 46) or were ghosted (n = 75), and perceived the lack of response to be ghosting[2]	3.93 (0.98)	3.51 (1.01)	$t(97.54) = 2.32$, $p = .023$, $d = 0.43$
3 (Live Ghosting) – Non-ghosting participants	108	→ Participants who did not ghost (n = 54) and were not ghosted (n = 54) imagined if they had ghosted or been ghosted (i.e., counterfactual beliefs)	4.22 (0.84)	3.24 (0.64)	paired $t(53) = 6.84$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.93$

Note. The response scale labels for ghosters' or responders' feelings and the predictions of them range from 1 = "not bad at all" to 5 = "extremely bad" in Studies 1 and 2, and from 1 = "extremely good" to 5 = "extremely bad" in Study 3.

[1]In Study 1, we asked both ghosters and ghostees: "Overall, to what extent [did you / do you think they] intentionally [choose/ chose] not to respond?" (1 = "completely accidental" to 5 = "completely on purpose"). We report results for the participants who perceived their or their conversation partner's behavior to be unintentional ghosting by reporting a value on the response scale below the midpoint of 3.

[2]In Study 3, we asked both conversation partners: "To what extent do you consider [your / your partner's] behavior to be ghosting (not responding to the other person when they are expecting a response)?" (1 = "not at all" to 5 = "extremely"). We report results for the participants who perceived their or their partner's behavior to be ghosting by reporting a value on the response scale above the midpoint of 3.

Disclosure Statement

We report how we determined our sample size, all data exclusions (if any), all manipulations, and all measures in each study. We report deviations from preregistrations in Table S1. All materials, data, and analysis scripts are available at https://osf.io/8w59r/?view_only=7479312c3e93464b9cde9805c166b061.

Study 1: Recalled Ghosting

In Study 1, we asked people to recall times when they ghosted a friend or were ghosted, testing whether people underestimate how bad the conversation partners who ghost them feel. Beyond measuring conversation partners' bad feelings at large, we also measured more specific emotions that could occur both before and after the ghosting experience (e.g., anger, guilt) to get a better sense of each party's full emotional experience. Finally, we explored how people's intentions to ghost their conversation partner were related to the expected and actual negative feelings of the ghosters, because we thought people who ghost accidentally (i.e., less intentionally) might feel worse about their behavior.

Method

We preregistered this study at https://aspredicted.org/z47m-48rb.pdf on February 1, 2023, before data collection started on February 2, 2023. Given this study was run earlier in the research process, we listed a broader set of hypotheses than the ones we ultimately focused on when writing the paper. The additional hypotheses are reported below. Table S1 lists deviations from the preregistrations for all studies.

Materials, data, and analysis scripts for all studies are available at https://osf.io/8w59r/?view_only=7479312c3e93464b9cde9805c166b061.

Participants

We opened the study to 200 participants from Prolific who had 95%+ approval rates, 100+ previous submissions, and were fluent in English, hoping to get about 100 people in each of our two experimental conditions based on typical standards in the field (Brysbaert, 2019). In total, 203 individuals completed the entire survey and, as preregistered, we excluded 8 participants who could not recall a relevant situation, leaving us with a final sample of 195 adults (M_{age} = 37.44 years, SD_{age} = 12.53; 50.26% male, 46.15% female, 3.59% other gender; 65.13% White, 9.23% Asian, 11.79% Black, 4.62% Hispanic, 9.23% other race; with median education level an associate degree in college). Participants earned $1.60 for participating in the study, which on average took 8.36 minutes. The final sample size of 195 gave us power to detect a Cohen's d of 0.40 at a statistical significance level of .05 with 80% power for a two-sided t-test.

Procedure

This experiment uses a two-condition between-subjects experimental design (ghoster or ghostee condition). Participants were randomly assigned to recall either the last time when they didn't respond to another person (ghoster condition) or the last time when someone didn't respond to them (ghostee condition). Specifically, participants in the [ghoster / ghostee] condition were instructed to "Please recall the last time when you were communicating with someone online (e.g., texting, emailing, using WhatsApp, Snapchatting, using Marco Polo, etc.), and **you didn't [respond to a message / receive a response] or haven't [responded to them / received a response] for a fairly long time.**" We selected several of the most common online

communication channels as examples in the prompt. We further encouraged participants to check their phone for the last time ghosting happened to mitigate the potential for biased recollections (e.g., participants might be more likely to recall particularly extreme instances): "Check the messaging apps on your phone to make sure you are thinking about the last time this happened." We specified that the relationship partner who participants recalled should be neither a complete stranger nor a close friend or family member: "In particular, please recall a situation of you and someone with whom you had / have a personal relationship, but who you would NOT consider a current close friend or immediate family member." We focused on non-close acquaintances because it represents a potentially important subjective threshold for ghosting. Close friends and family may have the relational security to interpret silence as temporary unavailability rather than ghosting; acquaintances lack this trust buffer, making silence more likely to be appraised as a definitive social exit (Smart Richman & Leary, 2009). On the other end of the spectrum, we wanted to exclude complete strangers, as people may not have strong emotional reactions.

After participants recalled an instance of ghosting or being ghosted, they provided descriptive information about the conversation (e.g., to whom they were talking, the nature of the relationship) and reported their beliefs about the ghosting experience (e.g., how intentional it seemed, the reasons why it happened). Then, they reported their reactions to the experience: how much they felt different discrete emotions (e.g., anger, guilt) both before and after the ghoster stopped responding and our key measures of 1) how bad they felt and 2) how bad they believed the other person felt (only after the ghosting experience). Participants also reported practical consequences of the interaction (e.g., whether the relationship ended). Finally, participants reported their personality and demographic information.

Measures

Bad feelings. Both ghosters and ghostees reported how bad they actually felt and how bad they thought the other person felt due to the lack of response ("How badly [did you feel / do you think the other person felt] after [you / the other person] stopped responding (for example, feeling guilty, ashamed, etc.)?", 1 = "not bad at all", 5 = "extremely bad").

Discrete emotions. In addition to reports and predictions of feeling bad, ghosters and ghostees reported how much they felt on each of eight discrete emotions[2] – "Angry", "Sad", "Anxious", "Disgusted", "Guilty", "Relieved", "Happy", and "Calm" - in a matrix table (1 = "not at all", 5 = "an extreme amount"), both before the ghosting and after the ghosting. They also predicted the other person's emotions after ghosting.

Intentionality: ghosters' actual intentions and ghostees' predictions. Ghosters rated how intentionally they chose not to respond ("Overall, to what extent did you intentionally choose not to respond?") and ghostees predicted ghosters' intentions ("Overall, to what extent do you think they intentionally chose not to respond?"; 1 = "completely accidental" to 5 = "completely on purpose" for both).

Other measures. We included several other measures that we briefly report below along with high-level results. For more details on these measures and our analyses, see the Supplementary Material.

To measure descriptive information about the interaction, participants reported how long it had been since the ghostee had last messaged (Median = 10 days) and whether the ghostee had followed up after being ghosted (28.72% had). Participants also reported the nature of their

[2] The first four emotions were selected from a well-validated factor analysis of common negative state emotions (Harmon-Jones et al., 2016). We added "guilty" and "relieved" because prior qualitative research suggests that ghosters experience these emotions (Freedman et al., 2024; J. O. Thomas & Dubar, 2021; Yap et al., 2021). We included "calm" and "happy" because we wanted to measure a few neutral and/or positive emotions as well.

relationship with the other person in three ways. First, they reported their relationship type ("How would you best describe this person's relationship to you?") from the following options: "a stranger" (4.6%), "an acquaintance" (34.4%), "a friend" (46.2%), "immediate family or very close friend" (8.7%), and "other" (6.2%). Second, they reported the relationship context ("How would you best describe the context of your relationship?") from the following options: "dating context" (8.2%), "friendship context" (59.0%), "family context" (8.2%), "work context" (17.9%), and "other" (6.7%). Third, they reported the relationship closeness ("How close were you to the other person at the time of their last message?", 1 = "not at all close", 5 = "extremely close") at the time when the ghosting happened (M = 2.37, SD = 1.10, M_{ghostee} = 2.48, M_{ghoster} = 2.28). Relationship type, context, or closeness did not statistically significantly moderate our main result.

To further examine beliefs about the ghosting experience, we asked participants to report the degree to which they agreed with each of six possible reasons for why the ghosting occurred (1 = "strongly disagree" to 5 = "strongly agree"): "[ghoster] meant to respond but just forgot", "[ghoster] needed to spend more time thinking about the response", "[ghoster] didn't want to discuss the topic", "the conversation was not that important to [ghoster] at that moment", "[ghostee] was bothering [ghoster] or making [ghoster] uncomfortable", "[ghostee] wasn't expecting a response"[3], where [ghostee/ghoster] were replaced with "I", "me", or "the other

[3] Situations in which the ghostee was not expecting a response may not constitute ghosting but rather a natural conversation ending. We therefore conducted a robustness check excluding participants who agreed or strongly agreed that the ghostee was not expecting a response (ratings of 4 or 5 on the Likert scale; n = 31 and n = 9, respectively). Excluding these 40 participants retains 75% of the data, and the primary result remains highly significant: ghostees still underestimated ghosters' bad feelings ($M_{\text{ghoster actual}}$ = 2.37, SD = 1.06; $M_{\text{ghostee predicted}}$ = 1.61, SD = 0.69), $t(147.07) = 5.39$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.83$.

person" accordingly. See the Supplement for summary statistics and details on perspective differences between ghostees' inferred and ghosters' reported reasons for ghosting.

To measure practical consequences of the interaction, we asked participants to indicate whether the relationship had ended and whether they thought the lack of response improved or worsened the relationship ("How do you think [your / the other person's] lack of response has affected your relationship with [the other person / them]?", 1 = "the relationship has worsened significantly", 5 = "the relationship has improved significantly"). The majority (80%) of relationships did not end, though on average, participants reported that the lack of response worsened the relationship (M = 2.57, SD = 0.74, between 2 = "the relationship has worsened" and 3 = "the relationship has not changed"). Ghostees' predictions of how bad ghosters felt did not correlate with perceptions of whether the relationship had improved or worsened nor the relationship's continuation.

Finally, participants reported their personality traits on the 15-item BFI-XS; (Soto & John, 2017) and demographic information.

Results

Bad feelings. Supporting our primary hypothesis, ghosters reported feeling worse (M = 2.27, SD = 1.07) than ghostees predicted that ghosters felt (M = 1.56, SD = 0.73), $t(177.22)$ = 5.41, $p < .001$, d = 0.77, 95% CI [0.51, 1.06]. However, we did not find a difference between how bad *ghostees* reported feeling (M = 2.11, SD = 1.05) and how bad ghosters predicted ghostees felt (M = 2.11, SD = 1.10), $t(192.89)$ = 0.02, p = .987, $d < 0.01$. (The difference between ghosters' predictions and ghostees' bad feelings varies across studies, and we report those analyses in the Supplementary Material in the remaining studies.)

Discrete emotions. Consistent with our main result that ghostees underestimated how bad ghosters reported feeling after they ghosted, we found that ghostees specifically underestimated how much ghosters reported feeling guilty ($M_{\text{ghoster actual}} = 2.35$, $SD = 1.28$; $M_{\text{ghostee predicted}} = 1.85$, $SD = 0.99$), $t(186.92) = 3.02$, $p = .003$, $d = 0.43$, and sad ($M_{\text{ghoster actual}} = 1.84$, $SD = 1.02$; $M_{\text{ghostee predicted}} = 1.46$, $SD = 0.80$), $t(187.77) = 2.94$, $p = .004$, $d = .42$, but ghostees also slightly underestimated ghosters' relief ($M_{\text{ghoster actual}} = 1.89$, $SD = 1.24$; $M_{\text{ghostee predicted}} = 1.56$, $SD = 0.98$), $t(188.07) = 2.05$, $p = .042$, $d = 0.29$.

Ghosters were fairly accurate about how bad ghostees felt, except that they slightly overestimated how angry ghostees reported feeling ($M_{\text{ghostee actual}} = 1.52$, $SD = 0.96$; $M_{\text{ghoster predicted}} = 1.87$, $SD = 1.10$), $t(192.15) = 2.37$, $p = .019$, $d = 0.34$.

These results refer to predicted and reported emotions after the ghosting, though we also collected the same self-reported emotions (without predictions) before ghosting. Summary statistics for all predicted and self-reported emotions for both perspectives before and after ghosting are in Table S3 of the Supplementary Material.

Intentionality. Ghosters reported leaving their conversations with more intentionality ($M = 3.75$, $SD = 1.29$) than ghostees predicted ($M = 3.19$, $SD = 1.25$), $t(192.74) = 3.09$, $p = .002$, $d = 0.44$. This result was the opposite of our preregistered hypothesis, whereby we thought ghostees might overestimate the extent to which they were ghosted because of something they did. However, in these data, ghosters recalled relatively intentional decisions to end conversations.

We explored how ghosters' intentionality, and ghostees' predictions about it, were related to each party's feelings about ghosting. Ghosters who had less intention to ghost reported feeling worse about doing so, $r = -.29$, $p = .003$. Yet ghostees failed to recognize this and did not think

that ghosters' intentionality correlated with ghosters' bad feelings, $r = -.002$, $p = .987$. Thus, ghosters' intentionality moderated ghostees' underestimation: a linear model testing the effect of perspective (ghoster/ghostee) and actual/perceived intentionality of ghosting on ghosters' actual/predicted bad feelings showed an interaction between perspective and intentionality, $b = 0.23$, $SE = 0.10$, $t(191) = 2.30$, $p = .022$. Decomposing this result, among participants who reported that intentionality to ghost was below the scale midpoint (i.e., 1 = "completely accidental" or 2 = "somewhat accidental" on the 5-point scale), ghostees' underestimation of ghosters' bad feelings was stronger ($M_{ghoster} = 2.62$, $SD = 1.18$; $M_{ghostee} = 1.50$, $SD = 0.76$), $t(51.58) = 4.87$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.17$, than for participants who reported that intentionality was at or above the midpoint ($M_{ghoster} = 2.09$, $SD = 0.97$; $M_{ghostee} = 1.64$, $SD = 0.69$), $t(108.28) = 2.89$, $p = .005$, $d = 0.52$.

Discussion

Overall, Study 1 suggests that people feel worse about ghosting than others realize. In particular, ghosters reported feeling guiltier and sadder - but also feeling more relieved - than ghostees predicted. The misprediction of several of ghosters' emotional experiences help capture the unique psychological tension ghosters face between the functional desire for social avoidance (Baxter, 1982; Timmermans et al., 2021) and the prosocial guilt of violating communicative norms (Baumeister et al., 1994; Freedman et al., 2024). For instance, ghosters' relief in ending the interaction likely reflects how aversive it was for them; the underestimation of their relief suggests that ghostees may not fully appreciate the negative toll the interaction exerted on ghosters.

Supplementary Study S1 provides an additional demonstration of people's underestimation of how bad ghosters felt in recalled interactions; specifically, participants were asked to recall the last time they were communicating with someone online and one person

"didn't respond for a longer period of time than usual or never responded". (Because it was unpreregistered, included additional exploratory measures, and did not measure intentionality, we only include a short summary describing this study in the Supplementary Material, but interested readers can find more details at https://osf.io/njrxy/?view_only=7479312c3e93464b9cde9805c166b061.)

We explored several possible moderators in the Supplementary Material and found no evidence that the relationship type, context, or closeness moderated the underestimation. Only intentionality moderated; people felt particularly bad about ghosting when they had *intended* to respond, yet ghostees did not recognize they would feel worse under such circumstances. This suggests that the underestimation of ghosters' bad feelings may be most pronounced when ghosters accidentally or unintentionally fail to respond - a possibility we continue to examine in future studies.

Study 2: Ghosting Versus Giving a Short Response

Study 2 tests our hypothesis using a different paradigm whereby participants imagined conversations in which one person either completely ghosts another (by not responding) or gives a short response ("Sorry, but I can't talk right now"). The short response still fails to fulfill the sender's immediate request for interaction, but it might help reduce the ambiguity that characterizes ghosting. It is possible that people who write short responses feel bad about not responding in more depth, but that the response-receivers are relatively more accurate in estimating their conversation partner's bad feelings relative to the people who do not receive any response at all. By measuring beliefs when a response is given compared to when no response is given, we test whether the perceived underestimation of bad feelings can be mitigated with even a short, low-effort response.

For this study, we measured only the discrete emotions that showed statistically significant mispredictions in Study 1 and that we identified as potential outcomes of interest from our literature review. These emotions were guilt (J. O. Thomas & Dubar, 2021; Yap et al., 2021) and relief (Freedman et al., 2024) for ghosters/responders[4] and anger for ghostees/receivers (Campaioli et al., 2022; Williams, 2009). We measured different emotions for ghostees and ghosters to reflect the psychological asymmetry of the ghosting dyad. Whereas ghosters manage social debt, ghostees primarily experience a threat to fundamental needs, which typically manifests as reactive anger (i.e., the Temporal Need-Threat Model; Williams, 2009; Campaioli et al., 2022). By measuring these role-specific emotions, we provide a more granular and theoretically aligned account of how ghosting impacts both sides of the exchange.

Method

We preregistered this study on August 19, 2025 at https://aspredicted.org/j34s-vh24.pdf before data collection started on August 19, 2025.

Participants

We opened the study to 600 participants from Prolific, hoping to get about 60 people in each perspective-context condition based on a heuristic judgment. In total, 601 individuals completed the entire survey (M_{age} = 42.15 years, SD_{age} = 12.8). Our participants were 47.9% male, 50.6% female, 1.5% other gender; 65.1% White, 9.0% Asian, 15.0% Black, 6.2% Hispanic, 4.8% other race; with median education level a bachelor's degree in college. Participants earned $1.00 for participating in the study, which on average took 6.75 minutes. The final sample size of 601

[4] Although sadness also showed a statistically significant misprediction in Study 1, we prioritized the "guilt-relief" pair to better represent this conflicting, mixed-feeling experience of the ghoster as discussed in prior work (Freedman et al., 2024).

gave us power to detect a Cohen's *d* of 0.23 at a statistical significance level of .05 with 80% power for a two-sided t-test.

Procedure

This experiment employs a 2 (perspective: ghoster/responder vs ghostee/receiver, between-subjects) × 2 (response type: ghosting/being ghosted vs. giving/receiving a short response; within-subjects) mixed design, such that participants were assigned to one perspective but completed both response type conditions in a randomized order. For the ghosters/responders only, we additionally manipulated the reason for not wanting to respond using three conditions between-subjects: their conversation partner was bothering them, they didn't have bandwidth to respond, or that the conversation was not interesting. In contrast, the ghostees/receivers were not given a reason but instead asked to infer one. Thus, the participants randomly assigned to be the ghoster/responder encountered a 2 (response type; within-subjects) × 3 (reason; between-subjects) experimental design whereas the other participants assigned to be the ghostee/receiver encountered a 2 (response type; within-subjects) experimental design. Additionally, for stimuli sampling purposes, we varied the conversation context for all participants (five contexts randomly assigned between-subjects): sharing opinions, emotional support, making plans, catching up, asking for help. Each participant viewed one context across both response type conditions.

Specifically, participants in the ghostee/receiver condition read about a scenario where they were messaging a friend who they didn't know very well and wanted to talk to them about one of the five conversation contexts. They read that they had texted back and forth with the friend a couple of times in the last few hours, and that they had just asked a question to the friend. Then, they learned that either the friend did not respond at all (ghost condition) or that the friend responded by writing "Sorry, but I can't talk right now" without writing anything further

(short response condition). An example of one such scenario in the “ghosted” condition and the “sharing opinions” context (with the bolded text changed based on experimental condition) is shown below. We provide all scenarios in the Supplementary Material.

Imagine that you are messaging a friend who you don't know very well.

You want to talk to them about **something you saw on the news**

You've texted back and forth a couple of times in the last few hours.

Now, the last message you sent is, **"What do you think of this?"**

Your friend **did not respond at all to the last message.**

After participants read each scenario, they completed an attention check (e.g., “How did [you / your friend] respond to [your friend / you]?”). If they answered incorrectly, they were shown the correct answer and allowed to proceed. Then, they reported their imagined reactions to this experience: how bad they would feel and how bad they thought the other person would feel, and how much they would feel different discrete emotions after their friend stopped responding or gave a short response. We measured perceptions of guilt and relief for ghosters/responders and anger for ghostees/receivers. The ghostees/receivers additionally selected a reason for why they thought their friend did or did not respond, out of the three reasons we gave the ghosters/responders. Given that these were only imagined situations, we did not ask about intentions to ghost in this study. Participants also completed several exploratory measures (for an overview, see the “other measures” section below).

Participants repeated the aforementioned procedure for the other response type: If they had just read about being ghosted, they then read the same scenario and answered the same questions except that they instead imagined receiving a short response, or vice versa.

Finally, participants indicated how realistic the scenario was and reported their demographic information.

Measures

Bad feelings. As in the previous studies, both ghosters/responders and ghostees/receivers rated how bad they felt (e.g., "How badly would you feel because [you / the other person] didn't respond at all?" or "How badly would you feel because [you / the other person] responded with 'Sorry, but I can't talk right now'?") and predicted the other person's bad feelings (e.g., "How badly do you think your friend would feel because [you / they] didn't respond at all?" or "How badly do you think your friend would feel because [you / they] responded with 'Sorry, but I can't talk right now'?") on Likert response scales ranging from 1 = "not bad at all" to 5 = "extremely bad".

Discrete emotions. Ghosters/responders reported how guilty ("How guilty would you feel because you didn't respond at all?") and relieved ("How relieved would you feel because you didn't respond at all?") they would feel, whereas ghostees/receivers predicted their friend's emotions on the same items ("How guilty/relieved do you think your friend would feel because they didn't respond at all?", 1 = "not guilty/relieved at all" to 5 = "extremely guilty/relieved").

Ghostees/receivers reported how angry they would feel ("How angry would you feel because your friend didn't respond at all?", 1 = "not angry at all" to 5 = "extremely angry"), and how they would feel towards their friend as a result of their friend's behavior (e.g., "How negatively or positively would you feel toward your friend because they didn't respond at all?", 1 = "extremely positive" to 5 = "extremely negative"). Ghosters/responders predicted their friend's anger and feelings towards them.

Inferred reasons for ghosting or responding. Whereas the ghosters/responders were given a randomly assigned reason for their behavior, the ghostees/receivers inferred what they thought the most likely reason for the non-response or response was (e.g., "Which of the following reasons do you think is the most likely for your friend's decision to not respond at all?"), choosing one option from the following set: "you were annoying them", "they didn't have the bandwidth to respond", and "the conversation was not that interesting to them".

Other measures. Like in Study 1, we again collected several other measures that we briefly report below along with high-level results; for additional details, see the Supplementary Materials. First, we collected the perceived likelihood of the ghostees/receivers sending a follow-up message. Ghostees/receivers were more likely to send a follow-up message when they thought ghosters/responders felt worse. We think this suggests a potential consequence of the underestimation of ghosters' bad feelings (i.e., that conversation partners will be less likely to follow up with ghosters) but given that this was just a hypothetical scenario, we explore this potential consequence in more detail in Study 3. Second, we measured perceptions of how effective the response or non-response was at achieving different conversational goals (e.g., reducing awkwardness, getting out of the conversation easily). Unsurprisingly, participants in both conditions thought that sending a short response was better at achieving each conversational goal. Finally, we asked participants to rate how realistic the scenario was; the scenarios were seen as relatively realistic (M = 3.79, SD = 1.02, between 3 = "moderately realistic" and 4 = "very realistic").

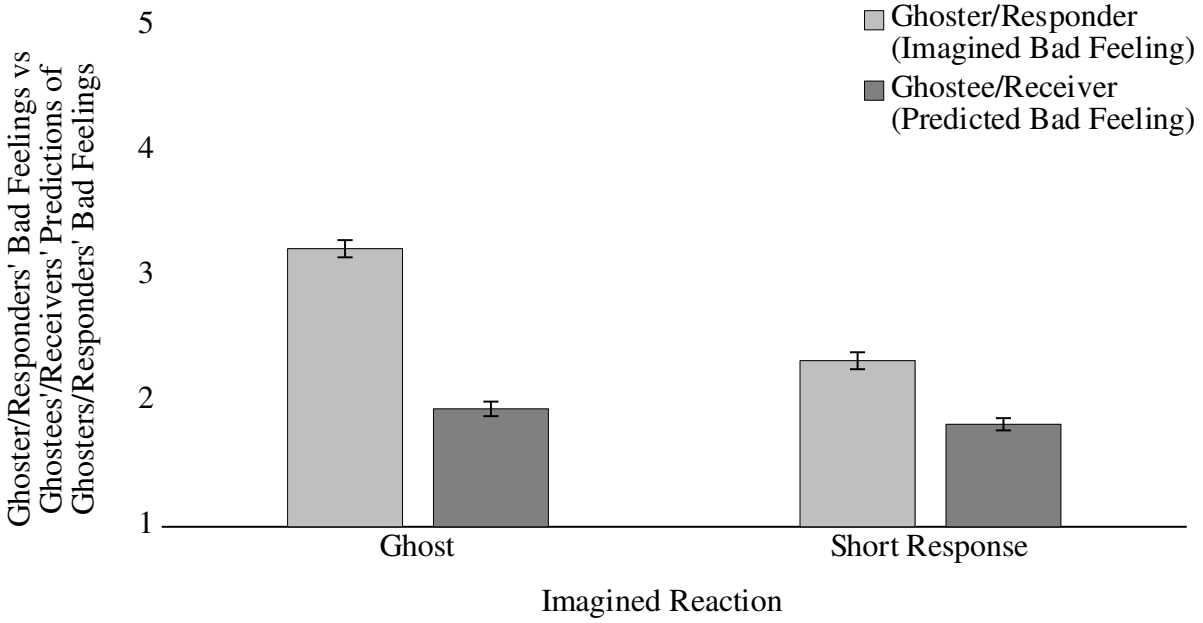
Results

Bad feelings. We conducted a mixed-model ANOVA of how bad participants imagined that ghosters/responders would feel on perspective (ghoster/responder vs ghostee/receiver) and response type (ghosting vs short response, within-subjects). Conceptually replicating Study 1, we found a main effect[5] of perspective such that ghosters/responders imagined they would feel worse (M = 2.78, SD = 1.27) than ghostees/receivers predicted they would (M = 1.88, SD = 0.94), F(1, 1198) = 210.93, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.150$. Unsurprisingly, there was also a main effect of response type such that participants reported/predicted that people would feel worse about ghosting (M = 2.45, SD = 1.33) than responding (M = 2.09, SD = 1.09), F(1, 1198) = 68.60, $p < .001$, η^2 = 0.054. We found an interaction between perspective and response type, F(1, 1198) = 39.34, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.032$, such that the underestimation of how bad a conversation partner would feel about ghosting ($M_{\text{ghoster imagined}}$ = 3.23, SD = 1.19; $M_{\text{ghostee prediction}}$ = 1.94, SD = 1.01) was larger than the underestimation for how bad they would feel about giving a short response ($M_{\text{responder imagined}}$ = 2.33, SD = 1.18; $M_{\text{receiver prediction}}$ = 1.82, SD = 0.85; see Figure 1). See the Supplementary Material for robustness checks and analyses of ghostees'/receivers' reactions.

[5]We preregistered that we would conduct simple t-tests to test the main effects of perspective and response type, but report them here in the main text using the ANOVA main effect to account for the within-subjects structure of the response type condition. The main effect of perspective remains highly significant in a simple t-test, t(1107.05) = 13.93, $p < .001$, d = 0.80, 95% CI [0.69, 0.93], as is the main effect of response type, paired t(600) = 10.07, $p < .001$, d = 0.41, 95% CI [0.33, 0.49].

Figure 1

How bad ghosters/responders felt as a function of their imagined reaction (either ghosting or providing a short response), compared to their ghostees'/receivers' predictions of their bad feelings in Study 2



Note. Error bars show standard errors. Bad feelings are measured on a Likert scale ranging from 1 ("not bad at all") to 5 ("extremely bad").

Discrete emotions. We also conducted mixed-model ANOVAs of ghosters' guilt on perspective (ghoster/responder vs ghostee/receiver, between-subjects) and response type (ghosting vs short response, within-subjects). Consistent with our main result and with Study 1, we observed a main effect of perspective such that ghostees/receivers underestimated how guilty ghosters/responders felt ($M_{\text{ghoster imagined}} = 2.81$, $SD = 1.29$; $M_{\text{ghostee predicted}} = 1.96$, $SD = 0.97$), $F(1, 1198) = 178.07$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.129$. We also observed a main effect of response type such that participants thought ghosters would feel more guilty ($M = 2.66$, $SD = 1.28$) than responders ($M = 2.11$, $SD = 1.10$), $F(1, 1198) = 74.03$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.058$. As with ghosters' bad feelings, we also observed an interaction between perspective and response type, $F(1, 1198) = 21.30$, $p < .001$,

$\eta^2 = 0.017$, such that receivers underestimated responders' guilt ($M_{\text{responder imagined}} = 2.39$, $SD = 1.23$; $M_{\text{receiver predicted}} = 1.83$, $SD = 0.86$) less than ghostees underestimated ghosters' guilt ($M_{\text{ghoster imagined}} = 3.23$, $SD = 1.21$; $M_{\text{ghostee predicted}} = 2.08$, $SD = 1.06$).

We also conducted mixed-model ANOVAs of ghosters' relief on perspective (ghoster/responder vs ghostee/receiver, between-subjects) and response type (ghosting vs short response, within-subjects). Consistent with Study 1, we observed a main effect of perspective such that ghostees/receivers again underestimated how relieved ghosters/responders felt, ($M_{\text{ghoster imagined}} = 2.52$, $SD = 1.32$; $M_{\text{ghostee predicted}} = 2.15$, $SD = 1.15$), $F(1, 1198) = 28.95$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.024$, and a main effect of response type such that participants thought ghosters ($M = 2.12$, $SD = 1.24$) would feel less relieved than responders ($M = 2.56$, $SD = 1.22$), $F(1, 1198) = 39.80$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.032$. However, this was driven entirely by the short responses; we observed an interaction between perspective and response type, $F(1, 1198) = 26.00$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.021$, such that receivers underestimated how relieved responders felt ($M_{\text{responder imagined}} = 2.92$, $SD = 1.27$; $M_{\text{receiver predicted}} = 2.19$, $SD = 1.06$). Unlike in Study 1, ghostees were relatively accurate about how relieved ghosters felt ($M_{\text{ghoster imagined}} = 2.13$, $SD = 1.25$; $M_{\text{ghostee predicted}} = 2.11$, $SD = 1.23$).

Inferred reasons. In an ANOVA of reports/predictions of bad feelings on perspective and inferred/assigned reason, there were main effects of reason such that both parties thought that ghosters/responders would feel worse when their behavior was due to not having the bandwidth to respond ($M_{\text{imagined}} = 2.90$, $SD = 1.27$; $M_{\text{predicted}} = 1.97$, $SD = 0.94$), compared to when it was due to the conversation not being that interesting ($M_{\text{imagined}} = 2.74$, $SD = 1.22$; $M_{\text{predicted}} = 1.85$, $SD = 0.95$) or when they were annoyed ($M_{\text{imagined}} = 2.69$, $SD = 1.31$; $M_{\text{predicted}} = 1.76$, $SD = 0.91$). There was no interaction between perspective and reasons, $F(2, 1190) = 0.093$, $p = .911$, $\eta^2 < .001$.

Ghostees'/receivers' inferences about why their friend responded (or didn't respond) differed based on whether they got a short response or were ghosted, $\chi^2(2) = 33.03$, $p < .001$. When they were ghosted, the ghostees inferred that each of the reasons seemed similarly likely (34.3% inferred no bandwidth, 33.7% thought the conversation wasn't that interesting, and 32.0% thought they were annoying their friend). However, when there was a response, receivers were very likely to think their friend did not have the bandwidth to respond (57.7%), compared to thinking the conversation was uninteresting (22.7%) or they were annoying their friend (19.7%).

Discussion

Conceptually consistent with Study 1, participants reported feeling worse when they imagined ghosting their friend than when they imagined *being* the ghosted friend in the same scenario, making predictions about the ghoster's bad feelings. However, this underestimation weakened with a relatively simple, low-effort intervention; participants who imagined a short response showed less underestimation of bad feelings than people who imagined ghosting.

This pattern of results was consistent with ghosters' and responders' feelings of guilt and relief: sending a short response led the responders to feel significantly less guilty and more relieved than the ghosters, and people particularly underestimated ghosters' guilt. Furthermore, receiving a response compared to simply ghosting helped reduce conversation partners blaming themselves for their friend's reaction or lack thereof.

In Supplemental Study S2, we replicate these results when comparing imagined/predicted ghosters' feelings about ghosting to an even more perfunctory response ("busy at the moment"). An interesting direction for future research could be exploring the characteristics of response that help align emotional experiences with predictions. For example, the responses we tested contain an explanation ("can't talk" or busy") and an implicit promise of future communication ("right

now" or "at the moment"), which may provide meaningful signals regarding the emotional state of the sender.

Study 3: Live Ghosting

Our final study seeks to improve external validity by conceptually replicating our previous findings in a real, live-ghosting experiment among people getting to know each other in online conversations. After an initial conversation, we gave one person the option to skip a second conversation (thus, ghosting their partner) while the other person had to sit in the chat window waiting for their partner to join (thus, being ghosted). We then examined both partners' feelings about the failed interaction and predictions of each other's feelings. We also tested whether people's belief that they had ghosted their partner (or been ghosted) mitigates the underestimation of bad feelings.

Methods

We preregistered this study at https://aspredicted.org/bqgf-fznc.pdf on August 22, 2024 before data collection started on August 29, 2024.

Participants

As preregistered, we initially opened the survey to 600 participants on Prolific, hoping to get complete data from at least 400 participants (200 pairs) in the final sample based on a heuristic judgment and cost limitations. We excluded 50 participants who did not find a partner within 5 minutes or experienced technical difficulties during the matching, 4 participants who timed out during the study, and 88 participants whose partners timed out during the study. This left us with a final sample of 458 participants, or 229 complete pairs. These participants were 41.0% male, 58.1% female, 0.9% other gender; 57.9% White, 8.3% Asian, 22.1% Black, 5% Hispanic, 6.8% other race, M_{age} = 38.37, SD_{age} = 11.89. Participants earned $5.50 for completing

the study, which on average took 21.11 minutes. As preregistered, our primary analyses only use data from the 175 pairs of participants (n = 350) where one conversation partner chose to ghost, i.e. skip the second conversation. These participants were 42.3% male, 56.6% female, 1.1% other gender; 56.6% White, 8.9% Asian, 22.6% Black, 4.6% Hispanic, 7.4% other race, M_{age} = 38.48, SD_{age} = 11.94. The final sample size of 175 pairs gave us power to detect a Cohen's d of 0.22 at a statistical significance level of .05 with 80% power for a paired two-sided t-test.

Procedure

This experiment employs a 2-condition (potential ghoster vs. potential ghostee between-subjects) experimental design. Participants first read about the study and completed an instructed attention check ("To ensure data quality, please select 'strongly disagree'"). Eleven potential participants who failed the attention check were not allowed to continue with the study. Eligible participants then waited up to 5 minutes to be matched with a partner. Once they were matched, they entered an 8-minute get-to-know you conversation with another participant. Previous research has found people can make meaningful relationship decisions even after very short conversations: For example, Finkel et al. (2007) and Eastwick and Finkel (2008) used 4-minute speed dating rounds, Larson and Tsitsos (2013) asked participants to reflect on 3 to 5-minute interactions, and Kardas et al. (2022) used 10-minute conversations to study how connected and happy the conversation partners felt. Thus, we thought 8 minutes would be sufficient time for people to form a connection.

During the conversation, participants were instructed to discuss questions designed to facilitate interpersonal closeness (Aron et al., 1997), e.g., "If you were going to become a close friend with your partner, please share what would be important for him or her to know." We

selected these questions because they build intimacy more quickly given the limited time (as shown in Kardas et al., 2022).

After 8 minutes, participants completed baseline measures of how they felt about the conversation and towards the other person, and how they thought the other person felt.

Then, participants read role-specific instructions before the second conversation. Participants in the "potential ghostee" condition read that they were going to have another conversation with the same person where they would ask their partner questions about their personality (e.g. "Are you someone who is dominant, acts as a leader?). The potential ghostees then selected three out of six questions that they would plan to ask their partner.

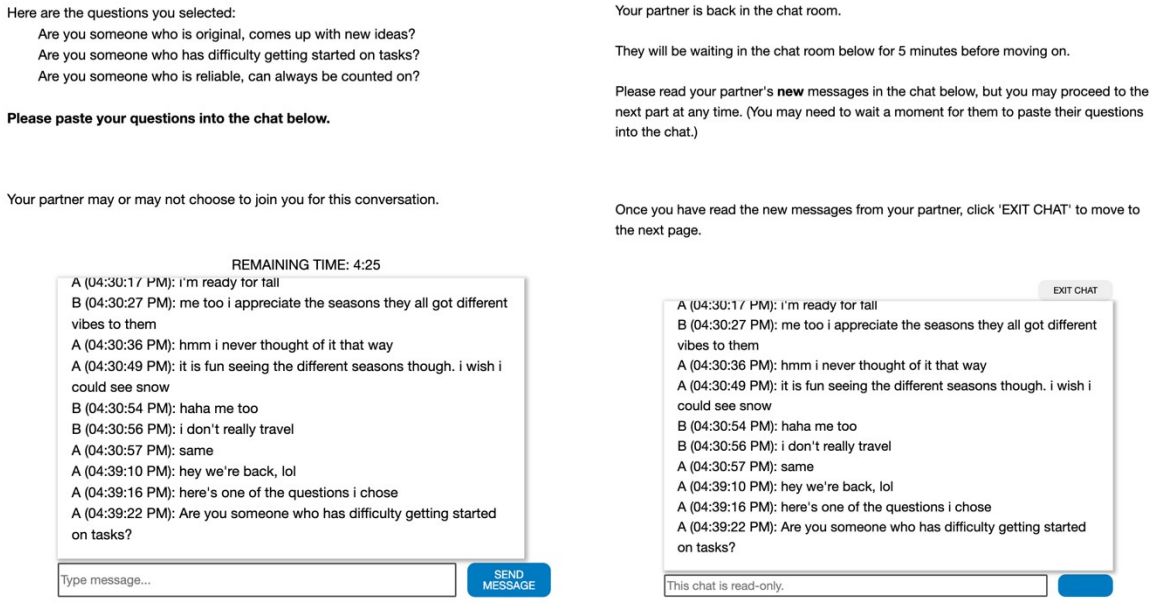
Participants in the "potential ghoster" condition were given the option to either "engage in a second 5-minute conversation with the same partner as before, during which you will be interviewed about your personality and write a short summary about it" or "skip the second 5-minute conversation and directly go to the last part of this study". We positioned skipping the conversation as more appealing ("directly go to the last part of the study" while receiving the same payment) because our primary analyses would only use participants who ghosted or were ghosted (i.e., participants who skipped the second conversation or whose partners chose to do so). Ghosters who chose to skip the conversation were then reminded that they had "chosen to skip the second conversation with [their] partner" and that they would "not be able to inform [their] partner that [they had] left and why." Responders, who chose to respond instead of ghosting, were able to continue the conversation with their partner in the chatbox in the next part.

Next, both participants were brought back to the same chatbox as before (shown in Figure 2). Potential ghostees were instructed to copy the questions they had chosen to ask into the chatbox and told that their "partner may or may not choose to join you for this conversation".

Ghosters saw a read-only chatbox and could read both old and new messages from the ghostees but could not type anything. They were instructed to read their partner's new messages but were allowed to move on from the chatbox page whenever they wanted. Ghostees had to stay on the chatbox page for five minutes. In pairs where responders responded, both parties carried on the conversation for five minutes.

Figure 2

Study 3 chat interface for a ghostee (left) and ghoster (right)



Then, both participants reported how they felt about the second interaction and the other person. Participants who ghosted or whose partners ghosted indicated how much they considered the behavior to be "ghosting" and their actual and inferred reasons for why they ghosted or were ghosted. Participants who continued with the second conversation indicated how they would feel and how they would predict their partner to feel if they had ghosted or been ghosted (i.e., counterfactual predictions). Finally, participants filled out their demographics and were debriefed. We also asked them to report whether they believed they were talking to a real person (versus an

AI), because we were concerned that they would feel less invested if they did not believe they were talking to another real participant.

Measures

After each conversation, participants reported the following measures in the order below. Since we only include pairs in which ghosting actually occurred for our primary analyses, the following measures of "ghoster" and "ghostee" refer to the actual ghosters and ghostees (unless otherwise indicated as "potential" ghosters and ghostees).

Manipulation check. Among pairs where the ghoster chose to skip the second conversation, both parties reported "To what extent do you consider [your / your partner's] behavior to be 'ghosting' (not responding to [the other person / you] when [they / you] are expecting a response)?" (1 = "not at all", 5 = "extremely").

Ghosters' feelings. Ghosters reported how good or bad they felt after the first conversation ("How good or bad do you feel about the first part of the study, given how you responded?") and the second conversation ("How good or bad do you feel about the second part of the study, given your [responses / lack of response]?"), on response scales ranging from 1 = "extremely good" to 5 = "extremely bad". Similarly, ghosters reported how positively or negatively they felt towards their partners after the first conversation ("How positively or negatively do you feel towards your partner?") and overall ("How positively or negatively do you feel towards your partner overall?") both on response scales ranging from 1 = "extremely positive" to 5 = "extremely negative". We also elicited ghostees' predictions of the ghosters' feelings for each part of the study, e.g., "How good or bad do you think your partner feels about the second part of the study, given their lack of response?".

For only the participants in the potential ghoster condition who chose *not* to ghost, we also asked counterfactual questions about how they and their partner would have felt if they had ghosted, for example: "If you had chosen to skip the conversation with your partner and left them alone in the waiting room for 5 minutes, how good or bad do you think you would feel?", 1 = "extremely good" to 5 = "extremely bad".

Interest in continuing the relationship. As in Study 2, we collected a potential behavioral outcome; both participants answered the questions, "How much would you want to develop a potential friendship with your partner?" and "How much do you think your partner would want to develop a potential friendship with you?" (1 = "not at all" to 5 = "very much") after both the first conversation and the second interaction.

Other measures. We again collected several other measures that we briefly report below along with high-level results. We measured ghostees' reactions: how bad they felt, how negatively they felt towards the ghoster, how much they would want to continue the relationship, and ghosters' predictions of these reactions. Ghosters slightly underestimated how bad ghostees felt after being ghosted and slightly overestimated how much ghosters would want to continue the relationship. We also measured inferences about the reasons for ghosting. Ghostees were most likely to think their partners left because the first conversation was not interesting, which ghosters correctly inferred. We also asked participants at the end of the study whether they thought their conversation partner was an AI; excluding these participants did not meaningfully change the results. For additional details, see the Supplementary Materials.

Results

Bad feelings. As preregistered, our primary analyses only use participant pairs where the potential ghoster actually chose to ghost, i.e., skip the second conversation. Unlike in past studies, we were surprised by a non-significant main effect of perspective; that is, ghostees did *not* significantly underestimate how bad ghosters felt ($M_{\text{ghoster actual}}$ = 3.26, SD = 1.11; $M_{\text{ghostee predicted}}$ = 3.35, SD = 0.86), paired $t(174) = .92$, $p = .357$, $d = .07$, 95% CI [-0.08, 0.23]. However, ghostees did overestimate how negatively ghosters felt towards them ($M_{\text{ghoster actual}}$ = 2.29, SD = 1.07; $M_{\text{ghostee predicted}}$ = 3.41, SD = 0.87), $t(174) = 12.02$, $p < .001$, $d = .91$, 95% CI [0.74, 1.13].

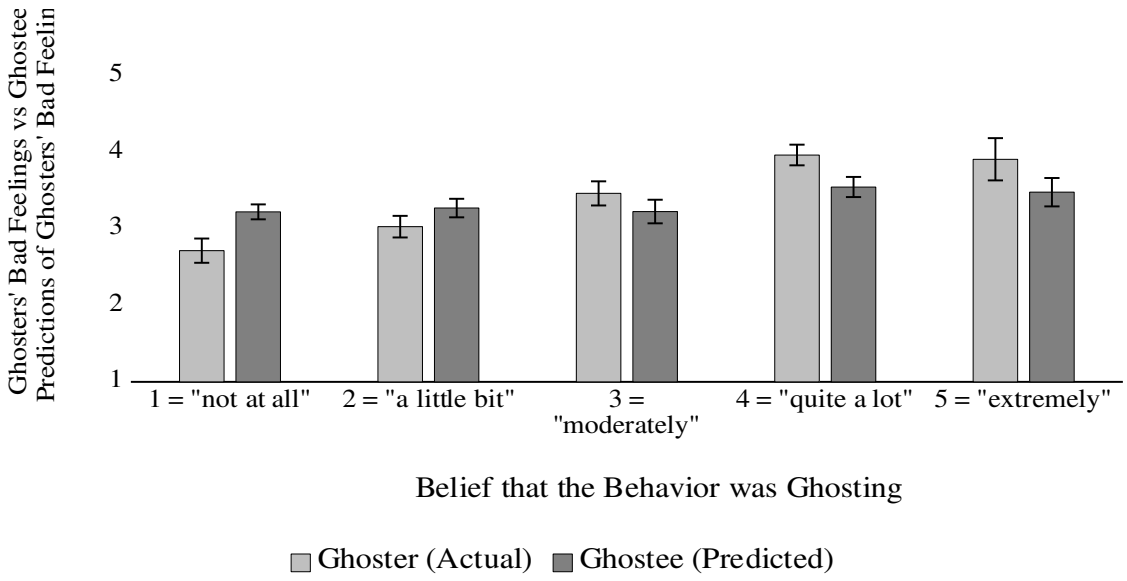
Whether ghostees underestimated how bad ghosters felt depended heavily on whether participants consider the behavior to be ghosting (see Figure 3). In a linear mixed model of how bad ghosters felt on perspective, the degree to which the behavior was considered to be ghosting, and their interaction with fixed effects for dyad, the interaction was statistically significant, b = 0.26, SE = 0.07, $t(333.30) = 3.73$, $p < .001$. Decomposing the data, among the participants who reported that they perceived the behavior as ghosting above the scale midpoint (i.e., 4 or 5 on the 5-point scale), we conceptually replicated prior results, finding that ghostees underestimate how bad ghosters feel (M_{ghoster} = 3.93, SD = 0.98; M_{ghostee} = 3.51, SD = 1.01), $t(97.54) = 2.32$, $p = .023$, d = 0.43, 95% CI [0.04, 0.88][6]. These results are consistent with previous studies in which both parties recognized the non-response behavior as being ghosting. As shown in Figure 3, the interaction was driven primarily by ghosters' bad feelings increasing as they perceived the behavior to be more strongly ghosting, r = 0.42, $p < .001$, whereas ghostees' predictions remained relatively flat with regards to their perceptions of whether it was ghosting, r = 0.13, p = .082.

[6] This analysis remains statistically significant including participants who perceived the behavior as ghosting at the midpoint (3 = "moderately" on the 5-point scales) (M_{ghoster} = 3.72, SD = 0.99; M_{ghostee} = 3.43, SD = 0.96), $t(173.03)$ = 2.02, p = .045, d = 0.30.

We note that this moderation was driven in part by an asymmetry between the two parties' perceptions of the behavior. Ghosters did not seem to consider their behavior to be ghosting as much as the ghostees did ($M_{ghoster}$ = 2.56, SD = 1.36; $M_{ghostee}$ = 3.06, SD = 1.45), paired $t(174) = 3.41$, $p < .001$, $d = .26$, 95% CI [0.11, 0.43]. We consider this result further in the discussion.

Figure 3

How bad ghosters felt and ghostees predicted the ghoster felt, based on whether the behavior was considered ghosting in Study 3



Note. Error bars are standard errors. These data are not paired. Bad feelings are measured on a Likert scale ranging from 1 ("extremely good") to 5 ("extremely bad").

Counterfactual feelings. In preregistered secondary analyses, we examined the imagined feelings of participants in the 54 pairs (n = 108) where the potential ghosters did not actually ghost and instead chose to continue the second conversation. Potential ghostees significantly underestimated how bad potential ghosters imagined they would feel for ghosting them ($M_{ghoster}$

$_{\text{anticipated}}$ = 4.22, *SD* = 0.84; $M_{\text{ghostee predicted}}$ = 3.24, *SD* = 0.64), paired $t(53) = 6.84$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.93$, consistent with other results.

Interest in continuing the relationship. Ghostees underestimated how much ghosters would want to develop a potential friendship ($M_{\text{ghoster actual}}$ = 2.58, *SD* = 1.18; $M_{\text{ghostee predicted}}$ = 1.53, *SD* = 0.87), paired $t(174) = 10.01$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.76$. Just as we did for ghostees' predictions of ghosters' bad feelings, we tested whether this result was moderated by whether the behavior was perceived as ghosting. In a linear mixed model of ghosters' interest in continuing the relationship on perspective, the degree to which the behavior is considered ghosting, and their interaction with fixed effects for dyad, the interaction was non-significant, $b = 0.15$, $SE = 0.08$, $t(340.86) = 1.93$, $p = .054$.

Discussion

Study 3 identifies a moderator of people's underestimation of ghosters' bad feelings: whether people perceive the lack of response to actually be ghosting. Although this moderator was not preregistered and future research should test it further, we think it is conceptually meaningful. Despite receiving multiple reminders that they had chosen to skip the second conversation and leave their partner waiting alone for five minutes without an explanation (e.g., after they made their choice, when looking at the chatroom, and before answering the second round of dependent variables), many ghosters did not consider their behavior to be ghosting. In real-world settings where people are not being as heavily reminded about their lack of response, they might be even less likely to recognize their non-response behavior as ghosting.

Interestingly, ghostees were more likely to perceive the lack of response as ghosting than the ghosters themselves - even though both parties shared the same chat interface and the

ghosters received more frequent reminders of their choice. This asymmetry and variance in how people can perceive the same behavior to be ghosting or not reinforces our conceptualization of ghosting as a subjective appraisal rather than a purely objective event. Future research could examine whether this asymmetry in labeling non-response behavior as ghosting is robust.

We acknowledge that a short online study cannot fully capture the stakes of longer-term relational dissolution. Participants likely entered the study expecting that they would never encounter the other participant again after the study was completed. Further, ghostees were informed that their partners might not rejoin, which may have preemptively reduced the uncertainty typically associated with ghosting. Together, these limitations suggest the study was a relatively conservative test of our hypothesis. However, we think our paradigm still captures realistic aspects of ghosting experiences: for ghosters, the temptation to skip a conversation and for ghostees, the experience of being stood up and waiting alone. Indeed, the fact that the predicted effects emerged specifically when participants appraised the non-response as a social exit suggests that our paradigm successfully captured the core psychological mechanism of ghosting. Nevertheless, future research should explore how these perceptual thresholds shift in more naturalistic, long-term relational contexts.

General Discussion

As online communication platforms continue to proliferate, ghosting one's conversation partner by simply not responding to them is becoming increasingly common. The current paper examines an overlooked element of this experience: whether ghosters feel bad about not responding to a conversation partner, and whether their partners recognize these bad feelings. Surprisingly, although ghosters presumably typically make an active choice not to respond, our studies suggest they still feel bad about it - even worse than their partners realize. Specifically, in

our studies, people underestimated how bad their conversation partners who ghosted them felt in recalled experiences (Study 1), imagined scenarios (Study 2), and a live conversation (when the non-response was recognized as ghosting; Study 3).

We further identified three moderators of this underestimation. For one, the underestimation was stronger in cases of unintentional ghosting. People who "accidentally" ghosted a conversation partner (versus those with more intentional reasons) reported feeling worse in real cases of recalled ghosting (Study 1) and expected to feel worse in imagined ghosting scenarios (Study 2), yet their counterparts failed to anticipate that they would feel worse. This is consistent with previous findings that transgressors are likely to feel more guilty and to apologize when the harmful outcome was not the intention (Leunissen et al., 2013). However, although the underestimation may be stronger for unintentional ghosting, it is not limited only to cases of unintentional ghosting; it also emerged among ghosters who made a deliberate choice to ghost their partners in our studies.

Second, whether the conversation partners actually perceive the lack of response as "ghosting" moderates the underestimation. In Study 3, both people who ghosted and those who were ghosted felt worse when they considered the non-response to constitute ghosting, suggesting ghosting is seen as a particularly severe form of not responding. However, those who were ghosted were more likely to consider the behavior to be ghosting than those who *did* the ghosting themselves. Prior research shows that transgressors and their victims sometimes disagree about what happened (Adams, 2016); in particular, victims tend to perceive the offending behavior as being more severe than transgressors do (Kearns & Fincham, 2005), which could be consistent with ghostees being more likely to perceive a lack of response as an instance of ghosting. When ghosting occurs in everyday life, there may be many reasons why ghosters do not recognize their

behavior as ghosting, ranging from simple distraction (Brazeau et al., 2024) to not taking the interaction very seriously (Timmermans et al., 2021).

Third, the underestimation of bad feelings was smaller when a response was sent - even a low-effort, insubstantive response (in Study 2, "Sorry but I can't talk right now," and in Supplementary Study S2, "busy at the moment"). Although more substantive responses increase perceived sincerity and relationship quality (Canevello & Crocker, 2010), these results suggest that even a short acknowledgement can prevent the uncertainty inherent in ghosting and make people more accurate in predicting their conversation partners' feelings. (At least the response arrived quickly, which prior research suggests is good for the relationship, e.g., Ziano & Wang, 2021. See Supplementary Study 2 for an investigation of how response substantiveness and speed affect predicted and actual feelings.) We also found that the short response reduced self-blame by the conversation partners, making them infer their partner's lack of substantive reaction was probably due more to external circumstances than to the other person not liking them. Situating this phenomenon within the broader literature on social rejection (Williams, 2007), we note that ghosting provides no signal, whereas a short response provides at least some signal that can help mitigate ruminative self-blame by proffering an external attribution for the silence (e.g., the partner is busy).

Theoretical Contributions

Our research provides several theoretical contributions. We extend research on social mispredictions by examining mispredictions in the context of an antisocial behavior (ghosting), rather than in the context of prosocial behaviors (e.g., Epley & Schroeder, 2014; Flynn & Adams, 2009; Flynn & Lake, 2008; Kumar & Epley, 2018; Zhao & Epley, 2021). In doing so, we identified a context where people underestimate others' negative emotional reactions. We think

these results complement prior research where people underestimate others' positive emotional reactions. For example, people underestimate how much strangers care about their feelings (Kardas et al., 2022), how much others like them (Boothby et al., 2018), and particularly relevant to our work, how much ghosters care about their ghostees‘ well-being (Park & Klein, 2024).

Consistent with this latter paper, we find that ghostees underestimate how much ghosters would want to continue or develop a friendship with them (Study 3). But moving beyond this, we also show that ghostees fail to appreciate transgressors' genuine distress, stemming from ghosters' conflicted feelings of both guilt and relief that follows the non-response. In such a way, our work extends the affective misprediction literature beyond prosocial motives and recipients' reactions to include the internal affective burden experienced by the transgressor.

In addition to ghostees' beliefs about ghosters' feelings, our paper also examines *ghosters'* beliefs about *ghostees*' feelings. Based on the hot-cold empathy gap (Loewenstein, 2005), it is possible ghosters might underestimate ghostees' bad feelings because ghosters are in a colder emotional state than ghostees. Yet we found that ghosters did not appear to be systematically miscalibrated in predicting ghostees' reactions throughout the studies. The robustness of this result, and why it occurs[7], could be investigated further.

Finally, our research contributes to the broader scientific study of ghosting. Conceptually, we augment other research that defines ghosting as a temporary behavior in an ongoing relationship (e.g., Brazeau et al., 2024; Campaioli et al., 2022; Kay & Courtice, 2022; LeFebvre et al., 2019), rather than solely as a method of relationship dissolution. Related to this, we examine what happens when potential ghosters actually respond to their conversation partners.

[7] Perhaps one possibility is that ghosters' own bad feelings of relational guilt (Baumeister et al., 1994) prevent them from entering a 'cold' state where they might underestimate ghostees' bad feelings.

Instead of focusing solely on romantic relationships, we examine ghosting in other types of relationships, such as friendships, family relationships, and newly met strangers. Methodologically, we are one of few studies of ghosting to examine both the perspective of the ghoster and ghostee simultaneously as well as beliefs about each other's perspectives.

Limitations and Future Directions

There are many limitations in our studies that provide directions for future research. A substantial limitation (also of other existing research on ghosting) is that it is difficult to manipulate ghosting to determine its causal effects. Assigning participants in an experiment to ghost their conversation partner poses problems both ethically and for internal validity; ghosting can cause negative emotions for both parties, and experimentally assigned ghosting may not be the same as real ghosting behavior. Future work could further explore natural instances of ghosting within preexisting relationships, e.g., by embedding short surveys in messaging platforms. (Supplementary Study S3 discusses our attempts to document "natural" ghosting in real, asynchronous conversations.) Further, our paradigms primarily capture ghosting in the earlier stages of a relationship, e.g., after relatively brief interactions, rather than capturing consequences of the dissolution of long-term relationships. Future work could explore the robustness of our findings at longer time horizons after the ghosting occurred and with longer-term relationships.

In addition to limitations of our design, we note that our sample consisted of participants only from the United States, potentially limiting generalizability to other cultural contexts. For example, cultures vary in their preferences for direct versus indirect communication (Holtgraves, 1997); people may not feel as bad about ghosting - which avoids direct confrontation - if such indirect communication is more culturally acceptable.

Several other directions for future research exist. One direction is finding alignment on the conceptualization of ghosting. Currently, scholars are using different definitions of ghosting in their research, leading to challenges in theoretical alignment. Yet we recognize the difficulty of converging on a definition, given that our own participants in Study 3 disagreed about whether the same interaction constituted ghosting or not. Future work could continue to investigate when and why ghosters consider their own behavior to be ghosting, and whether this aligns with ghostees' and observers' beliefs. Although lay definitions of ghosting may continue to evolve with online communication platforms and patterns, it is worth moving towards consensus on the key psychological features that constitute ghosting.

Another future direction is better understanding the consequences of employing short responses instead of ghosting. It might be useful to determine which elements of a response - such as stating an apology (e.g., "sorry!"), providing a situational explanation (e.g., "I'm in a meeting"), signaling future availability (e.g., "will get back to you later"), or simply acknowledging that the message was received (e.g., a single thumbs up) – are most effective at preserving a recipient's emotional positivity and relational security. Our Study 2 employed a response that contained multiple of the aforementioned elements but did not experimentally manipulate them, making it unclear how the relative presence or absence of each component influences both parties' emotional and relational outcomes.

A third direction could be a deeper exploration of how the relationship or communication context affects different aspects of ghosting experiences. Because most ghosting research has focused on romantic relationships, there is room for future work to explore in more detail how ghosting experiences differs across different relationship contexts. Although we did not find that relationship closeness or type moderated the underestimation of ghosters' bad feelings in Study 1,

we think more research could study these potential differences with higher-powered samples. For example, prior research has found that people in closer relationships tend to have higher empathic accuracy (G. Thomas & Fletcher, 2003), so it is possible that ghostees would more accurately anticipate ghosters' bad feelings in closer relationships. Conversely, if ghosters feel worse about ghosting in closer relationships but their partners do not recognize this, it could increase rather than decrease the gap. Ghosting experiences could also be influenced by hierarchical differences between the ghostee and ghoster. Because higher power tends to reduce attention to others' interests (Keltner et al., 2003), ghostees with higher power relative to the ghoster could be especially insensitive to ghosters' bad feelings. These are just a few of the relational factors that could plausibly shape ghosting experiences.

Conclusion

To conclude, people who ghost their conversation partner may feel worse than their partners realize. This result has implications for everyday communication. Mistakenly underestimating ghosters' bad feelings could reduce the potential for reconciliation. We find that a simple intervention that improves emotion recognition is sending a short response, e.g., confirming receipt of a message. In a world that relies increasingly on digital, asynchronous communication, understanding how conversation partners feel about responses – or the lack thereof - can help people navigate their everyday interactions more effectively.

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