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BRIEF REPORT

Ghosting from the workplace: The impact of feedback (or lack thereof) on applicants' psychological needs satisfaction

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Abstract

Background: Applying for a job can be a stressful experience. When a potential employer chooses to not move forward with a candidate, they can either directly tell them or cease communication altogether—known as ghosting. Ghosting has harmful consequences, such as lower basic psychological needs satisfaction than direct rejection, and there has been an apparent increase in this phenomenon by potential employers. The purpose of this study was to examine the effect of being ghosted after submitting a hypothetical job application.

Methods: An international sample of unemployed people ($N = 554$) completed an online job application task and were randomly assigned to receive no (i.e., ghosted), impersonal, or personal feedback.

Results: While our manipulation was perceived as intended, there was not an effect of condition on needs satisfaction. However, exploratory analyses suggest that ghosted participants have greater self-esteem and control than those that received personal feedback. Thus, the effect of being ghosted during a job application may not be as clear cut as previously thought.

Conclusion: Although the current study did not find evidence that applicants feel worse after being ghosted than being directly rejected, such an experience can still hurt, and more research is needed to understand the long-term effects of being ghosted by a potential employer.

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Any reports and responses or comments on the article can be found at the end of the article.

Keywords

ghosting, workplace ostracism, rejection, social exclusion, psychological needs satisfaction, employment application, application feedback



This article is included in the [Workplace Ostracism and Exclusion](#) collection.

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REVISED Amendments from Version 1

This version has been revised in response to reviewer comments. It has incorporated additional literature on communication reluctance. It has also expanded the discussion section to elaborate on the temporal aspect of ghosting and suggest further avenues for future research. It also includes a newly improved version of Figure 1.

Any further responses from the reviewers can be found at the end of the article

Applying for a job can be nerve-wracking, from the hours spent preparing the application to the vulnerability and possible rejection. Those who apply for jobs are often unemployed, a stigmatized (Karren & Sherman, 2012) experience associated with lower well-being (McKee-Ryan *et al.*, 2005) and greater social exclusion (Gurr & Jungbauer-Gans, 2013). Thus, unemployed people may be particularly sensitive to feeling ostracized.

In line with the need-threat model, ostracism—being ignored or excluded—immediately threatens basic psychological needs (i.e., belonging, self-esteem, meaningful existence, and control; Williams, 2009). Workplace ostracism occurs within an employment context, where individuals are ignored without necessarily knowing the reason behind their exclusion (Williams, 1997). While most literature focuses on ostracism within someone's current workplace (e.g., Ferris *et al.*, 2008), less is known about how feeling ignored impacts applicants.

Applicants may need to add *ghosting* to their list of worries. Ghosting is the act of ignoring or stopping communication with a person without explanation (Kay & Courtice, 2022)—an experience that is akin to ostracism (Freedman *et al.*, 2019). Most research on ghosting has been examined within the context of close relationships, with ghosting hurting more than direct rejection (e.g., Leckfor *et al.*, 2023). But in recent years, commentators have noticed the use of ghosting in the workplace, notably by potential employers (Becker, 2022). When a potential employer chooses to not move forward with a candidate, they can either directly tell them or cease communication altogether. In the current work, we compare these two approaches' impact on a candidate's psychological needs.

The negative effects of ghosting

The apparent recent increase in potential employers ghosting applicants is concerning because this method has harmful consequences, at least for ending close relationships. For example, 37% of adults who were ghosted on a mobile dating app blamed themselves for the situation, and 44% reported that being ghosted had long-term effects on their mental health (Timmermans *et al.*, 2021). Ghosting appears to have worse outcomes than direct rejection, with targets of ghosting feeling more excluded and perceiving the breakup as less expected and fair (Pancani *et al.*, 2022).

One reason ghosting is so harmful is because it is a type of ostracism that is used *to end* a relationship (Freedman *et al.*, 2019). For example, participants who recalled a time when they were ghosted reported lower needs satisfaction than participants who were directly rejected, and the harmful effects of ghosting were amplified for participants who had a higher need for closure (Leckfor *et al.*, 2023). Thus, ghosting can leave a target with a sense of uncertainty and lack of closure (LeFebvre *et al.*, 2020; LeFebvre & Fan, 2020), which may lead to negative downstream consequences for well-being.

Ghosting by potential employers

A third of job seekers report they were ghosted by the last company that turned them down (Delgado, 2018) and three-quarters of employers report having ghosted applicants in the past year (Christian, 2022). Commentators have speculated about the potential causes of application ghosting (Cappelli, 2019). Online job applications and interviews have recently become commonplace and employers may view these "virtual" relationships as less serious and more appropriate for ghosting—a process that occurs in the interpersonal context (Manning *et al.*, 2019)—which may be exacerbated by unwillingness to communicate (Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000). Another reason employers may use ghosting is because once they achieve their goal of filling a job vacancy, they are no longer incentivized to care about the applicants who did not receive the job (Converse & Fishbach, 2012). Employers may also favor ghosting over direct rejection because the latter is an emotionally taxing experience for the source (Williams *et al.*, 2000). In general, people are reluctant to communicate bad news (Rosen & Tesser, 1970), but when rejection is necessary, they prefer to do so with a short pre-written message compared to a personal response (Tom Tong & Walther, 2011). As when other relationships are dissolved (Timmermans *et al.*, 2021), employers may see ghosting as an easier route because it allows them to avoid the uncomfortable feelings that arise when directly rejecting someone.

When recalling past experiences, people thought companies that did not send a rejection letter (versus those who did) were not fulfilling their obligations and they felt less respected (Waung & Brice, 2000). Additionally, simply being acknowledged aids recovery from rejection (Rudert *et al.*, 2017). After submitting an application for an apartment, participants who received any acknowledgement—including friendly, neutral, or hostile feedback—reported greater needs satisfaction than those who received no feedback (i.e., were ghosted). Similar to close relationships, being ghosted by a potential employer can hurt applicants, with ghosting targets feeling down about themselves and depressed (Jackson, 2021).

People who end relationships often try to do so in ways that are cautious of the other person's feelings (Brown & Levinson, 1987). The Responsive Theory of Social Exclusion postulates that when rejection occurs, both the source and target are motivated to minimize the target's hurt feelings (Freedman *et al.*, 2016). Thus, it is beneficial to reject someone in a way

that is the least costly for both parties, which the theory suggests is explicit rejection (compared to ambiguous rejection or ostracism). However, the nature of the direct rejection could matter. A message including personal details may be less painful than an impersonal rejection, perhaps because it is more polite or conveys concern about the target's feelings, as past research suggests adding friendly statements to a rejection letter has positive outcomes (Aamodt & Peggans, 1988). The current work aims to extend ostracism theory to the job application process to find the best (or least costly) way to reject someone from potential employment.

The present research

The purpose of this study was to examine the effect of being ghosted after submitting a hypothetical job application. We hypothesized that there would be an effect of exclusion method on basic psychological needs satisfaction, such that ghosted participants would have lower needs satisfaction than those who received impersonal feedback on their application, and participants who received impersonal feedback would have lower needs satisfaction than those who received personal feedback.

Methods

Study design

Our hypotheses, stopping rule, and analyses were preregistered prior to data collection. The preregistration is available: <https://aspredicted.org/9nj6i.pdf>. The study was conducted online and data was collected from November 4th–10th, 2022.

Participants

We calculated power using SuperPower (Lakens & Caldwell, 2021), informed by the effect size observed in a similar study design ($d = .39$; Rudert *et al.*, 2017). A sample of 600 provides approximately 99% power to detect an omnibus analysis of variance (ANOVA) effect and approximately 97% power to detect planned contrasts of $d \geq .39$. Our analysis plan specified a one-way ANOVA, followed by planned contrasts sequentially comparing no-feedback to impersonal feedback (-1, 1, 0) and impersonal to personal feedback (0, -1, 1).

Six hundred and two unemployed adults (323 U.S. residents, 279 U.K. residents) were recruited from Prolific Academic. People were eligible to participate if they indicated in Prolific that they were unemployed and were over the age of 18-years-old. People who were prescreened by Prolific to meet the inclusion criteria had access to the study. We initially planned to sample entirely U.S. participants, but due to slow data collection we also made the study available for U.K. residents. Following our preregistration, we excluded 15 participants who requested their responses not be used or who did not complete the survey and 33 participants who failed at least one of two attention checks. The final sample included 554 participants (50.20% men, 46.00% women, 3.79% other/non-binary; $M_{\text{age}} = 29.62$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 10.59$; 68.1% White, 11.9% Asian, 7.4% Black, 6.14% Latinx, 4.87% multiracial, 1.44% other/not mentioned, 0.18% Native American).

Procedure and materials

Similar to previous ostracism work (Rudert *et al.*, 2017, Study 4), this study used a simulated online job application paradigm with false feedback using Qualtrics. A copy of the survey used can be found under *Extended data* (Wood *et al.*, 2022). Participants were told that they would complete the task with another person and be randomly assigned to either complete a job application or review the other person's application. In actuality, all participants completed the job application. They first indicated their ideal next job, one for which they were currently qualified and met their life needs. They filled out the simulated application by indicating their previous employment, education, and relevant skills for the job. Next, participants were told that their application met the qualifications for the position and they were asked to provide a brief description of why they were a good fit. Finally, they submitted their application for the "other participant" to review (during which they waited 45 seconds to increase believability).

Participants were randomly assigned to one of three feedback conditions (see materials for exact wording). All participants were told that the application process had ended. In the ghosting condition, participants were told that the reviewer did not leave any feedback. In the impersonal feedback condition, participants received a note from the "reviewer" stating that the participant was rejected from the job, but the note did not include any personal information. In the personal feedback condition, participants received the same note from the "reviewer," but the note also included personal information pulled from their application (i.e., name, past employment, and relevant skills).

Immediately after receiving (no) feedback, participants completed a measure of basic psychological needs satisfaction (Hales & Williams, 2018). Participants rated 15 items on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = *Not at all*, 7 = *Completely*) indicating the extent to which they currently felt each item. Example items include, "I feel liked" and "I feel powerful." Greater scores averaged across the 15 items indicate greater satisfaction of belonging, self-esteem, meaningful existence, control, and certainty needs ($\alpha = .92$). Participants then completed manipulation checks, demographic information, and were debriefed.

Ethical considerations

The study protocol was approved by the University of Mississippi Institutional Review Board (23x-091). The first page of the Qualtrics survey contained the informed consent form, and participants indicated they consented to participate in the study by clicking through to the next page. On the consent form, participants were informed that "the data may be posted online to be accessed by interested researchers."

Analysis

The full analytic plan is specified in our preregistration, which can be accessed at <https://aspredicted.org/9nj6i.pdf>, and is

followed in the Results section below. The analysis script, which details all data processing and analyses, can be accessed under *Extended data* (Wood *et al.*, 2022)

Results

Manipulation checks

The manipulations were perceived as intended (Wood *et al.*, 2022). To test three manipulation check questions (all on seven-point Likert scales), we conducted one-way ANOVAs with Games-Howell post-hocs (see Table 1 for descriptive statistics and post-hoc results). There was an effect of condition on the extent to which participants believed the

reviewer provided feedback, $F(2, 551) = 138.08$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .33$, as well as personal feedback, $F(2, 551) = 137.90$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .34$. Participants who received personal feedback reported the greatest endorsement for these items, followed by participants who received impersonal feedback, then by ghosted participants. There was also an effect of condition on the extent to which participants believed they were ghosted by the reviewer, $F(2, 551) = 229.65$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .46$. Participants who were ghosted reported the greatest endorsement for this item, followed by participants who received impersonal and personal feedback (no difference).

Table 1. Descriptive and Post-Hoc Statistics.

	Ghosted <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Impersonal Feedback <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Personal Feedback <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	
To what extent did the reviewer provide you feedback?	1.04 (0.28)	2.47 (1.49)	3.32 (1.68)	
Ghosted v. Impersonal				$t(198) = 12.80$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.08$
Ghosted v. Personal				$t(200) = 18.30$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.72$
Impersonal v. Personal				$t(370) = 5.17$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.64$
To what extent did you receive personal feedback on your application?	1.06 (0.41)	1.99 (1.33)	3.27 (1.71)	
Ghosted v. Impersonal				$t(222) = 9.14$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.93$
Ghosted v. Personal				$t(212) = 17.30$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.97$
Impersonal v. Personal				$t(355) = 8.11$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.03$
To what extent were you ghosted by the reviewer?	6.05 (1.56)	2.66 (1.91)	2.60 (1.76)	
Ghosted v. Impersonal				$t(353) = 18.50$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.73$
Ghosted v. Personal				$t(365) = 19.90$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.72$
Impersonal v. Personal				$t(370) = 0.32$, $p = .944$, $d = 0.03$
Basic Psychological Needs	3.81 (1.32)	3.73 (1.24)	3.54 (1.21)	
Belonging	4.00 (1.69)	3.85 (1.59)	3.68 (1.55)	
Meaningful Existence	4.42 (1.79)	4.60 (1.74)	4.37 (1.77)	
Certainty	4.06 (1.46)	4.29 (1.63)	4.15 (1.54)	
Self-Esteem	3.40 (1.53)	3.08 (1.37)	2.83 (1.34)	
Ghosted v. Impersonal				$t(354) = 2.08$, $p = .096$, $d = 0.22$
Ghosted v. Personal				$t(352) = 3.81$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.40$
Impersonal v. Personal				$t(373) = 1.82$, $p = .164$, $d = 0.18$
Control	3.17 (1.41)	2.83 (1.33)	2.67 (1.29)	
Ghosted v. Impersonal				$t(358) = 2.31$, $p = .055$, $d = 0.25$
Ghosted v. Personal				$t(357) = 3.53$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.37$
Impersonal v. Personal				$t(373) = 1.23$, $p = .438$, $d = 0.12$

Main analysis

To test our hypothesis, we performed a one-way ANOVA with feedback condition on basic psychological needs satisfaction. Contrary to our hypothesis, there was *not* an effect of condition on needs satisfaction, $F(2, 551) = 2.24$, $p = .108$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$ (see Figure 1). Planned contrasts revealed that needs satisfaction did not differ between participants who were ghosted versus received impersonal feedback, $t(551) = -0.58$, $p = .564$, $d = 0.06$, nor did it differ between participants who received impersonal versus personal feedback, $t(551) = -1.48$, $p = .140$, $d = 0.16$.

Exploratory analyses

As exploratory analyses, we examined the effect of condition separately for each basic need using one-way ANOVAs with Games-Howell post-hocs (see Table 1). There was not an effect on belonging, $F(2, 551) = 1.75$, $p = .174$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$, meaningful existence, $F(2, 551) = 0.87$, $p = .419$, $\eta_p^2 = .003$, or certainty, $F(2, 551) = 1.06$, $p = .346$, $\eta_p^2 = .004$. There was, however, an effect of condition on self-esteem, $F(2, 551) = 7.53$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$, such that ghosted participants had significantly higher self-esteem than those who received personal feedback (participants who received impersonal feedback did not differ from those who were ghosted or received personal feedback). Similarly, there was a main effect of condition on control, $F(2, 551) = 6.37$, $p = .002$,

$\eta_p^2 = .02$, such that ghosted participants had significantly greater sense of control than those who received personal feedback (participants who received impersonal feedback did not differ from those who were ghosted or received personal feedback).

Discussion

Being ghosted by an employer—like any form of ghosting—may have negative implications on psychological well-being. Using a well-powered design with an international sample of unemployed people, the current study examined if being ghosted after submitting a simulated job application resulted in lower psychological needs satisfaction than receiving impersonal or personal feedback. The experimental manipulation of application feedback (or lack thereof) used in the current study resulted in similar needs satisfaction for participants who were ghosted or directly rejected with impersonal or personal feedback.

The present study did not provide experimental evidence that workplace ghosting is harmful, however, there are various avenues for future research to further explore this phenomenon. Critically, we did not account for the temporal nature of ghosting in the current design. Because ghosting is a gradual process that creates uncertainty (LeFebvre *et al.*, 2019), ghosted participants may not have fully realized they were

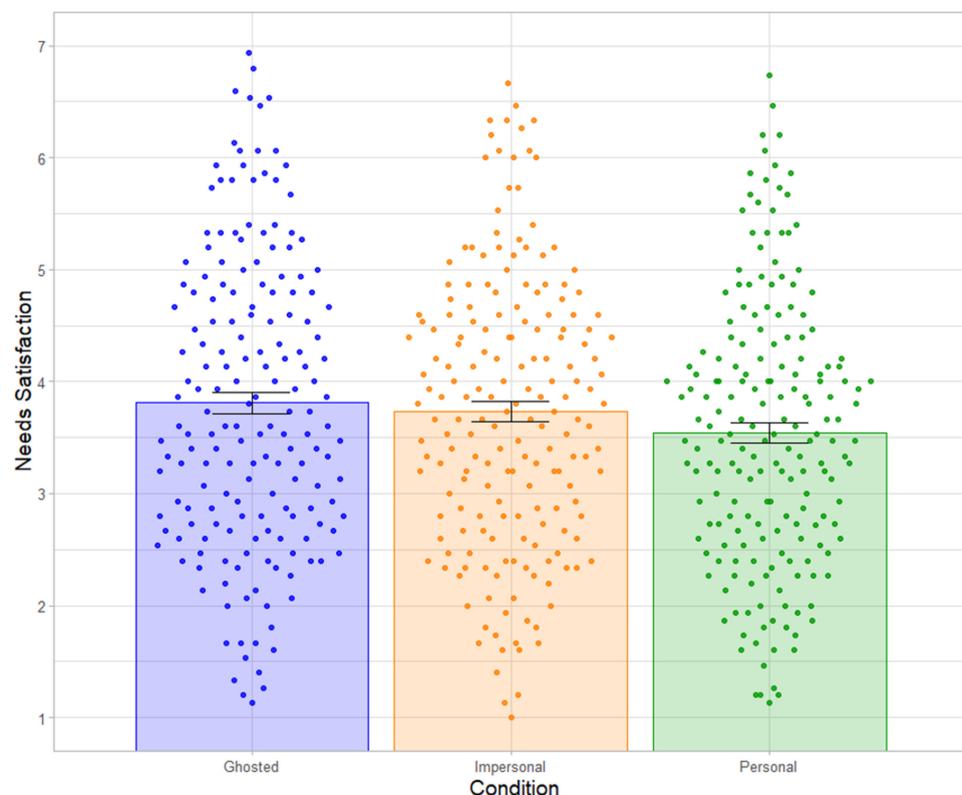


Figure 1. The Effect of Feedback Condition on Basic Psychological Needs Satisfaction. Note. Each dot represents an individual participant. Bars reflect standard errors.

being ghosted at the time we measured needs satisfaction. The predicted negative effect for those who were ghosted may have been delayed until they realized they were being ghosted, something our design could not detect (i.e., participants may have assumed that more feedback would be forthcoming on later pages in the study). Future research could track participants' needs satisfaction for an extended period of time after receiving (a lack of) feedback on a job application. Further, applicant expectation may also play a role in the impact of rejection method used by potential employers, suggesting that the temporal aspect of ghosting may be dependent upon employers giving a projected timeline of the hiring process, which tends to vary between job postings. Future research may also aim to explore other forms of workplace ghosting (e.g., applicants ghosting potential employers), empirically investigate the causes of workplace ghosting (e.g., virtual vs. in-person application process), and other consequences of workplace ghosting (e.g., reputation of employers who ghost applicants).

Interestingly, exploratory analyses revealed that ghosted participants reported higher self-esteem and control than participants who were rejected with personal feedback: opposite our prediction. Although unexpected, this is consistent with research in which people who attributed rejection to an internal reason (versus external) felt more depressed (Major *et al.*, 2003). In the present study, participants who received personal feedback may have made a personal attribution for the reviewer ostensibly reading and rejecting their application (i.e., I am being rejected because of who I am) whereas participants who were ghosted may have attributed the rejection to other factors (e.g., inattentiveness of the reviewer). If this finding can be confirmed in future research, then the effect of being ghosted during a job application may not be as straightforward as previously thought.

Ghosting is a nuanced experience even in the employment context. Sometimes ghosting is abrupt and communication is completely terminated, other times communication can slowly decrease over time (i.e., breadcrumbing; Navarro *et al.*, 2020). Although the current study did not find evidence that applicants feel worse after being ghosted than being directly rejected, such an experience can still hurt. In a pilot of this study, we asked participants how they felt about the application

task and one participant wrote, "It was a soul-killing reminder of the hours I waste every week trying to jump through esoteric hoops for random employers only to get ghosted or rejected." This quote highlights the negative impact being ghosted may have on applicants. In an uncertain job market with increased rates of both hiring and firing (Lindzon, 2022), it is imperative to understand the psychological impact of the hiring process. It is not feasible for every applicant to receive every employment offer, so we must understand how employers can best reject non-selected applicants. The present work suggests that feedback on a job application may affect the applicant's self-esteem and control, however more research is needed to understand the long-term effects of being ghosted by a potential employer.

Data availability

Underlying data

OSF: Ghosting from the Workplace. <https://osf.io/c9n3h>. (Wood *et al.*, 2022)

This project contains the following underlying data:

- WorkplaceGhosting_Data.csv [Data]

Extended data

- WorkplaceGhosting_Materials_UK.qsf [Qualtrics survey used for the U.K. sample]
- WorkplaceGhosting_Materials_US.qsf [Qualtrics survey used for the U.S. sample]
- WorkplaceGhosting_Preregistration.pdf [Copy of the preregistration; the actual preregistration is available here: <https://aspredicted.org/9nj6i.pdf>]
- WorkplaceGhosting_Script.R [Data processing and analysis R script]

Data are available under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license](#) (CC-BY 4.0).

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Dávid Miško 

The University of Prešov, Prešov, Slovakia

The authors' corrections are adequate with respect to the proposed ones.

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Coaching, Neuromarketing, Cognitive Distortions, Social Science, Organizational Behaviour

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.

Version 1

Reviewer Report 06 September 2023

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The methods of data analysis are not clearly mentioned and displayed; these can be a source for

similar studies in the future. It is important to the authors to state every step of the analysis and its references instead of preregistering it. However, the methods employed are sufficient enough. Therefore, it could be useful for further or other studies with similar topics and methods. In addition, it would be good if the research questionnaire is also included in the preregistration.

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it engage with the current literature?

Yes

Is the study design appropriate and does the work have academic merit?

Yes

Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?

Partly

Are all the source data and materials underlying the results available?

Yes

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?

Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: I am expert in finance, Islamic Finance particularly in Waqf, waqf behaviour, and waqf institution management.

We confirm that we have read this submission and believe that we have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.

Author Response 29 Sep 2023

Andrew Hales

We thank the reviewer for these comments. Additional methodological details not mentioned in the text can be found verbatim in the materials, data, and R script that are posted online (<http://www.doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/D48FS>). In examining our reported methods and results, we reformatted Figure 1 to better represent the data (i.e., changed the y-axis). We cannot make changes to the preregistration, but materials (including the research questionnaire) are available online.

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Report 17 August 2023

<https://doi.org/10.21956/routledgeopenres.19002.r27326>

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The article is based on current literature. To expand the discussion and provide numerous bibliographic references, it is also possible to draw on related areas that are connected to communication interruption but not directly labeled as ghosting (e.g., communication reluctance, unwillingness to communicate). The conclusions adequately emphasize that the issue remains insufficiently explored. The authors do not reflect on the temporal perspective of ghosting's emergence, its causes, and subsequent consequences for applicants, but they have sufficiently highlighted this aspect. In the discussion, the authors could contemplate whom we consider as a ghoster, for instance, (complete communication cessation – pretending not to know the other person without providing reasons; partial interruption – sometimes responding and communicating, sometimes not; short-term interruption – not responding for several days without explanation; also considering who we judge as a ghoster when providing feedback to applicants). It is necessary to discuss whether a ghoster is someone who interrupts communication without explanation (either temporarily or permanently) or also someone who fails to provide complete feedback to the applicant. Likewise, it is possible to discuss other forms, causes, and consequences of ghosting, as adequate definitions of workplace ghosting have not yet been established.

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it engage with the current literature?

Partly

Is the study design appropriate and does the work have academic merit?

Yes

Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?

Partly

Are all the source data and materials underlying the results available?

Yes

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?

Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Coaching, Neuromarketing, Cognitive Distortions, Social Science, Organizational Behaviour

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.

Author Response 29 Sep 2023

Andrew Hales

We thank the reviewer for these comments. Literature on communication reluctance and unwillingness to communicate is beneficial to the background of why employers may choose to ghost and we have incorporated it into the paper (first paragraph of the "Ghosting by potential employers" section). We have also expanded our discussion section to elaborate on the temporal aspect of ghosting (including the impact of target expectation; second paragraph), suggest other avenues for future research (second paragraph), and mention the nuance of ghosting operationalization (last paragraph). We believe these changes have improved the clarity of the document and thank you for the suggestions.

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.