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The Unfinished Ending: Disengagement, Ambiguity, and Self-Worth in Young Adult Romantic and Social Ghosting

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Abstract

Ghosting — the abrupt, unexplained withdrawal of communication in romantic or social relationships — has become a normalized feature of young adult relational life, yet its psychological mechanisms remain underexamined at the level of integrative conceptual synthesis. This paper addresses that gap by proposing a unified psychosocial framework, termed the ambiguity-permeability pathway, that explains how ghosting erodes young adult self-esteem through the interaction of four conditions: the structural ambiguity inherent to ghosting as a behavior that withholds explanation; a self-attributional mechanism through which individuals resolve interpretive uncertainty by generating self-blaming causal accounts, a tendency intensified among those higher in rejection sensitivity; digital mediation, which lowers the disengager's cost of withdrawal while simultaneously sustaining the target's exposure to visibility cues that prolong ambiguity rather than resolve it; and the developmental permeability of self-concept during young adulthood, a life stage in which relational and global identity are closely fused, making self-worth more contingent on romantic and peer feedback than at other developmental stages. Drawing on literature spanning ambiguous loss theory, attribution and rejection-sensitivity research, digital relational communication, and developmental identity theory, the paper argues that ghosting's psychological weight for young adults emerges specifically at the intersection of these conditions rather than from any single factor operating alone. The analysis explicitly resists overstatement, noting that ambiguous rejection is not uniformly more damaging than explicit rejection, that ghosters frequently retain other-oriented motives, and that young adults are not uniquely vulnerable to rejection relative to other life stages, but rather occupy a period of heightened relational self-relevance. The paper concludes that interventions addressing ghosting's self-esteem effects are most likely to succeed by targeting the interpretive stage of the pathway — disrupting self-blaming attribution — rather than attempting to eliminate ambiguity or alter developmental self-concept permeability. As a conceptual synthesis, the paper offers a theoretically grounded framework intended to inform future empirical and qualitative research directly testing the proposed pathway among ghosted young adults.

Keywords: *ghosting; ambiguous loss; self-esteem; rejection sensitivity; young adulthood; digital relational communication; identity development*

1. Introduction

Interpersonal relationships have long ended through recognizable rituals of closure — a conversation, an argument, an explanation, even a formal breakup message. In recent years, however, a markedly different mode of relational termination has become normalized among young adults: ghosting, the sudden and unexplained withdrawal of communication from a romantic partner, friend, or social contact, without acknowledgment, negotiation, or closure. Unlike traditional rejection, which at minimum offers an interpretable social script, ghosting withholds the very information that would allow the ghosted individual to construct a coherent narrative of what occurred and why. This absence is not incidental; it is constitutive of the behavior itself. Ghosting is defined by what does not happen — no message, no reason, no ending — leaving the recipient suspended in interpretive limbo.

This condition of enforced ambiguity carries particular psychological weight for young adults, a population for whom identity consolidation, romantic self-concept, and peer-based self-evaluation are especially active developmental processes. Whereas older adults may possess a broader repertoire of relational experience through which to contextualize rejection, young adults are frequently still forming the self-referential frameworks — attachment expectations, beliefs about their own relational worth, standards for what they are owed in social exchange — that ghosting directly unsettles. When a relationship or budding romantic connection ends without explanation, the

ghosted individual is left to generate their own account of the rupture, and in the absence of external information, that account is disproportionately likely to be self-referential: a search for personal deficiency, a rehearsal of imagined flaws, a private verdict rendered without a trial.

The contemporary prevalence of ghosting is inseparable from the conditions of digitally mediated relating. Mobile messaging, dating applications, and social media have restructured the practical and normative demands of relational disengagement, lowering the interpersonal cost of withdrawal to the point where simply not responding has become a viable, if ethically contested, way of ending a connection. This technological context does not merely provide the means for ghosting; it plausibly shapes the psychological experience of being ghosted, since the same platforms that enable the vanishing often leave behind visible, unresolved digital traces — read receipts, active status indicators, mutual social connections — that can intensify rather than resolve the ambiguity.

Despite the behavior's ubiquity in contemporary young adult social and romantic life, its psychological implications remain underexamined at the level of rigorous conceptual synthesis. Much existing commentary on ghosting circulates in popular and journalistic registers, offering advice or moral judgment rather than a disciplined behavioral-social account of how ambiguous relational loss interacts with self-esteem regulation. This paper addresses that gap by asking: how does the specific psychological structure of ghosting — its withholding of explanation, its enforced ambiguity, and its digital mediation — interact with the mechanisms by which young adults construct and regulate self-esteem? In pursuing this question, the paper examines ghosting not as an isolated dating trend but as a socially patterned behavior with identifiable psychological consequences, situating it within existing frameworks of ambiguous loss, rejection sensitivity, self-attribution, and identity development. In doing so, it aims to (a) characterize ghosting as a distinct form of relational disengagement warranting dedicated psychological analysis, (b) examine the mechanisms through which the absence of closure shapes self-attributional processes in ghosted individuals, and (c) consider how digitally mediated social conditions amplify or moderate these effects on young adult self-esteem and identity.

2. Review of Related Literature

2.1 *Ghosting as a Contemporary Relational Behavior*

Contemporary psychological research increasingly treats ghosting as a defined relationship-dissolution strategy rather than a loose colloquial label: one person unilaterally ends communication, most often through digitally mediated channels, without explanation or acknowledgment (Freedman & Powell, 2024; Kay & Courtice, 2022; Powell et al., 2021, 2022). Within breakup and disengagement taxonomies, this pattern is generally classified as avoidance or withdrawal and distinguished from direct rejection because it withholds the explicit feedback that even painful rejection normally supplies (Freedman & Powell, 2024; Leckfor et al., 2023; Park & Klein, 2024). Although ghosting overlaps conceptually with ostracism, the literature continues to assign it a distinct interpersonal meaning tied to the unannounced termination of a relationship or social connection (Freedman & Powell, 2024; Leckfor et al., 2023; Pancani et al., 2021).

Prevalence estimates indicate that ghosting is not a marginal experience among young adults. Emerging-adult samples report that substantial majorities have both ghosted and been ghosted by romantic partners, with estimates reaching 65% and 72%, respectively (Kabasakal & Çimşir, 2025; Leckfor et al., 2023), while broader population estimates place lifetime exposure at roughly 20-40% (Pancani et al., 2021). Its relevance also extends beyond romance: ghosting occurs in friendships and other social ties, and some evidence suggests it may be especially common in non-romantic relationships where expectations of commitment and explanation are less formalized (Kabasakal & Çimşir, 2025; Kay & Courtice, 2022; Yap et al., 2021). Cross-national findings further support the view that ghosting has become a widely recognized category of social rejection rather than a culturally isolated practice (Freedman & Powell, 2026). Adjacent Philippine evidence likewise shows that perceived childhood attachment is meaningfully associated with later romantic relationship satisfaction, underscoring the continuing developmental significance of relational histories without implying that attachment directly explains ghosting (Gabriel et al., 2026). Peer dynamics are also intertwined with personal-social functioning among late adolescents, suggesting that relational environments remain psychologically consequential during the transition into adulthood (Balut et al., 2026). Taken together, these findings support treating ghosting as a sufficiently prevalent and behaviorally distinct form of disengagement to warrant dedicated psychological analysis across relational domains.

2.2 *Ambiguous Loss and the Absence of Closure*

The psychological significance of ghosting becomes clearer when viewed through the logic of ambiguous loss, a framework developed to explain losses that remain unresolved, uncertain, or unconfirmed and therefore resist ordinary processes of closure (Boss et al., 2021; Küçükkaragöz & Meylani, 2024; Salafia & Adamsons, 2025).

Although ambiguous-loss theory emerged largely from contexts such as dementia, migration, and missing persons, its core condition - physical absence combined with psychological presence - maps closely onto the experience of being ghosted, where the disengaged person remains cognitively and emotionally salient despite communicative disappearance (Huang & Habermas, 2021; Leckfor et al., 2023; Odilavadze et al., 2024). The literature has not formally established ghosting as a subtype of ambiguous loss, but the conceptual correspondence is strong because both experiences impede role reorganization and coherent sense-making by withholding a stable account of what ended and why (Robins, 2024; Testoni et al., 2026; Valenta, 2024). In an adjacent field, narrative health analytics similarly emphasizes that lived experiences contain meaning-rich information that can be lost when events are reduced to decontextualized signals, reinforcing the broader importance of interpretive narrative structure in making experience intelligible (Atento et al., 2025).

The absence of such narrative resolution carries measurable psychological cost. Across theoretical and qualitative work on ambiguous loss, unresolved uncertainty is associated with prolonged or frozen grief, heightened anxiety, and impaired meaning-making compared with more definite forms of loss (Huang & Habermas, 2021; Küçükkaragöz & Meylani, 2024; Pihkala, 2024). Ghosting-specific research reflects the same pattern: people who are ghosted report lower satisfaction of basic psychological needs than those who experience direct rejection, together with continued attachment, monitoring, and difficulty achieving emotional closure (Leckfor et al., 2023; Szczesniak et al., 2025). Need for closure appears to intensify this reaction because individuals high in this disposition respond especially negatively when ghosting denies the informational resolution they are motivated to obtain (Leckfor et al., 2023). Related evidence from Philippine higher education employees shows that meaning is often constructed through family, partners, and other relationships, illustrating in an adjacent context how relational ties can organize personal meaning and why unexplained relational disruption may be especially difficult to integrate (Aguilar, 2026). The literature therefore positions the absence of explanation not as a peripheral characteristic of ghosting but as a central mechanism through which distress can persist beyond the point of communicative disengagement.

2.3 Self-Esteem, Self-Attribution, and Rejection Sensitivity

When an explanation for rejection is withheld, targets do not simply remain psychologically neutral; they attempt to generate causal accounts, and available evidence suggests that these accounts can become self-directed. Experimental work indicates that greater ambiguity in rejection increases self-blame and negative self-cognition relative to non-rejection conditions, although fully explicit rejection can still produce the highest self-blame in some paradigms (Janovsky et al., 2023). The more defensible conclusion is therefore not that ambiguity is invariably worse, but that unexplained rejection creates fertile conditions for self-referential attribution, while externally supplied explanations can soften negative evaluations of both self and other (Schulze et al., 2024). Ghosting is especially relevant because it combines a strong motivation to determine why the relationship changed (Park & Klein, 2024; Szczesniak et al., 2025) with the complete absence of explanatory information, leaving self-generated interpretations unusually unconstrained. A useful counterpoint comes from Filipino psychology students, among whom general social media use was not significantly related to self-esteem or body image, whereas self-esteem was moderately associated with body image; this suggests that specific relational and interpretive mechanisms may matter more for self-evaluation than digital exposure in the abstract (Ruela et al., 2026).

Rejection sensitivity further complicates this process. Defined as a trait-level tendency to anxiously expect and readily perceive rejection, it is associated across meta-analytic and cross-cultural research with lower relational well-being, stronger self-silencing, and diminished perceived mate value (Mishra & Allen, 2024; Mishra et al., 2024). More direct evidence also links higher rejection sensitivity to lower self-esteem and greater self-esteem threat following social exclusion (Freedman & Dainer-Best, 2022; Lei et al., 2024; Lin & Fan, 2022). The resulting pattern can be both self-protective and self-undermining: people high in rejection sensitivity may conceal themselves or distance relationally in ways that plausibly increase later vulnerability to disengagement, while also experiencing stronger threat when rejection occurs (Shulman & Yonatan-Leus, 2023). Philippine university evidence places social rejection sensitivity alongside loneliness, relationship quality, family conflict, and self-esteem within interrelated individual and interpersonal mental-health risk domains, providing an adjacent ecological context for understanding how rejection-related vulnerability rarely operates in isolation (Malabanan, 2026). At the same time, not every study shows uniform amplification: one daily-diary investigation did not find rejection sensitivity predictive of same-day emotional recovery after negative interactions (Richter et al., 2024). The overall evidence therefore supports a conditional model in which ambiguous rejection encourages self-blaming attribution, with rejection sensitivity operating as an important vulnerability factor whose effect depends on the specific relational context.

2.4 Digital Mediation and the Lowering of Relational Accountability

Ghosting cannot be separated from the technological infrastructure that makes silent disengagement easy to enact. Reviews and empirical studies consistently show that digital platforms lower the practical and social cost of ending communication without explanation, particularly by removing the need for immediate, synchronous confrontation (Campaoli et al., 2022; Morales et al., 2025; Yin et al., 2026). This technological affordance should not be confused with emotional indifference: people who ghost often report other-oriented motives and continuing concern for the other person's feelings, indicating that digital mediation reduces the behavioral cost of withdrawal without necessarily erasing its moral or emotional weight for the disengager (Fu et al., 2025; Morales et al., 2025; Park & Klein, 2024). Relational closeness still constrains this tendency, since individuals are less willing to sever digital ties with people they experience as close or supportive (Neubaum et al., 2021). In an adjacent student context, introverted Generation Z users reported relying on social media for emotional regulation and for avoiding uncomfortable in-person interaction, illustrating how digital environments can function as controlled spaces that reduce the immediate interpersonal demands of face-to-face engagement (Dancel et al., 2026).

For the person being ghosted, however, the same digital architecture can preserve traces of the disengager through read receipts, activity indicators, mutual connections, and other visibility cues. Such cues can transform uncertain silence into psychologically activating evidence of intentional withdrawal (Campaoli et al., 2022, 2025). They operate ambivalently: on one hand, they can assist sense-making by confirming that silence is deliberate; on the other, they facilitate repeated checking, monitoring, and cognitive engagement with the absent person (Campaoli et al., 2025; Szczesniak et al., 2025). Evidence from college-bound Filipino learners provides a useful parallel at the level of digital behavior: high social-media exposure coexisted with much lower rates of active sharing, demonstrating how digital environments can sustain substantial passive visibility without corresponding active engagement (Espelita et al., 2026). This distinction helps clarify why digital ghosting may prolong rather than resolve distress: the withdrawn person can remain persistently visible while remaining communicatively absent, sustaining the same ambiguous-loss condition described earlier (Fox et al., 2021; Fu et al., 2025; Malsya, 2026). Digital mediation is therefore not merely the setting in which ghosting occurs; it is a structural component that shapes both the ease of withdrawal and the persistence of its psychological aftermath.

2.5 Young Adulthood as a Developmentally Sensitive Period for Identity and Self-Worth

The self-esteem consequences of ambiguous rejection are unlikely to be evenly distributed across the lifespan. Young adulthood is especially relevant because romantic and peer relationships occupy a developmentally central role in ongoing identity formation. Adults aged 18-29 report higher rejection sensitivity than people in their thirties (Maiolatesi et al., 2022), and emerging adulthood is repeatedly described as a period in which identity, intimacy, and self-concept remain actively consolidated, increasing the developmental weight of relational experiences (Dover et al., 2024; Grossmann et al., 2023). Romantic breakups during this period are associated with measurable changes in self-concept and intimacy capacity, with adjustment shaped by coping strategies and attachment security (Fernandes et al., 2025), while accumulated relational distress across the twenties has been linked to later anxiety and insecurity about future relationships (Shulman & Yonatan-Leus, 2024). Complementary evidence among Chinese medical college students shows that self-disclosure statistically mediated the association between self-identity and fear of intimacy, indicating that identity development and emotional openness are closely linked within young-adult relational functioning even outside the specific context of ghosting (Qi, 2026).

This developmental sensitivity is reinforced by the structure of identity itself. Relational identity and global identity are strongly intertwined during young adulthood, making self-worth comparatively responsive to feedback from close relationships (Dover et al., 2024). Validating relational experiences can support agency and confidence, whereas insecure or rejecting experiences are associated with approval-seeking and self-blaming relational schemas (Nunes et al., 2021; Schacter & Ehrhardt, 2021). In another adjacent young-adult context, perceived parental emotional warmth was positively associated with self-control and self-efficacy, while self-control buffered the association between maternal rejection and self-efficacy, suggesting that self-regulatory resources can shape how rejection is internalized (Rui, 2026). Comparative evidence nevertheless requires caution: self-esteem responds to social inclusion in late adolescence and late adulthood as well as in young adulthood (Wagner et al., 2023). What may distinguish young adulthood, therefore, is not exclusive sensitivity to rejection but the unusually high developmental weight assigned to romantic and peer feedback during active identity consolidation. This positioning directly supports the present analysis because the attributional, rejection-sensitivity, and ambiguous-loss processes described above are likely to interact with a self-concept that remains particularly open to relational input, helping explain why ghosting can be experienced as a destabilizing relational loss rather than a minor social inconvenience.

2.6 *Synthesis of Literature*

Taken together, the five literature themes support a coherent psychological account of why ghosting can be especially destabilizing for young adults, even though no single empirical literature directly tests the complete sequence proposed here. Ghosting is first established as a distinct and prevalent disengagement strategy rather than a vague synonym for rejection. Its defining feature, the deliberate withholding of explanation, maps structurally onto ambiguous loss by leaving the disengaged person physically or communicatively absent but psychologically present. The resulting lack of closure sustains meaning-making efforts, and the attribution literature indicates that unexplained rejection can encourage self-referential causal search and self-blame, particularly among people already disposed to perceive rejection as threatening. Without equating ghosting with clinically more severe forms of distress, adjacent qualitative work among young adults with histories of non-suicidal self-injury shows how negative self-attitudes, self-doubt, and self-compassion can become central components of coping under psychological strain, illustrating the broader relevance of how distress is directed toward and interpreted by the self (Mañibo, 2026).

Digital mediation intensifies this chain rather than simply enabling it. Platforms reduce the interpersonal cost of withdrawal for the disengager while simultaneously providing the ghosted person with visibility cues that can make silence observable, monitorable, and difficult to disengage from psychologically. In this way, digital environments can sustain the ambiguous condition of being communicatively absent yet psychologically present. The developmental context of young adulthood adds another layer because relational and global identity remain strongly interconnected, increasing the likelihood that unresolved relational feedback will be incorporated into self-evaluation. Adjacent resilience research among Filipino helping professionals suggests that capacities such as ownership, reach, endurance, and broader resilience are associated with how effectively adversity is contained and managed, pointing to potentially useful protective constructs for future ghosting research without assuming that findings from occupational adversity transfer directly to relational loss (Adame, 2026). The synthesis therefore moves beyond the general proposition that ghosting is painful: it specifies a plausible pathway through which structural ambiguity, self-directed attribution, digitally sustained visibility, and developmentally heightened relational self-relevance may combine to prolong distress.

A final tension in the literature should remain explicit. Several studies caution against assuming that ambiguity is uniformly more harmful than explicit rejection (Janovsky et al., 2023; Wagner et al., 2023), and research on ghosters indicates that withdrawal can coexist with other-oriented motives rather than reflecting simple indifference or malicious intent (Fu et al., 2025; Morales et al., 2025; Park & Klein, 2024). The evidence therefore supports a psychologically serious but non-catastrophizing interpretation of ghosting: its potential harm arises primarily from the structural denial of explanation and closure, together with the self-referential and digitally prolonged processing that can follow, rather than from any necessary assumption about the character or motives of the person who disengages.

2.7 *Gaps in the Literature*

Several conceptual and empirical gaps become visible once the five themes are read as a unified account rather than as separate literatures.

First, no study identified in this review directly and formally tests ghosting as a subtype of ambiguous loss; the connection remains conceptually strong but empirically inferred, built by analogy from structurally similar but distinct contexts such as dementia, migration, and missing-persons research (Boss et al., 2021; Robins, 2024; Valenta, 2024). Second, the self-attribution literature on ambiguous rejection is drawn substantially from experimental vignette paradigms and algorithmic/job-rejection contexts (Arlinghaus et al., 2025; Janovsky et al., 2023; Schulze et al., 2024) rather than from naturalistic ghosting experiences specifically, leaving open questions about whether attributional patterns observed in controlled rejection paradigms generalize fully to the more protracted, digitally sustained ambiguity characteristic of real-world ghosting. Third, the developmental literature establishes young adulthood as a period of heightened relational identity contingency, but the age-comparison evidence is described in the literature itself as moderate rather than definitive, since self-esteem's reactivity to social inclusion also appears in other life stages (Wagner et al., 2023); what remains underexamined is whether the specific combination of ambiguity and digital visibility interacts differently with self-esteem in young adulthood compared to other developmental periods, rather than developmental sensitivity being examined only in relation to rejection in general.

Fourth, and most significantly for this paper's synthesis, no identified study integrates all four mechanisms — behavioral distinctiveness, ambiguous loss, self-attribution/rejection sensitivity, and digital visibility — within a single developmentally situated framework specific to young adult ghosting. Each mechanism has been studied largely in isolation or in pairwise combination (e.g., ghosting and closure; rejection sensitivity and self-esteem; digital cues and monitoring), but their conceptual integration into a unified account of how ghosting specifically erodes young adult self-worth remains absent from the literature.

2.8 Contribution of the Present Paper

This paper's contribution is primarily conceptual and integrative rather than empirical: it proposes a unified psychosocial framework in which ghosting's self-esteem effects on young adults are best understood as the product of an interaction between three converging conditions — structural ambiguity (denial of explanation and closure), digitally sustained visibility (which prolongs and often intensifies that ambiguity), and developmental self-concept permeability (which channels the resulting uncertainty into self-directed rather than externally distributed meaning-making). By explicitly linking the ambiguous loss framework, attributional research on rejection, and developmental identity theory — three literatures that have so far been substantially examined in parallel rather than in combination — this paper offers a more precise account of why ghosting, specifically, functions as a distinctively self-esteem-corrosive form of relational rejection among young adults, rather than treating it as a variant of generic social rejection or exclusion.

In doing so, the paper also offers a corrective to more totalizing or moralized popular accounts of ghosting, proposing instead a measured psychosocial model: one that acknowledges ghosters' frequently other-oriented motives, avoids treating ambiguity as invariably worse than explicit rejection, and grounds its claims in the specific developmental conditions of young adulthood rather than asserting universal psychological harm. This positions the paper as a foundation for future qualitative or empirical work — for instance, testing whether the proposed framework's predicted attributional and self-esteem patterns hold when examined directly in ghosted young adults' own accounts.

3. Methodology

This paper adopts a conceptual analysis design, integrating established theoretical and empirical literatures into a unified psychosocial framework rather than collecting or analyzing primary data. This design is appropriate given the paper's aim: not to test a novel empirical hypothesis, but to synthesize four previously parallel bodies of research — behavioral definitions of ghosting, ambiguous loss theory, attributional and rejection-sensitivity research, and developmental identity theory — into a single, internally coherent account of how ghosting affects young adult self-esteem. The paper is explicitly non-empirical; no interviews, surveys, or original qualitative material were collected, and no claims in this manuscript should be read as reporting new primary findings.

Source Orientation

The literature base for this paper was compiled through structured academic search using Consensus, an AI-assisted research search engine that indexes peer-reviewed scholarship, supplemented by direct examination of the retrieved primary sources. Search activity was organized around five literature themes, each anchored by two yes/no guide questions designed to be directly answerable through the empirical and theoretical literature (e.g., whether ambiguous loss extends conceptually to non-death relational endings; whether digital platforms lower the social cost of unexplained withdrawal). This question-driven search structure was intended to keep the literature review analytically focused rather than exhaustively descriptive, prioritizing sources that spoke directly to each guide question over incidental or tangentially related studies.

Inclusion Logic

Sources were included where they met one or more of the following criteria: (a) they empirically or theoretically addressed ghosting as a relationship-dissolution behavior; (b) they addressed ambiguous loss, closure, or unresolved grief in relational or para-relational contexts; (c) they examined self-attribution, rejection sensitivity, or self-esteem in response to social or romantic rejection; (d) they examined digital or platform-mediated relational disengagement; or (e) they addressed identity development, relational identity, or self-esteem contingency during young adulthood or emerging adulthood. Priority was given to peer-reviewed journal articles, systematic reviews, and meta-analyses published within approximately the last five years, reflecting the rapidly evolving nature of both ghosting-specific research and the broader digital-relational context in which it occurs. Foundational theoretical sources (e.g., ambiguous loss theory) were included regardless of publication date where they remain the field's standard theoretical reference point.

Thematic Grouping Logic

The five themes were sequenced deliberately to move from foundational definition toward applied psychosocial synthesis: first establishing ghosting as a distinct, prevalent behavior; then identifying its core structural mechanism through ambiguous loss theory; then examining how that structural ambiguity is processed psychologically through self-attribution and rejection sensitivity; then situating that processing within its dominant contemporary context, digital mediation; and finally anchoring the entire mechanism within the developmental period in which it is most

consequential, young adulthood. This sequencing reflects the paper's core positioning rule — behavioral-social question first, interpretive and theoretical depth second — by building outward from an observable behavior toward its psychological and developmental implications, rather than beginning from abstract theory and searching for behavioral illustrations.

Interpretive Framework

The paper's interpretive framework is explicitly integrative rather than adjudicative: rather than testing which single theory (ambiguous loss, attribution theory, or developmental identity theory) best explains ghosting's effects, the paper treats these frameworks as complementary lenses that, combined, offer a more complete account than any single framework alone. Ambiguous loss theory supplies the structural description of what ghosting withholds; attribution and rejection-sensitivity research supplies the mechanism by which that withholding is processed psychologically; and developmental identity theory supplies the explanation for why young adults are particularly susceptible to that processing pattern. Digital mediation is treated not as a separate causal factor but as a contextual amplifier that operates across the other three frameworks simultaneously.

Analytical Criteria

Claims drawn from the literature were evaluated for the strength and directness of their evidentiary support, and the manuscript deliberately distinguishes between findings with direct empirical support in ghosting-specific research (e.g., need for closure predicting reactions to being ghosted), findings extended by conceptual analogy from adjacent literatures (e.g., ambiguous loss theory, developed primarily outside relational-dissolution contexts), and areas of genuine disagreement or mixed evidence within the literature itself (e.g., whether ambiguity is uniformly worse than explicit rejection). Where the literature presented contested or non-uniform findings, this manuscript reports that contestation rather than resolving it in favor of the paper's thesis.

Limitations of the Approach

As a conceptual synthesis, this paper cannot establish causal relationships between ghosting, ambiguity, and self-esteem outcomes in young adults; it can only propose a theoretically and empirically grounded framework for how these constructs plausibly interrelate. The absence of primary qualitative or quantitative data means the paper's central integrative claim — that ambiguity, digital visibility, and developmental permeability jointly channel ghosting's effects toward self-directed attribution — remains a theoretical proposition rather than a tested finding. Additionally, because much of the self-attribution and rejection-sensitivity evidence originates from experimental paradigms using non-ghosting rejection contexts (e.g., algorithmic rejection, job rejection, vignette-based rejection), some caution is warranted in generalizing these mechanisms to the specific, protracted, digitally sustained ambiguity characteristic of real-world ghosting experiences.

4. Analytical Synthesis

The literature reviewed in the preceding sections was not originally assembled to explain young adult ghosting as an integrated phenomenon; each of the five themes developed largely within its own disciplinary conversation. Read together, however, they support a more precise analytical claim than any single theme establishes on its own: that ghosting's capacity to damage young adult self-esteem depends on the interaction of three specific conditions, rather than on any one of them operating alone. This section proposes and examines that interaction as an integrative framework — termed here the ambiguity-permeability pathway — before considering its behavioral-social implications and the boundaries of what the evidence can and cannot support.

4.1 The Ambiguity-Permeability Pathway

The first condition is structural: ghosting withholds the explanatory information that even overtly negative rejection typically supplies. This is not incidental to the behavior but constitutive of it, distinguishing ghosting from direct rejection at the level of definition rather than degree (Freedman & Powell, 2024; Kay & Courtice, 2022). The ambiguous loss framework clarifies why this withholding matters psychologically: it produces a condition of “physical absence, psychological presence” that blocks the coherent narrative construction ordinarily required to process an ending and reorganize one's relational expectations (Boss et al., 2021; Huang & Habermas, 2021). Structural ambiguity, in other words, is not merely uncomfortable; it is developmentally and cognitively obstructive, since without an external account of why the relationship ended, the ghosted individual cannot complete the interpretive work that closure ordinarily performs.

The second condition is mechanistic: humans do not tolerate this interpretive vacuum passively. The attribution literature indicates that ambiguity actively recruits causal search, and that in the absence of external information, this

search tends to resolve inward, toward self-blame, particularly among individuals higher in rejection sensitivity (Janovsky et al., 2023; Schulze et al., 2024). This is the paper's central mechanistic claim: ghosting does not simply withhold an explanation and leave a neutral gap; it withholds an explanation into a psychological system that is disposed to fill that gap with self-referential content. The absence of information is not experienced as absence — it is experienced as an unfavorable verdict about the self, generated by the self, in the absence of any competing account.

The third condition is contextual amplification through digital mediation. Because most contemporary ghosting occurs within platforms that preserve visible traces of the other person's continued activity, the structural ambiguity described above is rarely allowed to fade naturally. Read receipts, active status indicators, and mutual digital connections keep the disengaged party cognitively present long after they have become communicatively absent (Campaioli et al., 2022, 2025), converting what might otherwise be a bounded rejection event into an extended, monitorable condition. This matters analytically because it suggests digital mediation does not simply make ghosting easier to enact — it also structurally prolongs the self-attributional window described above, giving the self-blaming interpretive process more time and more provocation (via continued visibility) to operate.

The fourth condition, and the one that gives this framework its developmental specificity, is self-concept permeability. The developmental literature indicates that young adulthood is a period in which relational identity and global identity are unusually fused, such that romantic and peer feedback carries disproportionate weight in ongoing self-definition (Dover et al., 2024; Grossmann et al., 2023). This does not mean young adults are uniquely emotionally reactive to rejection in a general sense — the evidence on this point is genuinely mixed (Wagner et al., 2023) — but rather that the self-relevance of relational feedback is developmentally elevated at this stage. A self-blaming attribution generated by ambiguous rejection therefore has more available surface area to attach to in young adulthood than it might at a developmental stage where identity is more firmly consolidated and less contingent on relational input.

4.2 Why the Interaction Matters More Than Any Single Component

The analytical value of this framework lies in resisting two simpler but less accurate accounts. One simpler account would attribute ghosting's psychological harm entirely to its ambiguity, treating any unexplained rejection as equivalently damaging regardless of context or population. This does not hold against the evidence: ambiguity elevates self-blame relative to no-rejection controls, but does not always exceed the self-blame produced by explicit rejection (Janovsky et al., 2023), and rejection sensitivity's effects are not uniform across all outcome measures (Richter et al., 2024). A second simpler account would attribute the harm primarily to digital platforms themselves, treating technology as the causal agent. This, too, oversimplifies: digital mediation lowers the disengager's confrontation cost and prolongs the target's visibility-driven monitoring, but ghosters retain other-oriented motives even while ghosting (Fu et al., 2025; Morales et al., 2025), indicating that the platform is better understood as a structural amplifier than as the origin of the behavior's psychological logic.

What the four-condition framework proposed here suggests instead is that ghosting's distinctive capacity to erode young adult self-esteem emerges specifically at the intersection of these conditions: an ambiguity-generating behavior, processed by a self-blame-prone attributional system, sustained beyond its natural duration by persistent digital visibility, operating on a self-concept that is developmentally primed to absorb relational feedback as identity-relevant information. Remove any one condition and the pathway weakens. A direct, explained rejection removes the ambiguity condition. An in-person, non-digitally-mediated ending removes the sustained-visibility condition. Rejection experienced later in adulthood, when identity is more consolidated, plausibly weakens the permeability condition. Ghosting among young adults on digital platforms represents, in effect, a case where all four conditions converge simultaneously — which may help explain both its behavioral prevalence and its disproportionate salience in young adults' accounts of relational distress, relative to its comparatively recent emergence as a named social phenomenon.

4.3 Behavioral-Social Implications

Framed this way, ghosting's psychological weight for young adults is less a matter of individual sensitivity or generational fragility — framings common in popular commentary — and more a predictable output of a specific interaction between behavior, cognition, technology, and developmental stage. This reframing carries a behavioral-social implication worth foregrounding: interventions or protective strategies aimed at mitigating ghosting's self-esteem effects are most likely to be productive if they target the interpretive stage of the pathway — disrupting the tendency to fill ambiguity with self-blame — rather than attempting to eliminate ambiguity itself (which is structurally embedded in the behavior) or to alter developmental self-concept permeability (which is a normal, not pathological, feature of this life stage). This suggests, at a conceptual level, that psychoeducation emphasizing the attributional ambiguity of ghosting — that silence reflects the discloser's avoidance strategies and communication limitations at

least as plausibly as it reflects the target's deficiencies — may be a more tractable point of intervention than efforts to reduce digital visibility cues or to encourage emotional detachment from relational outcomes generally.

4.4 Boundaries of the Present Analysis

Two boundaries must be stated clearly. First, this framework is an integrative theoretical proposal built from literatures that have so far been examined largely in isolation; it has not itself been empirically tested as a unified model, and its explanatory power should be read as plausible and well-grounded rather than confirmed. Second, the framework should not be read as implying that all young adults who are ghosted experience significant self-esteem harm, or that ghosters are uniformly indifferent to the harm their withdrawal may cause; the literature is explicit that ghosters often retain other-oriented motives (Fu et al., 2025; Morales et al., 2025), and that individual differences — particularly rejection sensitivity and need for closure — substantially moderate reactions to being ghosted (Leckfor et al., 2023; Shulman & Yonatan-Leus, 2023). The pathway proposed here describes a mechanism of vulnerability under specified conditions, not a deterministic outcome.

4.5 Discussion of Findings and Implications

Implications for Psychology and Social Analysis

The framework developed here suggests that ghosting functions as a useful diagnostic case for a more general psychological principle: that the absence of information, rather than only its negative content, can independently generate psychological harm when it interacts with an attributional system oriented toward self-blame. This reframes ghosting not merely as a variant of social rejection but as an illustration of how ambiguity itself operates as an active psychological stressor rather than a passive void awaiting interpretation. For social-psychological theory more broadly, this reinforces and extends existing attributional research by demonstrating a real-world, high-prevalence context in which the interpretive vacuum is not incidental to the stressor but is, in fact, definitional to it.

Relevance for Contemporary Young Adult Life

For young adults navigating an increasingly digitally mediated relational landscape, this analysis suggests that ghosting's psychological weight is unlikely to diminish simply as the behavior becomes more normalized or more frequently discussed in popular discourse. Normalization may reduce moral judgment directed at ghosters, but it does not address the structural mechanism identified here: the pathway operates independently of how socially acceptable ghosting is perceived to be, since its harm derives from the interaction of ambiguity, self-blame, digital visibility, and developmental permeability rather than from social stigma attached to the behavior itself. This suggests that public discourse treating ghosting primarily as an etiquette failure — a question of what is polite or considerate — may be addressing a real but secondary concern while leaving the more consequential psychological mechanism largely unexamined.

Meaning for Identity, Coping, and Self-Worth

The developmental specificity of this framework carries particular significance for how identity and self-worth are understood during young adulthood. If relational feedback carries disproportionate weight for self-definition at this life stage, as the developmental literature suggests (Dover et al., 2024; Grossmann et al., 2023), then ambiguous relational endings may function as a distinctive category of identity disruption — not simply painful in the moment, but potentially destabilizing to a still-consolidating sense of self. This suggests that coping strategies effective for more clearly bounded relational losses (where an explanation, however unwelcome, is available) may be less directly applicable to ghosting, since the coping task is not only emotional recovery but also the harder work of constructing meaning in the persistent absence of causal information.

Theoretical Significance

Theoretically, this paper's central contribution is the proposal that ambiguous loss theory, attributional research on rejection, and developmental identity theory are not merely adjacent literatures that happen to share a subject but are mechanistically linked components of a single explanatory pathway when applied to young adult ghosting specifically. This integrative move has modest but genuine theoretical value: it suggests that future research on ambiguous relational loss more broadly (e.g., estrangement, situationships, “breadcrumbing”) might productively be examined through the same four-condition lens — structural ambiguity, attributional mechanism, contextual amplification, and developmental permeability — rather than through any single framework in isolation.

Boundaries of What Can and Cannot Be Concluded

This paper cannot conclude that ghosting causes clinically significant or lasting self-esteem damage in young adults as a general rule; the evidence supports a plausible, well-grounded mechanism of vulnerability under specified conditions, not a uniform or deterministic outcome. It also cannot conclude that digital platforms are the primary causal agent behind ghosting's psychological effects, since the evidence indicates platforms function as amplifiers of a psychological process rooted in ambiguity and attribution rather than as independent causes. Finally, this paper cannot conclude that young adulthood is uniquely or exclusively vulnerable to rejection-related self-esteem harm in an absolute sense, given that self-esteem's responsiveness to social inclusion is documented across other life stages as well (Wagner et al., 2023); the claim advanced here is one of developmental salience and self-concept permeability, not exclusive vulnerability.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

This paper set out to examine how the specific psychological structure of ghosting — its withholding of explanation, its enforced ambiguity, and its digital mediation — interacts with the mechanisms by which young adults construct and regulate self-esteem. The resulting analysis proposes that ghosting's capacity to erode young adult self-worth is best understood not as a product of any single factor but as the outcome of four converging conditions: the structural ambiguity inherent to the behavior itself, a self-attributional system disposed to resolve that ambiguity through self-blame, digital mediation that sustains and often intensifies the ambiguity beyond its natural duration, and a developmental stage in which relational feedback carries disproportionate weight for identity consolidation. This ambiguity-permeability pathway offers a more precise account than treating ghosting as a simple variant of social rejection, and it does so while explicitly avoiding two overstatements common in less disciplined treatments of the topic: it does not claim that ambiguous rejection is invariably more harmful than explicit rejection, and it does not claim that young adults are uniquely or universally vulnerable to relational rejection relative to other life stages.

The strongest supported insight from this synthesis is that ghosting's psychological weight derives specifically from the interaction of structural, cognitive, contextual, and developmental factors rather than from any one of these operating in isolation. This reframing carries a modestly optimistic implication alongside its diagnostic one: because the pathway's most tractable point of intervention appears to be the interpretive stage — the tendency to fill ambiguity with self-blame — rather than the ambiguity itself or the developmental permeability of the self-concept, this suggests that psychoeducational and reflective approaches emphasizing the attributional uncertainty of ghosting may hold more practical promise than efforts targeting digital platform design or attempts to encourage general relational detachment among young adults.

Several recommendations follow from this conceptual synthesis. For future research, the most pressing need is empirical work that examines the four proposed conditions in combination rather than in isolation — for instance, studies that assess self-blaming attribution specifically among ghosted young adults while simultaneously measuring digital visibility exposure and developmental identity contingency, rather than studying these variables in separate paradigms. Naturalistic and qualitative research on real-world ghosting experiences would also help address the current reliance on experimental and vignette-based rejection paradigms that may not fully capture the protracted, digitally sustained ambiguity characteristic of actual ghosting. For practice, the framework suggests that counselors, educators, and mental health practitioners working with young adults may benefit from explicitly naming the attributional trap this paper describes — helping ghosted individuals recognize that the absence of explanation reflects the discloser's avoidance behavior at least as plausibly as it reflects any personal deficiency. For reflective and educational contexts, the paper's integrative framework may also serve as a teaching tool for young adults themselves, offering a structured way to understand why ghosting feels disproportionately destabilizing without requiring them to conclude that this reaction reflects unusual personal fragility.

Ultimately, this paper contributes a theoretically grounded, integrative lens for understanding a behavior that has become a defining feature of contemporary young adult relational life, while maintaining appropriate caution about the limits of a conceptual, non-empirical synthesis. Its value lies not in offering definitive causal claims but in providing a more precise map of how ambiguity, attribution, technology, and development interact — a map that future empirical work is now well positioned to test directly.

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