

Abstract

CONNECT OR PROTECT:

THE IMPACT OF GHOSTING ON POTENTIAL PARTNER PERCEPTION & PURSUIT

by

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As an increasing number of individuals seek meaningful connections in online dating, it is important to understand how online dating users' perceptions and behaviors vary as a result of contact being terminated with them without warning (i.e., being ghosted) and their regulatory focus. Research on how being ghosted affects users' expectations and pursuit of potential partners is limited, despite ghosting being a pervasive online dating experience. Also, the role of users' motivational systems of goal pursuit, namely regulatory focus (promotion focus: motive to affiliate/connect with others, prevention focus: motive to avoid rejection/protect the self), on users' expectations and pursuit of potential partners on online dating platforms (ODPs) has yet to be explored in this context.

To address these gaps in the literature, I conducted one online non-experimental survey (Study 1) and two online experiments (Studies 2 and 3). In all three studies, regulatory focus was measured in terms of chronic regulatory focus with the Regulatory Focus Questionnaire (RFQ; Higgins et al. 2001) and relationship regulatory focus with the Regulatory Focus in Relationships Scale (Winterheld & Simpson, 2011). In Study 1, 145 users (81 men, 63 women, 1 non-binary) reported on their regulatory focus before indicating their anticipated connection success (ACS) and change to potential partner pursuit after a variety of hypothetical ghosting experiences. As the degree of connection before being ghosted increased (i.e., from being ghosted after messaging on the ODP

to being ghosted after an in-person date), ACS and pursuit of partners decreased. Also, both chronic and relationship promotion focus were positively associated with ACS and relationship prevention focus was negatively associated with pursuit in potential partners after imagining being ghosted. The results of Study 1 informed the manipulation of Studies 2 and 3 which involved instructing participants to imagine being ghosted versus mutually terminating contact. Due to the stronger effects emerging for imagining being ghosted after meeting in-person in Study 1, participants in Studies 2 and 3 were randomly assigned to imagine that after an in-person date they were either ghosted (ghosting condition) or mutually terminated contact (control condition).

In Study 2, 178 users (121 men, 54 women, 1 non-binary, 1 gender fluid) completed the regulatory focus measures before imagining being ghosted or mutually terminating contact with a potential partner. Participants wrote about how they would think, feel, and behave after the experience and then reported their ACS and importance of finding a meaningful connection, desire to pursue potential partners, and interest in ODP options (including using free and paid features to meet romantic partners and friends). A moderated mediation model was predicted. Specifically, it was expected that, within the ghosting condition, those relatively high (versus low) in promotion focus would have higher ACS, leading to more potential partner pursuit. It was also expected that those relatively high (versus low) in prevention focus would have lower ACS, leading to less potential partner pursuit. The predicted model was partially supported such that, after imagining being ghosted, those high in relationship prevention focus (controlling for relationship promotion focus scores) had lower ratings for importance of successfully finding a meaningful connection, leading to less desire for

partner pursuit. However, regardless of condition, those high (versus low) in relationship promotion focus (controlling for prevention focus scores) had higher ACS, leading to more desire for partner pursuit.

In Study 3, regulatory focus was not only measured, but manipulated by inducing participants into a promotion focus (i.e., listing ways to achieve online dating goals) or prevention focus (i.e., listing ways to avoid failure in online dating goals) after imagining being ghosted or mutually terminating contact with a potential partner. There were 162 users (91 men, 69 women, 2 non-binary) who completed the study. The association between regulatory focus induction and ACS only approached significance (and ACS was not statistically significantly higher in the promotion focus induction relative to the prevention focus induction), but higher ACS was associated with more desire to pursue potential partners (but not more interest in ODP options).

These results extend findings on how regulatory focus impacts relationship processes to the context of ghosting on online dating platforms. Studies 2 and 3 are also some of the first studies to test the causal link between being ghosted and online daters' desire to pursue potential partners. The results suggest that people's motives may alter the way that they respond to being ghosted, and how they continue to engage in online dating for potential partner pursuit.