What if 'ghosting' people isn't just rude, but psychologically harmful?

When The Banshees of Inisherin became such a hit last year, I couldn't help wondering if one of the reasons it was resonating so powerfully was that – despite being set on a fictional island off the coast of Ireland in the 1920s – it was essentially about ghosting. A man stops talking to his friend without explanation, and the emotional fallout is devastating.

In the 1920s, ghosting a close friend would indeed have been shocking. Ghosting as a social move was pretty much unheard of into the 2000s. Remember that 2003 episode of Sex and the City where Carrie is outraged that Jack Berger breaks up with her via Post-it note? "I'm sorry. I can't. Don't hate me," says the offending scrap of paper.

There's an endless sea of options. You choose someone based on the flick of a finger. "It's like ordering Seamless," a young man told me in a story I did in 2015, "but you're ordering a person" – a person who is arguably being treated as a commodity. So what does it matter if you ghost them? It's unlikely there will be any social consequences, since you probably don't have mutual friends. And the sooner you discard this person, the sooner you can get back to swiping, which these addictive platforms are designed to make you want to do.

And ghosting doesn't only refer to being a no-show at a date, but to abruptly ending a conversation or even a relationship that has lasted for weeks or months, even years. Social media is awash in videos of people expressing their frustration at being ghosted by people they've been dating both casually and seriously.

Ghosting can feel "abusive" to the person who has been ghosted, according to studies. Being ghosted "can have a profound impact on a person's mental health, leading to feelings of depression, anxiety and deflated self-esteem", as a Bumble press release accurately reports.

And that's why it's all the more alarming to see ghosting bleeding into friendship and work. A recent study from the University of Georgia says that researchers were surprised to find that over half the participants in its survey on ghosting and dating said that they had also been ghosted by a friend – which felt "just as bad" as being ghosted by a romantic partner, or even worse. And in their professional lives, people are now routinely being ghosted in work situations involving hiring, pitching, networking and more.

Ghosting diminishes our collective sense of connection and personal sense of wellbeing. In thinking about how we relate to each other – or fail to relate – in the digital age, I'm reminded of a quote from Martin Luther King: "In spite of these spectacular strides in science and technology, and still unlimited ones to come,

something basic is missing. There is a sort of poverty of the spirit which stands in glaring contrast to our scientific and technological abundance."