"Ghosting emotions": An open door for navigating intimacy in contemporary Spain

Sandra Fernández-García

Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia, ORCID 0000-0002-8470-9361

Francisco Sánchez-Valle

Universitat Oberta de Catalunya, ORCID 0000-0001-6144-3962

Abstract

Ghosting has mostly been associated with app-dating. However, our research addresses ghosting as a broader field of face-to-face avoidance practices. The article highlights the role of avoidance in emotional practices to maintain ongoing relationships. In the case of contemporary Spain, the structural uncertainty that permeates intimate relationships—related to neoliberalism's emphasis on individualism in the shaping of subjectivities—is reinforced by the tension in the coexistence of romantic and confluent models of love, which translates into a lack of scripts when it comes to dealing with intimacy. Drawing on the results of an ethnographic research project based on interviews with adults in the city of Madrid, we examine the ways in which social actors adapt their behavior to the context through what we have called *ghosting emotions*. This analytical tool accounts for those individual strategies, which, as a result of an exercise of emotional reflexivity, limit relationality by avoiding certain social practices in the shaping of intimacy. Thus, this article shows the concrete processes through which actors develop patterns shaping structural dimensions in contemporary intimacies when facing uncertainties. To safeguard individuality within relationships, these practices function as a means of enhancing a sense of control by leaving an open door.

KEYWORDS: emotions, intimacy, love, ghosting, neoliberal emotional regime

Introduction

Given all the contemporary structural changes that have permeated the relational conditions of the modern individual, the social processes of constructing intimacy have ceased to be a safe haven for the production of authenticity associated with the self (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995). According to the theorists of so-called reflexive modernity (Beck et al., 1994), the process of detraditionalization, that is, the loss of "ontological security" for our moral and emotional practices provided by tradition, has generated high doses of uncertainty across all spheres of life. While these authors constitute a heterogeneous corpus, they share certain analytical categories when it comes to diagnosing contemporary societies: instability, fragility, and fluidity that lead to affective uncertainty. According to the authors of risk theory, it has been proposed that the so-called first modernity and its emotional correlate, that is, romantic love, have been replaced by reflexive modernity, with its corresponding affective-sexual model: the so-called "confluent love" (Giddens, 1992) or "liquid love" (Bauman, 2003). By prioritizing the cognitive component in individuals' decision-making practices, this kind of love has been characterized by relationships grounded in circumstantial encounters and ephemeral confluence, thus amounting to a contingent love.

Nevertheless, throughout this paper, rather than assuming "romantic" and "confluent love" as sequential models followed by agents, they are understood to be overlapping ideals that inform social practices in the pursuit of intimacy. Love, as a structuring practice for social interactions, in which affective bonds are at stake (Rapport, 2017), does not remain a static category. Thus, the significance of love, and thus of emotional life, has changed both over time (for the context of Spain, see Delgado et al., 2016) and place (for cross-cultural approaches to love, see Karandashev, 2019 and Pananakhonsab, 2016). Hybrid ideals to enact contemporary intimacy shape an emotional regime that transcends the mere substitution of one for the other. Although romantic love endures across several areas of everyday life—especially through its cultural manifestations (Dong, 2023)—there are resistances, contestations, and processes of rupture that generate a sense of a loss of control over both material and affective conditions. Within this hybrid emotional regime, social actors must deal with uncertainty vis-à-vis the (re)construction of intimate relationships by engaging in distinctive social dynamics shaped by the prevailing neoliberal regime.

At the intersection of diverse disciplines such as anthropology, psychology, and sociology, the exploration of affectivity as a constitutive element, not only of the social order but also of the different subjectivities beyond the merely cognitive, has populated recent

literature. Anthropologically informed studies on cultural variations and local responses to what Laurent Berlant (2011) has termed "crisis-ordinariness" have shown how body, emotion, and cognition are inextricably linked in shaping lived experiences. The affective prediction in the pursuit of happiness (Stafford, 2015); the normative significance of aspirations for understanding motivations in decision-making (Baker, 2016); and the constitution of lived experiences through people's past events, present life, and future imaginations and perceptions (Irving, 2018) speak of how social agents mobilize their affective resources to cope with uncertainty by aligning everyday life with future expectations. In this research strand, various authors have examined how individuals embody narratives to navigate challenging social environments in their daily lives. For instance, Annemarie Samuels (2016) explores the body's role in narrative experiences of disasters, serving as a relational hub to reconstruct the social world by incorporating past events, current daily life, and potential futures. As demonstrated by the author, the intertwining of narrative and experience goes beyond mere attributions of meaning, encompassing the body. Similarly, Tine Gammeltoft (2016) delves into the embodied narratives of Vietnamese women, who endure suffering through "silence" as an adaptation to forms of domination that surpass their perceived capacity for change.

Through aspirations, possible futures, affective predictions or embodied narratives, social agents form a set of individual strategies for the pursuit of happiness, economic prosperity, autonomy, or security when facing the collective and relational dimensions associated with affective ideals. Within the scope of these studies, the mobilization of individual strategies by agents to enact the role of individualism in the realization of their life projects emerges as a research avenue in its own right, where the current study aims to contribute.

This exploratory research study addresses the significance of emotional life regarding definitions and subjective assessments of love in contemporary Spain by examining how social agents weave an individual-level safety net, which provides a sense of control to face structural uncertainties inherent in the established bonds.

Thus, far from hindering or obstructing rational processes, emotions—as a constitutive aspect of experience—are an inherent part of our actions and decisions (Lutz, 1988; Rosaldo, 1980; Scheper-Hughes, 1985). Based upon this perspective, the work of Mary Holmes enables us to transcend the relational/emotional dichotomy in addressing a key feature of the modern individual: reflexivity (Archer, 2012). Holmes suggests understanding reflexivity "as an emotional, embodied *and* cognitive process in which social actors have feelings about and try to understand and alter their lives in relation to their

social and natural environment and to others" (Holmes, 2010, p. 140). This *emotional re-flexivity* will enable us to understand how agents mobilize their resources in the face of uncertainty processes beyond the rational/emotional dichotomy. According to this approach, emotions emerge as a result of the relationship with others, with objects, and in specific environments. As Holmes points out:

> through this process people attempt to find ways through the world and a place in it. They hope that within that place they might be able to exercise some control and to be the kind of person that they want to be, within the roles available to them. These reflexive processes involve relational struggles. (Holmes, 2010, p. 143)

In this vein, our approach takes emotions as a cultural practice, whereby "emotional management" refers not to internal states but rather to the mobilization of an affective repertoire consisting of spaces, objects, and others (Scheer, 2012, p. 209). These practices can be learned as bodies' capacities for acting and interacting, which involve important implications for gradual social changes (Ahmed, 2004a; Scheer, 2012). To understand the concrete ways wherein individual practices function as a structuring element of relationships, we propose the term *ghosting emotions*. This concept refers to those practices of emotional avoidance which, as a result of a process of emotional reflexivity, aim to sustain existing intimate relationships in a context wherein both romantic and confluent love ideals overlap, as is the case of contemporary Spain. To support our argument, the article is structured as follows. After introducing the methodology, we briefly address the role of individualism in the neoliberal emotional regime as a key element in shaping the subjectivities that permeate intimate relationships. As we will see in the following section, the subjective constructions of the agents are linked to the affective deregulation produced by the coexistence of the models of romantic love and confluent love. This generates new relational patterns wherein the notions of individual independence and self-sufficiency play a central role. In the last section, we address one of these patterns. As a result of an exercise of emotional reflexivity, social actors try to adapt their behavior to the deregulated context through what we have called ghosting emotions. In other words, they implement social practices that involve avoidance of certain relational aspects, which unlike practices of non-choice (Illouz, 2019), serve to maintain ongoing relationships in environments characterized by high doses of uncertainty.

Methodology

The profound changes operated in Spanish society—in terms of openness to same-sex unions, divorce, adoption, and non-discrimination against LGTBIQ+ people—have combined with the entry into international flows of goods and people. All these factors have meant a move from National-Catholic marriage (with no possibility of divorce) to a landscape of great sexual, familial, and religious variability in just a few decades. The rapidity of these changes shapes a context in which very different ways of establishing and thinking about affective-sexual relationships coexist. Our research study is centered on in-depth interviews with 14 individuals. The fieldwork was complemented by informal conversations with six of them and some of their partners, as well as informal visits to their homes. It thus presents a fieldwork mainly underpinned by conversational methods due to the (intimate) condition of the practices taken as objects, as well as the complexity this entails for classical forms of ethnographic research (López, 2010). The age group of those interviewed is 33 to 65 years old, recognizing that affective-sexual changes are not limited to the younger demographic, this being the most studied population in terms of technologies and affectivities (Bandelli & Gandini, 2022; Choi et al., 2018; Dalessandro, 2018; Denby & van Hooff, 2023). We have explored diverse emerging practices in intimate relationships, including both long-term and short-term arrangements: from heterosexual monogamy to *chemsex*[1] encounters.

Despite the common aspects (urban, educated), diversity has been sought in aspects such as sexual orientation, gender identity, religious beliefs, and socio-economic status. This is significant because research suggests that those factors are relevant in affective relationships. Thus, this analysis should be seen as a starting point for further research on different groups, including first- and second-generation migrants.

While we were initially focused on studying contemporary affective-sexual models, as our fieldwork progressed, a multitude of issues transcending the initial categories of sexuality, monogamy, and conjugality began to emerge. Factors related to the active questioning of love and care, the construction of subjectivities, and the identification of the very relationships wherein the agents were immersed became crucial aspects in our exploration of these relational tendencies. Consequently, these novel categories were incorporated into our theoretical framework—following reflexivity (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983)—during the year-long fieldwork conducted amidst the backdrop of a pandemic.

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[1] The term *chemsex* refers to group sex encounters between gay and bisexual men based on the use of recreational drugs such as GHB/GBL, crystallized methamphetamine and/or mephedrone.

Our fieldwork commenced with prospective informal discussions within groups of friends and acquaintances, complemented by theoretical readings, which led to the development of new analytical categories. As we proceeded to conduct interviews, we noticed that, given the personal and intimate nature of these interactions, the information we gathered varied as per the level of trust established between the interviewee and the interviewer. This observation related to the emotional implication of the ethnographer in fieldwork, although not novel (Behar, 1996; Markowitz & Ashkenazi, 1999; Okeley, 1992), was particularly salient in our case. Additionally, the presumed relationship between the observing subject and the observed object, which forms the basis of traditional ethnographic research, quickly dissolved during our initial conversations (Clifford, 1986), resulting in a radical empiricism (Jackson, 1989). As has been well-studied, in the face of empiricist conceptions, the ethnographer's position in the field influences the data they produce (Davies & Spencer, 2010). Notably, the information obtained was remarkably less forthcoming from individuals who were less familiar compared to friends or complete strangers. A similar challenge arose when the researcher attempted to maintain a detached and non-sexualized stance during the interviews. Consequently, interviews were conducted with both friends and strangers, whose connections were established using the snowball method.

Subjectivities in the neoliberal emotional regime

The economic and emotional domains, rather than existing as autonomous spheres, intersect in the co-production of intimacy ideals grounded in modern individualism through the mechanisms of rationality and choice (Illouz, 2007). Emotions not only shape distinct worldviews but also manifest as unique modes of performing social actions and interactions, which extend beyond the individual to encompass institutions and shared values. As Sam Binkley (2018) underscores, one's self-directed focus and the social conventions implicit in our emotional experiences remain embedded within social structures that necessitate a high degree of individual risk and uncertainty.

Therefore, emotions should not only be exclusively located within individuals but also embodied within cultural practices through objects and symbolic systems of meaning shaped by unequal power relations (Abu-Lughod & Lutz, 1990). As Sara Ahmed notes, emotions, rather than being mere psychological dispositions, "work to bind subjects, [whether individual or collective] together. Indeed, … the non-residence of emotions is what makes them 'binding'" (Ahmed, 2004b, p. 119). This emphasis on the relational dimension encourages the examination of emotions within processes of social interac-

tion, wherein economic structures and the production and circulation of subjectivities converge (Ahmed, 2004b; Scheer, 2012).

As in any other emotional normativity, the one imposed by neoliberalism constitutes a specific "emotional regime" encompassing a specific set of norms, rituals, and institutional practices governing the expression and cultivation of emotions (Moreno, 2005; Reddy, 2001). This concept allows us to comprehend not only how a society shapes emotions through specific norms, beliefs, labels, and available knowledge but also, and significantly for our argument, to examine the performative nature by which certain emotions are constrained or relegated to the background (Wettergren & Jansson, 2013). In our research study, we conceive of an emotional regime not as an abstract system but as a collection of normative arrangements arising from interactions among individuals, artifacts, and concrete environments. Consequently, the neoliberal emotional regime, with its inherent contradictions and paradoxes, molds individuals into subjects deeply ingrained in a social world codified in market terms, such as competitiveness, success, risk, and opportunities. From this perspective, emotions are regarded as resources that can be harnessed both to enhance productivity and achieve self-realization. As Isidoro Moreno (2005) contends, this market logic, in its normative and pervasive dimension, has evolved into a "sanctified cultural logic". These cultural performance logics have led to an unprecedented intensification of emotional life at the individual level. The pursuit of "complete self-realization" becomes an attainable goal within specific normative frameworks (Illouz, 2008). In our daily lives, we engage in various life projects wherein the emotional realm assumes a central role: finding love, establishing relationships, forming families, realizing professional aspirations, ensuring economic stability, maintaining emotional balance, cultivating feelings of attractiveness, and more. However, the notion of the autonomous individual is challenged—experientially—when individuals fail to attain these goals and are relegated to the non-normative, the pathological, or the marginalized, bearing the associated affective burden.

Instances of failure in the logic of choice and effective risk management lead individuals to the realm of dependency and subjectivity precariousness. For instance, consider the case of Marta, a 40-year-old art and design teacher who recently exited a relationship that remains unresolved. In her conversation, Marta recurrently interconnects emotional, labor, and economic facets as intricately intertwined elements in the pursuit of her life expectations, rendering them analytically inseparable.

> I've always lived a bit precariously, but for some time now … it's something that
> has started to weigh heavily on me.… I've changed jobs and relationships so

many times that I don't know if I would be happy with a job as a civil servant. (Marta)

Marta describes her experiences as fragmentary and volatile, constantly changing over time. For her, labor and emotional deregulation have become co-constitutive elements of her everyday experience. The construction of her subjectivity in an insecure environment leads her to signify dependency as something negative associated with necessity.

> In the end, you are dependent. With all this talk that we have been sold about women … in the end, you are dependent on everybody. And in the last few months, I've had to depend on my ex-boyfriend to leave my things in his storage room, on a friend to look after my cat, on a friend of mine to live in her house, on my sister to lend me money and on my father to give me a guarantee. In other words, I'm completely dependent despite having a job. (Marta)

The individualization of experiences has resulted in a reductionism of the relational character of emotions. *Dependency* is not considered to be an effect of the constitution of a care support network but as the failed cause of not achieving individual independence according to the neoliberal imaginary. Thus, dependency—as a negative concept—is constructed based on the neoliberal ideal of self-sufficiency and not on the basis of vulnerability and relationality that is constitutive of the human being (Butler, 2016). Marta's subjectivity is shaped as "in lack".

Even when economic security is assured, the emotional neoliberal regime promotes a constant emotional work to fulfill the postulates of the idea of independence. Jaime, a 36-year-old heterosexual man in a stable heterosexual cohabiting relationship with a daughter and in a high-ranking position with a substantial salary in the private sector, tells us about his family relations:

> We appreciate each other but with distance … I'm more detached and cold; I've never liked dependence, I left home because I didn't want to depend on my mother and become a man, and I consider being a man, being independent and not depending on anyone for nothing. (Jaime)

While Marta represents the subjective construction of failure in achieving independence, Jaime represents the subjective construction of male success. However, both share a denial of certain relational aspects—deemed as a weakness of character—by emphasizing individual autonomy. The pursuit of the idea of the autonomous individual requires constant emotional work to understand personal authenticity. The individual—as a self-realized being independent of social institutions (Dumont, 1986)—assumes an active

role by becoming responsible for assessing their own emotions and acting accordingly. The grant of authority to individual feelings became a powerful agent of social change in the establishment of emotional individualism, that is, "an individualism in which emotions are valued and cultivated for the ways in which they give expression to an individual's singularity" (Illouz, 2017, p. 20). This emotional individualism marks the new cultural order of modernity, understood as a historical way of dealing with emotions and the body itself (Fernández, 2023; Scheer, 2012; Scheper-Hughes & Locke, 1987). The construction of the individual, according to the neoliberal emotional regime, weighs down the establishment and maintenance of intimate relationships. The intensification of market logic has permeated the emotional dimension of intimate relationships (Hochschild, 2003; Illouz, 2017), thus generating new flexible spaces of intimacy rooted in the foundational notions of individuality, namely, choice, freedom, and autonomy.

The grammars of freedom (Illouz, 2019) shape Martín's desire into a matter of individual choice, wherein the tension between normativity and expectations generates emotional and cognitive uncertainty in organizing his intimate relationships.

> Relationships reach a point in which the need of throw yourself in is not a necessity but a choice … I think that behind it, there's a kind of projection that has to do not with what you like but what you are supposed to do, or what you're supposed to desire … You make movies in your head knowing that there's a good chance they won't be like that in reality. (Martín)

The active and permanent (re)construction of intimacy through emotional work works not only for the maintenance of long-lasting duration relationships but even for the maintenance of sporadic encounters wherein the sexual dimension is at the core. Jaime performs an instrumentalization of relations for the future satisfaction of his own interests and desires:

> I had three or four friends with whom I used to meet, and many times I had to meet them to fuck unwillingly to keep the possibility available for when I felt like it. (Jaime)

For Armando, a 37-year-old gay man, the transgression of the normative in the maintenance of intimate relationships lies in "the naturalization of behavior." Establishing lines of escape from prescribed scripts means, for him, emphasizing free choice and personal autonomy:

> I'm not following the normative process; I mean keeping things for later…for example, listening to yourself, getting rid of all this bullshit of "should I write to

him or not?" Well, if you feel like it, write to him, and don't give a shit what the other person thinks. (Armando)

As we have seen through these last three excerpts, choice, freedom, and autonomy become modes of driving subjectivity according to the neoliberal emotional regime, which, in turn, enact distinctive individual practices in shaping "love." In the absence of an explicit decalogue to provide a single meaning for intimacy, the current forms of navigating it remain multiple. As a result, "love" acquires a diffuse character in the shaping of intimate relations by encompassing both partner relationships and chemsex sessions.

Because for me, taking care of a person you don't know at all in a session … is also love for the other person.… Love is with my friends, with my short or long relationships, or it can be a session. (Armando)

As the normative regime at stake shapes not only different conceptions of *love* but also drives certain social practices accordingly (Medina, 2014; Gammeltoft, 2021), an approach to the socio-cultural dimensions of love based on the meaningful practices of social actors is of great relevance.

In the case of contemporary Spain, as we will see below, the overlap between the survival of the narrative of the romantic love model and the implementation of new practices of confluent love has become a key aspect in understanding the strategies at play when agents conduct their intimate practices.

Transiting through models of love

The coexistence of both romantic and confluent love models has been the hallmark of Spanish society in recent years (Roche, 2020). This overlap cannot be understood without considering the social changes that have occurred in recent decades, wherein a "sexual transition" is occurring within intimate relationships (Ayuso, 2015). This transition is mainly characterized by secularization, contrasting with the Catholic cultural tradition, transformations in family structures, the eroticization of everyday life, a greater acceptance of non-normative gender identities, and the role of sexuality as a form of communication (Ayuso & García, 2014). According to sociologist Juan Roche (2021), the differing conceptions of time in these love models, lifelong love that transcends time and timeless love centered on the present moment, explain the processes of institutionalization of both models in Spanish society. While some qualitative studies have found a stronger emphasis on the ideals of confluent love in interviewee narratives (Núñez et al., 2014), it can be argued that, in the Spanish context, romantic love prevails as the hege-

monic model, not only in explanatory terms but also in terms of expectations, whether in online or offline interactions (Gallego-Granero & Fernández-Piedra, 2023).

The ideal of romantic love has permeated our social fabric through numerous cultural manifestations. From romantic literature to contemporary television series, romantic love has become the dominant ideology for the institutionalization of heteronormative emotions (Esteban, 2011; Herrera, 2010). The production and dissemination of stereotypes associated with romantic love myths have facilitated their commodification to serve capitalist commercial interests (Illouz, 2009). Today, romantic love continues to serve various social functions, including the search for partnership models, cohabitation, or dependency, while also shaping subjectivities related to both love and its absence, serving as an essential element in the formation of social bonds.

Martín, a 35-year-old heterosexual man, shows a romantic conception of love rooted in the 18th-century idea of passions as something overwhelming. This leads him to reconsider that what he feels for his partner in a stable three-year relationship is not that unbridled feeling, which, from his point of view, is opposed to what it means "to be at ease."

> Watching TV with her wasn't so fantastic; it was sitting down, having dinner, having a laugh criticizing someone on TV, doing funny word games … sleeping cool, it was that, it was like a super cool everyday life … I hope that love has a kind of…, pomposity or tension that this didn't have. This was super cool just because it didn't have any of that, because it was a space of security, of relaxation and affection, and I relate love more to the other, perhaps with passion and impetus, when this was the opposite, it was super cool. (Martín)

In a reflexive exercise, Martín brings into play the assumptions about emotions associated with romantic love, considering the latter as a love that requires high doses of demand. Lacking control over such situations, Martín considers love as something negative that affects his mental health:

> Love is fucking shit because it's very tiring … when I'm in love, when I feel that desire, that tension, that whatever, I'm chewing on it all the time and it's not a healthy situation, it doesn't make me feel good. (Martín)

However, although the "myths of romantic love" (Ferrer et al., 2010) are highly accepted among the Spanish population, regardless of gender or age (Ferrer et al., 2008), several assumptions are challenged and contested. Thus, while the myths of "the better half", "eternal passion", or "marriage" are generally assumed, "the couple myth" is not

among the most prevalent (Ferrer et al., 2010). One interviewee challenged the need to find a partner, thus corroborating that the couple myth is not at the center of seeking or engaging in intimate relationships: "I have learned that it is not better to have a partner than to be single … I have taken away all that obsessive desire to have a partner" (Armando).

However, criticisms of romantic love are not merely aspects of individual behavior. Rather, they arise from collective spaces that are critical of romantic notions of love in order to try to modify certain normative bonding practices. Armando tells us about the Grupo de Vinculación Afectiva[2] (GVA), a peer support group in Madrid aimed at people in search of how to (un)bond by sharing personal experiences and discussing them collectively. Through both online and offline meeting groups, GVA's members challenge concrete and contextual personal experiences. In Armando's words, the GVA is a space in which to learn:

> to bond and unbond in a different way, to challenge romantic love as well, to see what kind of relationships we have and how the construction of romantic love that we have had throughout our lives affects us … I have been very hooked on chemsex, and I am leaving it … this is what the Group of Affective Bounding is helping me with. (Armando)

In this scenario of deregulation wherein the options of each relational process must be shaped each time, we see that acceptances and rejections of the model of romantic love are simultaneously conflated. Emotional intensity is now rejected as a desirable attribute, linked to the idea of need, of being in need, but it is maintained as a feature of what love is.

"Ghosting emotions": An open door

> Deep down, you know that at any moment, you could be on your own. I leave an open door, just in case I have to run away … it's an emergency exit … like wearing a life jacket all the time. What an image! Isn't it? Living our whole life with a parachute on. (Sara, 46 years old, female)

Current relationships do not have clear boundaries and norms in their constitution and development. As we have seen above, the structural character of uncertainty is inextricably linked to the establishment of relationships in any form. Such a condition has been referred to by Eva Illouz (2019) as a lack of stable references when it comes to manag-

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[2] Group of Affective Bonding.

ing—that is, defining, evaluating, performing, or concluding—the bonds that are being produced. The traditional metaphor of the contract fails to explain contemporary affective-sexual relationships that are governed by "a generalized, chronic and structural uncertainty" (Illouz, 2019, p. 9). Both economic and emotional aspects form a single movement, strongly marked by capitalist commodification and the neoliberal imaginary. In the absence of behavioral referents and the ambiguity of encounters, such deregulation leads to a certain improvisation and, thus, to the possibility of ending a relationship at any of its stages, according to the moral imperative of emotional individualism. In this vein, and within the so-called *negative relations* (Illouz, 2019), the practices of non-choice—that is, the exercise of freely withdrawing from relationships—constitute the dominant practice when it comes to ending a relationship. The most paradigmatic example of such practices is *ghosting*. According to one of the actors interviewed, ghosting is:

> When you are with someone when you are in a relationship, you are meeting someone, and suddenly he disappears, ghost. They disappear completely, he stops answering you and do not give you … they don't know how to manage their emotions and they don't know how to sort things out and then they prefer to leave. (Marcos, 38 years old, male)

Ghosting, widely researched in the field of communication studies and often linked to dating apps (Halversen et al., 2022; Narr & Luong, 2022; Šiša, 2022; Timmermans et al., 2021) is a practice whereby a person unilaterally ceases all communication and contact with another person, voluntarily and abruptly, without apparent justification (LeFebvre, 2017; Pancani et al., 2021). In this sense, the withdrawal of consent becomes a principle justifying the action to oneself. What was originally a consent to another,[3] a negotiation or agreement in the constitution of the bond, functions now as a self-justifying principle when it comes to giving it an end. Such a principle requires—despite appearances—a reflexive process of deliberation. It is often the case that because they are not communicated, these reasons are often attributed to impulsive or spontaneous behavior on the part of the ghosting person—thus generating the eternal reason/emotion dichotomy. However, the practice of ghosting requires a decision-making process of non-choice wherein emotional individualism takes on a central role in both its emotional and cognitive dimensions:

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[3] In this respect, we must remember with Illouz that such consent or agreement is based on unequal positions of power, varying according to gender.

Interviewee: There was a woman I met through Tinder, she was a manager …
she put me in a dilemma because I was going to the Berlinale and she said to me:
'Hey, do you want to come?' … imagine being taken to the festivals … few things
more amazing can happen to you in life and there was a moment when I said …
in my decision of whether to continue with her or not, I am evaluating this …

Interviewer: And what did you do?

Interviewee: I ghosted her because I didn't want to have a closed relationship
with her and she didn't value anything else … but I could have said "No" after
going once … my buddy Bea told me: "You're stupid, come on! Someone give
me the tickets and …". (Martín)

While ghosting, as a practice of negative relationships (Illouz, 2019), has a conclusive
meaning when it comes to ending a relationship, our focus lies on social practices aimed
at maintaining ongoing relationships. We consider ghosting practices to be just the tip of
the iceberg, within a broader category of practices of avoidance that pervade modern
relationships. In essence, we propose that what is commonly referred to as ghosting is
merely an extreme manifestation of a larger category of (dis)affective practices we term
as *ghosting emotions*. As Arlie Hochschild (2003) has argued, "one important strategy of
emotion management is to develop the ability to limit emotional connections, as this
strategy allows us to adapt to survival in a destabilizing culture of capitalism" (p. 125).
Therefore, we introduce the concept of ghosting emotions as an analytical tool to de-
scribe emotional management practices, wherein certain forms of emotional attachment
are restricted or suppressed to sustain intimate relationships that balance attachment
and independence.

In the field of medical psychology, which views emotions as internal states expressed in
response to external stimuli, behavioral inhibition refers to emotional avoidance behav-
iors that individuals exhibit in unfamiliar social situations. "Deceptive inhibition" is the
deliberate suppression of an emotional response by an individual under emotional
stress, resulting in a "false" emotional display while regulating emotional experiences
(Traue et al., 2016). In contrast, our approach conceives emotions not as internal states
but as culturally contextual practices that mobilize values and interests (Ahmed, 2008;
Scheer, 2012). Therefore, various forms of "ghosting emotions" arise from processes of
emotional reflexivity, wherein individuals attempt to align their expectations with the
deregulated context described above. This emotional reflexivity fosters a sense of control
by adjusting available resources and expectations. In this adaptive process, concepts of
emotional intensity, love, and independence are critically examined and redefined by

social actors as they seek ways to cultivate and express their emotions while transiting intimacy without compromising individual authenticity.

In summary, while ghosting is paradoxically characterized by the absence of physical presence—and all it implies—ghosting emotions represent the praxeological outcome of individual emotional reflexivity. This emotional labor, in which social actors consciously foreground or background specific emotional expressions, occurs within various organizational practices. For instance, Åsa Wettergren (2019) proposed an emotive-cognitive model of rationality to understand the emotional labor carried out by officers at the Department of Asylum Assessments within the Swedish Migration Board. Wettergren found that adapting formal legal provisions to the individual circumstances of asylum seekers presents challenges that extend beyond the emotional norms of bureaucratic systems. Using the analytical concept of *framing*, she underscored the contextual limitations that guide officers' emotional labor as a conscious effort to align with or deviate from the emotional norms prevailing in their work environment. In her words: "even when emotions are silenced because they are perceived as unprofessional, the very performance of this professional script requires emotion work in order to silence emotions" (Wettergren, 2019, p. 36).

This frame demarcates the emotive-cognitive processes of "feeling" and "thinking" according to behavioral expectations. In the same way that the emotive-cognitive-judicial frame works as a script that constrains professional behavior, leading to a process of habituation that begins in law school (Wettergren & Bergman, 2016), the frame for the establishment of intimate relationships is also characterized by the coexistence of the romantic and confluent love models. Expectations and behavioral scripts are in flux as we write these lines. Habituation to the ideals of romantic love and the emergence of the scripts of confluent love generate new practices of (re)constructing intimacy through emotional backgrounding. In the absence of training in love as a univocal referent, an emotional uncertainty emerges, thereby resulting in a distinctive way of transiting the intimate. The result is the conscious inhibition of certain emotional practices, which results in a limitation of the relational character of intimacy, according to the notions of the neoliberal regime. Thus, ghosting emotions emerge as a response to both the feeling and the thinking on love, as we will see below through the following three cases.

Emotional intensity: "I don't know if we're going to talk tomorrow, so don't bother me! OK?"

Emotional intensity can be perceived through several different manifestations: a gift that exceeds response expectation; jealousy; showing too much interest or showing it too

soon. So, the idea of "being an intense person" emerges as problematic, deriving from practices of emotional self-protection in response to the feeling of being manipulated. Thus, there is a tendency to deal with the phenomena associated with emotional intensity through social avoidance practices. In the case of Armando, ghosting emotions appear as a response to the emotional intensity of his last partner. In his case, jealousy became the experience that drove him to avoid bonding in future relationships, according to lessons learned in the past.

> By leaving him, I know that I will never have a relationship with someone who is jealous because, after three and a half years, I know how to identify it. Indeed, I remember that very soon after I left him, I hooked up with a guy … and I was talking to him on WhatsApp, and he said, "What are you doing?," and I told him I was with a friend, and he said "With a friend or with a 'friend-friend?'" and I said: "Look, this comment you just made just now made me very uncomfortable, so I'm going to block you." It´s like nipping it in the bud. (Armando)

The regulatory framework set a tricky balance between not showing interest and showing too much in a sort of new normativity that has yet to be defined.

> My friend Jota already warned me, he is an *intensito*,[4] you know that … so I was with him the other day, we were having a drink and, at one point, he said to me: "Well, if you want tomorrow you can overnight at my house" … and I started to get overwhelmed. (Armando)

However, these manifestations of emotional intensity are associated with values that are opposed to those of independence and individual autonomy:

> Now I'm super relaxed … I used to be a bit of an intense person and the one who suffered, who was ghosted all the time … and now I'm letting myself go and not projecting at all. (Armando)

In his avoidance of emotional intensity, Armando expresses the need to refuse commitment. He suppresses planning with his affective-sexual partners. Faced with the uncertainty of not knowing how he will feel in the future and the fear of being forced into an unwanted situation, he avoids any form of planning that comes from the outside:

> For example, yesterday I was making a video call with him [his current partner], and he said to me at the end: "Well, we'll talk tomorrow," and I don't know if we're going to talk tomorrow, so don't bother me! Ok? (Armando)

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[4] *Intensito* is a vernacular term used to scorn someone. As a kind of insult, it carries a derogatory meaning related to the idea of being an emotionally very intense person. In fact, in Spanish, it is a noun comprising an adjective.

This form of avoidance of commitment at any level prevents him from falling into emotional intensity as a kind of unwanted bonding. Thus, this form of ghosting emotion constitutes an avoidance of planning practices, which allows Armando to maintain a sense of control over his decision-making choices at a completely individual level. Armando's past affective-sexual experience affects his current decision-making through the notions of dependency and need that he brings into play in his avoidance practices. After a three-year relationship with a controlling partner, Armando reconstructs his notion of love by limiting his relationality through the avoidance of emotional intensity – associated with practices of control. Under individual safety parameters, Armando does not promise and does not commit.

Love: "I could say 'I love you' with no problem … but …"

During the pandemic, we talked a lot with Martín—whose notion of love we have mentioned earlier—about his affective-sexual relationships. At the time, he had just ended a long-term relationship and had been involved for some time in sexual relationships of varying but no ephemeral duration, without any romantic affective involvement on his part. As an exercise in reflexivity, Martín realized that sometimes, this sort of engagement involves bonds that go beyond the strictly sexual. Under COVID circumstances, Martín felt that Ana developed a dependency on him that he found highly demanding:

> I was working in a sort of: let's get to know each other, let's have a good time …]and as it is not easy to be on the same plane as the other person. In the end, the other person generates some kind of dependency or desire for a project, and I have two options: to say, "Excuse me, you have got me wrong, and I'm not going that way," or to hold on, to put up with it. So, what I normally do is put up with these things … now with the quarantine, many people I used to see when I wanted to, I have had to see them more, and this has caused some problems. I've had to see Ana. I saw her once or twice a week, and when COVID started, it became a burden for me. (Martín)

When his relationships take a course that is close to a habituation to romantic love, Martín desists from certain emotional behaviors that could create problems in his relationships:

> I mean, I could say "I love you" with no problem because I loved her without a doubt, but I understand that it means different things to different people. What is happening to me is that, as there are certain words with very strong connotations

for certain people … I'm very careful about saying them so as not to generate the mess I then generate. (Martín)

Martín articulates his idea of romantic love through the maintenance of affective bonds via a specific form of ghosting emotion—not saying "I love you." This avoidance should not be limited to a speech act, since it transcends the merely linguistic (Reddy, 1997). In line with Monique Scheer (2012), the practical uses of emotions must take into consideration the place of the body. In the same way that naming an emotion implies a direct relation to a bodily practice, avoiding a linguistic expression entails a bodily disposition dependent on the socio-cultural context. Martín does not say "I love you," not only because of the implications of the term but also because his habituation to love is linked to a negative component—"love is fucking shit"—that he has embodied through past experiences. The values attached to the idea of romantic love lead Martín not to say "I love you," as a practice of materializing individual authenticity at the expense of maintaining an existing relationship. Thus, Martín opts for uncertainty when it comes to intimacy, as he associates love with a lack of control and as the opposite of "a space of security"—as we have seen above. Not saying "I love you" emerges as an avoidance practice that provides him with a sense of control over his relationships. This ambivalence produces, in practice, a permanent exercise of reconstructing the boundaries between the different types of love in play. As a result, Martín transits uncertainty when it comes to combining his feelings and his expectations for the future.

Independence: "I'm not going to share it … It's my house … my responsibility"

The case of Jaime, whose construction of subjectivity in independence we have already seen, also speaks of another practice of avoiding certain bonds through the prioritization of individual material safety. He refers to the avoidance of generating a bond with his partner through shared property:

I decide to buy the house alone. I tell her that I want to buy a house thinking about the future … but that it is not something I want to accompany me, nor that it will be a burden for her and that is why I'm going to take over it. And that it will be a house that we can both enjoy but that I will always be the owner, that I'm not going to share it … it's my house, I buy it, I pay for it, and it is my responsibility. (Jaime)

When asked about his relationship with his partner, Jaime refers to love and the emergence of cohabitation practices as something progressive:

Interviewer: How could you define your relationship with your current partner?

Jaime: Uh, good, it's a relationship … it's warm, it's fun and…it's good.

Interviewer: Does the word "love" come up for you, or is it something else?

Jaime: Yes, indeed, I call it love. It's not falling in love, it's love, falling in love is explosive and fleeting … it came up.

Interviewer: Did falling in love come to your mind?

Jaime: It arose; it wasn't explosive … more progressive. We consider the … [co-habitation], we talk, and we have interests and so on, we don't actively look for it, and she gets pregnant practically at the same time.

In contemporary Spain, cohabitation has emerged as a significant practice within the family formation practice (Domínguez-Folgueras & Castro-Martín, 2013). Jaime sets out a prescription for limiting the love bond via a distinctive way of cohabitation in order to continue the relationship. In this case, the requirement of romantic love's ideals of sharing lovers' lives in a substantial way is re-signified to exclude material security. The process of individualization of the loving experience implies that the biography of the human being must be detached from traditional securities in order to be based on the decision of each individual (Coontz, 2005; Illouz, 2017; Roca, 2008). Jaime unilaterally sets a distinctive relational arrangement as a prerequisite for the establishment of boundaries during the relationship.

This shaping of love through materiality speaks of how cultural materialism and emotions work in the changing praxis of bond formation (Malinowska & Gratzke, 2018). The practice of not sharing material things provides Jaime with a sense of control to develop his ideas of both emotional and economic independence in dealing with his life expectations. Non-sharing of the property implies not only non-sharing of responsibility and risk but also non-sharing of the financial stability that often comes with it. Despite maintaining long-term affective, sexual, residential, and family ties with his partner, he avoids establishing a common bond through material ties, thus safeguarding individual economic independence. This provides Jaime with a space no one else shares and, therefore, a space of non-dependence on others. His sense of independence is embedded in his relational arrangements through this ghosting emotion that is a form of non-bonding practice. In other words, by means of the mobilization of his material resources—by avoiding sharing properties—Jaime tries to assert his social role as an "independent man".

Conclusions

The practice of emotions in the field of negative relations has been well-rehearsed, especially by focusing on non-choice practices as a means of ending relationships (Illouz, 2019). Many current scholars have also addressed the affective strategies that social actors implement to lead a livable life in adverse social contexts (Gammeltolft, 2016; Samuels, 2016; Stafford, 2015). At the intersection of both of these lines of research (i.e., non-choice practices within intimate relationships and the maintenance of life projects), this article focuses on non-bonding practices when it comes to maintaining intimate relationships through emotional limitation. Our study highlights the role of avoidance in emotional practices to sustain existing relationships. Thus, this article has addressed a distinctive category of practices whereby social actors transit the modalities of intimacy in contemporary Spain. Drawing upon a practice approach to emotions, we have proposed the analytical tool of ghosting emotions to account for those individual strategies that limit relationality by avoiding certain practices in the making of intimacy.

Throughout the text, we have exposed how the global context of deregulation is combined, in the Spanish case, with a complex overlapping between the patterns of romantic and confluent love. This results in a lack of clear scripts, which is reflected in a constant need for emotional reflexivity on the part of social agents. The practices that (re)configure each affective relationship are the product of that emotional reflexivity so as to adapt their behavior to the insecure context. Thus, emotion, far from being a discrete entity preceding social interaction, is rather the result of it, emerging as a key relational and constitutive aspect of intimacy.

Within the neoliberal paradigm, this relational aspect is formalized through a productivist perspective of the individual. Consequently, the concept of individual autonomy, as opposed to dependency, intersects with an axiology embedded in the cultural ethos, manifesting through available social roles and emotional norms. Consequently, the processes of subjectivity become problematic while considering their interplay in the formation of intimacy. It is precisely within this tension that we discern a pattern of non-bonding practices, wherein one member consciously chooses to limit the depth of their intimate relationships to preserve them without compromising individual authenticity. This authenticity does not pertain to a genuine self but rather reflects the pursuit of personal accomplishments through an exercise of control. Consequently, avoiding emotional intensity, refraining from expressions such as I love you, or not sharing property within a relationship become individual practices of relational constraint, aligning with the principles of emotional individualism. However, these individual practices, extending beyond their pragmatic nature, evolve into a social phenomenon with various manifesta-

tions. Collectively, they contribute to the establishment of a constitutive pattern in affective and sexual relationships within the contemporary emotional neoliberal framework. Through this psycho-socio-material mobilization, individuals heighten their sense of control over their relationships, maintaining "an open door" as a contingency plan in case individual or collective endeavors falter. By employing emotional distancing techniques, social actors construct a personal safety net to transit structural uncertainties.

Finally, the results of this research study aim to contribute to further studies on non-bonding practices, not only from a gender perspective but rather from a wider intersectional one (Collins, 2019). We also consider that taking this article as a starting point, this study opens up possibilities to explore the role of collective action in the cultural dynamics of shaping intimacy. Given the contemporary technocultural landscape wherein information and communication technologies not only marketize relationships through dating apps but also bolster structural uncertainty (Bandelli & Gandini, 2022), whether these practices of relational limitation function to expand, contest, or constrain the boundaries of the neoliberal emotional regime, remains to be seen. We also believe that "ghosting emotions" could be a useful tool to address other domains—beyond intimacy—such as kinship or labor, among others, when it comes to exploring the emotional practices of avoidance as "an open door" to navigate relationality in the broad sense.

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Povzetek

Fenomen "ghostinga" je večinoma povezan z zmenki prek aplikacij. Pričujoča raziskava ga obravnava širše, kot področje praks izogibanja neposrednim stikom. Pri tem poudarja vlogo izogibanja v čustvenih praksah za ohranitev trajnosti odnosa. Na primeru sodobne Španije članek pojasni, kako strukturna negotovost (povezana z ne-oliberalnim in individualnim oblikovanjem subjektivitet) prežema intimne odnose in krepi napetosti znotraj romantičnih in konfluentnih modelov ljubezni ter se prevaja v pomanjkanje scenarijev pri soočanju z intimnostjo. Na podlagi raziskave med odraslimi prebivalci Madrida raziskujemo, kako se družbeni akterji prilagajajo kontekstu skozi tako imenovana *ghosting čustva*. Analiza identificira individualne strategije, ki s pomočjo čustvene refleksivnosti omejujejo odnosnost, ko omogočajo izogibanje določenim družbenim praksam pri vzpostavljanju intimnosti. Raziskava obravnava konkretne procese, prek katerih akterji v soočanju z negotovostmi razvijajo vzorce, ki oblikujejo strukturne razsežnosti sodobnih intimnosti. Prakse ghostinga ščitijo individualnost znotraj razmerij tako, da krepijo občutek nadzora z ohranjanjem odprtih vrat v razmerju.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: čustva, intimnost, ljubezen, ghosting, neoliberalni čustveni režim

CORRESPONDENCE: SANDRA FERNÁNDEZ-GARCÍA, Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology, Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia, Senda del Rey 7, Desp. 1.08, 28040, Madrid, Spain. E-mail: sandrafg@fsof.uned.es