

Writing Sample 2 summary: There's a term in social media called "ghosting," which is used when someone ends a relationship by drastically decreasing social media engagement/messaging without explanation. At the University of Maryland, College Park, a Research 1 state university, I conducted a first-of-its-kind study for a senior professor in Social Psychology that found that people's attachment styles are correlated with their use of social media "ghosting." Although my study found no significant effect of the hypothesized mediator on the relationship between attachment style and "ghosting" behavior (via data regression analysis), it observed a significant total effect between insecure attachment styles and "ghosting". Through the study, I gained hands-on knowledge about how a person's past experiences and traumas can motivate their present behavior and confirmed that social data analysis is a significant avenue for exploring human experience.

Attachment Style, Conflict Resolution and Ghosting Behavior

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Abstract

The current study predicted that there is a positive association between insecure attachment styles and ghosting behaviors and that relationship is mediated by fear of conflict. College students took questionnaires assessing their respective attachment styles, their levels of conflict fear/avoidance, and their likelihood to exhibit ghosting behaviors. The expected results are that participants with insecure attachment styles are more likely to have higher scores for fear/avoidance of conflict, and therefore, are more likely to ghost a friend or significant other. The study aims to discern if attachment style is a significant factor in how someone deals with conflict, especially when in relation to ending a relationship or friendship, through the use of technology and social media. Results of the study show that the original hypothesis was not supported; however, the researcher found significant total effects between insecure attachment styles and ghosting behaviors.

Attachment Style, Conflict Resolution and Ghosting Behavior

Relationships are the foundation of who we are as a society. It is well known that humans are social creatures, and therefore, crave interpersonal relationships (Young, 2008). Relationships can be great when they start, but more likely than not, they will end eventually. As one of the most notable Greek philosophers, Aristotle, once said, there are three kinds of friendships: friendships of utility, pleasure, and then the highest form of friendship, true friendship (Nicomachean Ethics, 2017). Friends of utility and pleasure are those who come in and out of your lives for a short period. There is nothing wrong with those friendships, but they do eventually end. When it comes to romantic relationships, there are two endings: break up or marriage/cohabitation. Seeing as so many friendships and romantic relationships inevitably end, there are also many ways to end these relationships. In this day and age, one method has become increasingly popular: ghosting.

Ghosting can be defined as slowly fading out of someone's life by gradually interacting with and contacting them less and less. It is a very passive way to end a relationship and does not provide closure for the person who is on the receiving end. Characteristics of ghosting include: texting short responses that don't further a conversation, avoiding in-person interactions, waiting long periods before responding, avoiding social media interactions, etc. And while there hasn't been much research on ghosting, it is something that many people have participated in or been affected by. According to a 2016 survey released by dating site *Plenty of Fish*, 78% of single Millennials, defined as people on the site between the ages of 18 and 33, have been ghosted at least once (Fortune, 2016). Because it is a very non-confrontational method of ending a relationship/friendship, the researcher hypothesizes that participants with anxious or avoidant attachment styles will most likely use this method because of their fear of confrontation/conflict. It is important to research ghosting because learning how to manage disagreement and negative emotions is key to resolving differences and for increasing relationship satisfaction (Gottman, 1998). Prior research has also shown that conflict management skills are particularly important during late adolescence when socializing with friends and romantic

partners is central (Furman & Buhrmester, 1992). By understanding why people ghost and who is most likely to ghost, researchers can suggest better methods of conflict resolution.

According to attachment theory, postulated by Ainsworth and Bowlby (1991), the relationship that a child has with its mother will become the foundation for their relationships with others in the future. In the first 12 months of life, a baby will develop one of three attachment styles: secure, anxious, or avoidant. These attachment styles are usually very fixed and will dictate how a person approaches relationships throughout their life (Hazan and Shafer, 1987). The main styles that the study will be focusing on are the insecure attachment styles: anxious and avoidant. People with anxious (preoccupied) attachment styles tend to crave intimate relationships and become anxious when they feel like their relationships are threatened. People with avoidant attachment styles either crave intimacy but are scared of letting people get close to them (fearful-avoidant), or they do not crave intimacy and do not want anyone getting close to them (dismissive-avoidant).

According to prior studies, people with anxious attachment styles are more distressed by conflict than individuals who are more securely attached (Campbell et al., 2005). And while avoidant or dismissive attachment has not been linked to a view of argument as threatening, avoidant individuals tend to deal with interpersonal conflict by using tactics that involve either avoiding/denying the conflict, or trying to dominate the partner (Luecken et al., 2013). Another reason that both attachment styles may avoid conflict is their beliefs on conflicts. People with avoidant attachment style have been reported to believe that conflict has no benefits, therefore they feel there is no reason to engage in it, further supporting that they use ghosting as a method to avoid dealings with the tedious intricacies of conflict (Rico & Sierra, 2017). People with anxious attachment styles reported being ambivalent to the benefits of conflict, however, there was a significant association with the belief that conflict is highly threatening to them (Rico & Sierra 2017). This further supports that anxious people would be more likely to be scared of the consequences of conflict than someone with a secure attachment style, and therefore use ghosting methods to end a relationship.

The current study attempts to discover whether fear or conflict is a mediator in the correlation between one's attachment style and his/her likelihood to use ghosting tactics when ending a friendship/romantic relationship. The correlation between the two variables is predicted to be significant, indicating someone with a more insecure attachment style such as avoidant or anxious, may also score higher on the scale of his/her likelihood to ghost a significant other or friend with the mediator of the correlation being his/her fear/avoidance of conflict. Those with secure attachment styles are expected to have less fear of conflict and therefore, exhibit less ghosting behaviors.

Method

Participants

The 93 participants were taken from the University of Maryland through convenient sampling. All of the participants were of college age, therefore from the ages of 18~23. Because of an issue with the original survey, the researcher had to collect data from 13 more people to offset the potential error the original 13 could cause. She received responses from more than 93 participants, therefore, once the problem data from the first 13 participants and the preview data was taken out, there was a total of 86 responses. A majority of the participants were white/Caucasian, with Asian being the second-highest percentage. Around 32% of the participants were male and around 67% of the participants were female. The average age of participants was 21 years old.

Procedure

Participants were recruited from a variety of social media websites and internet services, including Facebook groups, Groupme, Reddit, elms/canvas and mass emails. The questionnaires were distributed based on convenience. The researcher advertised the questionnaires in a wide variety of places to get as many different UMD college students as possible. Although the results may not be representative of all college students, the researcher hopes that the results will be representative of the University of Maryland population. Each questionnaire included an informed consent notice, a debriefing form, and the following measures:

Measures

Revised Adult Attachment Scale (Collins, 1996). This scale is a widely cited measure of a participant's attachment style. It involves questions that measure for secure, anxious, and avoidant attachment styles. The questionnaire contains 18 items in total and a set of scoring instructions for the researcher. The scale is a 5-point Likert scale that assesses how characteristic/uncharacteristic a statement is about the participant (e.g., "I find it relatively easy to get close to people"; "I find it difficult to allow myself to depend on others"; "I often wonder whether romantic partners really care about me"; etc.). The scale is labeled from very uncharacteristic to very characteristic. There are 18 items on the scale that are used to measure the amount of avoidance or anxiety a participant has in their attachment style. This scale measures the independent variable of the study. Cronbach's alpha for the anxiety subscale is 0.87. Cronbach's alpha for the avoidance subscale is 0.861.

Ghosting Scale. This scale was created by the researcher of this study to measure how likely a participant is to exhibit ghosting behaviors. The scale is a 7-point Likert scale and is coded by the researcher. The scale is labeled from very likely to very unlikely. The statements that were created were made to operationalize ghosting behaviors (e.g., "I would give one-worded responses to someone I did not want to text"; "I would slowly stop talking to someone if I did not want to see them anymore"; "If I were not interested in someone, I would avoid them" etc.). This scale has ten different items measuring the likelihood for someone to exhibit ghosting behavior. Cronbach's alpha for this scale is 0.812. The scale can be found in the appendix.

Conflict Approach/Conflict Avoidance Subscale (Goldstein, 1999). A shortened version of the Conflict Approach/Conflict Avoidance Subscale (Goldstein, 1999) was used to measure a participant's level of conflict avoidance and fear. Each item is meant to assess how uncomfortable a participant is with conflict. It is a 7-point Likert scales and includes statements that address key beliefs and feelings about conflict (e.g., "I avoid arguments"; "I find conflict exciting"; "I feel upset after an argument"). There are 11 items on the scale measuring fear of conflict and they are labeled from strongly disagree to strongly agree. This scale measures the mediating variable, which is fear/avoidance of conflict. Cronbach's alpha for this scale is 0.81.

Results

Regression analysis was used to test whether fear of conflict mediated the effect of attachment style on ghosting behavior. Results are presented in Figure 1. First fear of conflict was regressed, the presumed mediator, on ghosting behaviors, however, it did not reveal a significant effect or mediation, $p > .05$. Second, ghosting behaviors on both attachment style and fear of conflict were regressed. The effect of fear of conflict on ghosting behaviors was significant, $B = .260$, $t = 2.610$, $p < .05$, and the effect of avoidant attachment style was significant, $p < .001$. The total effect of avoidance on ghosting was also significant $B = .519$, $t = 5.047$, $p < .001$. The total effect of anxiety on ghosting behaviors was also significant but not as strong as the relationship between avoidance and ghosting, $B = .281$, $t = 2.431$, $p < .05$. A Sobel test of the indirect effect of attachment style on ghosting behaviors through an effect on fear of conflict was not significant in the anxiety attachment style, $p = 0.97$. With regards to the avoidant attachment style, it was significant, $p = 0.013$. However, this does not suggest mediation since the effect of the avoidant attachment style on fear of conflict was shown to not be significant in the multiple regression, $p = .391$. These results suggest that although attachment style may have a significant effect on ghosting behaviors, the effect is most likely not mediated by fear of conflict.

Discussion

Although the findings did not support the researcher's original hypothesis, stating that people who scored high in avoidant or anxious attachment styles would have a higher fear of conflict, and therefore exhibit more ghosting behaviors; it did provide them with some very important information about the effect of attachment styles on interpersonal relationships. The results of this study suggest that although fear of conflict is not a mediator, having an avoidant attachment style is related to ghosting behaviors. People with avoidant attachment styles also exhibit ghosting behavior, though the researcher believes that that relationship would have a very different mediator. The results may indicate that, although avoidant people would try to avoid conflict, it is not necessarily because they are afraid of it. As was explained in the introduction, people with avoidant attachment styles just don't

believe in the importance of conflict (Rico & Sierra, 2017). Therefore, it is understandable that fear of conflict would not be a mediator for their ghosting behaviors.

This study implies that there is much to be learned about ghosting behaviors. It would be interesting to study various possible mediators to understand the motivation behind such a prevalent behavior committed by insecure attachment styles. By understanding why people with anxious and avoidant attachment styles exhibit more ghosting behaviors, researchers will be better able to understand rejection within interpersonal relationships as well. The study's researcher believes that a better mediator for avoidant attachment style and ghosting behaviors would be indifference or empathy (or lack thereof). Someone high in avoidant attachment styles would be more indifferent and therefore exhibit ghosting behaviors. Someone high in avoidant attachment style would most likely be less empathetic and therefore exhibit more ghosting behaviors. Those with anxious attachment styles may exhibit more ghosting behaviors because they do not want others to look at them unfavorably for engaging in conflict. The possibilities are endless; therefore, it is important to continue studying the topic.

A possible limitation of the study and its results is that the individuals surveyed are not representative of the world at large. Students at a university may be more similar to each other than the rest of the world population concerning age, socio-economic status, and level of education. As a result, the results of this study may not be representative of the whole dating world. Ghosting is not limited to the demographic studied; therefore, the study should not be either. Ideally, the sample's participants would have been randomly selected from varying demographic regions to increase the likelihood of generalization and to increase the external validity of the study.

This study is also limited in that it does not establish causation. To establish causation, there needs to be an experiment designed that can identify the direction of causation. Because attachment style is not something you can manipulate, you would have to design a quasi-experiment that tests the effect of attachment styles on the mediator and consequently, the behavior.

In conclusion, the original hypothesis was not supported; however, the researcher did find significant total effects between insecure attachment styles and ghosting behaviors. This is a good start for the study of ghosting behavior, a behavior that has become so prevalent in our interpersonal relationships. Further research in the form of experiments with strict controls will be able to establish directional causation and rule out possible limitations.

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Appendix

Figure 1:
Anxious Attachment Style

		Coefficients		Standardized		
Model		Unstandardized	Coefficients	Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	4.123	.373		11.066	.000
	Anxiety	-.004	.114	-.004	-.031	.975

a. Dependent Variable: Conflict

		Coefficients ^a		Standardized		
Model		Unstandardized	Coefficients	Coefficient	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	s Beta		
1	(Constant)	2.563	.647		3.961	.000
	Anxiety	.296	.120	.280	2.459	.016
	Conflict	.210	.125	.191	1.673	.099

a. Dependent Variable: Ghost

		Coefficients ^a		Standardized		
Model		Unstandardized	Coefficients	Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	3.420	.400		8.552	.000
	Anxiety	.296	.122	.281	2.431	.018

a. Dependent Variable: Ghost

Avoidant Attachment Style

		Coefficients ^a		Standardized		
Model		Unstandardized	Coefficients	Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	4.494	.457		9.841	.000
	Avoidance	-.135	.156	-.102	-.863	.391

a. Dependent Variable: Conflict

Coefficients^a

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Coefficients Beta		
1	(Constant)	.916	.651		1.407	.164
	Avoidance	.798	.144	.552	5.539	.000
	Conflict	.286	.109	.260	2.610	.011

a. Dependent Variable: Ghost

Coefficients ^a						
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Coefficient s Beta		
1	(Constant)	2.218	.435		5.097	.000
	Avoidance	.752	.149	.519	5.047	.000

a. Dependent Variable: Ghost

Appendix 2: Questionnaire and Stimulus Materials

Conflict Approach/Conflict Avoidance Subscale (Goldstein, 1999) 5 point Likert Scale

Note: For our purposes, the scores have been reversed so that higher scores are equivalent to a higher level of conflict approach. The * denote questions that are reverse-scored.

1. I hate arguments.*
2. I wait to see if a dispute will resolve itself before taking action.*
3. I rarely have arguments with my friends*
4. I avoid arguments.*
5. I often start arguments.
6. I find conflict exciting.
7. I enjoy challenging the opinions of others.
8. Conflicts make relationships interesting.
9. I like when other people challenge my opinions.
10. I feel stressed when I think of conflict.*
11. I think conflict can be helpful in communicating opinions.*

Ghosting Scale

Read the statements below and use this scale in order to express how likely/unlikely you are to do something:

1-----2-----3-----4-----5-----6-----7

Very Unlikely Unlikely Somewhat Unlikely Neutral Somewhat Likely Likely Very Likely

- 1) If I were not interested in someone, I would directly tell them.*
- 2) If I were not interested in someone, I would avoid them.
- 3) I would slowly stop talking to someone if I did not want to see them anymore
- 4) I would stop talking to someone if I didn't want to reject them
- 5) It would make me uncomfortable to tell someone how I really feel about them if I wasn't interested
- 6) I would give one worded responses to someone I did not want to text them.
- 7) I would slowly stop talking to someone if they could not give me what I wanted
- 8) I wouldn't have a problem with disappearing from someone's life if I were no longer interested in them.
- 9) I would phase out of my life someone I was no longer interested in
- 10) I think ignoring someone you don't want to talk to is better than discussing it.

This scale is used to see how likely the participants would be to use ghosting tactics. The higher the score, the more likely they are to ghost someone. Questions with asterisks should be reverse scored.

Collins, N. L. (1996). Revised Adult Attachment Scale. PsycTESTS Dataset.
doi:10.1037/t19162-000

Revised Adult Attachment Scale (Collins, 1996)

Please read each of the following statements and rate the extent to which it describes your feelings about romantic relationships. Please think about all your relationships (past and present) and respond in terms of how you generally feel in these relationships. If you have never been involved in a romantic relationship, answer in terms of how you think you would feel.
Please use the scale below by placing a number between 1 and 5 in the space provided to the right of each statement.

1-----2-----3-----4-----5

**Not at all
characteristic
of me**

**Very
characteristic
of me**

- 1) I find it relatively easy to get close to people.
- 2) I find it difficult to allow myself to depend on others.
- 3) I often worry that romantic partners don't really love me.
- 4) I find that others are reluctant to get as close as I would like
- 5) I am comfortable depending on others.
- 6) I don't worry about people getting too close to me.

- 7) I find that people are never there when you need them.
- 8) I am somewhat uncomfortable being close to others.
- 9) I often worry that romantic partners won't want to stay with me.
- 10) When I show my feelings for others, I'm afraid they will not feel the same about me.
- 11) I often wonder whether romantic partners really care about me.
- 12) I am comfortable developing close relationships with others.
- 13) I am uncomfortable when anyone gets too emotionally close to me.
- 14) I know that people will be there when I need them.
- 15) I want to get close to people, but I worry about being hurt.
- 16) I find it difficult to trust others completely.
- 17) Romantic partners often want me to be emotionally closer than I feel comfortable being.
- 18) I am not sure that I can always depend on people to be there when I need them

Scoring Instructions for the Revised Adult Attachment Scale

If you would like to compute only *two* attachment dimensions – attachment *anxiety* (model of self) and attachment *avoidance* (model of other) – you can use the following scoring procedure:

<u>Scale</u>	<u>Items</u>
ANXIETY	3 4 9 10 11 15
AVOID	1* 2 5* 6* 7 8 12* 13 14* 16 17 18

* Items with an asterisk should be reverse scored before computing the subscale mean.

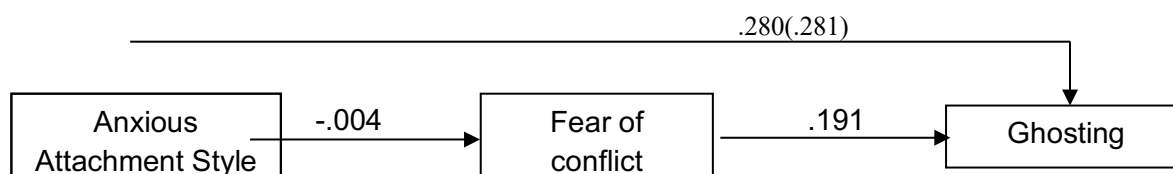


Figure 1. Mediating Effect of Fear of Conflict $p > .05$

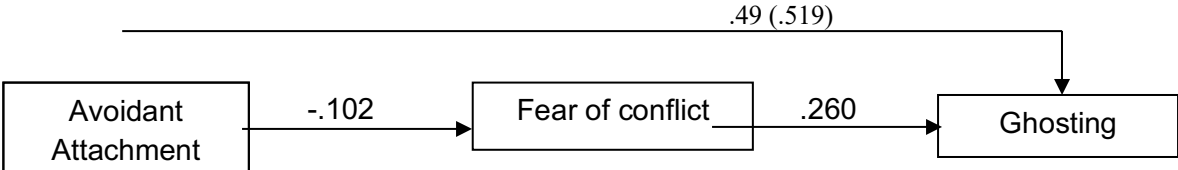


Figure 1. *Mediating Effect of Fear of Conflict*
p>.05

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