



## Pursue the boo: The moderating role of dating recency between ghosting and unwanted persistent pursuit

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### ABSTRACT

Drawing on Uncertainty Reduction Theory and Expectancy Violations Theory, this study examines the relationship between unwanted persistent pursuit (UPP) behaviors and ghosting behaviors. An online survey distributed via Amazon's Mechanical Turk found that those who experienced UPP were more likely to have previously engaged in ghosting behaviors. Additionally, those who experienced being ghosted had a more positive attitude toward UPP than those who had not been ghosted, and the relationship was moderated by dating recency. Finally, the results indicated a positive correlation between views of persistent pursuit and likelihood of engaging in ghosting behaviors that is moderated by dating recency.

### KEYWORDS

ghosting; unwanted persistent pursuit; relationship termination; romantic relationships; dating

Ghosting is a widespread relationship termination strategy (LeFebvre, 2017) where “one person suddenly ignores or stops communicating with another person, without telling them why” (Kay & Courtice, 2022, p. 386). The prevalence of this relationship termination technique has been facilitated through the rise of technology mediated communication and online dating (LeFebvre, 2017; Thomas & Dubar, 2021). It often results in negative effects for the ghosted individual, affecting their self-image (Powell et al., 2021), future relationships (LeFebvre & Fan, 2020), mental health (Pancani et al., 2021; Timmermans et al., 2020), and feelings of social connectedness (Astleitner et al., 2023). Previous studies examining why people use ghosting as a relationship termination technique have found that sometimes individuals will ghost relational partners if they experience undesirable or inappropriate behaviors such as unwanted persistent pursuit (UPP; Thomas & Dubar, 2021; Timmermans et al., 2020).

UPP refers to a broad scope of behaviors, such as sending excessively needy messages or leaving gifts, that are explicitly unwanted by the target (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2014). Although some persistent pursuit behaviors may seem innocuous or even romantic, idealizing persistent pursuit behaviors is dangerous and is correlated with endorsing stalking myths and minimization of interpersonal violence (Lippman, 2018). UPP occurs at the beginning or

following the termination of a relationship (LeFebvre & Fan, 2020; Timmermans et al., 2020).

Though previous studies have touched on the association between UPP and ghosting (e.g., Thomas & Dubar, 2021; Timmermans et al., 2020), it has yet to be explicitly studied in the extant literature. Moreover, dating recency, or the most recent time someone has dated a non-married partner, may impact perceptions of UPP and ghosting. Because ghosting has gained popularity in recent years, those who have not recently been on a date may be less likely to ghost in the future, have experienced ghosting, or find the increasingly normalized relationship termination technique to be acceptable. Therefore, we report a survey study that examines the associations among participants' previous ghosting experiences, likelihood of ghosting in the future, dating recency, and attitudes regarding UPP.

### **Hypotheses and Research Questions**

Expectancy Violations Theory (EVT; Burgoon, 1993) posits that violations of expectations cause the receiver to shift their attention to the relationship. Violations that are evaluated as negative, such as UPP which can violate the target's moral, trust, and social expectations in a negative way, result in a negative outcome: being ghosted (Burgoon, 1993; Timmermans et al., 2020). Previous research exploring reasons for ghosting has found that it is often in response to unwanted behaviors at the beginning of a relationship (Thomas & Dubar, 2021; Timmermans et al., 2020). Treating UPP as a negative behavior, we predict that those who have experienced UPP behaviors will be more likely to have ghosted someone than those who have not (H1).

On the other side of the relationship, being ghosted might also constitute an expectancy violation as it happens abruptly and without explanation. Negative violations increase levels of uncertainty in relationships (Afifi & Metts, 1998). Ghosted individuals are left with high levels of uncertainty about their relationship, their identity, and how to proceed (LeFebvre & Fan, 2020). Uncertainty Reduction Theory (URT) posits that individuals are driven to reduce uncertainty in relationships by engaging in information seeking behaviors (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). To reduce the uncertainty caused by ghosting, ghosted individuals may seek to engage in information seeking strategies that constitute UPP behaviors (Ramirez et al., 2002; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2014). For example, LeFebvre and Fan (2020) found that 6.4% of people who were ghosted sought to interactively reduce their uncertainty by trying to confront or repeatedly contact the ghoster. Since people tend to match their beliefs with their behaviors (Festinger, 1957), those who adopt persistent pursuit as a viable strategy to address ghosting are likely to find UPP behaviors to be acceptable. Therefore, we predict that those who have previously been

ghosted are more likely to have a positive view of persistent pursuit than individuals who have not been ghosted (H2). However, it remains unclear whether people's views of persistent pursuit are associated with their likelihood to ghost in the future (RQ1).

As a relationship termination strategy that gained popularity more recently with the increase in dating apps and technology mediated communication, people who have varying dating recencies may have different expectations regarding ghosting. First, ghosting most often occurs in the context of casual dating (Thomas & Dubar, 2021), and is found to be less acceptable for longer-term relationships compared to newer relationships (Freedman et al., 2019). Therefore, individuals who have been in a serious relationship for many years may find ghosting to be a less acceptable relationship termination strategy than those who are casually dating. Additionally, as ghosting has increased in prevalence in recent years, it has become increasingly normalized as acceptable behavior (LeFebvre, 2017). Those who have not been on casual dates in recent years may differ in their behavioral expectancies and experiences with ghosting from those who have not dated casually in the recent years where ghosting has increased in prevalence and acceptability (Burgoon, 1993; Timmermans et al., 2020). Therefore, we have included moderating hypotheses predicting that dating recency enhances: the relationship between the experience of UPP behaviors and having ghosted someone (H3), the relationship between having been ghosted and UPP attitudes (H4), and the association between people's view of persistent pursuit behaviors and their likelihood of ghosting to end a relationship (H5).

## Method

### Participants

Participants were recruited through Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk). To ensure a higher-quality sample, CloudResearch, which uses pre-tested data quality checks and has been found to improve reliability and validity and ensure the collection of high-quality data (Rivera et al., 2022), was used. Participants were adults over the age of 18 living in the United States. Of the 250 participants who completed the survey, 28 participants were excluded because they have never been on a date before. The demographics including age, gender, race, education, and dating recency of the sample ( $n = 222$ ) can be found in Table 1.

### Procedures

After obtaining IRB approval, this study was conducted in November 2021 through an online survey created on Qualtrics. The study was described as

**Table 1.** Demographic information for the sample.

Measure	Value
<b>Age</b>	
Range	22–71
Mean	40.15
<i>SD</i>	12.08
<b>Gender</b>	
Man	58%
Woman	42%
Prefer not to say	1%
<b>Race</b>	
Black or African American	4%
Asian or Asian American	9%
White	77%
Another or mixed raced	5%
Prefer not to say	6%
<b>Education</b>	
Some high school or lower	1%
High school diploma	25%
Some college/Associates	15%
College degree	50%
Postgraduate degree	9%
<b>Dating Recency</b>	
0–3 months	10%
3–6 months	6%
6 months–1 year	5%
1–2 years	10%
2–5 years	15%
More than 5 years	54%

a communication research study asking participants about communication practices in different areas of their life. Once informed consent was obtained, participants answered demographic questions and proceeded to answer questions regarding persistent pursuit attitudes and ghosting behaviors. Participants were compensated with a small sum of money for their time. The entire study took about 20 minutes to complete. The survey was anonymous, and participants were paid via Cloud Research.

## **Measures**

### ***Experience of UPP Behaviors***

First, a definition of unwanted persistent pursuit was characterized as “a previous romantic partner continuously pursuing greater intimacy with you in a way you expressly did not want.” To prevent any negative bias, the term unwanted persistent pursuit was not included. One question asked participants if they had experienced someone engaging in UPP behaviors with them before. Response options were no and yes, with 43.2% of participants indicating having experienced UPP behaviors.

### ***UPP Attitudes***

Adapted from Spitzberg and Cupach (2014), four items measured attitudes toward UPP behaviors in romantic relationships. Participants were asked how acceptable they would find four scenarios where a previous romantic partner continuously pursued greater intimacy with them in a way they expressly did not want. The scenarios included: “leaving unwanted gifts (e.g., flowers, stuffed animals, photography, jewelry, etc.); leaving affectionate electronic messages (e.g., expressed attraction or affection left on a voicemail, text message, etc.); sending excessively needy or demanding messages (e.g., pressuring to see you, assertively requesting you go out on a date, arguing with you to give them ‘another chance,’ etc.); involving others in contacting you (e.g., asked friends about you, talked to your colleagues or family to get information, etc.).” Participants responded with Likert-type response options from unacceptable (1) to acceptable (5). These items were averaged ( $M = 1.78$ ,  $SD = 0.91$ , Cronbach’s  $\alpha = 0.84$ ).

### ***Experience of Being Ghosted/Ghosting Someone***

First, a definition for ghosting was presented to participants: “Ghosting is the act of abruptly cutting off communication with another person as a means of ending a relationship (e.g., not reaching out to that person, not responding to messages from that person).” Then, two questions asked participants if they had experienced being ghosted before or if they had ghosted someone before. Response options were no, yes, and unsure. 34.7% of participants had been ghosted (3.1% were unsure), and 34.2% had ghosted someone (2.2% were unsure).

### ***Ghosting Behavior Disposition***

Three items from Freedman et al. (2019) were adopted to measure ghosting behaviors (i.e., how likely the participant would be to use ghosting before a first date, after only one date, and to end a short relationship) on a Likert-type scale from extremely unlikely (1) to extremely likely (5). These items were averaged ( $M = 2.14$ ,  $SD = 0.91$ , Cronbach’s  $\alpha = 0.75$ ).

### ***Dating Recency***

Participants were asked to choose how recently they last went on a date with a partner to whom they were not committed. The options included 0–3 months ago (9.9%), 3–6 months ago (6.3%), six months to one year ago (5.4%), 1–2 years ago (9.9%), 2–5 years ago (14.9%), and more than five years ago (53.6%). The median time range was more than 5 years (IQR = 1–2 years to more than 5 years). Therefore, we split participants into two groups: those who had been on a date in the past five years, and those who had not.

## Results

### *Relationships between ghosting and unwanted persistent pursuit behaviors*

**H1.** A chi-square test showed a significant relationship between having previously experienced UPP behaviors and having ghosted someone ( $\chi^2(1) = 14.91, p < .001, V = .26$ ). Consistent with predictions in H1, those who had experienced UPP behaviors had significantly higher rates of ghosting in the past (49.5% had ghosted) than those who had not previously experienced those behaviors (24.2% had ghosted).

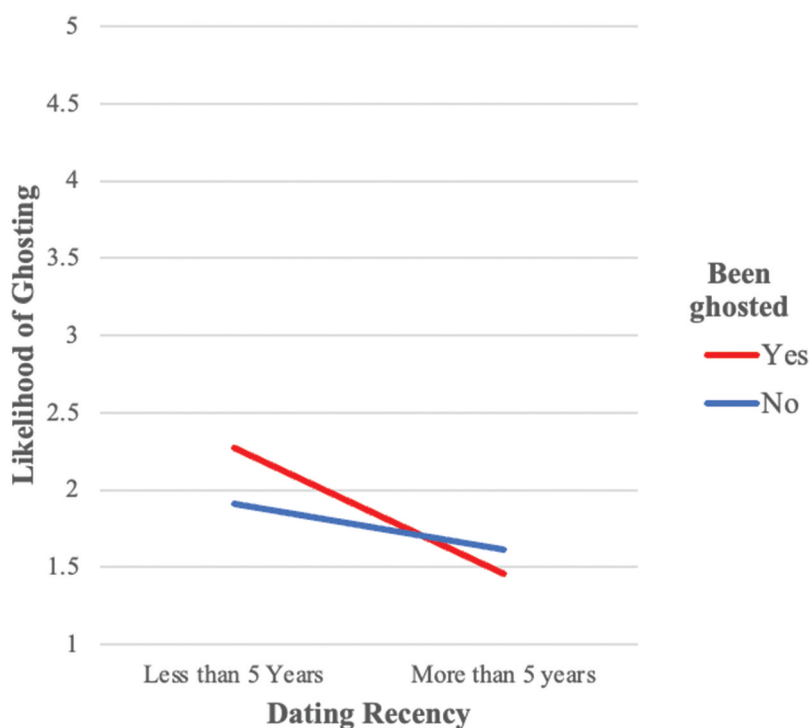
**H2.** An independent samples *t*-test showed that those who had been ghosted ( $M = 1.88, SE = 0.11$ ) held similar attitudes about UPP with those who had not been ghosted ( $M = 1.73, SE = 0.07$ ), ( $t(213) = 1.10, p = .271, d = .16$ ). Therefore, H2 was not supported.

**RQ1.** A Pearson's product-moment correlation revealed that participants' favorable attitudes of UPP were positively correlated with their likelihood of ghosting ( $r = .20, p = .004$ ).

### *Dating recency as a moderator*

**H3.** For both those who have and have not been on a date in the past five years, there was a significant relationship between having previously experienced UPP behaviors and having ghosted someone ( $\chi^2(1) = 8.82, p = .003, V = .31$  and  $\chi^2(1) = 5.90, p = .015, V = .23$ , respectively). These results are similar and consistent with the results from the unmoderated chi-square test. Therefore, H3 was not supported.

**H4.** A simple moderation analysis (PROCESS model 1; Hayes, 2022) was conducted to test the interaction effect of a participant experiencing being ghosted and their dating recency on their attitudes toward UPP behaviors. The results revealed a significant interaction effect,  $b = -.52, 95\% \text{ CI } [-1.01, -.29], t = -2.09, p = .038$  (Figure 1). Specifically, for participants who have dated within the past five years, people who have been ghosted found unwanted persistent behaviors to be more acceptable ( $M = 2.27, SD = 1.01$ ) than people who have not been ghosted ( $M = 1.90, SD = .93$ ),  $t = 2.05, p < .042, 95\% \text{ CI } [.01, .72]$ . However, for participants who have dated more than five years ago, people who have been ghosted ( $M = 1.45, SD = .73$ ) and people who have not been ghosted ( $M = 1.60, SD = .82$ ) did not significantly differ in their attitudes toward UPP behaviors,  $t = -.89, p = .374, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.50, .19]$ . This is initial



**Figure 1.** Ghosting experience and ghosting intention by dating recency.

evidence of dating recency as a moderator for the relationship between UPP behaviors and experiencing being ghosted, in support of H4.

**H5.** Another simple moderation analysis (PROCESS model 1; Hayes, 2022) was performed to test the moderating role of dating recency on the relationship between attitudes toward UPP behaviors and likelihood of ghosting. The results showed no significant interaction effects,  $b = -.02$ , CI  $[-.35, .32]$ ,  $t = -.10$ ,  $p = .920$ . Therefore, H5 was not supported.

## Discussion and Conclusion

In this study, we conducted a survey to understand the link between ghosting and UPP behaviors. Our findings contribute to the scholarly understanding that experiencing UPP and ghosting are related, common, and negative experiences (Freedman et al., 2019; LeFebvre & Fan, 2020; Timmermans et al., 2020). Specifically, support for H1 indicates that people who have experienced UPP behaviors would be more likely to have ghosted someone. This finding is consistent with previous studies which show that ghosters may experience UPP from the ghosted

individuals either before or after ghosting (LeFebvre & Fan, 2020; Timmermans et al., 2020). Moreover, while previous literature has suggested that ghosted individuals may engage in persistent pursuit as a cause or result of being ghosted (LeFebvre & Fan, 2020; Timmermans et al., 2020), support for H4 in our study builds on these findings by showing that dating recency is an important factor that qualifies this positive association. Based on our study, we recommend researchers only recruit participants who have recently dated someone (within the past five years or less) when examining ghosting behaviors.

This study also bears two limitations. First, dating recency may not accurately capture participants' familiarity with online dating because some participants may actively read about this emerging phenomenon despite not having dated anyone. This may explain why we failed to find any statistically significant moderating effects of dating recency in H3 and H5. Future studies should also consider participants' familiarity of ghosting behaviors as a potential moderator. Alternatively, subsequent studies can also measure dating recency as a continuous variable which would provide more variation than treating it as a categorical variable. Second, though previous studies have suggested different causal orders (i.e., engaging in UPP behaviors leads to being ghosted vs. being ghosted leads to unwanted pursuit behaviors), the present study did not ask participants about the temporal order of their experiences. This may explain the inconsistent findings between the positive associations identified in RQ1 and Lippman's (2018) suggestion that more acceptance of these beliefs leads to tolerating more of these behaviors which would, in turn, lead to a lower likelihood of ghosting someone engaging in these behaviors.

More importantly, understanding the temporal occurrence of these two behaviors would help researchers to assess the applicability of URT and EVT. If the results indicated that ghosters are more likely to experience UPP behaviors after ghosting, then we would find support for the URT framework. Conversely, if UPP behaviors precede ghosting, it would support the EVT explanation. Additionally, there is a possibility of a cyclical relationship between EVT and UPP. Suppose partner A engages in UPP, which is perceived as a negative violation by partner B. This results in negative consequences (ghosting) from partner B, which constitutes a negative violation for partner A, creating uncertainty. Partner A uses interactive information seeking strategies to reduce this uncertainty, but these strategies constitute UPP for partner B.

In conclusion, examining the connection between UPP and ghosting behaviors not only contributes to our knowledge about two harmful practices, but also offers researchers a new testing ground for understanding the explanatory power and interaction of two essential theories in interpersonal communication.



## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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