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Avoiding Uncertainty in the Aftermath of Ghosting: The Role of Need for Closure and Age

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Abstract. With the rise of online dating, ghosting—a strategy to end a relationship without explanation—has become a prominent aspect of the modern dating scene. Because of the uncertainty this strategy entails for the ghostee, different individuals might react in different ways due to their individual level of need for closure (NFC). The current research tested the hypotheses that NFC is associated with higher attributional confidence (H1) and with a quicker conclusion of having been ghosted (H2). These associations were measured through a survey in two studies. In Study 1 (N = 25), correlation analyses showed partial support for H1, whereas H2 was not supported. In Study 2 (N = 181), hierarchical regression analyses again revealed support for H1, but not for H2. Additional analyses in Study 2 showed age to be a significant predictor for both attributional confidence and time estimation. Overall, these findings indicate that high-NFC individuals are more confident in their attributions. Furthermore, emerging adults display less attributional confidence and arrive quicker at the conclusion that they have been ghosted than adults aged 30+. These findings provide insight to the dynamics of NFC in close relationships.

Online dating has quickly become the most common way of meeting a romantic partner (Rosenfeld et al., 2019). As a consequence of this transition, research has brought to light a collective change in relationship dissolution strategies (LeFebvre et al., 2019). Ghosting—a form of social exclusion without explanation—has become a prominent aspect of the modern dating scene as a strategy to end a relationship (Freedman et al., 2019). The ability to date and communicate online has simplified the process of initiating romantic encounters; they have been made more accessible than ever (Rosenfeld et al., 2019). Studies illustrate how many individuals experience choice overload (Pronk & Denissen, 2020; Timmermans et al., 2021) and communication burnout (Audrey et al., 2022; Narr & Luong, 2023) in the current online dating landscape. Furthermore, many modern romantic relationships, especially among emerging adults (ages 18-29 years), have evolved from traditional committed relationships to so-called *nonrelationships*; that is, ambiguous romantic entanglements lacking in serious commitment (James-Kangal & Whitton, 2019). Taken together, it is therefore not strange that ghosting has increased in prevalence, leaving individuals confused in the aftermath of the uncertainty it creates. The lack of closure this entails for the ghostee can have damaging psychological effects (Timmermans et al., 2021). Moreover, due to individual differences in the need for closure, people are likely to make sense of ambiguous situations, such as ghosting, in different ways (Leckfor et al., 2023). A better understanding of the nuances of this phenomenon and how it affects individuals could have important implications for education and mental health support.

Ghosting

The concept of ghosting refers to a sudden or gradual way of obscurely ending an interpersonal relationship. Ghosting entails ceasing all online and in-person communication

with the other person, and withholding any explanation as to why (Leckfor et al., 2023). The person executing the ghosting can be referred to as the *ghoster* or *initiator*, and the person being subjected to the ghosting can be referred to as the *ghostee* or *non-initiator* (Jahrami et al., 2023; LeFebvre et al., 2020). As observed in a study concerning ghosting by Leckfor et al. (2023), 66% of participants (emerging adults) reported having been ghosted in the past, and 63% reported to have themselves ghosted another person. This phenomenon has, alongside the rise of mediated communication through technological advances, proliferated as a "contemporary breakup strategy" (LeFebvre & Fan, 2020). Modern technology has changed the way people communicate with one another; a large part of communication takes place through mediated channels instead of in person (Leckfor et al., 2023). Additionally, many relationships today both start and end online (LeFebvre et al., 2020). The invisible wall that mediated channels insert between the persons conversing enables a less personal kind of communication. Ghosting therefore becomes an easier strategy to reach for, considering no face-to-face confrontation is needed (Timmermans et al., 2021).

Several concepts related to ghosting exist, and a salient example of this is *ostracism* (Freedman et al., 2019). Ostracism entails ignoring or excluding another person, usually from a group or social context (Rudert et al., 2023). In contrast, ghosting generally occurs between individuals (Leckfor et al., 2023), highlighting a fundamental distinction from ostracism. The most prominent difference between the two, in the context of romantic relationships, is the fact that ostracism can occur during the relationship and not end it, while ghosting is final and terminates the relationship (Freedman et al., 2019). Ghosting and ostracism share similarities but ought to be classified as separate concepts, and it is therefore of interest to further investigate ghosting as an isolated phenomenon.

While ghosting is a quick way to dissolve an interpersonal relationship, the repercussions for the ghostee can be detrimental. Ghosting often leaves the ghostee in a state of confusion and pain, sometimes accompanied with long-term mental health effects (Leckfor et al., 2023). Account-making is an important element in processing a relationship dissolution; comprehending what happened and why is central in the act of moving on from the relationship (LeFebvre et al., 2020). The obscure nature of ghosting often catalyses retrospective rationalisation in the ghostee, in an effort to make sense of the dissolution. Looking back at the relationship and rationalising about potential reasons the ghoster could have for ghosting, is done with the goal to provide function for the ghostee rather than achieve accuracy; the accounts could be completely rooted in fiction as long as they result in sense-making (LeFebvre et al., 2020). However, little is currently known about the processes behind sense-making in the aftermath of ghosting.

Need for Closure

Building on the precarious nature of ghosting, this present study is anchored in the theory of *need for closure* (NFC), a psychological construct that captures a fundamental cognitive-motivational aspect of knowledge formation. NCF is defined as an individual's desire for *any* answer when faced with cognitive uncertainty to relieve the discomfort it creates (Webster & Kruglanski, 1994). NFC plays an important role in how people perceive ambiguity and uncertainty, an ever-present aspect of our lives with implications for how we handle information and make decisions. Since closure isn't universally desirable, NFC varies along a continuum where individuals at the high end experience an intense desire to reach closure (Webster & Kruglanski, 1994). This desire can vary as a stable trait across individuals or be situationally modified by manipulations such as time pressure, a noisy environment,

and fatigue to increase NFC, whereas a low NFC can be induced by fear of invalidity (Kossowska et al., 2016; Kruglanski & Webster, 1996).

Whether situationally induced or due to dispositional differences in individuals, the dynamics of NFC on the epistemic process happen unconsciously with implications for judgement and decision making-processes (Kruglanski & Fishman, 2009). Effects have been observed on both an individual and a social level, where high NFC often leads to proneness toward primacy effects, stereotypical thinking, and group-centrism (Kruglanski et al., 2006). A study on NFC and decision sidestepping found high-NFC individuals to avoid decisions by applying status quo bias, inaction inertia, and option fixation more frequently than those scoring low on NFC (Otto et al., 2016). This suggests that individuals with increased NFC would rather bypass the decision-making process by relying on heuristics and biases that allow them to avoid actively making decisions. A team of researchers also found a positive relationship between difficulty of multitasking and increased NFC unless shifting ability (i.e., executive function of ability to shift back and forth between tasks) was sufficiently high (Szumowska & Kossowska, 2016). Expanding on this, investigations of the underlying mechanisms of NFC have found lower working memory capacity to correlate with higher levels of NFC (Kossowska et al., 2010), suggesting that increased cognitive load prompts individuals toward closure. Furthermore, effects of NFC seem to be moderated by an individual's ability to achieve closure (ACC; Kossowska & Bar-Tal, 2013), where ACC refers to the individual's ability to satisfy their NFC. Studies on NFC and ACC have demonstrated how individuals with high NFC but low ACC are more vulnerable to psychopathologies than other combinations (Roets et al., 2006; Roets & Van Hiel, 2007). All this suggests that individuals in stressful situations with limited cognitive resources will feel increasingly inclined to achieve closure and illustrates how NFC is an influential motivational aspect of our cognition.

The dual-phased process through which an individual with high NFC moves to achieve closure is referred to as seizing and freezing (Kruglanski & Webster, 1996). The initial seizing phase is characterised by pronounced urgency until closure is achieved. During the freezing phase, a permanence arises and the individual becomes less susceptible to new or contradicting information, as it becomes important to protect the closure they have achieved and limit further uncertainty. NFC can accordingly be described as a "brake" on the epistemic process. Due to the nature of the seizing and freezing process, Acar-Burkay et al. (2014) proposed that polarised and persistent judgements might serve the needs of individuals under increased NFC. In line with this reasoning, the results from a series of studies they conducted demonstrated this logic to hold, as high NFC individuals made firmer and more persistent trust judgements compared to low NFC individuals. Adding to the research on the polarising effects of NFC, Leckfor et al. (2023) illustrated a pronounced polarisation following both ghosting and inclusion-scenarios; the higher NFC an individual had, the more extreme their reactions became. This meant that following a ghosting scenario, individuals scoring high on NFC experienced more distress than those scoring lower. Interestingly, the converse effect turned out to be the case following a scenario of inclusion, where increased NFC meant greater feelings of wellbeing and belonging than in those individuals with lower NFC. Leckfor and colleagues also noted the gap in the literature on the dynamics of NFC and close relationships. Taken together, the above findings illustrate the importance to further understand how individual differences cause different responses in uncertain situations, such as the uncertainty following ghosting.

The Present Research

The combined facts that ghosting is a prevalent but understudied phenomenon, and that NFC is still fairly unexplored in the context of close relationships, call for further research on the relationship between the two phenomena. Due to the effects of NFC, motivation toward closure should play a role in individuals' account-making in the aftermath of ghosting. The present study thus aimed to investigate if individuals' attributional confidence when faced with the possibility of being ghosted varies depending on their NFC. We also explored if there is an association between NFC and the amount of time before someone concludes that they have been ghosted.

In the present research, the above relationships were examined through a survey. Participants were presented with one of two scenarios illustrating ghosting in the context of online dating. The scenarios had differing degrees of romantic interest from the ghostee's perspective, and participants were asked to rate their confidence in a set of six possible attributions of the suddenly ceased contact. Attributional confidence served as a proxy for judgemental polarity, and the number of days until the participant would draw the conclusion that they had been ghosted represented the urgency to reach a conclusion. Based on the previous research reviewed above, we formulated two hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1: Higher NFC will be associated with more polarised (i.e., more extremely positive or negative) attributions of the initiator's behaviour.

Hypothesis 2: Higher NFC will be associated with a lower reported number of days before arriving at the conclusion that one has been ghosted.

As most studies on the topic of ghosting have been conducted on emerging adults, we chose to include adults with a wider range of ages to explore whether or not age has a moderating role.

Study 1 (Pilot Study)

The aim of the pilot study was to investigate potential preliminary support for our hypotheses as well as to assess the feasibility of the procedure and survey.

Method

Participants

The survey was distributed using convenience sampling, mainly to students in a methods course at the Department of Psychology, University of Gothenburg. Data were gathered during two days, reaching a sample of N = 34. Nine responses were removed from the dataset due to failure to complete the survey, leaving a total sample of N = 25 (20 women, 5 men) for the final analyses. Participants' age ranged from 21 to 57 years (M = 29.12, SD = 10.15).

Materials

A survey constructed in Qualtrics was used to collect the data for this study (see Appendix A). To investigate the research questions, the survey contained three parts. The first was designed with the intention to capture the phenomenon of ghosting from the non-initiator's perspective, based on the literature on sensemaking in ghosting scenarios (LeFebvre & Fan, 2020). Two versions of a dating scenario with differing degrees of romantic interest (high or low) from the ghostee were used, one of which was presented to

each participant through randomization. We created a matrix of possible attributions inspired by LeFebvre et al. (2020) after deliberation with our supervisor. Participants were asked to rate their confidence in each attribution on a seven-point scale from *not at all likely* to *extremely likely*.

In the second part of the survey, participants were asked to estimate the number of days before they would begin to consider having been ghosted. This was answered by entering their estimate in a text box.

The third part of the survey assessed participants' degree of dispositional NFC using the 15-item Need for Closure Scale (NFCS; Roets & Van Hiel, 2011). As the survey was conducted in Swedish, the items were taken from a Swedish version of the 42-item NFCS (Webster & Kruglanski, 1994) used in other studies (Ask & Granhag, 2005). Item 7 of the 15-item NFCS was translated directly from English since the existing Swedish version did not contain an equivalent translation, as this was one of the revised items introduced by Roets and Van Hiel (2007). Cronbach's alpha for the 15-item NFCS showed a balance of good internal reliability without suggesting redundancies ($\alpha = .760$).

Procedure

An invitation to take part in the survey was sent out by link through an online social media platform to fellow students in a methods course at the Department of Psychology, University of Gothenburg, as well as to close others of the authors. Data were collected over the course of two days (2023-10-27 to 2023-10-29), after which we began our analyses. The average response duration was 6.61 minutes (SD = 3.57).

Data Analysis

After exporting the data from Qualtrics to IBM SPSS (version 29.0.0.0), the dataset was cleared from incomplete responses. The variable values for attributional confidence was recoded from a seven-point scale to a four-point scale representing confidence in attributions independent of direction. In the recoded scale, a value of 1 was assigned to ratings in the middle (4) of the original seven-point scale, whereas a value of 4 was assigned to ratings at the extreme ends (1 or 7) of the original scale. An index variable using the average of the attributional confidence ratings was created for each of the two ghosting scenarios, as well as an index variable based on the average of the 15 NFCS items. Following this, we ran bivariate correlation analyses of our variables to test our hypotheses.

Results

NFC and Attributional Confidence

We carried out bivariate correlation analyses using Pearson correlation coefficients to measure the relationship between NFC and attributional confidence (see Table 1). Attributional confidence did not have a significant overall relationship with NFC (p = .212). However, the second scenario, with a high degree of interest, did show a significant positive relationship (p = .040), whereas the first scenario, with a low degree of interest from the ghostee, did not (p = .697). These findings provide partial support for Hypothesis 1, as higher NFC was associated with higher attributional confidence in the scenario with a high degree of romantic interest.

NFC and Urgency of Conclusion

Furthermore, a bivariate correlation analysis using Pearson correlation coefficient was conducted on the relationship between NFC and amount of time before participants would

have considered themselves to have been ghosted (see Table 1). The correlation did not come out significant (p = .333), and thus no support was provided for Hypothesis 2.

Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations for Variables in Study 1

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	
1. NFC	-					
2. Attributional confidence	.258 [152, .593]	-				
3. Scenario: low interest	133 [679, .507]	-	-			
4. Scenario: high interest	.553* [.032, .838]	-	-	-		
5. Time estimation	202 [553, .210]	.478* [.103, .735]	.424 [236, .816]	.475 [074, .803]	-	
М	3.736	2.433	2.591	2.310	4.840	
SD	0.539	0.430	0.404	0.423	2.982	

Note. [95% CI]

**p* < .05

Discussion

Our first hypothesis declared a relationship between higher NFC and greater polarity of attributions in a dating scenario. The low-interest scenario did not show a significant relationship, but the high-interest scenario did, which indicates a potential interaction effect that we will further explore in Study 2.

The second hypothesis predicted a relationship between higher NFC and a quicker arrival at the conclusion of having been ghosted. Although no significant relationship was established between NFC and time estimation, this is something we will further investigate in Study 2 as NFC is predicted to be associated with quicker conclusions due to the underlying process of *seizing* and *freezing*.

Time until one considers oneself ghosted is something we would like to further explore in relation to age as well, since it is possible that the new technological landscape influences the communication norms of different age groups in different ways (Thayer & Ray, 2006).

Due to time restraints and the scope of this exploratory pilot study, the conducted data analyses were kept minimal. The limited amount of data, gathered from a small group of participants, constrained the conclusions we were able to draw; although some of the correlations came out significant, low power due to the small sample size was a fact. We also began questioning the precision of the question regarding the amount of time before one considers oneself ghosted, as it might not have measured exactly what we aimed to measure. We aimed to improve these aspects of the study for Study 2.

Study 2

With Study 2, we aimed to further investigate the relationship between NFC, polarity of attributional confidence and urgency to reach a conclusion. We also decided to include age as a predictor in the following analyses. Minor changes were made in the survey with the intention to better capture potential associations, and with more extensive analyses we hoped to present more informative results and thus make more reliable conclusions.

Method

Participants

We estimated the largest possible sample that we could feasibly recruit and set our goal to a sample size of 200. Data were gathered over the course of twelve days, reaching an initial sample of N = 227. Forty-six participants (19.8%) were excluded due to failing to complete the survey, thus leaving a final sample of N = 181. The sample consisted of primarily female participants (131 women, 46 men, 4 other) and age distribution ranged from 18 to 79 years (Md = 27, M = 32.75, SD = 14.68), with 109 emerging adults and 72 adults 30+ years.

Although no descriptive data on the occupations of the participants were collected, it is likely that a large part of the sample consisted of university students due to the locations of recruitment.

Materials

The survey stayed mostly the same from the pilot study with the exception of some minor modifications (see Appendix B). We added instructions asking participants to answer as spontaneously as possible, and underscored that there were no right or wrong answers. Minor changes were made to ease data analysis, such as the input of age (asking participants to enter their age manually instead of a drop down menu). In the first part measuring attributions in a ghosting scenario, the wording of the scenarios was updated to clarify the high and low degrees of interest from the ghostee. We also reworded the question in the second part measuring the estimate of time before the ghostee concludes that they have been ghosted. In the revised survey, the formulation of the question was changed from "begin to consider" to "concludes". The third part, assessing the degree of NFC ($\alpha = .758$), stayed the same.

Procedure

An invitation to take part in the survey was sent out via a link through social media, posted in several Facebook groups, and shared with close others. In addition, a QR-code was printed and posted on bulletin boards at several locations at the University of Gothenburg. Participants were also asked directly for voluntary participation at several departments of the university. Data were collected anonymously over the course of twelve days ranging from 2023-11-09 to 2023-11-20, after which we began our analyses.

Data Analysis

The data was exported from Qualtrics to SPSS (version 29.0.0.0), after which all participants who had failed to complete the survey were cleared from the data set. Thereafter, we followed the same procedure as in Study 1 to recode the variable values for attributional confidence and the creation of index variables for each scenario and NFC.

Dummy variables indicating age category (1 = 18-29 years [emerging adults], 0 = 30+ years [others]) and type of scenario (1 = low interest, 0 = high interest) were created. We then mean-centred the NFC index and created three two-way (NFC × Scenario, NFC × Age, Age × Scenario) and one three-way (NFC × Scenario × Age) interaction terms.

To test Hypothesis 1, we conducted a hierarchical regression analysis with attributional confidence as the outcome variable and NFC, age, and scenario and their interaction terms as predictors. We tested for normal distribution of residuals and homoscedasticity. The data met these criteria.

To test Hypothesis 2, a hierarchical regression analysis with the above-mentioned predictors and interaction terms was carried out, now with estimation of time until conclusion as outcome variable. Here, issues with normality of residuals were compensated for by bias-corrected and accelerated (BCa) bootstrapping of the coefficient standard errors using 1,000 bootstrap samples.

Tolerance values above .2 (lowest: .216) and VIF below 5 (highest: 4.631) suggest acceptable levels of collinearity. All analyses were based on a significance level of 5%.

Results

We ran a bivariate correlation analysis using Pearson correlation coefficients of our variables to create an overview of the data (see Table 2). Note that the mean for the time estimation is higher and has an increased standard deviation (M = 7.13, SD = 5.53) compared to Study 1 (M = 4.84, SD = 2.99).

Table 2

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. NFC	-					
2. Attributional confidence	.178* [.033, .316]	-				
3. Scenario: low interest	.147 [059, .340]	-	-			
4. Scenario: high interest	.220* [.011, .410]	-	-	-		
5. Time estimation		055 [199, .092]	110 [307, .096]	.018 [192, .227]	-	
6. Age	.034 [113, .179]	204** [339,060]		269* [453,063]		-
М	3.818	2.588	2.582	2.595	7.127	0.602
SD	0.602	0.489	0.488	0.494	5.528	0.491

Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations for Variables in Study 2

Note. [95% CI]

p* < .05, *p* < .01

Age was coded as 1 = emerging adults (18-29 years), 0 = adults 30+ years.

NFC and Attributional Confidence

To test our first hypothesis, we conducted a hierarchical regression analysis with NFC, scenario, and age (and their interactions) as predictors of attributional confidence (see Table 3). From this we got three models. The first, testing the three simple predictors in parallel was significant, F(3, 177) = 4.84, p = .003, $R^2 = .076$. The model including the three two-way interaction terms did not significantly increase the proportion of explained variance, F(3,174) = 0.17, p = .916, R^2 change = .003, neither did the third model adding the three-way interaction term, F(3, 173) = 3.24, p = .074, R^2 change = .017. Hence, we interpreted the results of the first model.

The results from this analysis support Hypothesis 1, as NFC had a significant positive relationship ($\beta = .185$, p = .011) with attributional confidence.

Age was also found to have a significant relationship with the polarity of attributional confidence in a negative direction ($\beta = -.210$, p = .004), such that older participants made firmer assessments. No further explorative results were found to be significant.

Model	Variables	<i>B</i> [95% CI]	SE_B	β	р
1	Constant	2.710 [2.581, 2.840]	.066		< .001
	NFC	.150 [.034, .266]	.059	.185	.011
	Age	209 [351,067]	.072	210	.004
	Scenario	.008 [131, .147]	.071	.008	.908
2	Constant	2.685 [2.527, 2.843]	.080		< .001
	NFC	.139 [076, .354]	.109	.171	.203
	Age	166 [368, .036]	.103	167	.107
	Scenario	.055 [171, .282]	.115	.057	.630
	NFC × Scenario	.050 [192, .292]	.123	.038	.683
	$NFC \times Age$	020 [265, .225]	.124	020	.870
	Age × Scenario	081 [371, .209]	.147	076	.582
3	Constant	2.671 [2.513, 2.828]	.080		< .001
	NFC	.030 [215, .275]	.124	.037	.807
	Age	156 [357, .046]	.102	156	.129
	Scenario	.054 [171, .279]	.114	.055	.639
	NFC × Scenario	.343 [058, .744]	.203	.262	.093
	$NFC \times Age$.154 [156, .463]	.157	.150	.328
	Age × Scenario	078 [367, .210]	.146	073	.592
	NFC × Scenario × Age	457 [958, .044]	.254	280	.074

Table 3

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Note. Scenario was coded as 1 = 1 low interest, 0 = 1 high interest.

Age was coded as 1 = emerging adults (18-29 years), 0 = adults 30+ years.

NFC and Urgency of Conclusion

A regression analysis with simple and interactive predictors representing NFC, age, and scenario on time estimation of conclusion was conducted to test our second hypothesis (see Table 4). The first model testing the simple predictors was significant, F(3, 177) = 4.90, p = .003, $R^2 = .077$. Neither the second model with the added two-way interaction terms, F(3, 174) = 0.41, p = .746, R^2 change = .006, nor the third model with the final three-way interaction term, F(1, 173) = 0.02, p = .886, R^2 change = .000, contributed with increased proportion of explained variance. Therefore, we interpreted the results of the first model.

Our second hypothesis was not supported by the results from this analysis, as NFC did not have a significant association with the time estimation of conclusion ($\beta = -.094$, p = .178). However, a significant association of age with the outcome variable was found ($\beta = -.240$, p = .004), such that emerging adults estimated a quicker conclusion.

Table 4

Model	Variables	<i>B</i> [95% CI]	SE_B	β	р
1	Constant	9.241 [7.583, 11.155]	.903		< .001
	NFC	865 [-2.217, .466]	.635	094	.178
	Age	-2.705 [-4.472, -1.227]	.869	240	.004
	Scenario	997 [-2.674, .671]	.794	090	.218
2	Constant	9.474 [7.353, 11.900]	1.152		< .001
	NFC	708 [-3.327, 2.132]	1.336	077	.593
	Age	-3.128 [-5.725,704]	1.353	278	.021
	Scenario	-1.355 [-4.165, 1.724]	1.481	123	.361
	NFC × Scenario	-1.286 [-3.829, 1.231]	1.285	087	.307
	$NFC \times Age$.601 [-2.354, 3.751]	1.456	.052	.680
	Age × Scenario	.678 [-2.738, 4.061]	1.738	.056	.682
3	Constant	9.461 [7.317, 11.788]	1.154		< .001
	NFC	807 [-3.77, 2.311]	1.569	088	.590
	Age	-3.119 [-5.757,585]	1.353	277	.024
	Scenario	-1.357 [-4.241, 1.789]	1.496	123	.360
	NFC × Scenario	-1.020 [-6.388, 4.625]	2.586	069	.663
	$NFC \times Age$.759 [-3.351, 4.746]	1.875	.065	.662
	Age × Scenario	.680 [-2.778, 3.994]	1.759	.056	.684
	NFC × Scenario × Age	415 [-6.085, 4.363]	2.890	022	.875

Hierarchical Regression Analysis Predicting Urgency of Conclusion in Study 2

Note. SE, CI and *p*-values are based on 1,000 bootstrap samples.

Scenario was coded as 1 = 1 low interest, 0 = 1 high interest.

Age was coded as 1 = emerging adults (18-29 years), 0 = adults 30+ years.

Discussion

The results from our first regression analysis showed that, in line with Hypothesis 1, NFC had a significant positive relationship with attributional confidence. This indicates that a higher NFC is associated with more extreme attributional confidence, suggesting that high-NFC individuals tend to make firmer attributional assessments. Further results obtained from this analysis showed a significant relationship between age and attributional confidence. This indicated that emerging adults were less confident in their assessments.

Even though the results from the correlation analysis were in line with the results from the pilot study, high interest scenario being significant whereas the low interest scenario was not, no interaction effect was found in the following analyses.

The second hierarchical regression analysis had no significant relationship between NFC on estimation of time, but a significant association was again found from the predictor variable age. This went in a negative direction, indicating that emerging adults arrive earlier at the conclusion that they have been ghosted than the older age group of 30+ years.

General Discussion

Romantic relationships are a central part of people's lives and they play an important role in fulfilling the human need for close connection (South, 2023). However, romantic relationships and the dissolution of said relationships have been identified as also being major causes of distress (LeFebvre et al., 2020; LeFebvre & Fan, 2020). Our investigations have been focused on the phenomenon of ghosting and aspects of the subsequent account-making from the ghostee's perspective.

The results obtained from these studies supported our first prediction that higher NFC would be associated with more extreme attributional confidence. This corresponds with previous research on NFC, as it has been found that individuals with heightened situational or dispositional NFC indeed are both more confident in their evaluations (Kruglanski & Fishman, 2009) and tend towards polarity in judgements (Acar-Burkay, et al., 2016). Individuals with high NFC faced with uncertainty are, according to the previous literature, more likely to strive for closure. It is therefore not surprising that our results indicate a higher attributional confidence for high-NFC individuals, as a greater confidence in evaluations serves the need that these individuals aim to satisfy. Similar to the research conducted by Leckfor et al. (2023), our findings from this study indicate that high-NFC individuals have more extreme reactions in a ghosting scenario. Unlike Leckford et al.'s study, we chose to measure reactions in terms of attributional confidence, whereas they measured basic psychological need satisfaction (i.e., assessing if an individuals' needs are met). Our correlational cross-sectional study sheds light on a potential role of NFC in individuals' differing reactions following uncertainty such as ghosting, but does not hint to whether or not ghosting increases the subjective experience of emotional distress for ghostees with high NFC.

Our second hypothesis stated that high NFC would be associated with a quicker conclusion and was not supported by the results obtained from our study. This prediction was grounded in the logic behind the seizing and freezing process of NFC, as high-NFC individuals are predicted to strive for a quick resolution in uncertain situations (Webster & Kruglanski, 1996). That our prediction was incorrect was thus surprising. It is, therefore, of interest to understand why our results did not support our hypothesis, as NFC reasonably should influence individuals to make quicker conclusions to relieve the discomfort that lack of closure creates. It is likely that individuals begin to consider the possibility of ghosting much earlier than they conclude it, and perhaps this is enough closure in this context to satisfy their individual NFC. Seizing at early options, or, the urgency phase, is often described in the literature in terms of discounting subsequent information in benefit of earlier cues (i.e., making the high-NFC individual more susceptible to primacy bias; Kruglanski & Fishman, 2009). The lack of significance in the analysis of Hypothesis 2 might therefore be explained by a misinterpretation of the literature—perhaps the urgency to reach a conclusion cannot be measured by a time estimation of when individuals conclude themselves to have been ghosted, especially in a hypothetical scenario. The lack of significance could thus be rooted in the design of the question. It is also possible that we did not sufficiently capture the construct we aimed to investigate when we changed the formulation of the question. Redesigning the question from "begin to consider" to "conclude" was done with the intention to better capture the actual closure of the situation, but this also resulted in differing means and standard deviations between Study 1 (M = 4.84, SD = 2.99) and Study 2 (M = 7.13, SD = 5.53). This could be indicative of capturing a different construct in Study 2, and the question of whether the initial consideration of having been ghosted is closure enough arises again.

Additional findings from these analyses showed age to be a significant predictor of both attributional confidence and estimation of time until conclusion. These findings indicate that emerging adults both make less firm attributional assessments as well as quicker conclusions that they have been subjected to ghosting. Communication norms and preferences have been found to vary across age groups (Thayer & Ray, 2006). That age was found to play a significant role in our study was thus to be expected. A study conducted by Riordan et al. (2018) explored differences between people born before and after online communication became a part of daily life (i.e., the internet age), and found that interpretation of digital cues such as the use of periods or non-periods varied between the two groups. People born after the internet age were more sensitive to these types of signals. Although the phenomenon of ghosting has existed before the internet age, the concept is a relatively new one (Leckfor et al., 2023). That emerging adults in our study estimated to more quickly arrive at the conclusion that they had been ghosted could be speculated to have to do with the fact that ghosting is likely to be a topic of conversation amongst this age group. This might lead to a quicker conclusion that one has been subject to this, as emerging adults are both more likely to pick up on digital cues and have a strong conceptualisation of the phenomenon.

That emerging adults were less confident in their attributions as to why a person has ceased contact is, however, less straightforward. Emerging adulthood is a time filled with uncertainty and instability in several different regards, such as in one's living situation, occupation, identity, and relationships (Arnett, 2014). This instability forces emerging adults to constantly revise their plans and navigate life with a certain wariness. As has been noted by other researchers, many modern relationships have evolved into so called nonrelationships (James-Kangal & Whitton, 2019), which also illustrates the innate ambiguity and instability in emerging adults' love life. Increased stability, responsibility, and certainty signifies the end of emerging adults are more prone to make less confident assessments of the reasons underlying relationship dissolutions.

Strengths and Limitations

A prominent strength of this study is the fact that unexplored aspects of NFC—confidence ghosting-related attributions urgency in and of ghosting conclusions—were investigated, while still remaining rooted in theory and previous findings. Previous research (LeFebvre & Fan, 2020) has noted that ghosting is in need of further investigation and scientific attention, as it is an understudied but prevailing phenomenon in the current zeitgeist. Additionally, our decision not to focus on a single age group, which most previous research on ghosting has done (Leckfor et al., 2023), gave a fuller picture of how it affects a wider range of individuals. This also made it possible to find that age plays a role in the account-making following ghosting. However, it is possible that the topic in itself alienates older participants, as ghosting and online dating might be perceived as too foreign.

The decision to investigate attributional confidence independent of direction (i.e., attributions rated as extremely likely or extremely unlikely were both treated as highly polarised) shows a strength in design, considering it includes the whole spectrum and is in line with previous research on increased polarity in judgements and reactions of high-NFC individuals (Acar-Burkay et al., 2016; Leckfor et al., 2023). It could be interesting to investigate if the direction varies systematically in future studies.

Moreover, great emphasis was put on making the survey as short as possible, by utilising the short version of the NFC Scale and keeping all other questions to a minimum. This was done in an effort to attract a large number of participants willing to follow through with the survey in its entirety, as well as to prevent respondent fatigue. However, it is worth noting that employing the short version is also a limitation, considering the fact that it measures general tendencies rather than each of the dimensions of the full 42-item scale (Webster & Kruglanski, 1996; Roets & Van Hiel, 2007). This limits the possible analyses, as some dimensions could be more associated than others with attributional confidence.

Due to the design of this correlational cross-sectional study, no causal relationships with regard to the role of NFC can be inferred. In the same vein, we have not been able to control for situationally induced NFC which thus poses a threat to the study's validity. It is likely that a large part of the participants who were recruited in person were between lectures and therefore under time pressure when answering the survey. In previous research, time pressure has often been used to induce and manipulate NFC (Webster & Kruglanski, 1996) and, thus, it is possible that our results may have been influenced by that. We also did not control for the potentially moderating role of ability to achieve closure (ACC), which could be of importance when understanding the role NFC plays on account-making following ghosting. Finally, although measures were taken to create as general scenarios as possible, our results may only be generalisable to other WEIRD (i.e., western, educated, industrialised, rich and democratised) countries. Online habits might differ in other cultures, and individual differences such as NFC and ACC might influence individuals in different ways in other cultural contexts (Roets & Van Hiel, 2007).

Implications and Future Research

Developing our understanding of the underlying mechanisms prompting different reactions in uncertain, though common, situations could have important implications for education and support such as psychological therapy. Since romantic relationships play such an essential part in our lives, it is of considerable importance to understand how different people relate to different aspects of dating. Clinicians and counsellors need to be aware and educated about the concept of ghosting, considering its emerging presence in modern dating, as well as possess the necessary tools to approach their patient in case the topic arises in therapy. It is also worth noting that coping strategies in the aftermath of ghosting can prove to be more or less effective depending on the individual (LeFebvre & Fan, 2020), and awareness of such complexities needs to be taken into account for support to lend itself helpful. It is important for mental health practitioners and educators to understand how factors such as age and varying levels of NFC influence people to interpret and make sense of distressing situations, to offer effective support for those in need. Extensive research on NFC exists, but a lack of understanding of the role it plays in the context of close relationships leaves a gap that needs bridging. Future research could further investigate the complexities of account-making and factors that might moderate this.

Conclusions

The findings from this study suggests that NFC plays a role in attributional confidence in the aftermath of ghosting. Additional results also show age as a significant predictor of both attributional confidence and estimation of time, where emerging adults are less certain in their assessments and arrive quicker at the conclusion that they have been ghosted. Our findings contribute to the literature by highlighting that individual differences and age plays a role in the account-making following ghosting.

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Appendix A

Denna pilotstudie utförs som en preliminär undersökning inför vårt kandidatarbete i psykologi. Syftet med följande studie är att undersöka en aspekt av dejting.

All data samlas in anonymt. Deltagande är frivilligt och kan när som helst välja att avsluta studien.

Tack för att du deltar!

Linnea Flygfors & Wilma Arvidsson

Har du några frågor är du välkommen att kontakta oss på: gusflygfli@student.gu.se gusarviwi@student.gu.se

Vänligen ange samtycke

- Jag samtycker
- Jag samtycker inte

Ange kön

- o Man
- o Kvinna
- o Annan

Ange ålder

Scenario 1

Tänk dig att du dejtar en person och ni har under en tid kommunicerat regelbundet. Du har upplevt att det ömsesidigt känts bra och att ni gillar varandra. Plötsligt slutar den andra personen svara på dina meddelanden eller ta initiativ till kontakt utan någon tydlig förklaring. Nu har det gått såpass lång tid att du börjar fundera på vad som har hänt. Hur sannolikt är det att du skulle tillskriva det förändrade beteendet till följande orsaker?

Scenario 2

Tänk dig att du dejtar en person och ni har under en tid kommunicerat regelbundet. Du har upplevt att det ömsesidigt känts väldigt bra och du börjar bli kär. Plötsligt slutar den andra personen svara på dina meddelanden eller ta initiativ till kontakt utan någon tydlig förklaring. Nu har det gått såpass lång tid att du börjar fundera på vad som har hänt. Hur sannolikt är det att du skulle tillskriva det förändrade beteendet till följande orsaker?

Ē.

	Inte alls troligt	-	-	-	-	-	Extremt troligt
Inte intresserad (ex. ändrat sig, träffat någon annan)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Osäkerhet (ex. vill hålla det öppet, rädd för commitment, osäker på egen vilja)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Yttre omständigheter (ex. något har hänt, blivit sjuk, mycket att göra, upptagen)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Kommunikationspreferenser (ex. gillar inte att skriva, olika kommunikationsnormer, vill tänka igenom, är långsam)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Personliga brister (ex. tar de inte på allvar, egocentrisk, idiot)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Oavsiktlig försummelse (ex. glömt, inte sett meddelandet, trott att den svarat)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Annan orsak?

(Svar i fritt fält)

Ghosting är en strategi för att avsluta romantiska relationer antingen gradvis eller plötsligt utan tydlig förklaring om varför.

När börjar du tänka att det rör sig om ghosting? Vänligen ange dagar.

(Svar i fritt fält)

Hur acceptabelt anser du att ghosting är som strategi för att avbryta kontakten i ett dejtingsammanhang?

Ange på en skala 1-10 (1 = inte alls acceptabelt och $10 =$ helt acceptabelt)	1	2	3	4	5	6	6	7	8	9	10	

Har du någon gång blivit ghostad i dejtingsammanhang?

- o Ja
- o Nej

Ta ställning till nedanstående antaganden utifrån dina generella tendenser.

Jag gillar inte situationer som är ovissa.

0	0	0	0	\bigcirc	0
Motsätter mot starkt	Motsätter mig ganska starkt	Motsätter mig något	Instämmer något	Instämmer ganska mycket	Instämmer starkt

Jag tycker illa om frågor som kan besvaras på flera olika sätt.

0	0	0	0	0	0
Motsätter mot starkt	Motsätter mig ganska starkt	Motsätter mig något	Instämmer något	Instämmer ganska mycket	Instämmer starkt

Jag anser att ett välordnat liv med regelbundna tider passar min natur.

0	0	0	0	0	0
Motsätter mot starkt	Motsätter mig ganska starkt	Motsätter mig något	Instämmer något	Instämmer ganska mycket	

Jag känner obehag när jag inte förstår varför en händelse inträffat i mitt liv.

0	0	0	0	0	0
Motsätter mot starkt	Motsätter mig ganska starkt	Motsätter mig något	Instämmer något	Instämmer ganska mycket	Instämmer starkt

Jag blir irriterad när en person motsätter sig vad alla övriga i en grupp anser.

0	0	\bigcirc	0	0	\bigcirc
Motsätter mot starkt	Motsätter mig ganska starkt	Motsätter mig något	Instämmer något	Instämmer ganska mycket	

Jag tycker inte om att	ge mig in i	något utan att veta	vad jag kan förvå	änta mig.
oug cycher mice om acc		magot atam att vota		

0	0	0	0	0	0
Motsätter mot starkt	Motsätter mig ganska starkt	Motsätter mig Instämmer något Instämmer något ganska mycket		Instämmer starkt	
När jag tagit et	t beslut känner	r jag mig lätta	d.		
0	0	0	0	0	0
Motsätter mot starkt	Motsätter mig ganska starkt	Motsätter mig något	Instämmer något	Instämmer ganska mycket	Instämmer starkt

När jag ställs inför ett problem ser jag vanligtvis den bästa lösningen mycket snabbt.

0	0	0	0	0	0
Motsätter mot	Motsätter mig	Motsätter mig	Instämmer något	Instämmer	Instämmer starkt
starkt	ganska starkt	något		ganska mycket	

När jag är förbryllad över en viktig fråga känner jag mig mycket upprörd.

0	0	\bigcirc	0	0	0
Motsätter mot starkt	Motsätter mig ganska starkt	Motsätter mig något	U	Instämmer ganska mycket	Instämmer starkt

Jag tycker inte om att vara med folk som är i stånd till att göra oväntade saker.

0	0	0	0	0	0
Motsätter mot starkt	Motsätter mig ganska starkt	Motsätter mig något	ę	Instämmer ganska mycket	Instämmer starkt

Jag tycker inte om när en person säger något som kan betyda flera olika saker.

0	0	0	0	0	0

Motsätter mot
starktMotsätter mig
ganska starktInstämmer något
ganska mycketInstämmer
starkt

Jag anser att skapandet av fasta rutiner gör att jag kan njuta mer av livet.

0	0	0	0	0	0
Motsätter mot starkt	Motsätter mig ganska starkt	Motsätter mig något	Instämmer något	Instämmer ganska mycket	

Jag tycker om att ha en klar och strukturerad livsstil.

0	0	\bigcirc	0	0	0	
Motsätter mot starkt	Motsätter mig ganska starkt	Motsätter mig något	e	Instämmer ganska mycket	Instämmer starkt	

Jag brukar inte ta hänsyn till många olika åsikter innan jag bildar mig en egen uppfattning.

0	0	0	0	0	0
Motsätter mot starkt	Motsätter mig ganska starkt	Motsätter mig något	Instämmer något	Instämmer ganska mycket	Instämmer starkt

Jag tycker inte om oförutsägbara situationer.

0	0	0	0	0	0	
Motsätter mot starkt	Motsätter mig ganska starkt	Motsätter mig något	Instämmer något	Instämmer ganska mycket		

Appendix B

Hej! Denna studie är en del av vårt kandidatarbete i psykologi. Syftet med följande studie är att undersöka en aspekt av nätdejting och hur olika personer förhåller sig till det.

Vi är intresserade av din personliga uppfattning och det finns inga rätt eller fel på någon av frågorna.

All data samlas in anonymt, deltagande är frivilligt och du kan när som helst avsluta studien.

Tack för att du deltar!

Wilma Arvidsson & Linnea Flygfors

Vänligen ange samtycke

- Jag samtycker
- Jag samtycker inte

Ange kön

- o Man
- o Kvinna
- o Annat

Ange din ålder i siffror

(Svar i fritt fält)

Scenario 1

Tänk dig att du dejtar en person och ni har under en tid kommunicerat regelbundet online. Du har upplevt att det ömsesidigt känts bra och att ni gillar varandra. Plötsligt slutar den andra personen svara på dina meddelanden eller ta initiativ till kontakt utan någon tydlig förklaring. Nu har det gått såpass lång tid att du börjar fundera på vad som har hänt. Hur sannolikt är det att du skulle tillskriva det förändrade beteendet till följande orsaker?

Scenario 2

Tänk dig att du dejtar en person och ni har under en tid kommunicerat regelbundet online. Du har upplevt att det ömsesidigt känts väldigt bra och du börjar bli kär. Plötsligt slutar den andra personen svara på dina meddelanden eller ta initiativ till kontakt utan någon tydlig förklaring. Nu har det gått såpass lång tid att du börjar fundera på vad som har hänt. Hur sannolikt är det att du skulle tillskriva det förändrade beteendet till följande orsaker?

T.

	Inte alls troligt	-	-	-	-	-	Extremt troligt
Inte intresserad (ex. ändrat sig, träffat någon annan)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Osäkerhet (ex. vill hålla det öppet, rädd för commitment, osäker på egen vilja)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Yttre omständigheter (ex. något har hänt, blivit sjuk, mycket att göra, upptagen)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Kommunikationspreferenser (ex. gillar inte att skriva, olika kommunikationsnormer, vill tänka igenom, är långsam)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Personliga brister (ex. tar de inte på allvar, egocentrisk, idiot)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Oavsiktlig försummelse (ex. glömt, inte sett meddelandet, trott att den svarat)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Annan orsak?

(Svar i fritt fält)

Ghosting är en strategi för att avsluta romantiska relationer antingen gradvis eller plötsligt utan tydlig förklaring om varför.

När drar du slutsatsen att det rör sig om ghosting? Vänligen ange antal dagar.

(Svar i fritt fält)

Hur acceptabelt anser du att ghosting är som strategi för att avbryta kontakten i ett dejtingsammanhang?

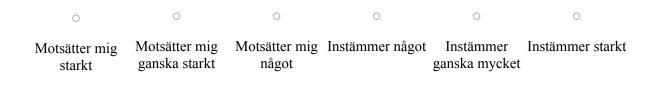
Ange på en skala 1-10 (1 = inte alls acceptabelt och $10 =$ helt acceptabelt)	1	2	3	4	5	6	6	7	8	9	10	
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Har du någon gång blivit ghostad i dejtingsammanhang?

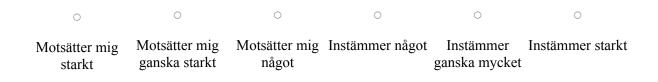
- o Ja
- o Nej

Ta ställning till nedanstående antaganden utifrån dina generella tendenser. Försök svara spontant.

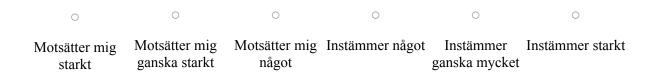
Jag gillar inte situationer som är ovissa.



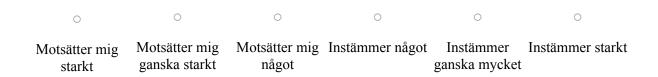
Jag tycker illa om frågor som kan besvaras på flera olika sätt.



Jag anser att ett välordnat liv med regelbundna tider passar min natur.

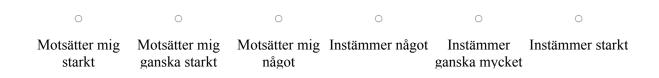


Jag känner obehag när jag inte förstår varför en händelse inträffat i mitt liv.



Jag blir irriterad när en person motsätter sig vad alla övriga i en grupp anser.

OOOOMotsätter mig
starktMotsätter mig
ganska starktInstämmer något
någotInstämmer
ganska mycketInstämmer starkt
ganska mycket



Jag tycker inte om att ge mig in i något utan att veta vad jag kan förvänta mig.

När jag tagit ett beslut känner jag mig lättad.

0	0	0	0	0	0
Motsätter mig starkt	Motsätter mig ganska starkt	Motsätter mig något	Instämmer något	Instämmer ganska mycket	Instämmer starkt

När jag ställs inför ett problem ser jag vanligtvis den bästa lösningen mycket snabbt.

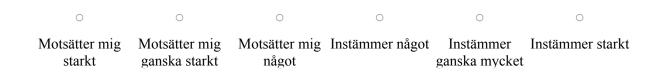
0	0	0	0	0	0
Motsätter mig starkt	Motsätter mig ganska starkt	Motsätter mig något	Instämmer något	Instämmer ganska mycket	Instämmer starkt

När jag är förbryllad över en viktig fråga känner jag mig mycket upprörd.

0	0	0	0	0	0
Motsätter mig starkt	Motsätter mig ganska starkt	Motsätter mig något	U	Instämmer ganska mycket	Instämmer starkt

Jag tycker inte om att vara med folk som är i stånd till att göra oväntade saker.

0	0	0	0	0	0
Motsätter mig starkt	Motsätter mig ganska starkt	Motsätter mig något	Instämmer något	Instämmer ganska mycket	



Jag tycker inte om när en person säger något som kan betyda flera olika saker.

Jag anser att skapandet av fasta rutiner gör att jag kan njuta mer av livet.

0	0	0	0	0	0
Motsätter mig starkt	Motsätter mig ganska starkt	Motsätter mig något	Instämmer något	Instämmer ganska mycket	

Jag tycker om att ha en klar och strukturerad livsstil.

0	0	0	0	0	0
Motsätter mig starkt	Motsätter mig ganska starkt	Motsätter mig något	Instämmer något	Instämmer ganska mycket	Instämmer starkt

Jag brukar inte ta hänsyn till många olika åsikter innan jag bildar mig en egen

uppfattning.

0	0	0	0	0	0
Motsätter mig starkt	Motsätter mig ganska starkt	Motsätter mig något	Instämmer något	Instämmer ganska mycket	

Jag tycker inte om oförutsägbara situationer.

0	0	\bigcirc	0	0	\bigcirc
Motsätter mig starkt	Motsätter mig ganska starkt	Motsätter mig något	Instämmer något	Instämmer ganska mycket	

Har du några synpunkter eller kommentarer? (Svar i fritt fält)

Tack för ditt deltagande! Dina svar har tagits emot.

Har du några frågor är du välkommen att kontakta oss på:

gusarviwi@student.gu.se

gusflygfli@student.gu.se