

Ghosting as a technologically assisted exit strategy on mobile dating apps

Anamarija Šiša

University of Ljubljana, anamarija.sisa@fdv.uni-lj.si

Abstract

This article examines the practice of “ghosting” on mobile dating apps. In the context of such apps, ghosting is the practice of unilaterally ending an interaction without explanation and avoiding any further communication with the potential partner. Findings from the qualitative analysis presented in this article are based on interviews with 26 dating app users from Ljubljana, Slovenia, and reveal that the use of the ghosting strategy on dating apps, even in the earliest stages of interaction between potential partners, enables the normalization of this strategy. This article examines ghosting as an uncertain practice enabled by the gamified nature of dating apps. It also explores how ghosting establishes a sense of control in the uncertain, gamified, and laborious environment of dating apps. Ghosting is, therefore, a practice that enables relegating the emotionally challenging workload of terminating a relationship or interaction to technology. Overall, by situating this study within a broader nexus between scholarship on media studies and dating apps, the results offer a new understanding of the connection between contemporary dating practices and the sociotechnical mechanisms enabling them.

KEYWORDS: ghosting, dating apps, gamification, uncertainty, emotional labour

Introduction

Over the previous decade, the use of dating apps as well as the number of dating apps has proliferated. They have not only changed how people meet and flirt but also how they terminate their interactions and exit relationships. This article addresses the recent emergence of the practice of ghosting that found its home on dating apps. In October

2020, just before Halloween, the mobile dating application Tinder introduced a new tool called Ghosting Graveyard that made it possible for its users to get in touch with someone they had ghosted. On the website, ItsYourBoo.com users would get a personalized ice-breaker they could send to the person they have ghosted in the past. A year later, another, new-on-the-market (video) dating app named Snack introduced a so-called anti-ghosting feature. Anyone who was constantly or frequently ghosting others and was reported by other users would be penalized by the app and would become less visible on the platform. Snack took it a step further than Tinder and made this tool a feature in the app. The app is trying to bring back some basic manners and decency into the dating app game (Zara, 2022). Despite various attempts by dating apps to dissuade users from ghosting others, ghosting is a feature enabled by the uncertain and gamified nature of these apps.

Ghosting is a dissolution practice for exiting relationships that developed together with the use of digital communication technologies and social media. A definition of ghosting was added to the website Urban Dictionary already in 2016: “when a person cuts off all communication with their friends or the person they’re dating, with zero warning or notice beforehand” (SunnyDoll, 2016). Ghosting, therefore, did not first appear on dating apps. It has emerged as a new relationship dissolution or breakup strategy that uses different communication technologies as its channels (LeFebvre, 2017) but in the past decade, the platformization of dating (Wilken et al., 2019) has normalized ghosting as a dissolution strategy used on dating apps. For example, matching and not starting an interaction, not responding or not getting a response after initiating a conversation with a match, and terminating the interaction in the middle of a conversation are all forms of ghosting on dating apps.

This paper is a contribution to the research on mobile dating applications and its goal is to expand the understanding of ghosting in relation to mobile dating apps. Mobile dating apps have been defined as cultural organizational technologies (Thylstrup & Veel, 2019) that have accelerated the gamification of the dating process (Mackinnon, 2022). Findings from the qualitative analysis presented in this article are based on interviews with 26 dating apps users from Ljubljana, Slovenia, and reveal that the use of ghosting on dating apps, even in the earliest stages of interaction between potential partners, facilitates the normalization of this strategy. My first claim is that dating apps as risk management technologies that organize around and productively work with uncertainty (Thylstrup & Veel, 2019), enable the uncertain practice of ghosting since it is a necessary strategy both from the apps’ point of view as well as from users’ point of view. Ghosting

is making continuous interaction and data flow possible and at the same time, it is helping users avoid unwanted interactions. My second claim is that the uncertain practice of ghosting is enabled by the gamified nature of dating apps. This gamified environment is surrounded by ambiguity. On the one hand, it is making dating fun and entertaining, but on the other, it is making it laborious and unsustainable. Ghosting is therefore a practice that enables moving the emotionally challenging workload of terminating a relationship or communication to technology. Dating apps can be understood as tools that assist users in the task of dating as a laborious affair, even though they are the ones making it laborious, by enabling interaction with an abundance of potential partners users can simultaneously interact with. I will therefore show that dating apps enable ghosting as their aim is the extensive and continuous use of dating apps. The findings expand on the existing literature and underscore why we should focus research on dating apps as technological forces that normalize the practice of ghosting as one of the most widespread practices of contemporary dating. Overall, by situating this study within a broader nexus between scholarship on media studies and dating apps, the results offer a new understanding of the connection between contemporary dating practices and the sociotechnical mechanisms enabling them.

Ghosting as an exit strategy: From intimate relationships to mobile dating apps

In the last decade, research on ghosting has been conducted mostly in the field of communication studies that focus on the reasons for enacting ghosting and the interpersonal consequences of ghosting in romantic relationships (LeFebvre et al., 2019, 2020), and the strategies used to navigate those post-dissolution consequences (LeFebvre & Fan, 2020; Pancani et al., 2021). These studies consider the strategy of ghosting as intertwined with new communication technologies and have consequently established conceptualizations crucial for its better understanding. Research on ghosting has defined ghosting as a technologically mediated unilateral termination of all communication in a relationship without one partner knowing this will happen (LeFebvre, 2017). To be exact, the non-use of digital media technology that is used in everyday communication is signaling to the partner that the relationship is over, without explaining why this is happening (LeFebvre et al., 2020). This usually means cutting contact and communication face-to-face and across all platforms (e.g., not answering phone calls, not replying to text messages or messages on social media) (Pancani et al., 2021) and expecting their partner to “get the hint” that the relationship has ended. It, therefore, means terminating all physical connections, and closing communication, most importantly communication between part-

ners, either permanently or temporarily (LeFebvre, 2017, p. 220), either permanently or temporarily. LeFebvre (2017) claims that ghosting “creates ambiguity and uncertainty in the ghostee (the one being ghosted) wherein they cannot achieve closure after the indirect breakup” (p. 228). This kind of breakup is not expected, it leaves non-initiators uncertain and there are many questions they ask themselves, the most common being—why has this happened, how come I did not see it coming, what is wrong with me and what am I supposed to do now (LeFebvre et al., 2019). They have no access to any explanation since their (ex)partner has excluded themselves physically and psychologically from the relationship. Nevertheless, technology enables them to stay present in each other’s lives. For example, they are visible as contacts on various channels; ghosters share and comment on content on social media that is visible to ghostees and they can potentially, at any given moment, make contact with them. This is why the ghostee is left in a state of uncertainty and ambiguity. Ghosting, therefore, “operates in a paradox enabling physical and psychological absence while maintaining a digital technological presence” (LeFebvre & Fan, 2020, p. 6). It changes how daters communicate and lowers their expectations from future relationships and potential partners. It represents a new way to end a relationship—it is a means to an end (Freedman et al., 2019; LeFebvre et al., 2020) for which the reasons are usually very ambiguous (the person is not ready for a relationship, loss of interest or possible alternative partner) (LeFebvre et al., 2020). Ending communication or the relationship has become as quick and painless as removing a patch. Even though they have unanswered questions, it is expected of ghostees to continue with their lives as if nothing has happened.

LeFebvre and Fan (2020) have gone a step further in conceptualizing ghosting and updating it while considering the different uses of new media and technology. They claim that “ghosting does not require an established romantic relationship, only interpersonal relationships, and communication” (LeFebvre & Fan, 2020, p. 3). It requires a one-sided expectation that interaction will happen and continue developing, and that termination then comes as a surprise. In communication on dating apps, there is a state of anticipation at both ends that interactions are “pointing towards future horizons” (Veel & Thylstrup, 2021, p. 204) and will end at least with a date. This anticipation that interaction will happen determines ghosting on dating apps. In recent years only a few studies focused exclusively on ghosting on dating apps (De Wiele & Campbell, 2019; Halversen et al., 2022; Narr & Luong, 2022; Timmermans et al., 2021) and some have shown that ghosting is the most common rejection strategy users use or experience on dating apps (Bandinelli & Gandini, 2022; Christensen, 2021; De Wiele & Campbell, 2019). One of the most common ways of ghosting on dating apps is just matching and never contacting

the person or not answering if the person makes the first move. But it can also be just exiting the interaction in the middle of the conversation and never coming back to it, before or after seeing each other on a date (De Wiele & Campbell, 2019). This can happen anytime and is not connected to a specific stage of a relationship. According to LeFebvre and Fan, ghosting does not follow the common breakup “narrative format of beginning, middle, and end” (LeFebvre & Fan, 2020, p. 3). Ghosting can happen multiple times and at any moment leaving behind the feeling of uncertainty that goes hand in hand with the uncertain environment (Thylstrup & Veel, 2019) of gamified dating apps (Isisag, 2019; Mackinnon, 2022).

Research by Timmermans et al. (2020) considers the affordances of dating apps, such as selection based on images, the gamification of dating through swipe logic, and mobility affordance, as a driving force behind ghosting behavior. Although it focuses on the reasons for and consequences of ghosting and subsequent coping mechanisms when being ghosted on dating apps, it does suggest that mobile apps are the stimulative environment for ghosting due to those affordances. Their research showed that ghosting can often be unintentional and can happen because the affordances of the app enable ghosting (Timmermans et al., 2021). The possibility of unmatching other users or deleting matches and blocking them also enables the process of disconnecting from others (De Wiele & Campbell, 2019). Those are in-app features that also contribute to the proliferation of the practice of ghosting.

The attraction of apps is therefore hidden in the promise that users can flirt in an environment that is less risky and more fun than face-to-face communication, all without serious consequences. Elements of gamified interfaces such as the use of GPS technology focus on visual images, the cultural technique of swiping, and pop-up notifications enable the acceleration of gamification in the process of finding a potential partner (Isisag, 2019). Gamification is most commonly defined as “the use of game design elements in non-game contexts” (Deterding et al., 2011). Research on gamification of dating has shown that games “mitigate the seriousness of romantic rejection” and that dating apps have only accelerated the process of gamification of intimacy already present in Western Europe (Mackinnon, 2022). Since the use of dating apps is turned into a playful experience on dating apps, simultaneous communication with several interests is encouraged and there are always potential matches waiting (Timmermans et al., 2021) users disengage from others with more ease and experience rejection as less significant (De Wiele & Campbell, 2019).

Dating apps need to enable ghosting, since being ghosted or rejected, therefore not finding their match, is the only way users will return to the app, possibly being more careful

than before but still curious about what will happen this time. Ghosting also enables being safe or avoiding unpleasant confrontations, rejecting someone, and continuing the search. Compared to the techniques of swiping and geolocation, ghosting is another technique that “permits the right amount of uncertainty to flourish to make the experience exciting while limiting the exposure to unwanted risk” (Thylstrup & Veel, 2019, p. 7). Ghosting is therefore another dating practice that seems to help users in the process of optimization and efficiency of the dating process. In other words, it helps them in being more successful in the dating game. They can terminate an interaction as fast as they have decided to swipe right, sometimes it does not even have to be a conscious decision, they can simply forget. Although ghosting is a strategy which users employ in relation to other users, the existence of communication technologies as mediators or channels of this strategy is crucial for its understanding since it reveals a lot about the relationship between users and technology.

Methods

This paper discusses insights based on fieldwork conducted in May and June 2021 in Ljubljana, the capital of Slovenia, involving in-person interviews with dating apps users. Participants engaged in “user-led walkthroughs” (Light et al., 2018), which means they were showing me their profiles and interactions on the apps while we were discussing their experiences of everyday app use. Participants were asked to guide me through their profiles, explaining how they navigate the app and their search for matches. While this interview technique facilitated a reflexive conversation that captured the complexities of participants’ experiences, interview questions were used to maintain enough structure to code for recurring patterns.

The research involved a total of 26 participants. I interviewed 6 heterosexual and 3 homosexual male users and 8 heterosexual, 7 bisexual, 1 lesbian, and 1 undefined female users. Their ages ranged from 19 to 30; 8 of them were employed, and 18 were students. At the time of the interviews, 10 of them were single, 9 of them were single but seeing someone, and 7 of them were in monogamous relationships; 16 were active users of the apps, and 10 were past users but would/will use dating apps again in the future. All participants were therefore either active or past users of dating apps and they have all been using apps while living in Ljubljana. Many of those I interviewed used a couple of dating apps with varying degrees of engagement. The most popular apps were Tinder for heterosexual male and female users and Grindr for homosexual male users. I recruited the interview informants via digital ads posted on Instagram. Most of the interviews were conducted in different coffee places or bars; two interviews were conducted in

users' households, upon their invitation. Before the interview, I articulated the aim of my study and guaranteed full anonymity and privacy for the participants.

During interviews, I asked a series of open-ended questions regarding their experiences using dating apps. Most of the participants were referring to their experiences on Tinder, but I did not focus on a particular app and considered everyone's answers. The interviews lasted between 40 and 180 minutes. All interviews were audiotaped, transcribed, and analyzed through the qualitative analysis software MAXQDA. Using MAXQDA, I created codes based on their common themes, and for this article, I focused on the theme of ghosting. I translated the Slovene interview excerpts into English. Pseudonyms of the participants are used throughout this paper.

The normalization of ghosting as a rejection strategy on mobile dating apps

Interviews with dating app users show that ghosting has become a normalized practice and communication strategy on dating apps. First, nearly all of my informants, who use different dating apps and have various social media accounts, have experienced ghosting—they have ghosted and have been ghosted. Many experienced ghosting for the first time on dating apps and needed some time to get used to ghosting being a common rejection strategy. Users mentioned never being contacted by the person they matched with, writing something to their match and never getting an answer, or being ghosted after they have exchanged a few messages or after they have been on a date. Jure (30, student) confirmed that being ghosted and ghosting others is an expected experience on dating apps:

There is a lot of this on Tinder, whether you write to someone but they don't answer, whether it's just a match and then nothing, or she writes to you and then it's nothing. There is a lot of that. Or you get together for the first time, and it's nothing after that. At least I have that kind of experience. I think this is a predominant experience for the average user.

Even though many claim they do not take the apps seriously and are often comparing them to a game, they nevertheless connect ghosting to negative feelings and experiences they normally do not expect to experience in face-to-face interactions. Ghosting is therefore linked specifically to technologically mediated communication where disconnecting at any point is not as problematic as it would be in face-to-face interactions. Denis (27, student), for example, noted:

This is just another app that you fiddle with during the day, but you don't take it that seriously unless you feel bad or something. It can be a negative experience for you if you are feeling bad about yourself and get your hopes up that you will meet someone. This can be negative because in person no one will get up in the middle of the conversation and just leave. Here, however, this is the most common result of the conversation.

The same difference was experienced by female user Lucija (19, student):

It happened to me, and I wasn't fine. It seems to me that there's a lot of ghosting on Tinder and you kind of expect that.... It is annoying sometimes, but it's much easier to swallow and much easier to accept than if someone I hang out with in person does that.

Negative feelings connected with ghosting do not prevent users from ghosting, even though they are aware this is an issue. When asked about unwritten rules on dating apps, Lucija's direct answer is: "I've already mentioned that ghosting someone is normal." Normalization of ghosting on dating apps and through technologically mediated interaction is the consequence of dating apps being naturalized as places for meeting potential partners where different rules apply. As Bandinelli's latest research shows, users perceive dating apps "as default options which are as unavoidable as inefficient" (2022, p. 910). Her research showed that even though users are dissatisfied with the connections they make on dating apps they do not see other options available or useful (Bandinelli, 2022). In my research, Anastasija (21, student) has mentioned more than once that she wanted to meet someone outside the circle of her friends, and dating apps have been an obvious choice, even though she went only on one date and has not met anyone who would interest her. This can be linked with the naturalization of platforms as forms of sociability (Luthar & Pušnik, 2021) as users not only embrace online platforms as places where they meet (with) others but they also point out to a narrative that those are the places where things are *happening*. Digitalization and platformization of dating are processes that have been unfolding for the last decade and we have witnessed their acceleration during and since the covid-19 pandemic (Bandinelli, 2022). Moving the process and practices of dating to a digital space defined by the platform economy has formed new expectations and practices. Expectations of being ever-present, available, and active in the dating sphere which is now intertwined with the rest of the user's digital communication. The key practice for maintaining this presence and activity is ghosting since it enables fluidity between multiple interactions. Lee Mackinnon draws attention to the concept of fluidity in connection to digital space, where the "fluid motion of

data” is a central resource to the platform economy (2021, p. 26-28) and fluid interactions that hold no promises and can be exited at any moment (Illouz, 2019) mean more different data flows. Being hyperconnected and available on the dating market holds a promise of competitive advantage in the process of dating even though users constantly deal with rejection in a form of ghosting.

Ghosting as an uncertain practice in uncertain environment

In such a hyperconnected environment of dating apps, ghosting is surrounded by uncertainty and users usually do not understand why were they ghosted. As Matjaž (29, librarian) professed:

No, I have no idea why. She was my overall second or third match. We talked for two months. Every three to four days for two hours. After I moved to Ljubljana, we went on a date. We were in a bar for three hours. I thought it was cool. Then I walked her home and got a goodnight kiss. Then the next day or ... yeah, I think it was the next day, I wrote to her “Hey, I had a great time, good luck with the exams.” Okay, no response—she’s busy, she doesn’t have time. In five days “Hey, I hope you’re doing well.” A couple of days later I saw that we were no longer a match on Tinder. Then it was clear to me. I sent her one message of defeat anyway. I wrote “I understand what is going on, even though I don’t know why and thank you for the company anyway.” And that was it. But Ljubljana is so fucking small, I see her now and then.

This uncertainty that comes with a lack of communication is negatively influencing users’ self-esteem: was confirmed by other user, Denis (27, student):

The most embarrassing thing is that these people just stop responding in the middle of a conversation and then that’s it ... This happened to me once, the first time I matched with someone I liked. ... We already agreed to have a drink, but then I made a joke and she just stopped answering and we never got together. That ruins your confidence a little.

Some users are quite intrigued when others are having problems communicating that they are not interested:

He invites you out and then just terminates all communication without any explanation. You don’t understand how and why. I don’t know, this is another such phenomenon that I plan to explore in more detail because it’s not clear to me what leads to this. Or rather, if you aren’t vibing, why are people reluctant to say

they don't see it going anywhere, or they are not ready for anything right now. Or even to say that they just changed their minds. (Tanja, 27, student)

This kind of uncertain behavior usually leads to overthinking and fear of ghosting:

I'm afraid of ghosting. I understand that in some situations guys or girls can react aggressively to rejection and many people find it easier to ghost, but I find it so uncomfortable. Even though it hurts I prefer rejection over letting my brain go into scenarios and overthinking what I did wrong. (Matjaž, 29, librarian)

As we can see, dating apps at the same time enable uncertain practices and strategies and provide features that help users protect themselves from uncertainty. On the one hand, ghosting is a practice with uncertain consequences, such as not knowing the reasons behind it. On the other hand, ghosting can be used as a strategy to protect oneself from uncertainty. Users find themselves in an environment where they have to completely trust the technology that provides very limited information about others who are supposed to be their matches and potential lovers or partners. Mobile dating apps can therefore be defined as organizational or "risk management technologies that help us organize life's uncertainties into controllable possibilities" (Thylstrup & Veel, 2019, p. 2). Thylstrup and Veel claim that dating apps "organize around, and productively work with, uncertainty" (Thylstrup & Veel, 2019) and enable what Eva Illouz calls negative choice, "the choice to unchoose: to opt-out relationships at any stage" (Illouz, 2019, p. 21). In her critique of negative relations, she claims that negative bonds and practices are practices of managing uncertainty in entrepreneurial neoliberalism. Drawing on Illouz's analysis, Bandinelli and Gandini argue that even though they seem to offer solutions to deinstitutionalized and individualized dating "market," dating apps are uncertain environments (Bandinelli & Gandini, 2022). Dating apps promise to "operate a rationalization of intimacy, subduing the mystery of romantic alchemy to the scientific work of data, through their technological infrastructure, that is, algorithms" (Bandinelli & Gandini, 2022, p. 2). But the reality of dating apps is quite the opposite. Dating apps aren't as transparent or efficient as they would like to be. They are "fundamentally uncertain social environments" (Bandinelli & Gandini, 2022, p. 3) where users are continuously exposed to risky interactions with others and with the app.

At the same time, every respondent I was talking to noted that they have ghosted and are probably going to do it again, even though they sometimes do not know the reasons why they or others do it. Users do feel bad about ghosting and their reasoning is often individualized. For example, Sofija (21, student) blames herself for being a bad texter:

I sometimes write to someone, but it usually lasts for two or three hours. If it's a really good first impression, then we usually move to Instagram. But even that doesn't last. It's more my fault because I'm a poor texter and I just forget to answer people. Then the conversation fades out a bit.

Others claim they often are not in the mood for chatting:

People aren't stupid and they quickly realize that you're no longer interested if you don't answer them. I've already ghosted someone, but for no particular reason. I just didn't feel like talking to them anymore and I muted them and that was it. (Maša, 21, student)

Even though in most cases users don't know the reasons for ghosting, they have embraced this strategy as a common way to communicate their decisions. This is especially relevant if we take into consideration that, "dating no longer has a set goal and trajectory that unfolds when one secures a lifelong partner, but involves constant pressure to self-improve in an open and unpredictable environment with no set guidelines" (Krašovec, 2019, p. 1555). We can conclude that practice of ghosting, even though produces uncertainties, has become a way for users to protect themselves from the novelty, complexity, and contingency characteristic of dating in an online context. Ghosting is therefore producing "stability to the inherently volatile conditions of online dating" (Komporozos-Athanasiou, 2022, p. 92).

Gamification of dating and ghosting

The platformization of dating and the naturalization of dating apps as places where potential partners meet is enabled by the gamification of dating on dating apps. The gamification of dating apps, especially Tinder, is mostly connected to swiping. As described by Stefanie Duguay (2018, p. 127): "While the swipe is a simple, mundane gesture that has previously featured in touch-screen technologies, its central role in Tinder's design has been highly influential in shaping users' and press's perception of the app." The swipe makes flirting feel like a game, since a simple thumb gesture of swiping to the right or to the left means deciding you like someone or not. In both cases, you are being awarded. If you choose yes, you can be awarded a match. If you choose no, you still get awarded with another profile that could be a possible match. Sofija (21, student) for instance has Tinder in the same folder with other games on her smartphone. When asked why, her answer is very simple: "Because it's actually like a game to me, left-right, left-right. That's how I perceive it." Her peer Maša (21, student) notes that Tinder is a fun

social network: “If it would be possible to swipe on Instagram, I would be swiping through random people’s accounts. If it would be possible, I would be doing it because it’s entertaining. Tinder really is a game.” Swiping or sorting other users’ profiles offered in the deck of cards is the first level in the game of searching for a potential partner. When two users both swipe right after seeing each other’s profiles, they match and have the possibility of starting a conversation. While swiping is something users have to do to engage with the app, interaction is not. This is best seen among users whose goal is self-worth validation. Lucija (19, student) for example, uses Tinder predominately for self-validation and even swipes right only to check if she attracts the person she finds attractive, even though she thinks they would not be a match. She does not initiate the interaction. With this in mind, swiping can be defined as a “symbolic framing of a specific in-game process that allows players, for instance, to accumulate points” (Garda & Karhulahti, 2021, p. 250). Users do not necessarily like someone by swiping right, the swipe is a feature that enables matching and interaction between users (Garda & Karhulahti, 2021).

Matches are therefore Tinder’s key currency (Garda & Karhulahti, 2021), and swiping is “designed to reward ongoing use with more potential matches” (Duguay, 2018, p. 129). If users swipe and interact consistently, their use will be rewarded with more matches. If they only swipe and do not interact with others, they will get less and less matches. This is the narrative formed by dating apps in general to encourage engagement with the app, since gamification techniques “exploit positive feedback and aim to enforce actions that are considered to be favorable” (Schrape, 2014, p. 30). Since men are predominant users of dating apps, in many cases they experience the lack of matches and possibilities to interact with others. In this regard, when trying to avoid rejection, stimulate interaction and be rewarded in return, users use different gaming strategies. Jure (30, student) for example only swipes right until he uses all of his swipes. Since he does not get a lot of matches, he is trying to protect himself from disappointment:

After some time I came to a conclusion that there are, first of all, small chances I will get a match. Second of all, that I will like her, and third, that I will get a response. This is why I don’t waste time at looking at profiles, I just swipe right. The only thing important is a match.

In the game of dating on dating apps, matches count as points that have to be collected in order to have the possibility of meeting someone. As dating apps key currency, matches reflect users success. Since the narrative of rewards in dating apps revolve around active use, Jure’s first move is always to write to all of his matches—this is when, in most cas-

es, he also experiences ghosting. To avoid it, other users emphasize the importance of bios in getting a match and starting a conversation. They claim they would not even swipe right on the person that did not “offer” them some information for conversation starter. As Max (26, researcher), who has written in his bio that he will cook his matches a dinner if they write to him in Morse’s code, described:

Mostly I write first, and then they refer to it (cooking) later in the conversation. Sometimes it comes down to the question whether I like to cook or it’s just some clickbait that guys like to use. I took advantage of that once, I said—here is my Instagram, you can go see what I cooked and then we switched the conversation to Instagram.

Maša (21, student) is also using her bio as a conversation starter:

I wrote: “Swipe right if you see your kink,” and then there are six indents. The first is “saving the bee.” Then there is “choking, being treated equally, rough sex, fighting climate change, hair pulling.” It is a really good conversation starter because they always say we have quite a few similar kinks and then I can write, “I like that you like to save bees.” I mean, it’s still obvious why I’m here, but I’m still not going straight in that direction with the conversation.

Bios aren’t important only to users who don’t want to be ghosted but also to dating apps—in the case of Tinder and Bumble there is a percentage circle indicating how complete users’ profiles are. Apps want to motivate users to add more authentic and playful information about themselves, claiming this is the easiest way attract others. Even though this narrative is confirmed by some users as they appreciate creativity in communication, for others interaction is usually very uniform. Marco (30, self-employed) shares his experience on Grindr:

Everything is predictable and because of this predictability of the already established language, behavior, and communication: “Hey, how are you? What are you looking for?”; the human moment is eliminated. If yes, then this, if no, block. Or, if the answer is no, then the conversation is over.

Marco’s example shows perfectly how apps enable ghosting by offering unmatched or block options, but those are not as visible or important as swiping or chatting. But even the option of terminating interaction by not answering or by closing the app is pivotal. Ghosting is different from swiping, as it is not a design function; rather than initiating different relationships on apps (between users, users and advertisers, users and apps), it represents exiting or terminating these relationships. Even though there is no *ghost* but-

ton, ghosting nevertheless contributes to keeping the game on the app continuous, never closing the circle of the search, and accelerating the search and the use. Despite the fact that users goal is to get a match and start an interaction, it is crucial for them to have the possibility of exiting at any moment. Maša (21, student) therefore notices that ghosting is something dating app enables her to do without any consequences:

It seems to me that the platform itself isn't like that ... it's not necessarily expected from you to respond to every person. Even if you don't feel like opening the message, you don't have to. It seems to me that on Tinder you don't have the kind of commitment you have on Instagram when you're a little more active with someone. On Tinder, if I don't want to talk to someone, I don't talk to them. If they persist, I unmatch them and that's it. I won't bother with every x match that writes to me.

For those users who decide not to engage in any kind of interaction, it is possible to collect and archive their matches similarly to likes on other social media. As Lucija (19, student) puts it: "If I see that he is far away, sometimes I'll give him a chance, if I see that this connection has potential. If not, I'll just let him rest here in my matches." What is important, it's the production of positive feedback that keeps the users in the loop of engagement with the app. The gamified nature of dating apps produces "virtual reality" in which the acts users perform while using the app appear as they don't have direct consequences outside of the app (Garda & Karhulahti, 2021). This way, ghosting as a technologically mediated act that exists exclusively on mobile apps is regulated by loose moral codes and fuzzy rules, and doesn't appear as having consequences on other users or on relationships outside this technologically mediated environment.

Ghosting as outsourcing emotional labor to technology

At some point, users claim, the game of dating on dating apps becomes emotionally exhausting and starts to feel laborious. It is physical, as well as emotional as it takes a lot work to perform the version of yourself to attract others. As Weigel (2016, p. 8) claims, "the hardest part can be making that work seem effortless." By gamifying dating and making it seem effortless, dating apps are trying to cover up the fact that they elicit emotional labor from their users and that this emotional labor is "required of them to successfully engage with the digitally mediated dating scene" (Bandinelli & Gandini, 2022, p. 16). For Anastasija (24, student), just initiating and maintaining so many conversations feels tiresome: "There were so many unnecessary things and all those initial hello, how are you, where you are from, what do you do. It gets annoying and boring and I

just couldn't deal with it anymore." Users put so much of their time and energy into these interactions that it takes up most of their free time. As Matjaž (29, librarian) describes:

At some point there was such an overload of it all and you say to yourself—fuck, I can't talk to five people at once right now. You hope something might come out of it and then one by one fails. In the end, I was just exhausted actually. I noticed I was doing nothing but texting. I probably spent more than two hours a day for these things. I bought a new bass guitar and didn't practice it for the first month because I was wasting my time on Tinder.

The context of having too many matches and users to talk to was described as a disadvantage, resulting in an overload of information, emotional labor and interactions that usually ended with ghosting:

Otherwise I don't know, it seems to me that then I fill my brain with some irrelevant information and some irrelevant people and I end up tired of talking to five different people and putting so much energy in there, and then I just disappear .
(Lucija, 19, student)

Max (26, researcher) on the other hand reported that even though he experienced overload he strategically decided to start multiple conversations because of the fear to be forgotten or ghosted:

The downside may also be the number of people you interact with at once. I swipe right even though I'm already talking to someone, and then you have three or four matches, and I at least think it's best to write to them as soon as possible because if you don't, you fall into oblivion. And after talking to several people at once you are losing attention which can be a bad thing.

The pressure of initiating and maintaining multiple interactions at once is the consequence of the perpetual availability of connection and interaction social media and new technologies impose on their users who are in a state of constant networked attention (Luthar & Pušnik, 2021). This hyperconnectivity backfires into overload, divided attention, and ghosting since users find it difficult to juggle multiple relationships. In this context, ghosting can be linked to digital disconnection, where users choose to disconnect from other individuals and in some cases to even terminate the use of the app for some time. Digital disconnection emerges as a way to "disengage or to choose not to engage in a specific focus on hyperconnectivity that requires negative choices in order to navigate the increasing information overload induced by digital media" (Kaun, 2021, p.

1576). For example, Ivana (20, student) realizes that most of her matches end with ghosting and does not find them as important as already established connections:

I find communication with these people I match with on Tinder to be less important because, in the end, it seems to me that at some point I start getting tired—I dedicate myself more and more to some of my old friends from before and in the end, I find it more and more comforting to hang out with them and talk to them. Tinder contacts often dissolve. Because of that I am under-engaged in this communication.

Ghosting can therefore not be interpreted as rejecting social interactions or terminating the search for potential partners altogether, but as making space for other or new relationships that would possibly have better outcomes. In Anna Kaun's words, "digital disconnection emerges in conjunction with hyperconnectivity, not as fundamental critique, but as a way to reproduce and sustain social order that is increasingly built on digital technology" (2021, p. 1574). Dating apps enable ghosting to make space for negative bonds, based on non-committing and on the choice to unchoose, as defined by Eva Illouz. For Illouz, contemporary relationships are characterized by break-ups and disengaging (more or less directly), by multiplication of names for casual relationships that imply their limited duration and uncertainty, and by new norms of self-responsibility when forming romantic relationships (Illouz, 2019). The platformization of dating on dating apps only accelerates the emergence of negative choice as dominant social form. Ghosting is an example of how it is impossible to understand digital culture and networked sociality without researching how social connections dissolve or how users disconnect from one another. It seems that users are confronted with a paradox—dating apps demand continuous engagement, making dating a laborious affair, but are at the same time tools that enable moving emotionally challenging workload of terminating communication to technology itself. Ania Malinowska argues that:

As the reliance on machine intelligence embedded in the media devices we use daily for reasoning about love, the role of those devices shifts from mere mediators to affective agents. The modern media take over many bits of emotional labor; with this, they accelerate the dynamics of our romantic conduct and its inherent protocols (Malinowska, 2021, p. 49).

This is especially true for ghosting since it takes over a huge part of challenging emotional labor. Hurting someone when confronting them with rejection is for most users the hardest part of communication, and this is why they leave this part to technology.

Since choosing who you like is simplified to a swipe, un-choosing has to be just as simple and efficient.

Conclusion

This article has drawn on findings from interviews with young users of dating app aged between 19 and 31, living in Ljubljana, Slovenia. The results demonstrated how ghosting, a technologically assisted breakup strategy, is normalized on dating apps through gamified interfaces and uncertain apps environments. Dating app users are familiar with the practice of ghosting, either as ghosters or as ghostees. Ghosting gives users a sense of control but is at the same time surrounded by uncertainty. Users can control whom they are going to ghost, but they never know when they are going to be ghosted themselves. If the user is on the receiving end of ghosting, new uncertainties are being produced - at the moment of ghosting, they are connected to the users' experience and self-esteem, and in the context of forming intimate relationships, they are connected to a dissolution of structural and institutionalized steps of forming and dissolving relationships. Dating apps as risk management technologies that organize around and productively work with uncertainty enable the uncertain practice of ghosting, since it is a necessary strategy both from the apps' point of view as well as from users' point of view. Ghosting is making continuous interaction and data flow possible and at the same time it is helping users avoid unwanted interactions. This can't be disentangled from the specific design of dating apps based on gamified technological interfaces and infrastructure. The gamified nature of dating apps enables ghosting since newly formed intimacies formed on dating apps participate in a narrative of spontaneity, entertainment and informality. If the use of dating app should be fun and relaxing, then ghosting shouldn't present a problem. At the same time this game of dating crosses paths with emotional labor and uncertainty, and then becomes exhausting and unsustainable. Ghosting is therefore a practice that enables moving the emotionally challenging workload of terminating a relationship or communication to technology. Dating apps can be understood as tools that assist users in the task of dating as a laborious affair, even though they are the ones making it laborious, by enabling interaction with an abundance of potential partners users can simultaneously interact with. The aim of dating apps is not that different from the aim of other digital games. As Natasha Schull explains, "the aim is not only to speed up the game but to extend its duration" (Schull, 2005, p. 67). Therefore, the more work dating apps are putting on their users, the more efficient strategies users need to eliminate this work, so dating can resemble a game, a game that can be continued with-

out interruptions. To conclude, ghosting is a social-cultural practice that emerges from and is framed by the new technological environment of dating apps.

This study is subject to some limitations, which should be taken into account. First, even though my research was conducted in Ljubljana, I did not focus on the local specificities of dating games in a small capital such as Ljubljana. Given that many users mentioned fear of the possibility of encountering someone whom they ghosted or have been ghosted by in their everyday life, it should be considered how users then adapt their dating game. Future research is encouraged to compare data collected in this study with the data collected in larger capitals or in rural areas where dating apps are used. Future work in this area might also explore gender games or highly gendered gamified use of dating apps and the question of how dating games played on dating apps reinforce stereotypical gender norms. This should not be limited to the difference between how women and men play the dating game in heterosexual relationships but should also include the research on ghosting by men and women in same sex interactions on dating apps. Such research might also help with the systematic comparative analysis of the practice of ghosting on different dating apps and provide useful and much needed material to better understand the phenomenon. While mindful of its limitations, I believe my research has contributed to highlighting how communication technologies enable new dating practices. I have shown that dating apps are sites of uncertainty management that are simultaneously producing uncertainty due to their gamified and laborious nature. Dating apps are sites that facilitate complexity, contingency, and possibility (Mackinnon, 2016) in the intimate lives of dating app users, and ghosting is one of the mechanisms dating apps use for reaching their aim of guiding users in organizing their intimate lives (Malinowska, 2021).

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Povzetek

Članek preučuje prakso izginjanja (ang. ghosting) pri mobilnih aplikacijah za zmenke. V kontekstu aplikacij za zmenke je ghosting praksa enostranskega prenehanja interakcije brez pojasnila in izogibanje nadaljnje komunikacije s potencialnim partnerjem ali partnerico. Ugotovitve kvalitativne analize, predstavljene v tem članku, temeljijo na intervjujih s 26 uporabniki aplikacij za zmenke v Ljubljani, Slovenija. Rezultati kažejo, da uporaba strategije izginjanja na aplikacijah za zmenke, tudi v najzgodnejših fazah interakcije med potencialnimi partnerji, omogoča normalizacijo te strategije. Članek preučuje izginjanje kot negotovo prakso, ki jo omogoča igrificirana narava aplikacij za zmenke. Raziskuje tudi, kako izginjanje vzpostavlja občutek nadzora v negotovem, igrificiranem in obremenjujočem okolju aplikacij za zmenke. Izginjanje je torej praksa, ki omogoča prenos čustveno zahtevnega bremena prekinitve razmerja ali interakcije na tehnologijo. Umestitev rezultatov te študije v kontekst medijskih študij in študij aplikacij za zmenke ponuja novo razumevanje povezave med sodobnimi praksami zmenkovanja in družbenotehničnimi mehanizmi, ki te prakse omogočajo.

Ključne besede: izginjanje, aplikacije za zmenke, igrifikacija, negotovost, čustveno delo

CORRESPONDENCE: ANAMARIJA ŠIŠA, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana, Kardeljeva ploščad, SI-1000 Ljubljana. E-mail: anamarija.sisa@fdv.uni-lj.si.